College Boys and High School Girls

Summary

I've been reading a lot of college AUs and I figured I'd try my hand at it.

After a falling out with his grandfather, Marius Pontmercy finds himself adopted into a new peer group. Despite love triangles, disappearances, an awkward as ass intervention, old secrets, old wounds, substance issues, and a whole host of other issues, the friends manage to advocate for social justice and even attend class every now and then.

This fic has a high rating and contains adult subject matter handled in a manner befitting adult discourse.
This is a highly rated fic, and highly rated subject matter is handled throughout it. I try to do so in a mature, respectful manner without exploitative or titillating lead ups, or gratuitous, tasteless detail.

Though I'm doing my best to preserve a sense of the characters and some of the events in Les Misérables with this AU, I'm not making any attempt at geography. I've only been to France once, and am not equipped to write a story about college students set there. As I'm American, they're attending an American University.
Courfeyrac’s first inclination upon joining his friends for lunch outside the theater building was to plop down next to Grantaire so he could piss and moan to his friend about his art history class (Grantaire was the only one of the group capable of sympathizing with Courfeyrac on this, having suffered through two semesters with Margot as a requisite). Then he noticed that Grantaire was on the ground with his back against a low garden wall; quite literally sitting at Enjolras’ feet, as the graceful blond was perched on the wall attempting to look through his notes. The flush on Enjolras’ cheeks indicated that his attention was not as invested in his notes as he would like, and the unlabeled water bottle in Grantaire’s hand (that wasn’t fooling anybody) probably had something to do with it.

As there was every chance Enjolras might start kicking Grantaire, Courfeyrac decided to give them a berth of space and sat down next to Legle instead.

“Hey Bossuet. How’s it going?” Courfeyrac greeted.

Legle shrugged. “Not too bad today. Dawson bought it when I told him I couldn’t print my take home because the file corrupted when I put it on my flash drive-”

“Which is what happened. I think he’s just realized that with you it’s not an excuse,” Courfeyrac noted. “I mean, you took him last semester, so he must be used to you.”

“And I’m going to try to take my world lit sequence with him too, if I can manage. I’ve decided to make the most of it whenever I do find a professor sympathetic enough to believe what sounds like utter bullshit but is in fact my life.”

Courfeyrac politely listened to some of Legle’s anecdotes about his recent misadventures as a legal history major, then jumped in with his art history woes even though it was clear Legle didn’t give a fuck. However, the friends were all goodly enough to at least pretend to listen when it was called upon, as everyone inevitably wanted to bitch about their classes even when they were taking courses that no one else had in common. It would have been better to whine about the workload with Grantaire, who was intimately acquainted with the pain of professor Margot’s introductory level class that she taught like a graduate course, but all Courfeyrac really needed was the pretense of an ear for his complaints.

He lost even that pretense when Legle waved to someone walking along the sidewalk on the other side of the street from them. “Hey, Maurice! You there, Maurice! Aren’t you in my historiography class?!”

A kid did stop, but he was looking at Legle in some confusion. “Do you mean me?”

Legle frowned. “Your name’s not Maurice, is it?”

The kid shook his head. “It’s Marius.”

“Oh. Well I was close.”

Marius crossed the street and warily joined them. Courfeyrac couldn’t help staring at him a little once he got close enough to be properly checked out; the kid was fucking gorgeous. Nice build, thick dark
hair, and absolutely stunning eyes framed in black lashes. Once he was done staring at Marius, Courfeyrac chanced a sidelong glance at Legle, wondering what his particular goal was in waving Marius over, and if maybe he was going to follow in Courfeyrac and Grantaire’s example and use college as the excuse (clichéd though it was) for some bicurious exploration. Or (Courfeyrac hoped) maybe Legle was just aware that he had a couple of gay friends and that widening their circle to include more pretty boys was good manners.

“Was I at least right about you being in historiography with me?” Legle asked.

Marius nodded. “I think so. I had to skip today though-”

“Fuck, me too. I was hoping you could let me look at your notes. I was late because of a flat tire. Why’d you miss?”

Marius frowned, and set his gaze on the ground. “I, um, had a falling out with my grandfather.”

“I’m sorry. Family stuff sucks,” Legle said with an air of sympathy.

Courfeyrac glanced at the full backpack on Marius’ back, the messenger bag slung over his shoulder, and the duffle bag at his side. The kid was also wearing three sweatshirts. “Bad falling out?” Courfeyrac guessed. Marius dismally nodded. “You wouldn’t happen to have been living with him, were you?”

Marius stared at Courfeyrac in amazement. “How could you tell?”

“I’m a professional psychic,” Courfeyrac said, perfectly deadpan.

“Really?”

Legle was laughing into his hand. “He’s a professional bullshitter, is what he is. Marius, you’re carrying all your worldly possessions.”

“Oh. Right.” The kid’s face went red, and it was one of the most adorable things Courfeyrac had ever seen.

“That’s rough, dude. Do you have a place to stay?” Courfeyrac asked.

Marius shook his head. “I’ve just been walking around trying to figure out what to do. But I don’t want to trouble you. I’ll figure something out, I’m sure.”


“I’d invite you to my place,” Legle said, “Only I’m not actually staying there right now. We had a burst pipe and the whole first floor flooded, so I’m crashing with Joly and Feuilly for now. But Courfeyrac’s place is nice. It’s downtown, not too far from campus.”

“I couldn’t impose-”

“You can’t walk circles around the campus forever, Marius. It’s fine, I’ve got the space.”

“But you don’t even know me-”

“I’ll vouch for Courf not being a serial killer or anything,” Legle said.

Courfeyrac rolled his eyes. “No offense, Legle, but you didn’t even know the guy’s name. I’m not sure how much your word is going to count to him.”
Legle whistled to get the attention of their other friends, who were all intently watching as Enjolras verbally castrated Grantaire. “Hey, guys! Tell Marius that Courfeyrac is not a serial killer, and that he has a nice apartment with lots of room!”

The boys did look a bit startled at the request, but they readily complied (even Enjolras, who had built up quite a lot of steam in his diatribe).

“That settles it. C’mon Marius, I’ll take you back to my place so you can drop your stuff. We have to hurry though. I’ve got a three twenty class today.” Courfeyrac took Marius’ duffle bag from him and started walking towards the student parking lot. Still looking a bit unsure of himself, Marius had no choice but to fall in step behind him.

They hadn’t gotten very far before they were joined by a breathless Grantaire. “Hey, let me get that for you. You must be tired after hauling this shit around all afternoon.” He rudely pulled Marius’ backpack off of him and started walking very quickly with his head down.

“Everything alright, Grantaire?” Courfeyrac asked, trying (and failing) not to laugh.

“Oh yes, everything’s lovely. Just figured I might as well join you as I’m done with classes for the day. And also, I think Enjolras might have meant it this time when he talked about vivisecting me for his biology final.”

“You really should stop flirting with him, Grantaire. I don’t think he’s into you.”

“Nonsense. He’s just playing hard to get.”

Marius’ eyes went a bit wide. “Did you just…you’ve been flirting with another man?”

Grantaire grinned at him. “I’m sorry kid, but have you not seen Enjolras? I don’t think if you are straight; you’d flirt with him too.”

“Not everyone has the same taste as you. I’ve never flirted with Enjolras,” Courfeyrac said.

“That’s just because I called dibs and you’re a good friend.”

“He’s also not my type.”

“I call shenanigans. The man is fucking flawless; he’s everybody’s type.”

Courfeyrac coughed something that sounded like ‘crazy eyes’ and Marius laughed.

“So…you’re both queer?” Marius asked. He didn’t sound upset, just oddly fascinated.

“Kind of,” Courfeyrac said, confusing the poor kid once more. “We like girls too.”

“They’re just not terribly fond of us,” Grantaire added with a wink.

“Speak for yourself.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware you’d suddenly had a run of luck. Wasn’t the last girl you dated only trying to get you to write her comp final for her?”

Courfeyrac laughed it off, but he really wished Grantaire hadn’t brought that up in front of Marius.

They’d reached Courfeyrac’s car, a beat up old Volvo, and after quickly loading Marius’ things into the trunk, Courfeyrac and Marius climbed up front and Grantaire dropped gracelessly into the
“Do you need me to drop you anywhere?” Courfeyrac asked.

Grantaire waved one of his hands dismissively. “I’ve got no plans. I’ll just hang with you guys. Further reassure Mickey here that you’re not a serial killer.”

“It’s Marius.”

“Kay. I only remembered that it started with M. I’m Grantaire, by the way.”

“Oh, and I’m Courfeyrac.” He couldn’t actually remember if he’d bothered introducing himself. “I’m doing a double major in theater and history. Grantaire’s one of the art kids, though I think you can probably tell by looking at him.”

“Fuck off. I don’t dress like one of those pretentious blowhards.”

Courfeyrac mouthed ‘dirty hipster’ and, laughing, Marius nodded his agreement. A raised middle finger shot up from the backseat, indicating that Grantaire had noticed the insult. “I saw that, oh skinny-jeans-clad hypocrite.”

As Courfeyrac really did live remarkably close to school, it was a very quick drive to his place. He was soon pulling into a narrow gravel drive, and then the three of them were carting Marius’ things up a rickety old staircase to his third floor apartment. They set Marius’ things in the living room, and then Courfeyrac gave him a short tour while Grantaire raided the fridge.

“Right, so it’s only a one-bedroom, but it’s a good size. Bathroom’s off the kitchen, for some weird reason. I think the whole place used to be one big house, and then the new owner decided to carve it into smaller apartments or something. But I have a couch and a futon in the living room, so you can claim either one of them as your bed, and look-we’ve got a porch. Very handy, since Grantaire the not-a-pretentious-hipster-douche art kid smokes cloves constantly and stinks up the place.”

“I told you to fuck off! I’m not a hipster!”

Marius grinned. “He, er, spends a lot of time here?”

“I have a hard time getting rid of him, yeah. The useful thing about hipsters though, is that you can clear them out by playing a Clear Channel radio station. He bolts at the first notes of a Kesha song.”

Courfeyrac had been showing Marius the futon and the sofa, and so they were back in the living room. Grantaire came charging in from the kitchen, ready to defend his non-hipster credentials, but he happened to be clutching a beer he’d stolen from the fridge, and as it was an artisan brew from a local bar he completely defeated his own point. Courfeyrac and Marius burst into laughter, and Grantaire flipped them off as he went out on the porch to smoke.

“He’s a strange kid, isn’t he?” Marius observed.

“He likes to pretend he’s a bastard, but Grantaire’s a good guy. He’s just a little fucked up.” Courfeyrac shrugged. Marius still looked concerned, so he clapped a hand on his shoulder in a comforting gesture. “You’ll get used to it eventually. Y’know, now that you’re in the group.”

“Group? What group?”

“Our group,” Courfeyrac said simply. “You’re one of us now.”
“Gooble gobble!” Grantaire called from the porch. The poor kid looked thoroughly lost.

“It’s a good thing. Trust me, Marius. We’re the cool kids. Everyone wants to be friends with us. I’ve got to head back to campus for that last class. Are you going to be alright, settling in and everything?”

“I…I guess so. Um…you don’t feel weird, leaving me alone in your house?”

“Nah.” Courfeyrac went to put his shoes back on, and then something occurred to him. “Actually, would you mind keeping an eye on Grantaire for me until I get back?”

“What does that entail?”

“Try not to let him drink any more of my booze, and don’t let him bring the cigarettes inside. That asshole’s determined to destroy my security deposit.”

“Alright. I’ll do my best.”

Courfeyrac ran over to the porch and leaned out the door. “Don’t take advantage of Marius.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Grantaire assured him, looking much less than trustworthy.

Courfeyrac let out a melodramatic sigh. “Come on, dude. He’s like a puppy. He’d probably believe you if you tried to tell him I let you smoke pot but not ciggs because it’s ‘natural’.”

“You should let me smoke pot in the house. It’s fucking freezing out here. You’re a horrible host, Courfeyrac.”

“You’re a horrible person.” Courfeyrac shut the porch door and turned back to Marius, who was busily removing layers of clothing that he’d padded himself with in an effort to bring as much as he could from his grandfather’s house with him. Courfeyrac stopped in his tracks and noted with pleasure that Marius looked incredible in a thin t-shirt. His new roommate was fucking gorgeous.

“Hey, Marius. Don’t believe anything Grantaire tells you.”

“Um…can I just apologize in advance for whatever happens?”

Courfeyrac smiled and squeezed his shoulder again. “Don’t worry roomie; I won’t blame you. See you in a couple hours.”

“Yeah, uh, have a good class.”
“That’s a weird apology.”

Grantaire stared up at Marius. “You know, you don’t have to talk to me if you don’t want to.”

“What makes you think I-”

“I can tell I’m making you uncomfortable. I don’t care if we kill time doing separate things. Courfeyrac doesn’t really intend for you to babysit me.”

Marius sat down on the sofa, posture stiff, and tapped his hands anxiously against his knees. “I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone like you, Grantaire.”

“Yes, well, I am one of a kind. So, therefore, not a hipster. Those stupid twats are a dime a dozen.”

Grantaire texted Enjolras back, then frowned when he got his next answer. “Drat. Turns out I’ve only been downgraded to a dissection.”

“Is it weird if I ask which one was Enjolras?”

“Nope. He was the cute blonde who was yelling at me.” Grantaire looked for a picture in his phone and then held it up for Marius to see. Marius leaned forward and peered at the little screen.

“Oh. I think he was in my lit class last semester. Is he the kind of guy to out-lecture a professor?”

Grantaire burst out into laughter and nodded.

Marius smirked. “It was definitely him then. Our poor professor was adjunct, and I think he was still a grad student himself. He was trying so hard, but the guy was inexperienced and Enjolras…”

“Tore him a new one if he made the slightest mistake?”

Still smirking, Marius nodded. “He’s awfully intense. Seems, um, this probably isn’t my place to say anything, but he seems like a weird choice for a crush from someone like you.”

Grantaire took another long drink of wine, not sure if he wanted to be offended by that or not. He finally settled on changing the subject. “So what about you, kiddo? You got any crushes or flings going on?”

Marius shook his head. “I’m not really very social.”

“Well that’s about to change. Legle and Courfeyrac seem to have decided to adopt you. We’ll fill up your time, no problem. It’s a bit of a sausage fest though, so if you’re into chicks we probably won’t be much help.”

Marius smiled good-naturedly. “That’s alright. Courfeyrac’s giving me a place to live. It wouldn’t be terribly realistic to expect him to find me a girlfriend too.”

“So you’re straight?” Grantaire prodded.

Marius shrugged. “Haven’t really thought about it before, so I suppose that means I am. I’ve only liked girls so far.”

“Ah.” Grantaire let out a bit of a sigh. Courfeyrac was going to be disappointed. But at least Grantaire could go back to picking on his friend in front of their new pretty boy without feeling guilty. And, on the plus side, the new pretty boy really was enough of a puppy not to have noticed the way Courfeyrac had been looking at him.
That earned Marius a few points of esteem from Grantaire. One of the most awkward parts of coming out to his friends had been having to repeatedly reassure everyone he wasn’t in love or lust with them (well, excepting Enjolras, obviously). The presence of a straight boy obtuse enough not to even consider the possibility of bi boys checking him out was rather refreshing.

Marius took a laptop from his messenger bag and extracted a few notebooks. “Does Courfeyrac have wireless?”

“Well. Shit…what’d he change the password to this time? I think it’s Stoppiggybackingleech. If that’s not it, try it with a couple of zeroes at the end.”

Marius snorted, but typed it in and successfully connected to Courfeyrac’s wireless. “I’ve just got to email a few of my professors and let them know why I missed class today.”

“If you’ve got any homework you were hoping to get done I suggest you do it before Courfeyrac gets back. He’s going to want to drag you out to Brammer Street with us.”

“Where’s that?”

“It’s this little café a couple towns over. They do open mics on Thursdays and one of our friends is the featured poet tonight. Normally we hang out at the Musain, which I much prefer as it’s stumbling distance from my squalid little hole of a studio, but we’re all going out to support Jehan and buy his chap book.”

“I’ve never been to an open mic before,” Marius said, looking up from his computer screen with a naïve kind of enthusiasm. “What are they like?”

“Intentionally offbeat, which is the worst kind of offbeat, in my opinion. Everyone’s pretentious, and brazenly leftist, and looking for reasons to be pissed off and full of themselves. There are senile old beatniks who don’t realize what caricatures they are, and insipid little teenagers trying so hard to rebel that they fit in perfectly. And all your friends kick you if you happen to fall asleep.”

“Oh. Well that doesn’t sound like much fun.”

“It’s not, but you should go anyway. Jehan’s not bad, for a poet.”

Despite Grantaire’s less-than-glowing commentary on open mics, Marius took his advice and got his studying out of the way. He even took the time to run a brush through his hair and neaten his appearance a little before Courfeyrac got back. When Courfeyrac opened the door he found Marius perched on the sofa reading through a book of Ginsberg that he’d borrowed off of a bookshelf in preparation for the open mic, and Grantaire slouched on the floor halfway through the bottle of wine.

“That was for cooking, you know.”

“It’s good for drinking too. You know.”

“You know Grantaire, you have a bit of a problem.”

“I have a lot of problems. This one’s my favorite.” Grantaire saluted him with the wine bottle and took another long drink. Courfeyrac rolled his eyes, but refrained from pressing the issue. “I told the puppy about Jehan’s feature. He wants to come with.”

“Oh, excellent!” Courfeyrac’s face lit up. “Do you like poetry, Marius?”

“A little. I don’t know much about it.”
“You should read something!”

“I don’t, I mean, I’ve never written any.”

Courfeyrac waved him off. “People read other peoples’ poems all the time. Jehan’ll pick out a good one for you. Come on, it’s fun!”

“Careful, Marius. Enthusiasm is terribly catching. Before you know it they’ll have you caring about ideals, and art, and political issues, and making a proper ass of yourself in public,” Grantaire warned.

“Do you want me to leave you here?” Courfeyrac asked, a touch of exasperation in his tone.

“Unsupervised?” Grantaire asked, insolent smirk stained red from the wine.

Courfeyrac hauled him up by the collar of his sweatshirt and started pushing him towards the door. “Come on, move your feet. And leave the damn bottle on the table! I already told you, no more open containers in my car!”

Brammer Street was definitely not Grantaire’s scene. It was small, crowded, and far too proud of itself for not being big business. They served weird ass beers Grantaire had never heard of, and even their coffee was difficult for an outsider to navigate.

Marius was at the counter for nearly five minutes before he figured out how to order a medium black iced coffee. At least he hadn’t made the mistake of attempting Starbucks jargon. Bahorel had tried that his first visit, and some of the baristas still teased him for it.

Eponine was working the counter, so thankfully Grantaire could dispense with bullshit and have a straightforward transaction. He gave Eponine money, and she gave him alcohol, though technically she was supposed to run and get one of the other baristas instead. Eponine was the only high school girl who worked at the café, and as such she wasn’t supposed to be serving anything stronger than espresso.

Grantaire took his bottle, that for all its fancy labeling still tasted remarkably similar to a Budweiser, and started for one of the few open tables, when he felt a tugging on his sweatshirt. He turned around and regarded Eponine with a raised eyebrow. “Yes?”

“Who’s the new kid?” Eponine asked, tilting her head towards where Marius was being preyed on by Jehan, Courfeyrac, and at least four volumes of poetry.

“Some stray from the university that Courf’s been goodly enough to take in. Why?”

“Why do you think? He’s cute.”

Grantaire looked Marius over again, trying to see whatever it was Courfeyrac (and apparently Eponine) saw in the kid. Yes, he was nice looking…but he was also painfully nice. “I don’t much care for puppies.”

“Mm, everyone knows you prefer marble. Even if it’ll freeze your prick right off if you get too close.”

“My dear Ponine, who ever taught you how to talk to customers? Don’t you know you’re liable to offend someone?” Grantaire asked. He dropped a twenty in the tip jar and watched with approval as
Eponine fished it out and shoved it down her bra. He winked at her and she blew him a kiss.
“Seriously though, that was a horrible mental image.”

“Would that be because Enjy threatens to castrate you at least once a conversation?”

“Does he know you call him Enjy?”

“He just walked in. Why don’t you go ask him? I could use a good show, and I know better than to expect much from these bored rich kids who think they’re so Bohemian.”

“I already gave you a twenty. You can stop being clever now.”

Eponine waved another beer in front of him enticingly. He snatched it, and gave her a ten that joined the twenty snugly in her cleavage.

Grantaire ambled over to the doorway, where Enjolras was standing aloofly, doing his best to discourage the attentions from the few regulars who didn’t already know better with a damned impressive glare. One poor girl, who was probably Eponine’s age, was rushing away from Enjolras towards the bathroom. She looked like she might actually cry. A skinny slip of a thing with chestnut hair and a floral dress ran after the girl to make sure she was alright.

Grantaire shoved Feuilly out of the way and straddled a chair at a table next to where Enjolras was brooding. Before he could open his mouth Enjolras rolled his eyes. “Are you drunk already?”

“I was already buzzed at school, and that was hours ago. Are you really surprised?”

“Sadly, no. I just get stupidly hopeful from time to time, even though you are determined to meet expectations. Are you going to be able to behave yourself, Grantaire? Jehan’s reading for a half hour.”

Grantaire scowled. “I know. And he doesn’t even go on right away. First we’ve got to listen to all these stupid twats publicly jerk off about how special and deep they are. But I promise, I won’t ruin our poet’s night. I’ll even buy his crappy little book.”

Somehow, that answer didn’t seem to appease Enjolras, even though Grantaire meant it sincerely. He wished Jehan the best, and wouldn’t dream of making a scene during his big night. This was only Jehan’s second feature, and his first chap book. Talented though he was, making a living as a professional poet was going to be an uphill battle at best. He needed to make the most of these opportunities, network to the best of his ability, and hopefully he’d get into a decent grad program and go from there. His friends hoped for the best, all proud of Jehan for following through on his dreams even when success seemed such a remote possibility. But then, Courfeyrac and Joly had both promised Jehan a bed in the basement of their houses if it all went to hell, so in Grantaire’s mind it really wasn’t a complete gamble.

At any rate, Enjolras took a seat at Grantaire’s table and kept a mean glare fixed on him whenever he tried to speak.

Marguerite, an elderly poet with frizzy gray hair and friendly eyes who was always covered in cat hair, opened the night with a welcome so sincere that even Grantaire had a hard time complaining about her. Despite himself, he actually liked Marguerite. She was too good a person not to, and her sincerity went a long way in reigning in the pretensions in the crowd. She was also a published poet and an English professor, and she’d offered to write Jehan a letter of recommendation when it was time to apply to grad programs, so there was that.

“Well, we’ve certainly got a full crowd in here tonight,” Marguerite observed. “Our invasion from
the Student Revolution continues.” Almost everyone laughed good-naturedly, but a few of the old beats rolled their eyes and grumbled under their breaths. Apparently this particular open mic had been the domain of an old guard that resented new blood, and was accordingly literally dying out as its regulars bit the dust. Then Jehan had discovered the place, dragged Combeferre, Enjolras, and Courfeyrac to a few readings, and now the place was bursting with college kids. Marguerite and the baristas were happy, as new blood meant new poets for the good old woman to mentor, and new blood kept the place in business, which meant more paychecks for the baristas.

Even though Grantaire never participated beyond clapping for his friends, he was glad to note that his very presence annoyed some of the old Kerouac-wannabe bastards.

“I’m sure you’re all eager to get to our feature, the lovely, talented, and humble Jehan Prouvaire. Seriously ladies and gents, this one’s a rising star and we’ve got to enjoy him while we have him. Show your appreciation when the tip basket comes around, and make sure you buy his chap book, the Ramblings of ABC.” Marguerite was momentarily drowned out by applause and shouts from Jehan’s supporters. She stood back from the mic to clap for Jehan as well, and then resumed her introduction. “Sign-ups are on the chalkboard to my left. We’ve still got a few open spots, and we’d be happy to hear from any and all of you. You get five minutes to do whatever you want, but if you go over you’ll be at Eponine’s mercy, and the dear girl does have a way of getting the stage clear.”

Eponine saluted Marguerite, her other hand perched saucily on her hip.

“Alright, first up tonight’s a new one. Everyone make some noise for Cosette Fauchelevent!” The girl from earlier, with the chestnut hair and the floral dress, walked up to the mic and gave them a shy smile. Her blue eyes looked almost too large for her head, but they were thankfully pretty. Grantaire looked her over in appreciation, lamenting the fact that she was probably still in high school.

“Hello everyone. I, um, hadn’t realized I’d signed up for the first spot. I’m afraid I won’t be using my entire five minutes as I’m completely new to this poetry business. I just wanted to read a quick poem I wrote about my Papa.” The girl’s face was bright red, and her eyes kept flitting to something just to the left of her. Grantaire barely heard a word of her poem, cute and sappy thing that it was, such was his curiosity about what was distracting Cosette so badly.

He leaned so far over that he almost fell off his stool, but he was finally able to pick out the object to the left that was in Cosette’s line of sight; a shell shocked looking Marius. Grantaire laughed under his breath and righted his posture on the stool.


“I think our new puppy likes high school girls,” Grantaire said with a chuckle. He motioned to the staring contest Marius and Cosette were unwittingly participating in, and Enjolras inclined his head in a slight nod. Cosette didn’t seem to notice that she’d finished her one poem, and she ate into her five minutes blushing at Marius. Marguerite rescued her, and then Cosette was followed by a string of poets who couldn’t hope to be half as interesting.

Then Marguerite called Marius up to the stage, singling him out as another newcomer and urging everyone to give him a loud welcome. Marius tried to back out, but he was prodded forward by Courfeyrac and Bahorel.

“Er, um, hi. I’m not actually a poet, but my friends said that, that people read other peoples’ poems sometimes and, well…anyway, they told me to read this one because Grantaire would like it, and they figured he must be bored by now.”
“Absolutely fucking right you are, Marius!” Grantaire yelled from the back.

Looking more confident for the obnoxious hollering, Marius began his poem. “To Whoever Set my Truck on Fire. But let us be friends awhile and understand our differences…”

The poem was completely up Grantaire’s alley, and he made a mental note to thank Courfeyrac for selecting it at the first available opportunity. Marius did a nice job reading it. The puppy had a lovely, yipping little bark, and he certainly made his new friends proud going through his paces up on the stage like that.

Grantaire took a break from the stifling atmosphere of artistic achievement after that and went outside for a smoke. He was a bit surprised to see Eponine walking around the back of the building, but he figured the girl was probably on break and had stepped outside for some air. He staggered after her down a little alley. “Hey, Ponine…oh, ’scuse me.”

Eponine was in the process of some sort of illicit transaction with a kid who managed to be incredibly seedy looking while still being well groomed and dressed nicely. It was something in his eyes that gave it away; something dead looking.

Eponine shoved the bag of whatever she’d bought in her pocket, face going red. “That wasn’t my tip money you just used, was it?” Grantaire asked.

“What’s it to you, asshole?” the dealer snapped.

“Montparnasse, be nice. He’s a friend. Well, kind of.” That news didn’t seem to make the kid look any happier, but Eponine pretended not to notice as she sidled up to Grantaire with a friendly, but thoroughly insincere smile on her full lips. “You did actually pay for this, so it only seems fair to offer you a hit. I know you drink like a fish. Is there anything else you’re interested in?”

Grantaire frowned at her. “For god’s sake Eponine, aren’t you like fifteen?”

“Seventeen, actually. And you’re being awfully high and mighty. Just how old were you when you started getting black-out drunk, hm? To hold it the way you do now, you must have started ages ago.”

“This is different.”

“It’s just coke, Grantaire. Try some before you judge me.” She turned back to her dealer and bought another bag. Grantaire tried to edge away from her, but she was sober and nimble and had a startlingly strong grip. She shoved the bag down his pants pocket before he could pry her off of him.

“Eponine…”

“Then give it back to me if you don’t want it. I’ll make use of it.”

“Sure she will,” Montparnasse said with a sly grin that turned Grantaire’s stomach. He came up behind Eponine and placed a possessive hand on her hip.

Grantaire threw his cigarette into a snow bank, turned, and stalked back into the café.

Enjolras leaned across the table and gently prodded Grantaire’s arm. “You know, when you promised to be well-behaved…I know I’m going to regret saying this, Grantaire, but I didn’t actually
expect you to be silent.”

Grantaire offered him a tipsy grin, but his eyes were troubled. “I happen to be enraptured by Jehan’s artistic…whatever. Now leave me alone so I can listen.”

“If you insist.” Enjolras tried to get back into his friend’s poetry, but as the next poem was half in Japanese he found his attention wandering again in no time. Normally he enjoyed listening to Jehan’s work. Enjolras was no poet himself, but Jehan’s love of his art form was catching, and his enthusiasm was usually enough to win others over.

The thing was, Grantaire had come back from his cigarette break looking like a wounded animal, and the fact that he’d kept mostly silent since then was a bad sign. Normally it was a task to keep Grantaire quiet; something must have really gotten under his skin.

When the next poem turned out to be a sweeping metaphor built in too much Buddhist jargon for Enjolras to make heads or tails of it, he admitted defeat and reached into his bag for a notebook. He ripped off a piece of paper, scrawled a quick note, and slid it across the table to Grantaire.

The note read: I wouldn’t really dissect you.

Grantaire smiled stupidly and mouthed ‘I know.’ The smile only lasted a moment though, and then Grantaire was back to moodily staring straight ahead, one hand absently brushing against his pocket.

Enjolras tried again. He wrote an instruction to smile and scribbled a lopsided happy face underneath it.

Grantaire laughed, then took Enjolras’ pen and drew a quick sketch of the two of them traipsing through a field of daisies. He wrote ‘better?’ and threw a mockingly innocent expression Enjolras’ way. Enjolras stuffed the paper back into his bag, but he was smiling.

At this point, he’d amassed quite the collection of Grantaire-doodles, though they generally weren’t as innocent as skipping through daisies.

After Jehan finished his reading the friends lingered in the café for another twenty minutes, giving him the opportunity to sell as many copies of his chap book as possible. Enjolras already had one tucked in between his laptop and his Europe in the Age of Enlightenment text, but he bought another copy anyway, figuring he could give it to some interested party at the Honor’s conference in the spring.

It was turning out to be a rather fantastic night. Everyone was toasting Jehan for a stunning poetic triumph, Marius was settling in nicely to their group of friends, and no one had made a scene…

Perhaps it was too early for an observation like that. Enjolras looked back towards the counter and noticed Grantaire trading heated words with the youngest of the baristas, who definitely didn’t seem to appreciate his attentions if the scowl on her face was any indication. Enjolras grabbed the drunkard by the arm and steered him away.

“Excuse me miss.” Then he turned to Grantaire. “What the hell’s the matter with you? A high school girl? Really, Grantaire? Are you that desperate?”

“Oh go fuck yourself, you icy bastard,” Grantaire snapped. He yanked his arm out of Enjolras’ grip and stalked outside.

Enjolras shook it off, then returned to his friends. “Guys, I think we’re overstaying our welcome. The owners of the establishment might want to close it.”
“Oh, shit, you’re right!” Jehan yelled. “They were supposed to close a half an hour ago.”

“It’s okay, boys. Didn’t want to interrupt your sales,” the barista Grantaire had been hassling said with a pretty smirk. “However, if you wanted to make it up to us…” She nudged the tip cup forward with her elbow.

The students all rushed to throw a few bills into the cup before hurriedly pulling their jackets and sweatshirts back on. Enjolras dropped a ten into the cup and apologized again for Grantaire. For some reason, his comments seemed to really amuse the barista.

“Has anyone seen Grantaire?” Courfeyrac called. “He rode in with me and Marius, so he doesn’t have a way home.”

“I saw Enjolras chase him out of the café about ten minutes ago,” Bahorel answered.

“I did not chase him!” Enjolras insisted. The students made various noises of contradiction in answer, but they were mostly long suffering sighs and incredulous snorts.

“Well you were the last one to see him so he’s your responsibility now. Just call his cell and pick him up from whatever liquor store he’s stumbled over to, okay?” Courfeyrac instructed.

“I have an eight am class. I need to get home!”

“I’ve got a seven thirty and I didn’t piss him off and send him running. If you don’t find him then he’s stumbling home.”

“Let him,” Enjolras snapped. Then he noticed that it was flurrying. He grumbled some swears under his breath while he fished his phone from his pocket.

Courfeyrac grinned broadly and started for his Volvo, a concerned Marius at his heels babbling about how they couldn’t expect Grantaire to walk home in the snow. “Don’t worry, Marius. Enjolras will look after Grantaire. He always does.”

“Hang me if I know why,” Enjolras grumbled. But he was able to ascertain from text that Grantaire was only a few streets away buying cigarettes from a convenience store. He hopped into his Prius and set off to pick up the useless ass.

Chapter End Notes

Gooble Gobble is a reference to the Tod Browning 1932 classic movie Freaks. To Whoever Set my Truck on Fire is a real poem, by Steve Scafidi, and is easily obtained through google. I suggest looking it up, as it is absolutely hilarious (and I do think Grantaire would enjoy it)
Chapter Summary

Marius and Courfeyrac bond after an awkward conversation.

Enjolras and Grantaire come together ever so briefly...

Grantaire was leaning against the wall of the convenience store when Enjolras pulled into the parking lot. The light flurries had turned into wet, heavy snow, as he’d known they would, and the stupid ass didn’t even have his sweatshirt zipped.


“I just bought it. Can’t I finish it?” Grantaire asked. Either his lips were trembling to accentuate his pout in an attempt at humor, or he really was that cold. Enjolras glared at him, and he reluctantly tossed the cigarette into a puddle of slush.

He then proceeded to track as much snow and slush as possible into Enjolras’ immaculately clean car. Enjolras ignored the obvious provocation and pulled back out onto the street. He turned the heat up though, as Grantaire was still very much shivering.

“With all the cigarettes you’ve made me toss, you must owe me at least a carton by now,” Grantaire grumbled.

“Cigarettes stink, Grantaire. Besides, it’s a disgusting habit. All cigarettes do is kill you.”

“Oh come on Enj, we both know my liver’s going to crap out well before my lungs.”

“How can you speak so calmly about such terrible things?”

Grantaire shrugged. “S’just who I am, I suppose. So how was Eponine?”

“Eponine…?”

“The barista whose honor you so stoutly defended against me,” Grantaire said with a snort. “I knew you didn’t know her name. She calls you Enjy, by the way.”

“Huh. Um, well, we all tipped her for keeping her from closing. She seemed happy enough after that.”

“That girl’s a mercenary. I bet she makes a killing in tips.” Grantaire leaned his head against the window and let his eyes fall shut. “I barely talk to her, really. She only sees me when Jehan drags us out to that miserable little dump.”

“Clearly she’s got a good mind for names and faces,” Enjolras said, with no clear idea what Grantaire was getting at.

Grantaire snorted. “Because she remembered you? Nah, Enjolras, you stand out. You command attention. Me, on the other hand. I’m dismissed pathetically easily unless I make a nuisance of
myself. It’s no surprise that she noticed you. What’s bothering me is that even she thinks I have a drinking problem. Some stupid little teenage bitch that I barely even talk to. I’m certainly never tipping her again.”

“Grantaire…don’t you think that if near strangers are saying it, it might be time to reexamine your life?” Enjolras asked softly.

Grantaire gave a little moan and shook his head. “I know I drink a lot, but it’s not a problem because I like life better this way. Hurts too much the other way.”

Enjolras cast a pained look Grantaire’s way (one he did not see, as his eyes were still closed), and then returned his attention to the increasingly slippery roads. He needed to keep his focus; Priuses weren’t good in the snow. However, he couldn’t just let this conversation go. Not when they were finally getting somewhere.

“Why is it painful?”

“Hm?”

“Grantaire, why is sobriety painful?”

Grantaire snorted. “You wouldn’t get it. Rich, pampered little golden boy. Good at everything. Fucking perfect creature that you are. For us lowly mortals, mere existence is a struggle.”

“I am not…” Enjolras sucked in a deep breath. That was more deflection. Grantaire wanted Enjolras to defend himself from the ridiculous charge of perfection instead of focusing on what he really wanted to get at. “Fine. I’m not struggling as much as you are. Is there anything I can do to help you?”

Grantaire made a dismissive noise and wriggled in his seat, pressing more of his forehead against the window. His bangs were plastered to his forehead with sweat. Frowning, Enjolras pulled to the side of the road, parked the car, then leaned over and touched Grantaire’s forehead. “You’re burning up. You idiot. Didn’t you notice it’s winter? Why didn’t you wear something heavier than a sweatshirt today?”

“Dunno…couldn’t find my coat.”

“Do you have any aspirin or fever breakers or anything at your studio?” Enjolras asked, pretty sure he already knew the answer.

Grantaire smiled, his crooked bottom teeth visible with his slightly delusional looking mirth. “Actually Enjolras, my medicine cabinet is in an appalling state. You’d expect better of me, wouldn’t you?”

“Well, thankfully you’re not that kind of addict,” Enjolras mumbled, adding a silent ‘yet’ to it. He pulled back onto the street and changed courses, heading for one of the old money neighborhoods by the oceanfront.

“Where the hell’re we going?” Grantaire asked.

“To my place. I can’t in good conscience drop you at your diseased little deathtrap when you’re sick like this. I’ll give you some medicine, you can crash on my couch, and I’ll drop you at your place on my way to class in the morning.”

“But Enj, you take morning classes! I don’t want to get up at ten!”
Enjolras furrowed his brow and cast Grantaire a sidelong glance. “Ten counts as a morning class for you?”

“…what’s a morning class for you?”

“Eight.”

“Fucking horseshit! I haven’t taken an eight am class since I was a freshman! What the fuck are you doing in an eight am class when you’re a junior?” Grantaire croaked, an endearing amount of vehemence to his exclamation.

“That’s the only time Europe in the Age of the Enlightenment ran,” Enjolras said defensively. Grantaire made some disparaging comments about Enjolras’ academic enthusiasm, but he didn’t otherwise object to the plan.

Enjolras was quietly relieved to get his car parked in the driveway, though he wasn’t looking forward to clearing it off in the morning. Then began a new ordeal; helping a disoriented drunk get up the stairs and into his owner occupied apartment without waking his landlords. Grantaire was a worryingly warm dead weight at his side, flopping uselessly as soon as his sneakers touched the first patch of black ice. Enjolras kept his arm clamped firmly around his friend and they made their slow, horribly uncomfortable progress to the apartment.

They tracked a fair bit of slush into the living room, but Enjolras would worry about that later. Grantaire was struggling to stay on his feet as it was; it was best to let him just drop into an armchair first thing. Enjolras kicked his own boots off, then helped Grantaire divest himself of sneakers and peel off his wet sweatshirt. He was wearing a threadbare t-shirt underneath it, and Enjolras wanted to scream in frustration. “For fuck’s sake Grantaire, it’s January and you live in New England. Don’t you have any sweaters? Or at least a long sleeved shirt?”

Grantaire rubbed at his nose with the back of his hand. “Do I have any clean ones is the better question.”

Enjolras grabbed a blanket off of his couch, chucked it over Grantaire, then went off in search of his thermometer and some medicine.

“Do you think we should text Grantaire, just in case Enjolras doesn’t find him?” Marius asked.

Courfeyrac laughed and shook his head. “I promise you, it’ll be fine. Enjolras will take care of him. It’s what he does.”

Marius tapped his fingers against his knee and glanced out the car window thoughtfully. “Are you sure? I mean, I know they’re your friends and that you know them better than I do…but it doesn’t…it kind of looks like Enjolras hates Grantaire.”

Courfeyrac laughed. “Yeah, I remember when I thought it looked that way too. But that’s not what it is. It’s a complicated dance, I’ll give you that…but they’re gravitating towards each other. Everyone can tell. Well, everyone but them, anyway. Grantaire wants it to happen so bad that he keeps fucking it up and delaying the inevitable, but Enjolras really seems to have no clue.”

“I don’t know if that’s what love looks like, Courfeyrac. I thought when people were destined for each other that they were a little more…romantic?”
Courfeyrac shrugged. “Normal people, maybe. And maybe Enjolras will get a little nicer once he realizes he loves Grantaire back.”

“You really think they’re in love?” Marius asked. “You’re not just making fun of me somehow?”

“There are little signs, Marius. You’ll start to see them eventually. For example, you did notice that they sat together all night?”

“Yes…”

“They always sit together,” Courfeyrac said. “Even though Enjolras complains, he never gets up and leaves. Even though he knows Grantaire just hassles him because he wants the attention, he always gives it to him. If he really wanted to discourage Grantaire he could do it.”

“Is he gay too then?”

“Now that’s a better question,” Courfeyrac said, looking thoughtful. “I have no doubt in my mind that Enjolras has romantic feelings for Grantaire. Sexual though…the guy’s just not wired the like the rest of us. I don’t know if he’s noticed he’s even got genitals.”

Marius’ face turned red and he looked determinedly back out the window. Courfeyrac chuckled at his obvious discomfort. “Enjolras certainly isn’t attracted to women. He chases away female suitors very efficiently. He hasn’t chased Grantaire away though, and that makes me think that when his sex drive does finally wake up he’ll make our little cynic the happiest hipster alive.”

“Well, one can only hope,” Marius murmured. “It’d be nice to see Grantaire happy. He’s an odd kid, but I like him anyway.”

“Me too,” Courfeyrac readily agreed. “So how are you enjoying membership in our Student Revolution?”

“I like it so far,” Marius said, wearing an adorable smile. “I’ve never hung out with guys my own age before. It’s pretty cool.”

“Why not?” Courfeyrac asked. “You’re a nice guy. I’d have thought you’d have been popular in high school.”

“My grandfather had me homeschooled,” Marius explained. Courfeyrac nodded, guessing that that had a lot to do with Marius being so open and trusting while also coming across as incredibly sheltered. “And we didn’t spend any time with other people with kids. Up until I went to college it was just me, Grandfather, and my aunt. Well, we’d go to the senior center once a week so my aunt could play bingo and my grandfather could complain about politics with a bunch of other mean spirited old men, and that’s pretty much the extent of my social interactions until freshman orientation.”

“Wow. Well that sucks.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Was that why you had the falling out then? Because you let out a ‘fuck you’ that had been bottled up for the last twenty odd years?”

Marius smiled sadly and shook his head. “I wish. No, I…I found out that…I’d always thought I was an orphan, and that that was why I was living with my grandfather. But I bumped into one of my dad’s old friends last week and he told me that not only was my father alive up until last spring, but
that he wanted me.”

“So why weren’t you living with your dad then? I’d think it’d have been easy enough for him to get custody of you.”

“He was a veteran, and he got pretty screwed up from serving. He had PTSD, and he sort of lost it when he found out my mom had died while he was overseas. By the time he got himself sorted out, he’d already lost custody of me and Grandfather fought to keep it. The old gent never liked my dad, so he did everything he could to keep us apart. I’ve lived my entire life with a miserable, selfish old man with a hole where he should have a heart, and all the while my father wanted to be with me. I’ll never forgive my grandfather.”

“Marius, that’s terrible! If the roads weren’t so shitty I’d say we should get McFlurries and drive around listening to awful music until we both felt better. But as it is rather dangerous we’re going to have to get back to the apartment as quickly as possible.” Courfeyrac frowned as something else occurred to him. “Can you get my phone out of my bag and make sure I turned the volume back on after Jehan’s feature?”

“Sure. Are you expecting a call?” Marius asked.

“Not exactly…but Enjolras always says his car is shit in the snow, and Bossuet has the kind of luck that’d get him run over by a plow. I want my phone on in case one of the other guys needs help.”

“You’ve got a text from Grantaire. Should I open it?”

“Sure. Fuck. Enjolras didn’t ditch him in a snow bank or something, did he?” Marius looked up from the phone. “I thought you said Enjolras always took care of Grantaire.”

“Generally he does, but he has limits. Grantaire’s got a unique talent for finding them.”

“Ah.” Marius finally read the text, and he frowned at it, expression undeniably troubled. They’d just hit a red light, so Courfeyrac had the leisure to study his discomfited expression.

“What is it?”

“Um…Grantaire texted you to let you know that I’m straight. He threw in a frowny face.”

Courfeyrac’s eyes went wide, then he turned his attention back to the road. “Hm. How ‘bout that.”

“He did ask me about it earlier, but I thought he was just making conversation. Did you ask him to find out?” Marius asked, voice tight and posture a bit guarded.

“I definitely did not do that. I, uh…look, Marius, you’re very pretty, that’s all. I was checking you out a little, and Grantaire must have noticed.”

“Is that why you invited me to live with you?”

“I invited you to live with me because you needed help. For god’s sake, just because I think you’re cute doesn’t mean I’m going to jump you. If you’re straight, you’re straight. I have a lot of straight friends and I don’t sexually harass them, okay?”

Marius chewed on his lip and turned to look out the window. He was silent for the rest of the ride home, and even Courfeyrac, who usually knew how to smooth over a bad conversation, couldn’t think of what to say to fix this. Marius had just opened up to him about a deeply personal pain, and
the very next beat of their conversation had made Courfeyrac look like an opportunistic sleaze.

It was absolutely disgusting out by the time Courfeyrac maneuvered the Volvo into the driveway. He definitely wasn’t looking forward to the trek over to the porch, and regretted his choice of footwear. Damn ever-changing New England weather.

And then there was the lost looking guy sitting in his passenger seat, still holding Courfeyrac’s phone and idly running a thumb over it while he chewed on his lower lip.

“I’m sorry,” they both said, at exactly the same time.

“Marius, you don’t have anything to be sorry over,” Courfeyrac said.

“Sure I do. I offended you, and you’ve been nothing but good to me so far. I didn’t mean to be insensitive. I’ve just never hung around with gay kids before. Or even straight kids. I’m probably going to put my foot in my mouth kind of a lot.”

Courfeyrac squeezed his shoulder. “That’s fine. I was just embarrassed, honestly. I, um, get rejected rather a lot. I’m everyone’s friend, but no one’s…so yeah. It kind of sucked to get found out and shot down when my crush only lasted a night. But it’s fine. I bounce back easily. I used to have a crush on Grantaire too, and we’re great friends now.”

“You had a crush on Grantaire?” Marius asked, looking incredulous.

Courfeyrac felt his face flush. “It was years ago, back when we were in high school. He wasn’t so bitter then. He used to be really happy.” He let out a small sigh, and privately ached for the friend he had a hard time even remembering anymore.

“I wish I had known him in high school then,” Marius said. “I mean, I like him now. But he’s a little…moody.”

“Understatement of the fucking year. C’mon, let’s get the trek upstairs over with. School never cancels when they should, so I’ve still probably got a seven thirty class to be coherent for.”

“I’ve got a nine thirty,” Marius muttered.

They trudged up to the apartment, and by the time they got into the living room both boys were soaked through and shivering, with snow melting into their hair. Courfeyrac let Marius use the bathroom first, and he changed into the heaviest pajamas he could find in the meantime.

When he went into the bathroom he found Marius’ hygiene products neatly arranged as unobtrusively as possible in the tiniest corner of a shelf that Courfeyrac had specifically cleared off for him. He rolled his eyes, but figured that the boy would eventually take the hint and make use of the space. He then proceeded to brush his teeth and wash his face, and when he padded back out to the living room he nodded a goodnight at Marius, who was looking snug and cozy on the futon.

Marius sat up suddenly and stopped Courfeyrac in his tracks with a wide eyed stare. “I’m sorry you always get rejected. Um, if it turns out I do like guys too, like you and Grantaire…I’d take you out to dinner, if you wanted.”

Courfeyrac smiled fondly at the adorably innocent creature. “That’s very kind of you, Marius, but I don’t need a pity date.”

“It wouldn’t be pity! You’re a really great guy, and if I am even the littlest bit queer then I’d love to date you, really!”
He couldn’t help but laugh at that. “Oh wow. Marius, you don’t have to try to turn yourself gay to make me feel better. I mean, if you mean it then yes, by all means, let’s get dinner. But don’t force anything, okay? I’m fine with the Friends Zone. I’m actually quite used to it, at this point.”

“Well…I’ll keep thinking about it.”

“Alright then. Goodnight, Marius.”

“Night.”

Grantaire’s eyes were heavy. He managed to crack them open, and fuzzily observed unfamiliar surroundings. He was in a neat and orderly room that looked like a photo that had been clipped from a housekeeping magazine. It was kind of like a living room, but so tasteful that it was probably a den (besides, the TV seemed more of an afterthought while the bookcases were given places of prominence). He was lying on the most comfortable couch in the world, and there was a nice, soft quilt tucked over him.

The quilt fell off his shoulders as he sat up, and pooled around his waist. He shoved his bangs out of his eyes, squinted at the room, and tried to remember how he’d gotten to it. Then he noticed the glass of water and bottle of aspirin sitting on the coffee table in front of him. There was a note lying next to them in Enjolras’ neat scrawl: Only water for now.

Grantaire smirked, but he dutifully swallowed a couple of tablets and drained the glass. His head was killing him, and he still felt weak from his fever. He wasn’t clammy or trembling anymore though, so it was probably going back down again.

His memory of the drive back from Brammer Street was fuzzy, but Enjolras’ almost belligerent concern for him came back with full force. It was sweet, really. Here he was, a foul mouthed drunk who spent most of his time sexually harassing Enjolras, and the guy still took him to his house and nursed him when he got sick.

He was going to have to give up. Enjolras was too good for a broken bastard like him.

As Grantaire was still thirsty, he struggled up off of the couch, picked up the glass, and carefully walked through the apartment, looking for the kitchen. He found another room that looked awfully similar to the one he’d been sleeping in, but on a smaller scale. It had a sloped roof and a nice view of the ocean, so of course there was a writing desk shoved in front of it, packed to bursting with stacks of unpleasant looking books on genocide, social politics, and philosophy. Grantaire eased back out of the study and resumed his search down a hallway that looked promising.

Dawn was breaking outside, casting Enjolras’ house in a soft pink light. Grantaire walked as quietly as possible, deciding that he’d settle for tap water from the bathroom if he happened to find it first. He gently eased open the first door he came to, and frowned when he determined he wasn’t going to find a sink in it.

Then he realized he was looking into Enjolras’ bedroom and he stopped in his tracks. He couldn’t help but stare a little.

It looked like Enjolras had had a restless sleep; he’d kicked most of the covers off and curled himself into a ball at the absolute edge of the mattress, hugging one of his pillows to his chest. His pajama pants were riding low, showing off quite the expanse of golden skin and the barest swell of a perfect ass.
Grantaire shoved a hand in his mouth and bit down. Fuck bunnies, but that man was gorgeous! Completely, objectively, the most beautiful man in existence.

Unfortunately, he also angered easily and probably wouldn’t take kindly to finding Grantaire creepily hovering in his doorway watching him while he slept. Reluctantly, Grantaire started backing out of the room, eyes still fixed on his slumbering friend, trying to commit the image to memory. He accidentally walked into the door, and it made a loud creaking noise as it swung fully open.

Enjolras bolted upright and then hastily pulled his pajama pants up. “Huh? Grantaire? Is everything okay?”

“I, um…water?” Grantaire held out the empty glass as evidence, all the while silently praying that Enjolras wouldn’t punch him for being a creeper. “Your place is ridiculous, by the way. How do you live here alone?”

“I tried dorming,” Enjolras said. He reached his arms over his head, stretched, and cracked his back. It damn well should not have been as erotic as it was. “My roommate called me a psychotic prude, we had a fistfight, and I decided I was better off commuting to school. I’ve been living alone since, and I have to say, it’s pretty spectacular. Much better than dealing with family or roommates.”

Enjolras climbed out of bed, put on slippers, and started walking for the doorway. Grantaire noted with amusement that apparently Enjolras’ angelic curls took some effort to maintain; first thing in the morning, most of his hair was plastered into one of two uneven clumps, and it was more wavy than curly. Then there were the strands in the back doing their best to defy gravity.

“What?” Enjolras asked, sounding groggy.

“Nothing,” Grantaire said, choking back a laugh. “Your hair’s just so lovely right now…”

Enjolras smirked, looking startlingly close to embarrassed. “I take it that if you’re up to mocking my hair you must be feeling better?”

“Much, actually.” He followed Enjolras the rest of the way down the long hallway and into the kitchen, where Enjolras refilled the glass with ice water. “Thank you. And not just for the water. I, um, I wouldn’t have expected you to go out of your way like that for me.”

Enjolras snorted. “I didn’t go out of my way, Grantaire. Technically, going out of my way would have been driving you back to your place. Taking you home with me was much more convenient. Besides, no one likes to be alone when they’re sick.”

“I’ve always survived before. But thank you, anyway. I’m certainly recovering better this time for your attention.”

“Let’s check on that, shall we?” Enjolras touched Grantaire’s forehead, then he went off to get the thermometer. “You still feel a little warm, but not as bad as last night.” He shoved the thermometer under Grantaire’s tongue, and Grantaire obediently waited for it to beep, but he made faces until it did so. Enjolras rolled his eyes, but he was still smiling.

When it beeped Grantaire spit the thing into his hand and read off the tiny screen. “Ninety nine point seven. That’s not so bad. Damn, I can probably go to class with a temperature like that.”

Enjolras yawned and rubbed at his eyes. “Yep. I’ve written A plus papers with a higher fever than that.”

Grantaire pulled a face. “You would. Personally, when my body starts roasting itself I take a break
“from school work.”

“And that’s why I’ll be graduating summa cum laude while you’ll be struggling to graduate at all.”

“Rub it in, Enjy.”

“Please don’t call me that.”

Grantaire grinned. “Fine. But only because you said please. So…your class starts at…eight?”

Enjolras looked at the clock on the stove, which read six forty three, and let out a long suffering sigh.

“I should get in the shower. Urgh…I’d much rather go back to sleep though.”

“You’re the masochist that chose an eight am class.”

“I like my European history courses! This one was a passion class, not a graduation requirement.

And…and…I really want to go back to bed. I was up with you until one in the morning.” Enjolras put his head in his hands and slouched down against the counter.

“It can’t have been that late,” Grantaire said, feeling defensive.

“We left Brammer Street at ten thirty, and it took me twice as long to drive home because of how bad

the snow was. By the time I got you set up on the couch it was almost midnight, and then you had to

throw up, and we almost made it, but you threw up in the tub instead. I got you set up in the living

room again, and by the time I scrubbed and disinfected everything it was one in the morning.”

Grantaire wasn’t terribly surprised to hear that he’d thrown up, but the memory took a few minutes

coming back to him. When it did he felt like crying. There was no way Enjolras would ever find him

sexually attractive after that. “Shit, I’m sorry. Um, so you know, it’s kind of drunk’s etiquette that we

clean up the messes we make when we, when we vomit all over someone else’s house. You should

have left it for me.”

“If you feel that bad then you can be the one to clear off the car.”

“Hey, right, it’s snowing!” Grantaire went over to the window and peered out. “Like, it’s still

snowing! I bet classes are cancelled.”

“I don’t know. The administration is pretty stubborn about cancelling for weather.” Enjolras frowned

as he glanced at the accumulation, considering it against his eco-friendly but somewhat impractical

car. “I might have to skip even if classes aren’t cancelled. It’s probably not safe for me to drive in that

again.”

“Mm. Especially if you’re sleep deprived,” Grantaire agreed.

Enjolras rolled his eyes. “I’m going to check the school’s website. There could be a delay.”

“Right. I’m going back to bed.” Grantaire finished his third glass of water, then successfully

navigated the confusing and much too large apartment to find his nest on the couch. He curled up

under the quilt and smiled stupidly when he noticed that it smelled faintly of Enjolras.

He was just starting to drift off when he was startled awake by a weight settling on his feet. He sat up

and threw an abused look at Enjolras, who was sitting on him with his laptop open.

“Why Enjolras, did you brush your hair?” Grantaire asked, all kinds of amused at the faint blush on

Enjolras’ cheeks.
“I’d say it’s fairly obvious that I did, yes.”

“…because I was teasing you?”

“If school hasn’t been cancelled then I still need to make myself presentable. Now stop being an ass, and don’t go back to sleep yet. I still might need you to clear off my car.”

Grantaire pulled his feet out from Enjolras’ ass and reluctantly pulled himself into a sitting position. Just to be a brat, he rested his head on Enjolras’ shoulder and watched the screen while he pulled up the school’s website. To his surprise, Enjolras didn’t shove him away.

“Two hour delay,” Enjolras read. “I don’t have to be in until noon then. What time’s your first class?”

“I’ve got a studio at one. Back to bed then?”

Enjolras shut his laptop down and frowned. “I’m already more than half awake. Do you care if I put on a movie?”

“The last time I watched a movie with you, you put in some fucking silent film in French and then got mad at me for falling asleep.”

“La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc is interesting from a variety of historical perspectives, as a representation of Joan of Arc’s trial and a record of early twentieth century French nationalism, and it’s also cinematographically important. Besides that, I thought you might enjoy Maria Falconetti’s crazy eyes.”

Grantaire gave the faintest of starts and shifted his gaze towards Enjolras. However, with his head resting on his friend’s shoulder he really couldn’t see much.

He hoped that wasn’t some kind of a personal shot. Grantaire talked about Enjolras’ crazy eyes with nothing but fondness. He liked his friend’s intensity. It…did things to him.

“Anyway, I won’t put on anything I expect you to stay awake for. I’m planning on napping too.”

“Oh, well, then by all means. Put in whatever you want.” Grantaire repositioned the pillow against the arm of the couch and then dropped against it while Enjolras put a DVD in.

Enjolras really was in a charitable mood. He put on Chaplin’s The Great Dictator, which granted wasn’t the most light-hearted of comedies, but Grantaire was still surprised Enjolras owned it. Pleasantly surprised, even.

He was even more surprised when Enjolras settled back onto the couch curled against Grantaire’s side. He was tempted to make some kind of sarcastic quip about it, but it also seemed unforgivably stupid to look this particular gift horse in the mouth. He wrapped an arm around Enjolras and enjoyed the warmth at his side instead.

Enjolras nodded off sometime around the dancing globe sequence, and though Grantaire drifted off here and there, generally he was awake and enjoying himself immensely. Running his fingers through soft blond hair was becoming his new absolute favorite thing ever. He was going to miss the sensation immensely when he finally woke up from what must have been a fever dream. Even when the movie ended, Grantaire remained where he was and just stared at Enjolras.

He could feel Enjolras’ breath on his neck. It wasn’t a dream. The beautiful slab of marble was really there, and he was cuddling.
Enjolras’ lashes began to flutter, and then he was looking at Grantaire from under them and the sight of it was so beautiful that Grantaire had a ridiculous urge to grab a sketchpad and try to capture it before everything slipped through his fingers. Instead, he tried to return Enjolras’ small smile and wished he had something to say.

“You’re not a bad pillow,” Enjolras said, voice a bit scratchy from sleep.

“If I weren’t feeling so slow and stupid right now, I feel like I’d have to make a quip about taking me to bed with you. It’s kind of the perfect set up.”

“It is. I give you a lot of set ups, don’t I?”

Grantaire frowned, wondering where he was going with that. “And then you threaten to castrate me.”

“Mm…about that…” Enjolras shifted his position slightly, rubbing his cheek against Grantaire’s chest and letting his eyes fall shut again. “This morning’s been nice. You haven’t been pervy, or bratty, or anything. I knew there was a decent guy somewhere beneath all your cynical bullshit.”

Grantaire swallowed nervously. “Enjolras, if this is a prank then I will never forgive you. You know how badly I…I’ve made it very clear. You should know exactly how I feel about you by now.”

“Say it anyway?” Enjolras sat up, facing him with a particular shade of intensity that Grantaire had never seen from him before. “You’re consistent, but you’re always biting, always half-joking. You’ve never said it in sincerity before.”

Grantaire licked his lips, and took down his last bit of emotional armor. “I’m stupidly in love with you, and always have been. And it’s not just because you’re the most ridiculously pretty thing in existence. It’s because you’re you, and you’re perfect, and you make me better just by letting me leech off a little of your radiance. And if this is a prank I’m going to kill you. With a heart full of love, mind you, but you’ll still be dead.”

“It’s not a prank. I like you too.”

“No you don’t. You hate me. You kick me. You tell me what a bastard I’m always being, and you call me out on being drunk even when I’m still being manageable about it, and you look down on me. How could you like me?”

Enjolras finally started looking like himself again, because that consternation on his face was much more familiar than the touched look he’d worn before that. “Get up, you stupid pessimistic jerk.”

“See? That’s how you really feel about me.”

“Grantaire, I said get up.” Enjolras yanked him to his feet and dragged him through the apartment to his bedroom. Grantaire followed warily, dragging his feet, absolutely sure that something bad was about to happen to him.

Enjolras waved a hand at the bed, and Grantaire obediently sat down. He watched as Enjolras reached around under the bed until he unearthed a shoe box. He upended its contents on Grantaire’s lap and then tossed the box aside with a flourish, a proud gleam in his eyes.

Grantaire stared at a mess of innumerable slips of paper without comprehension. Then one of them caught his eye. It was a quick doodle of Enjolras with a book in his hand, glaring over the top of it
and snarking at a little cartoon Grantaire that was mooning him. Grantaire picked up another one, this
time doodled on the back of a receipt, and found a chibi version of Enjolras self-importantly ranting
about the plight of starving flying reindeer in the North Pole.

They were all doodles Grantaire had made, either absently in class, or while they were out with their
friends, or lazing on one of the campus greens. There were at least a hundred of them, and he’d kept
every single one.

Grantaire stared up at Enjolras, stupefied. “You can’t like me. I don’t even like me.”

“Well you can be a bit stupid sometimes.” Enjolras sat down on the bed next to him and carded a
hand through his hair. “Like when you slipped this one into my notes for the undergraduate research
seminar.” He held up a pornographic one Grantaire had drawn with the particular aim of provoking
the testy honors student.

“And you kept it anyway,” Grantaire said, feeling an odd mixture of pride and horror.

Enjolras’ face was a bit red. “I, um…was a bit fascinated by it. I was only mad at first, but then…I
mean that facial expression you drew on the light haired one-”

“Enjolras, that’s you.”

“That’s me?”

“They’re all us. That’s the point,” Grantaire said.

“Well, I mean I’d noticed that on the cartoons. But the, um, the realistic ones…the sexy ones…is that
really how you see me?” Enjolras stared at the drawing with a new fascination. “Because I’m
not…that. I’m too awkward.”

“You’re grace personified.”

“Not with…with this stuff.” He waved a hand, as though that explained anything. “If I was then
you’d believe me by now when I said I liked you. I can’t even seduce the man that’s been flirting
with me for three years, so I believe the term awkward is highly appropriate for me. That and
sexually constipated.”

“You’ll get the hang of flirting eventually. Lesson one, don’t use the word constipated. Nobody
wants to be thinking about bowel movements when they’re being wooed.”

For one ridiculous moment it looked like Enjolras was considering taking notes (Grantaire figured
he’d misspoken by using the phrase ‘lesson one’ on a scholastic overachiever), but when Enjolras
did react to Grantaire’s banter, it was to grab his face and pull him close for a fiercely possessive kiss.
Grantaire reacted purely by instinct, because his mind certainly wasn’t in a place to respond to stimuli
like that. He wound his arms around the gorgeous creature and kissed him back for all he was worth.
He quite literally threw himself into the kiss, knocking Enjolras back against the mattress and draping
himself over his beautiful idealist.

Enjolras managed to pry Grantaire off of him to breathlessly complain about the way they were
crinkling his drawings.

“Don’t worry about it, Enj. I'll paint you a fucking mural. I'll cast you a bronze, or compose you a
sonata or have Jehan teach me how to write poetry. I’ll make you as much art as you want, as long as
I can keep holding you for a little longer.”
Enjolras curled his fingers in Grantaire’s hair, looking at him with trust and affection so pure that it made him ache. He’d done nothing to deserve that, and to have it come from Enjolras. “I didn’t know you were a musician and a poet too.”

“I’ll be anything you want me to be.” Grantaire kissed him again, sucking gently at Enjolras’ lips and thoroughly enjoying the soft little gasps he made every time their lips parted.

Grantaire had both known and believed that Enjolras was abstinent; he’d confessed it once and tried to explain it to the group at a New Year’s party shortly after they’d all fallen together as friends. Grantaire had never really appreciated what it meant though (other than that seducing a self-imposed prude was going to be monumentally difficult). Enjolras had never made out with anyone. Grantaire was the first person to feel those hands clamped almost painfully in his shaggy black hair; he was the only person to have that almost invisible blond stubble rasping against his skin; he was the only person to have that tongue timidly run against his, as if not quite sure that people really did this.

Enjolras’ inexperience characterized his actions for the first five or ten minutes, which was fine because Grantaire was more than happy to just hold the love of his life and kiss him breathless. But once he felt more comfortable his assertive personality shone through, and he took command. He shoved Grantaire, almost roughly, further up on the mattress and climbed on top of him. Grantaire clawed at his back as their kisses became more heated and desperate, eyes falling shut in gratitude and bliss.

He got a thigh between Enjolras’ legs and started rubbing against his crotch. Enjolras was still only wearing thin pajama pants, and his eyes flew open when he felt the denim clad leg grinding up against him. He let out a loud moan and thrust his hips wantonly into the movement.

“So much for your...celibacy, huh?” Grantaire whispered, voice weak and broken.

Enjolras had his face buried in Grantaire’s neck, and when he bit him his damned sharp teeth connected with skin and muscle.

“Ow! That wasn’t sexy!”

“Don’t be an ass while we’re making out or I’ll stop. After all, you just reminded me that I’m not ruled by animal urges. I can stop any time.” He held his face a breath away from Grantaire’s, blue eyes blazing with intensity usually reserved for worthier pursuits.

Grantaire swallowed around a dry throat, duly chastised and determined not to ruin this for himself. “I’ll be good.”

“You said you’d be whatever I wanted you to be.”

“I will.”

“What I want is for you to not embarrass me. I know I’m inexperienced, but it’s not my fault. You’re the first person who’s ever made me feel this way.” He sounded angry when he said it.

Grantaire’s cock was throbbing against his zipper. Wearing tight jeans had been a bad call (not that he’d expected to have Enjolras disheveled and pressed up against him when he’d thrown on the only clean clothes in his apartment, but still). When Enjolras was ready for it, their angry sex was going to be incredible.

“Say it,” Grantaire whispered brokenly. Enjolras was beginning to thrust his hips against him again, so he resumed grinding up into the contact even though his jeans had gotten decidedly painful.

“Please, Enjolras, how do I make you feel?”
“Like an unforgivably stupid tangle of hormones and passions and irritation and frustration and love
and…like everyone else. Concrete instead of abstract. Here. Human. You make me feel like I’ve
been doing everything wrong up until now, and I just want to smile at you all day like some
simpering idiot.”

“Just smile?”

“I’ll bite you again.” Enjolras leaned close and whispered against his ear. “You make me want to
emulate those drawings you made of us…the sexy ones.”

Well. Clearly twenty two years’ worth of sexual repression had just unleashed in one go. Grantaire
let out a completely undignified strangled noise and rutted harder against Enjolras, whose hands were
moving and had just bunched his t-shirt up under his armpits.

“Your skin is so soft,” Enjolras said, sounding almost insultingly amazed.

Grantaire managed to steal one of his hands back from where it had been groping a perfected human
form and hastily yanked his shirt back down. “It’s because I don’t have muscle tone,” he snapped.
The body pressed against him, though gifted with smooth golden skin, also possessed lean, hard
muscle.

“Grantaire, don’t be self-conscious.” He slipped one of his hands back under Grantaire’s t-shirt and
brushed his long, warm fingers over the v of Grantaire’s hip. “I like it.” He kissed along Grantaire’s
neck, nuzzled against his throat, and delivered more wet, sucking kisses to his lips. Grantaire melted
against him, thoughts turning incoherent under the weight of love and lust.

They both jumped when they heard a loud bang just next to them. “What the hell was that?” Enjolras
gasped.

Grantaire sat up on his elbows and patted his pocket. “I think you groped my phone out of my jeans
and knocked it off the bed.”

“Oops. Sorry.”

Grantaire would have been perfectly content to leave the device on the ground and continue petting
his gorgeous blond, but Enjolras guiltily leaned over the edge of the bed to retrieve the phone and
check that it wasn’t damaged. Grantaire impatiently waited for him to sit up so that he could throw
the phone back on the ground and get back to business, but Enjolras remained as he was, shoulders
tensing visibly under the thin fabric of his shirt.

“Enjolras? What is it?”

“Care to explain what this is?” Enjolras sat up, holding a clear plastic bag with white powder in his
elegant fingers.

Grantaire had forgotten all about Eponine and her damn drugs.

“Not what it looks like,” Grantaire said weakly, shrinking under the strength of Enjolras’ glare.

“It looks like a bag of drugs. As they’re certainly not mine, I can only assume they fell out of your
pocket with your phone.”

“Well, yeah, but they’re not mine! That girl last night, Eponine-”

“For fuck’s sake Grantaire, I know I don’t drink or use drugs myself, but I’m not an idiot! Are you
really going to try to convince me that you’re just holding them for someone else? Really?"

“But it’s true. I just took them so the teenager wouldn’t—I wasn’t going to use them! You know me! I drink. I don’t...” Well, he did smoke pot, but that wasn’t the same as cocaine.

Although that argument probably wouldn’t hold water for Enjolras.

“I can’t believe you brought drugs into my house. Oh holy hell, you had drugs in my car. What if I’d been pulled over? What is wrong with you?"

Grantaire tried to reach for him again, but Enjolras jumped out of the bed and stormed out of the room. Grantaire followed after him in a panic. “Enjolras, wait! It’s really not my coke, I swear! Enjolras, please!”

“Shut the fuck up!” Enjolras ran into the bathroom, ripped the baggie open, and flushed the powder down the toilet. “I don’t know what I was thinking, saying all that bullshit to you just now when you’re doing your damndest to kill yourself. It’s disgusting, Grantaire. How can you expect me to invest myself in you when you’re like this? It’s bad enough that you’re drinking yourself to death without fucking drugs on top of it!”

Grantaire couldn’t breathe. Shit, fuck, and every other expletive in existence. He couldn’t believe how quickly he’d fucked that up. But Enjolras was right. Grantaire wasn’t good enough to lick his boots. Why should the stunning idealist devote himself to a lost cause like him?

Grantaire bolted from the room, tears stinging his eyes as he tore blindly through the apartment, mostly going on instinct. He snatched his sneakers and his sweatshirt from the living room and ran for the door without putting them on.

They were still wet from the night before, and it was still snowing. He’d run halfway home before he got cold enough to notice.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Grantaire goes missing. His friends worry.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Grantaire was almost back to a neighborhood he recognized, walking hunched over with his hands shoved under his armpits, trying his best to will the wind into cutting it the fuck out because he was already cold enough, when a car pulled up next to him. The window rolled down and Eponine smiled at him. “So what are you doing walking around without a jacket?”

“I don’t want to fucking talk about it.”

“Did the marble statue freeze your prick off? I did warn you, you know.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Eponine turned in her seat to talk to the driver. “That’s a yes, then.” She turned her attention back to Grantaire, and the locks in the car clicked open. “Get in, you poor idiot. We’ll give you a ride somewhere.”

It was probably a bad idea. He’d thought there was something vaguely sketchy about Eponine even before discovering her recreational drug use, and had chalked her up as a friendly acquaintance for public places while being surrounded by his actual friends. However, Grantaire wasn’t sure how much worse this day could get, or if it was even possible for him to be hurt more than he already was. He climbed into the back seat without looking to see who else was in the car, and let his head fall against the window as soon as the door was shut.

“Put your seatbelt on,” the driver snapped. It was the drug dealer from the other night, Montparnasse. Grantaire couldn’t say he was surprised; he’d seemed to know the flirty barista as more than a customer.

“I’m surprised you care about something like that,” Grantaire mumbled, while fumbling through the articles of clothing and shopping bags in his way for the seatbelt.

“The cops have it out for Montparnasse, so they’re always pulling him over for the flimsiest of excuses,” Eponine explained. She petted her friend’s hair and jutted out her lower lip in exaggerated sympathy.

“Gee. Why ever would the cops single you out?”

Montparnasse stopped suddenly and Grantaire went flying into the seat in front of him. He bit his lip when he banged his head, and when he righted his posture he had to cup his hand over his chin to catch the trickle of blood. Eponine swatted Montparnasse’s arm and let out an affronted squeal, but she was also laughing.

“Oops. I guess you should have put on your seatbelt as soon as you got into my car, or at least not
been a smart ass.”

“Calm down honey,” Eponine crooned. “Poor Grantaire looks like he’s having a rough morning. Is any of the heat getting back to you, sweetie? I’m not sure if the vents work on both sides back there.”

“S’fine,” Grantaire mumbled around his throbbing lip.

“So where are you headed?” she asked.

Grantaire shrugged. “You can just drop me somewhere downtown. I want to crawl over to a friend’s house and get shitfaced as soon as possible, and all the friends who won’t judge me for that live within a few blocks of the Musain.”

“Oh Grantaire, you don’t have to run crawling to one of your stuck up college buddies for that. You can just get shitfaced with us,” Eponine said brightly.

“But no open containers in the car,” Montparnasse growled. It was probably the only time the sketchy prick was ever going to have something in common with Courfeyrac.

Grantaire would have much preferred Courfeyrac, Bahorel, Bossuet, or even Jehan’s company. They would all tell him not to get blackout drunk, and they’d probably side with Enjolras, but they’d be sympathetic and Courfeyrac was really nice to him when he was hung over (and the walk through the snow was proving to have been another poor choice, because Grantaire was feeling a bit feverish again, so being in the presence of someone who would take care of him was gaining enormous appeal). But he also knew he was a nuisance for his friends, which was why Enjolras was disgusted with him, and that everyone needed a break from his whining once in a while. In the state he was in, it seemed unforgivably rude to force his company on those he actually cared about.

So Grantaire slumped down in the seat, nodded dismally at Eponine, and let them take him wherever it was they’d been going.

It didn’t take long for Enjolras to regret yelling at Grantaire. In fact, he regretted it before the front door had even slammed shut.

Enjolras sank to his feet and buried his face in his hands. His breathing was erratic, and he was trembling all over. He remained like that for a few minutes, and when he slowly climbed to his feet he was almost in control of himself.

His eyes fell on the little baggie he’d flung in his bathroom trash, and he felt queasy.

Drugs. Because the extent of Grantaire’s alcoholism wasn’t terrifying enough, no, now he was using drugs.

Any thought of classes entirely forgotten, Enjolras tore through the house and grabbed his phone. It was still snowing, and Grantaire was sick, and he’d just run out and he lived on the other side of the city. Enjolras tried calling Grantaire, but he noticed the phone vibrating from where they’d left it on the floorboards by the bed.

“For fuck’s sake!” Enjolras yelled. He threw his phone onto the bed and then started pacing. “He could be anywhere by now! Why did I let him leave? Stupid asshole. I’m such a stupid…” Enjolras fell back against his bed and picked up his phone. Before he was even aware of making a decision he called Courfeyrac.
“Hey dude. What’s up?”

“Grantaire’s outside somewhere in the snow with a fever and also he’s doing drugs.”

There was a brief pause.

“Kay, um…what, is he on acid or shrooms or something? Or is he just loopy from the fever? Either way, I’d think you could keep him from running outside in a blizzard, y’know, since you’re stronger than him. Why the hell didn’t you keep a better eye on him when he was on hallucinogens anyway? You’re a sucky trip sitter, Enjolras.”

“Courfeyrac, stop and think really hard. Who in their right mind would go to me and ask me to trip sit for them?”

“Someone who wanted to get punched in the face, most likely. Alright, fair point. I’m looking for my car keys now. Mind telling me what happened?”

In fact, he minded terribly. But it was all going to come out at some point anyway, as Grantaire couldn’t keep his mouth shut. Enjolras explained about Grantaire coming down with a fever the night before, and how he’d slept over so that Enjolras could take care of him. He talked over Courfeyrac (who attempted to cut in with some mocking squeals and coos) and told him about finding the drugs on Grantaire, although he made it sound like the bag just happened to fall out of his pocket. “So…so I kind of flipped out on him and he ran off.”

“…he ran away crying because you called him a drug addict?”

“He wasn’t crying!” Oh wait, he actually was. “But essentially, yes.”

“Essentially. Come on Enjolras, I’d have thought you thought better of me by now. What aren’t you telling me?”

“There was a little more to it, but it’s private.”

“If I know the whole story it might make it easier to find him, you know. Just saying.”

Enjolras still remained stubbornly silent.

“Fine. But you know dude, you could have been nice. You didn’t need to break his heart.”

“I didn’t-” The call was abruptly ended, and Enjolras felt like he’d been slapped in the face.

Marius was in the living room goofing off on his laptop when Courfeyrac passed through the room. “Classes have been out and out cancelled,” Marius informed him.

“Took them long enough,” Courfeyrac muttered. “Hey, are you busy?”

“Not particularly.” Marius motioned to the laptop screen, which showed a blossoming virtual farm and three open chat windows. Courfeyrac leaned over the back of the couch, curious about who Marius was chatting with.

“You’re talking to Jehan and Bossuet?”

“I think it’s more accurate to say that Jehan is talking to me,” Marius said with a self-conscious grin.
“First he was recommending me all these books, and then I told him that I was going to be broke for a while because my grandfather cut me off, and so he started linking me to websites where I can read poetry and e-books for free. And now he’s offering to teach me Arabic.”

“Oh, yeah, we should have warned you. He’s really good with languages and multiculturalism as well as literature, and he loves to share his knowledge. You will have to tell him to shut up if you want it to stop.”

“Well it’s interesting. And I’m just whining about historiography with Laigle.”

“Who’s the other one?” Courfeyrac asked, motioning to a chatbox with an unfamiliar username.

Marius’ face went red and he hid the box. “Oh, um…no one important.”

Courfeyrac straightened his posture and laughed at him. “And that is why I told you not to take me out to dinner last night. It’s that girl from the café, isn’t it? The one who wrote that poem about her dad?”

Still bright red, Marius nodded. “Her name’s Cosette. Well, actually it’s Euphrasie, but she goes by Cosette because Euphrasie is horrible. Look…she’s a high school girl. I’m just talking to her because she’s interesting. I don’t want to date a sixteen year old.”

“Uh huh.”

“I mean it!”

“And I believe you.”

“You don’t sound like it.”

Courfeyrac snorted. “No, I suppose I don’t. Anyway, if you can handle tearing yourself away from Jehan’s ranting, Bossuet’s bitching, your darling Cosette, and what appears to be a booming virtual farm, I need to go Grantaire-hunting and I wouldn’t mind some company.”

Marius typed out farewells to his friends and shut his computer down while Courfeyrac pulled on his university sweatshirt and a heavy coat. “What happened? Is everything okay?” Marius asked, looking around for his own coat.

“Enjolras was being a bit cryptic, which leads me to believe that the scale of their fight was a bit grander than the norm. Grantaire is on foot in the snow with a fever, and it’s a safe bet he’s in a bad headspace, so the sooner we find him the better.”

Marius got his boots on and followed Courfeyrac out the front, down the stairs, and over to the Volvo. “You know, you keep saying that the two of them are in love, but I really haven’t seen any evidence of that yet.”

“Marius, just because two guys love each other doesn’t mean they’re going to be sensible about it.”

Marius still looked unconvinced.

Courfeyrac sighed. “Alright, I’m speaking with the wisdom of someone who’s dated four girls and two boys since middle school. Boys are stupid and girls are crazy. I can’t make you appreciate how true this is.” Courfeyrac gesticulated with the hand that wasn’t on the steering wheel for emphasis. “Even the sweetest, most adorable girl in the universe has moments of bat shit instability, where she makes you want to tear your hair out and run into walls just to get away from her mind games and
insecurity and those stupid little tests that there are no right answers for. The boy version of that is being spectacularly stupid when it comes to the feelings and motivations of your significant other. I tend to prefer boy-stupid to girl-crazy, but they both suck.”

“Kay… so are you saying that Grantaire and Enjolras are both stupid?”

“Yes. I mean, I know Enjolras is a genius, but when it comes to feelings he’s a fucking idiot, and he has no appreciation for what he puts Grantaire through. And not only is Grantaire boy-stupid when it comes to feelings, he’s also got a fair bit of girl-crazy in him to boot.”

Marius’ eyes were wide and he looked a bit pale. “You know what Courfeyrac, I’ve reconsidered things, and maybe I don’t want to date anyone at all. I mean, if my options are stupid and crazy…”

“Hey, the right person is worth the stupid. Or the crazy. Or the both, as the case may be.”

“Uh huh…”

Courfeyrac plugged his mp3 player in and handed it over to Marius. “Here. Put on whatever you want. Once we get to Enjolras’ neighborhood I want to switch over to Ride of the Valkyries though. I think it’s appropriate hunting music.”

“Uh huh…” Marius fumbled a little with the generic mp3 player. “How come you don’t have an I-pod?”

“Mention Apple in front of Enjolras and Comberfere sometime. You’ll figure it out really quick.”

“Is there something wrong with Apple?”

Courfeyrac was about to answer with the short version of the overseas human rights violations rant that he’d heard more times than he could count, but he was distracted by Marius selecting Toto.

“Kay, I know it’s on my mp3 player, but I have to admit I’m a bit surprised.”

“I just figured that if I wanted to listen to anything poppy I ought to do it before we found Grantaire. I noticed you have a hipster playlist for him on here.”

“As well as one designed to annoy the fuck out of him. That one’s mostly Mika and Nicki Minaj. I don’t even like half the songs on it, but sometimes I get sick of his bitching and I just want to do something completely contrary. And that usually amounts to listening to bad music because I know it’s bad, and reveling in it because the douchey art kid thinks I should be embarrassed about it.”

“Oh.”

“Plus Jehan really likes that list. Kid’s got a weird fascination with Beyonce.”

The snow was finally starting to lighten up, so that by the time they got to Enjolras’ neighborhood the roads were even almost safe. Courfeyrac grumbled about the plows prioritizing the yuppie streets over the low income neighborhood he lived in, and Marius gave his enthusiastic support to the idle whining.

They kept an eye out for Grantaire, but they didn’t see him. Courfeyrac pulled up in front of Enjolras’ house and called him.

“Did you find him?”

“Uh...hello Enjolras. Nice to speak with you,” Courfeyrac said, rolling his eyes.
“Well?”

“No, but we only just started looking. I’m sitting out front with Marius. Do you want to hop in and search with us, or are you going to look for him with the Prius?”

“He hasn’t been gone that long. Are you sure you didn’t see him? Were you looking? He can’t have made it very far. You must not have been looking.”

Courfeyrac let out an exasperated breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. “We were looking, Enjolras. He wasn’t there. He might have ambled down a side street or something. Now do you want to ride with me and Marius or are you going to take your own car?”

“I’ll be down in a minute.”

“Kay.” Courfeyrac hung up, then banged his head against the steering wheel. “Oh joygasm!”

“He’s riding with us then?” Marius asked.

“Yep, and he’s being a regular ray of sunshine. Oh well. At least this way I have a better chance of getting the whole story out of him.”

Enjolras ducked into the backseat a moment later, and Courfeyrac took one look at him before deciding that he could figure out the story for himself.

Enjolras was wearing a black turtleneck with a heavy wool scarf that Feuilly had knit when he’d been working at a craft store and had been picking up a new hobby every other week. Enjolras hadn’t done anything to hide the beard burn on his face though.

Courfeyrac put the car in drive, pulled out onto the street, and locked the doors before he commented. “So…you freaked out on him for drug use after making out with him? That’s a really good strategy, that. Doesn’t send any sort of mixed signals, or fuck with a guy’s head when he’s clearly got enough issues all on his own. Just saying.”

Enjolras’ posture went rigid and he sucked in a quick breath. “I did not make out with him.”

“Your scarf and turtleneck suggest otherwise, sir.”

“It’s cold,” Enjolras snapped.

“It is cold out, Courfeyrac. It’s even still snowing a little,” Marius murmured.

Courfeyrac chuckled under his breath. “You’re adorable. Marius, he’s also got beard burn.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s when your face gets red from being rubbed against some guy’s beard. Or in this case, stubble.”

Enjolras crossed his arms over his chest. “Fine, we were making out.”

“I knew it!” Courfeyrac yelled. “Wait, really? What brought you around? Grantaire’s been throwing himself at you since we were freshmen. Why now?”

Enjolras threw a sour look Marius’ way. “Do we have to talk about this now?”

“Yes…we’re looking for Grantaire now, and I want to know why. Besides, Marius is my bro.”
“I am?”

“Of course.”

Marius looked adorably pleased with himself at the declaration. He even made a giddy little noise when Courfeyrac fist-bumped him.

Enjolras rolled his eyes, and fixing his sour stare out the window instead, he caved. “I’d been thinking about giving him a chance for a little while now. And this morning everything was really nice. He hadn’t had a chance to get drunk yet, and when he’s not drunk he’s like a different person—”

“I know,” Courfeyrac said quietly. “That’s not really it though. He’s like all the best parts of himself. Anyway, go on. Grantaire wasn’t being a brat and he was sober so…”

“So I told him that I liked him too. He didn’t believe me, so I had to be really insistent. Then we made out, and his phone fell off the bed, and when I was getting it for him I noticed—”

“You were making out in bed?” Courfeyrac yelped. Marius had an interesting gob smacked expression stuck on his face.

Enjolras’ face was going red, though whether from embarrassment or anger was anyone’s guess. His eyes were definitely angry though. “Yes, we were making out on my bed. And his phone fell out of his pocket and fell on the floor, and when I got it for him I noticed a bag of cocaine that had also fallen out of his pocket.”

Courfeyrac frowned. “Are you sure it wasn’t just weed? Grantaire smokes pot sometimes, but he doesn’t do coke.”

“It was white powder. And I might add, just because I don’t use intoxicants and sleep around doesn’t mean I’m completely ignorant of the practices.”

“Ah huh.”

“Plus he identified the substance as cocaine.”

“Ah.”

A tense silence reigned in the car for several minutes as the friends processed the unwelcome news. Courfeyrac certainly hadn’t expected Enjolras’ panic about drugs to be valid. The guy had unrealistic standards—he gave Combeferre dirty looks sometimes for getting too reliant on coffee during exams. But no, cocaine was legitimately a scary, addictive, and dangerous substance, and Courfeyrac did not like the idea of it being added to Grantaire’s list of vices.

He was so consumed by worry for his friend that he accidentally ran a red light, and had to swerve sharply to the side to avoid another car. Thankfully, no damage was done and all they had to suffer through was a blaring horn and some angry gesticulations. Courfeyrac pulled over to the side of the road and buried his head in his shaking hands.

“C-Courfeyrac?” Marius gently patted his back, sounding terrified.

“He’s going to fucking kill himself, isn’t he?!” Courfeyrac yelled without looking up. “We’re going to bury him, aren’t we? God fucking dammit!”

“Courfeyrac, get up. You can’t drive like this,” Enjolras said, voice gentle with concern but also firm enough that it left no room for argument. Accordingly, Courfeyrac switched places with him and
Enjolras slid into the driver’s seat. Marius looked a wee bit petrified at the arrangement, but he made no objections. He did sit up a bit straighter in his seat though.

“He doesn’t seem to be wandering the streets,” Enjolras observed. “He must have gotten a ride from a friend.”

“How could he? Did he have his phone on him to call someone?”

“No, he left it at my apartment. Maybe he knows someone else who lives around here,” Enjolras said. Courfeyrac snorted and rolled his eyes. “He didn’t just disappear into thin air, okay? He’s got to be somewhere.”

“I’ll text Laigle and Jehan and see if they’ve heard from him,” Marius volunteered. “But um…those are the only numbers I’ve got so far.”

“I’ll get the other guys,” Courfeyrac said. “We can check his place too, in case he really did get a ride from someone else.”

Reassured by their flimsy plan, Enjolras started driving towards the downtown area.

“So you’re a college guy, huh? That’s cool. Montparnasse isn’t a college guy. I think he’s old enough to be a college guy, but he doesn’t go to college so he doesn’t count. Right?”

Grantaire mumbled something incoherently at the twig of a teenage girl sitting cross legged in front of him. Her name was Azelma and she was Eponine’s little sister, which meant she was even younger than jailbait, but that hadn’t stopped her from thrusting out her lack of chest or rubbing her small, stubby hands on Grantaire’s thighs.

He would have shrugged her off but he thought he might vomit if he made a sudden movement. Mindful of the fact that he was sickly, Grantaire had opted for a screwdriver for his alcoholic beverage of choice, figuring that at least the orange juice would be nutritious. So he’d dumped a bottle of vodka into a half-empty carton of orange juice, shaken it a little, and he’d been gulping from the thing for nearly a half hour while Montparnasse and Eponine screwed around in the other room.

Apparently Azelma was supposed to be keeping him company.

“You know when I’m old enough I think I’m going to go to college. Ponine doesn’t want to. She says she makes enough to get by at the café, and when she gets bored of fleecing beatniks and whiny college students she can just become a stripper. I think Ponine’s really pretty, but I don’t think she’ll be a very good stripper. What do you study at school? Whatever it is, I bet it’s really cool.”

“Go ‘way. Stop friggin’ touching me you little harpy.”

Azelma let out a small ‘hmph’ and sat back with her arms crossed over her flat chest. “You know what, I take everything back. You’re the most boring sack of shit they’ve ever left me with.”

Grantaire took a gulp of his pathetic screwdriver and let out a loud belch.

“Ponine! Will you finish with Montparnasse so I can have a turn? Your other friend is disgusting!” Azelma shrieked. She ran over to the closed bedroom door and banged on it with her tiny fist.

Eponine opened the door a crack. She was wearing a man’s undershirt with neon green panties, and
her hair was sticking up. “Will you fucking shut up? Grantaire’s had a rough day. Just let him pass out if that’s what he wants to do.”

“But I’m bored!”

“Then go home,” Eponine snapped. “No one said you had to follow me here, you know.”

“But Dad’s got his friends over to play cards, and they’re so creepy. C’mon Ponine, the college guy is your stupid friend. You should be the one stuck outside with him.”

“You know girls, if you’d just get over your hang ups about sisterly inferiority, we really could solve this boredom problem with a threesome,” Montparnasse called from inside the bedroom.

Eponine and Azelma both made faces of disgust. “I’ve already told you, if my sister is naked in a room then I’m not going to be present.”

“But it’d be so hot…”

“No!” they both shrieked.

“Fine, fine. Well will one of you just get in here then?”

“My turn,” Azelma snapped. She roughly pushed past Eponine and slammed the door shut.

Shrugging it off, Eponine sat down next to Grantaire, took the orange juice from his limp fingers and took a sip. “Wow, that’s the worst screwdriver I’ve ever tasted.”

“Made one once with something the dollar store labeled Orange Drink. That was worse.”

Eponine laughed. “I guess it would be. So baby…do you want to talk about it?”

Grantaire snatched the orange juice back, tried to take a sip, and ended up spilling it down his chest. “Shit…urgh…no, no talking. Just drinking.”

“Well if we’re playing it that way then I’m not going to drink your half assed screwdriver. I’ll go check Montparnasse’s cabinets. Be right back.”

“Uh huh.”

Eponine returned a moment later with a bottle of chocolate cherry wine. “This looks good.”

Grantaire quirked an eyebrow suspiciously. “That’s chick wine. Why’s your boyfrien’ haff chick wine?”

“Because he often entertains chicks?” Eponine guessed. “Damned if I know, Grantaire. Montparnasse has some weird tastes though. Now do you want to drink this bottle with me or are you going to keep gulping your horrible excuse for a screwdriver?”

Grantaire shook the carton, which was mostly empty, then tossed it aside and reached for the wine bottle.

“That’s the spirit.” Eponine cuddled up beside him and rested her head on his shoulder. “I’m sorry, by the way. Enjy doesn’t know what he’s missing.”

Grantaire could feel his eyes welling again, so he took a long gulp from the bottle instead of answering. Far from being deterred, Eponine draped an arm over him and hooked her leg around his
knee. Even though she’d only had one sip of his orange juice and a few sips of wine, she didn’t look all that sober. Grantaire shuddered, and tried not to think about what the teenager had been doing in the dead-eyed weirdo’s bedroom.

He was also trying not to stare at the bruises on her thighs and hips, or the especially big one on her neck.

“So sweetie…did you try that coke I bought you?”

Grantaire tensed, and shook his head.

“Why not?” she crooned, reaching up to twirl his hair around her fingers.

“Never been a big fan of nosebleeds,” Grantaire muttered.

Eponine smirked. “Well if you ever change your mind, make sure you buy from Montparnasse. He gets pretty good stuff. Are you too drunk to fuck?”

“Yes.”

“What if I had curly blond hair and a look that could peel paint?”

“Then I’d still be too drunk to fuck and also you’d have no innerest in me. You’d want to tear my heart out because I’m disgusting.”

Eponine drummed her fingers on his chest. “Unrequited love’s one hell of a bitch, isn’t it?”

“May you never know its pain, Ponine. Seriously, this is the worst feeling in th’world.”

“It must be, to turn you into such a sad sack. I’d like to think that even if I did have the misfortune to fall for some icy bastard who didn’t appreciate me I wouldn’t just self-destruct like this. Pull yourself together, baby. You’re better than this.”

“I’m really not.”

Eponine snatched the wine away from him and took a gulp. “If you say so, sweetheart.”

As Enjolras had only been to Grantaire’s apartment once during freshman year (a mistake he hadn't repeated), he didn’t remember how to get to it. Courfeyrac directed him from the backseat, and after a few minutes Enjolras parked the car in front of a dingy looking skateboarding shop.

Courfeyrac looked more like his usual cheerful self by that point, at least. He lead them around back to a battered looking door with peeling red paint and up a narrow flight of stairs. He walked right into Grantaire’s studio apartment, progress never once impeded by a lack of keys. All of the doors were unlocked, and the one to Grantaire’s actual apartment didn’t even close properly.

“Nice place,” Marius mumbled.

The studio probably still would have looked dismal with a neater tenant, but with Grantaire living there it looked absolutely squalid. He slept on a mattress shoved into a corner with a wadded up sweatshirt for a pillow. There was a dresser buried somewhere under a mound of dirty laundry, and all the surfaces were covered with makeshift ashtrays, food containers, art supplies, school books, and the expected litter of empty bottles and cans.
And, unfortunately, there was no indication that Grantaire had been there any time recently. Enjolras frowned when he spotted Grantaire’s winter coat lying on the floor by the mattress. It was covered with crusted vomit, which explained why he hadn’t worn it.

“Wow. This is actually pretty bad, even for him,” Courfeyrac said. “I mean, the kid’s not exactly neat on the best of days, but he usually at least tries to throw out the trash and keep up with the laundry.”

“No wonder he spends so much time at your place,” Marius observed. “Um…should one of us stay here in case he comes back?”

Courfeyrac snorted. “It’s not a bad idea, but it seems a bit cruel to force someone to hang out in Grantaire’s filth all day.”

“I don’t mind,” Marius said. “I can clean up for him. I mean, I just…I’d like to feel like I’m actually doing something.”

Enjolras privately agreed with him on that. He dropped his head and walked over to the one window in the room. He looked out onto the street and even though he didn’t really expect to see Grantaire stumbling up the sidewalk, he lamented that it would have been nice.

Marius and Courfeyrac were talking among themselves, trying to figure out what to do next. Only vaguely listening to them, Enjolras studied some of the objects in the room, mostly out of habit and definitely out of a desire for some kind of distraction. There was a sketchpad at the foot of the mattress, so he picked it up and started flipping through it.

There were the typical sketches one would expect from an art student. Some quick pencil work from the figure drawing course he’d done a few semesters ago, some doodles he’d done to plot out a final project for his nonrepresentational art class, and then Enjolras landed on the stuff Grantaire had drawn for himself.

There were a lot of pictures of their friends. Enjolras couldn’t remember ever seeing Grantaire take out his sketchbook when they were in public, so they must have been done from memory. Apparently being consistently drunk hadn’t dulled Grantaire’s memory as much as Enjolras had expected; the portraits were very faithful.

There was one of Jehan reading at his very first open mic (Enjolras vaguely remembered the hot pink Walt Whitman shirt Combferre had gotten him as a joke that he faithfully wore at least once a week). It was done in soft colored pencils that suited Jehan’s nature, and really captured something of his nervous enthusiasm. The next one was done in bold prisma colors, was more of an abstraction, and showed Grantaire and Courfeyrac playing video games in Courfeyrac’s living room. The next one was in anime style, of Feuilly in his craft store apron folding millions of cranes and fans.

Enjolras flipped through the book, completely unaware of the small smile he was wearing while lost in Grantaire’s somewhat rose colored view of his friends. Even the ones that were teasing (like Feuilly and his origami, or Bahorel failing at beer pong) were bursting with affection for the subjects.

His smile disappeared when he got to the first portrait of him. He wasn’t surprised to see it, or even all that surprised by how beautiful it was, but it made him ache all the same. Grantaire had rendered him in chalk pastels. He was sitting in the grass underneath an old maple tree on campus reading. Enjolras recognized the spot; it was a favored hangout place for them at school. In fact, if he remembered correctly, Combferre and Joly should probably have been in the picture too. But he’d only drawn Enjolras, and he’d changed the light significantly (because Enjolras doubted he would still be reading in the fading light of a sunset), put him through soft focus, and really made him look
almost divinely beautiful. He could barely see himself in those exaggeratedly attractive features, and his eyes had certainly never looked that soft and pretty any of the times he’d studied his reflection.

Enjolras abruptly closed the sketchbook and dropped it back onto the mattress as though it had burned him. Without saying a word he started for the door.

“Enjolras, hey! We still haven’t figured out what we’re doing next!” Courfeyrac called after him.

“I’ll wait outside. I can’t be here anymore.” Enjolras started jogging down the stairs, not waiting for Courfeyrac’s sigh of frustration, or murmur of “Cold hearted bastard.”

He was pacing next to the Volvo when Courfeyrac joined him a few minutes later. “Marius is staying behind to clean up. He’s going to call us if Grantaire comes back,” he said.

Enjolras nodded. “I was thinking we could stop in at the Musain and ask if anyone’s seen him. It’s just around the corner.”

“That’s a thought. Alright, to the Musain then.”

Marius was rinsing out glass bottles and throwing them into a crate that he’d designated as a recycling bin when his phone vibrated. Thinking it might be news about their stray, he hurriedly wiped his hands dry and opened the text.

Sadly, the text didn’t have any news about Grantaire, but as it was from Cosette he still smiled. ‘U signed off qwik. Still busy?’

Marius texted her back, explaining about how he’d run off to look for a missing friend. Cosette sent him a frowny face and asked if there was anything she could do. “She’s so sweet,” Marius mumbled. Smiling like an idiot, he told her that he wasn’t sure she could, but that it was nice of her to offer.

They spent the next ten minutes or so trading texts, and by the end of it Cosette knew as much as Marius about the weird romantic drama in his new group of friends. Then Cosette surprised him by asking if Grantaire had messy black hair and favored skinny jeans.

Marius texted back that he did, and asked her what was going on. Then his phone rang. “Hello?”

“Hello Marius,” Cosette greeted. “I know where your friend is.”

“Really? How?”

“He’s at my ex-foster sister’s boyfriend’s house. Which means you guys should go and get him as quickly as possible, because Ponine’s boyfriend is a psychopath. Her little sister just called and asked me if I could go get her because Montparnasse was having an episode and she wanted to leave. I just got back from picking her up, and I’m pretty sure I saw your friend passed out in the living room. He was at the poetry open mic the other night too, right?’’

“Yeah. He was the one that yelled from the back when I read my poem.”

“He was the one sitting with that good looking jerk who made my friend cry, right?”

“Um…I don’t remember that happening, but he was sitting with Enjolras, and Enjolras is…well he does make people cry, yeah,” Marius babbled.
Cosette sighed. “I can’t leave. Papa doesn’t want Eponine or Azelma alone in the house anymore, because they steal. But I can text you Montparnasse’s address so you guys can go and get him.”

“Okay. Thank you, Cosette. I really appreciate this.”

“Not a problem. Call me later though. I’ll worry about you guys if you don’t.”

Marius promised to call her as soon as everything settled down, then he hung up so that he could get her text. As soon as he had Montparnasse’s address he called Courfeyrac.

“So…when your high school girl said this kid Montparnasse was a psychopath, did she mention anything specific?” Courfeyrac asked.

Marius shook his head. “She said he was having an episode though. I think she meant it seriously, not, like, as an exaggeration.”

Courfeyrac let out a long-suffering sigh. “Grantaire would crash at a legitimate psychopath’s house for company. Enjolras, can you send out a mass text and see if anyone else will come with us for backup?”

Enjolras was sitting in the backseat wearing a blank, almost bored looking expression. He wordlessly took his phone out and did as instructed. Courfeyrac spent a few minutes putting Montparnasse’s address into his GPS and then they were off.

“Bahorel and Legle are in. What’s the address?” Enjolras asked. Marius read it back to him and he texted it out. His phone buzzed with a new text a moment later. “Bahorel says the guy lives between a liquor store, a rowdy bar, and above a slightly less rowdy bar.”

“Peachy. Does this feel like a bad movie to anyone else?” Courfeyrac asked.

“At least he lives above the less rowdy bar,” Marius said, attempting to be cheerful.

They remained silent for the rest of the car ride.

Bahorel and Legle were waiting for them when they pulled up in front of what was undoubtedly a seedy looking bar. Bahorel was leaning against the hood while Legle peered up at the building in question. “Lights are on on the third floor. I’d say that’s where they’ve got our cynic.”

“He hasn’t been kidnapped,” Enjolras snapped. “He’s just done something stupid.”

“Yeah, lot of that going around lately,” Courfeyrac muttered. “C’mon, let’s get going.”

None of the young men made the slightest movement. In fact, almost everyone was looking at Courfeyrac expectantly. He stage coughed. “C’mon guys, let’s go.”

“Yeah, you first though,” Bahorel said.

“Why me⁈” Courfeyrac yelped.

“You’re our leader,” Legle said simply.

“Bullshit! Enjolras is our leader!”
“When we’re doing something respectable,” Bahorel said. “But you handle the everyday stuff in our group.”

“And fetching a depressed drunk from a psycho’s house is everyday sort of stuff, is it?” Courfeyrac snapped.

Bahorel smirked. “Haven’t you been friends with Grantaire since high school?”

Courfeyrac shot him a dirty look, but he shoved his hands in his pockets and started walking for the awful looking building. Marius was on his heels, which was a comforting presence, and with Bahorel, Legle, and Enjolras trailing after him he did feel slightly less nervous.

Much like Grantaire’s building, this apartment could have used a few more doors with locks. They were able to make it up to the third floor with no impediments, and far sooner than Courfeyrac would have liked he was standing in front of an abused looking wooden door that looked like it had been kicked in at least once.

He knocked on it rather timidly and, rolling his eyes, Bahorel pushed him out of the way and banged on it with much more force.

The barista from Brammer street opened the door, looking fairly surprised to see all of them. She was wearing black leggings and a short black dress, meaning other than a missing white apron she was ready for work. “Hey guys. What are you all doing here?” Then she smiled at Marius, looking at him from under her lashes. “Hey.”

“Um…hello miss,” Marius said, since she was clearly focusing on him. “You wouldn’t happen to have seen our friend Grantaire, would you?”

She sucked her cheek into her mouth, eyes going hard. “Yeah, I’ve seen him.”

They waited. She didn’t say anything else.

“Is he here?” Marius pressed.

“He, um, yeah. Yeah, he’s here, but he’s not feeling well so he’s just going to crash with u-”

“Can we talk to him?” Courfeyrac asked.

The barista subtly nudged the door closer to closed, blocking as much of the room behind her as possible from sight with her petite frame. “The poor boy’s really out of it. I think he’d rather sleep it off and then see you all again tomorrow. Some of you more than others.” Her eyes fixed on Enjolras, and there was no mistaking the look of dislike in them.

“Look, we’ve been looking for him for hours. Can I just talk to him for a few minutes and make sure he’s okay?” Courfeyrac asked.

“I already told you-”

“Everyone else can wait out here. It’ll just be me, and I’ll be quick.”

The girl didn’t respond right away, obviously weighing her options. Then Bahorel let out a grunt of “Fuck this” and shoved past her. The girl almost fell over when he strode into the room, and she whined ineffectually when the rest of the boys filed in after their friend.

They were in a large living room that connected to an open kitchen, and it was empty other than the
barista. But the presence of some empty bottles by a bean bag chair indicated that Grantaire had been there fairly recently.

The holes in the walls were really worrying, the flipped over coffee table more so, and the blood stains on the carpet leading over to a closed door had the friends looking stricken. Bahorel opened the door, revealing a bathroom.

Grantaire was on the floor, unconscious, with a black eye, busted lip, and possibly a broken nose. It looked like the girl had dumped him in there when she’d heard them come to the door. Wordlessly, Bahorel picked Grantaire up, and Marius went to help him with his legs. Legle ran ahead of them to get doors, leaving Courfeyrac and Enjolras to turn their glares on the girl, who was shaking.

“Just get out of here before he gets back.”

“What happened?” Enjolras growled. “Who did that to him?”

“My boyfriend, and he’s really going to lose his temper if you’re not all out of here before he gets back from his walk. My sister got lippy, my boyfriend started slapping her around for it, and Grantaire thought he could be some kind of hero even though he was too blitzed to even stand. Which, if I’ve inferred correctly, was your fault, so mind who you’re glaring at.”

“Grantaire getting drunk is no one’s fault but his own,” Enjolras snapped defensively.

“Maybe he’d do it a little less if you’d shut your self-righteous cake hole and just appreciate him,” the girl said viciously, prodding his chest with her bony finger. “He was already a mess when we found him wandering out in the snow, and that certainly wasn’t our fault. Now seriously, get the fuck out of here.”

“We can’t just leave you here,” Courfeyrac said, expression troubled.

“You need to help your friend, and I need to calm mine down so I can go to work. Seriously, move it. I’m fine, you’re fine. Everyone’s fine.” The girl all but shoved them out into the hall and slammed the door after them.

Courfeyrac seemed tempted to go back for her, but Enjolras touched his arm. “Grantaire’s unconscious. He might need medical attention.”

“R-right.” Courfeyrac gave himself a little shake and followed Enjolras down to the cars.

The guys had gotten Grantaire into the backseat of the Volvo. Marius was already sitting in the front passenger seat, either texting the other guys to let them know that they’d found their lost drunk, or updating Cosette. Bahorel and Legle walked over to Enjolras and Courfeyrac as soon as they spotted them.

“How is he? Does he need to go to the hospital?” Enjolras asked. They all turned towards Bahorel, who had frequented some dives around campus and gotten into a fair few bar brawls before changing peer groups.

Bahorel glanced back towards the car, a frown on his face. “I don’t think we need to call the hospital yet…but we shouldn’t leave him alone. He’ll shake off getting punched out. But that fever…”

“I’ll take him back to my house. Me and Marius can sit up with him,” Courfeyrac said. He glanced towards Enjolras. “Are you coming with us?”

“It doesn’t look like there’s room,” Enjolras said. Ignoring the incredulous look Courfeyrac shot him,
he turned towards Bahorel. “Can you guys give me a lift back to my place?”

Bahorel and Legle traded a surprised look, but they both nodded. Without acknowledging Courfeyrac, Enjolras strode intently towards Bahorel’s car and climbed into the backseat.

Shrugging, Bahorel and Legle followed after him, and Courfeyrac cursed under his breath as he walked back to the Volvo.

Chapter End Notes

Luminous_Bluebell gave me the line about having Enjolras shut his self-righteous cake hole, so thanks for that ;)

Thanks everyone for all the support and lovely attention. I’m having a blast writing this AU (even if I am supposed to be working on other things, oops). I know this chapter was a little angst-heavy. There’s some lighter stuff coming up, if you’ll bear with me. Thanks for reading, and extra thanks to everyone who's commented <3
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

A few things get resolved. With a little help from friends.

Chapter Notes

Unrelated Rant: So I went to see Mumford and Sons the other night with one of my friends, and we arrived obscenely early so that we could get a good spot right in front of the stage (worked; I was close enough to count pinstripes on Marcus Mumford's shirt). Anyway, we had A LOT of time to kill so I spent a good long while torturing the girl by ranting Les Mis. I was telling her about an interview with Aaron Tveit I’d watched on youtube the other day (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSEZ2AFITFI) where among other things he talked about filming the death scene. Apparently they filmed something where Javert is walking around taking in the carnage, and Aaron was left in his harness hanging out the window. He said that Russell Crowe’s head almost brushed his. It was a cute anecdote, because he mentioned that when he saw the movie and the scene wasn’t there he was disappointed, as it was physically uncomfortable to film (extended cut on DVD release...?) but my friend had an observation.

This means that the soldiers just left Enjolras there. Many of the bodies are laid out nicely, but Enjolras was left in the window, flag-style. From this we started making really inappropriate jokes about the king having the body of the leader of the failed revolution stuffed, so that he could take Enjolras out at parties as a form of entertainment for guests. "Everyone, heap abuses on this insignificant little maggot that thought to challenge the crown."

We're kind of terrible people. So yeah, have some story. I promise, there are no taxidermied revolutionaries in it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It wasn’t that late when Bahorel and Legle dropped Enjolras off, but he was exhausted all the same. It hadn’t exactly been a restful couple of days, and he was emotionally spent.

The quilt and the pillow were still on his couch. Enjolras frowned at them, and tried not to think about how good a pillow Grantaire had been when they’d napped on the couch together. He kicked his shoes off, shrugged out of his coat and threw his scarf off, then hopped onto the couch with his feet tucked under him and pulled the quilt over his shoulders. He closed his eyes and pictured Grantaire, with his face all banged up and the scratches on his thin arms, and when he was so overcome with guilt and worry that he couldn’t breathe he fell back against the pillow resting against the arm of the couch, and he thought of warm kisses and lingering touches and how good it had felt to run his hands through that tangled hair, even if it was a little greasy.

The quilt smelled faintly of BO and cigarette smoke. Enjolras put the quilt over his nose and inhaled
“What the hell am I doing,” he muttered. It wasn’t even a good odor, it was just his.

Then his phone started buzzing with texts.

The first one was from Marius. ‘Hey Enj, we don’t want to panic you or anything but there are some cuts on Grantaire and they look like he did them. Like razor cuts. Were they there when you made out with him?’

Enjolras frowned and texted back a no. He thought about adding more to the message, but he ended up leaving it at that.

The next text was from Courfeyrac. ‘He keeps babbling about you dude. Said you said he was disgusting. I don’t know if it’s real or the fever, but do you think you could come over here and say something nice to him? He’s not listening to me and M.’

Enjolras swallowed around a dry throat, and then texted a suggestion that they call Joly, as he was the nursing major and could probably treat a fever better than Enjolras could. Courfeyrac responded with another request for Enjolras to come over, this one worded more strongly, and Enjolras suggested they bring Grantaire to a hospital if he was really doing that poorly.

The next text came from Marius, and it was cute and meek and might have worked if Enjolras hadn’t already been feeling so dejected.

He spent the next ten minutes defending himself against his two concerned friends. Yes, he wanted Grantaire to get better, but no, he couldn’t visit him. He didn’t have it in him.

What he needed was some time to sit and think and sort himself out so that he didn’t accidentally make it all even worse.

Then Courfeyrac called him. Against his better judgment, Enjolras answered. “Hello?”

“You need to talk to him.”

“I don’t want to talk to him.”

“You want him to be okay, right?” There was a brief pause. “Enjolras,” Courfeyrac snapped.

“Yes, fine, I want him to be okay. But I don’t think I’m what he-”

“If you want him to be okay then man up and get your ass over here.” Courfeyrac abruptly ended the call and Enjolras tried to get his breathing under control. He felt like he was coming undone.

With trembling hands, he hit the speed dial for Combeferre.

“Hey Enj. You’ve got great timing. I was just about to take a study break, so if you want to head to the Musain with me and get a cof-”

“Am I a bad person?”

“Fee…” Combeferre sounded a bit befuddled. “Um…no, actually, you’re one of the best people I’ve ever met. What’s going on?”

“I, um, I’ve been…look, everything’s just gone to complete shit with me and Grantaire, and he’s at Courf’s, and he’s sick and beat up and we think some of the wounds are self-inflicted, and
Courfeyrac says it’s my fault and that I need to talk to him, but every time I do he gets worse, and so, so…I’m starting to think that it really is my fault.”

There was a heavy silence. For a minute Enjolras worried that he’d gotten so hysterical that Combeferre hadn’t followed him, but then he finally spoke. “Kay. So I’m just going to wake Jehan up, and then we’ll be right over. Do not take any calls from Courfeyrac or Marius until you’ve talked to someone who isn’t wrapped up in Grantaire’s pain, okay? Seriously, just give me five minutes.”

“O-okay.”

Enjolras sat down on the couch to wait. Six minutes later, Combeferre’s spare key turned in the lock, and he and Jehan burst into the room. Jehan pulled Enjolras into a hug that he was too surprised by to properly return, then he slid off his messenger bag and divested himself of outerwear and sat down on the arm of the couch. The kid was wearing fleece X-Men pajama pants, and Enjolras felt a twinge of guilt for having had him dragged out at a late hour.

Combeferre kicked off his shoes and hovered by the coffee table. He looked a bit restless, and after a minute or so he started pacing.

“Marius has been texting me,” Enjolras said. He held out his phone in demonstration. “I’d like to open them in case they’re important.”

“If something was really wrong then there’d be a group message out. That’s what they did when he was missing,” Combeferre said, waving a hand dismissively. Enjolras stowed his phone back in his pocket. “Enj, tell us what happened. Start at the beginning.”

“And don’t hold back or dress it up with guilt. We won’t judge you,” Jehan added.

Throat tight, Enjolras nodded. “Alright. Well, um, the most recent stuff, the relevant bits, happened after your feature at Brammer Street. Grantaire came down with a fever so he stayed here with me, and in the morning…I ended up confessing that I had feelings for him too.”

Combeferre stopped in the middle of a step and arched an eyebrow. “Been sitting on that for a bit, have you?”

Enjolras felt his face grow warm. “I’d been contemplating the possibility of a change of heart since the start of the semester, but it all kind of fell together this morning when he was so nice…and sober. I acted without thinking it through, which was just stupid of me-”

“Love does that to people,” Jehan interrupted. “Sorry. It’s just, Combeferre said you were feeling guilty, so I thought it was important to tell you that so far you haven’t done anything wrong.”

“I brought him for emotional support,” Combeferre added. “Plus this just seems like the kind of thing where a poet’s commentary might help. So you told Grantaire you loved him. I bet that was a sight to see.”

“I didn’t actually say it; I just said I liked him. And, yes, he didn’t take it very well. He didn’t believe me, because he hates himself so therefore I must hate him too, you see.”

“Oh, that’s really rough,” Jehan said with a frown.

“Is it?”

“Yes it is,” the poet insisted, conviction strong in his tone and expression. “Look, it’s been rather obvious that you and Grantaire have been evolving into a thing, and whereas I think it could be
really good for both of you it’s also got the potential to be a total train wreck. Grantaire’s got a lot of issues, and he’s not handling them well. You’re awfully strong and sure of yourself, so the temptation’s going to be to try to fix everything for him, but you can’t. You shouldn’t have to, either. The boy’s fundamentally unhappy, and self-medicating with alcohol. Him pinning all his hopes for happiness on you is really pretty selfish, because his pain is so serious. He needs professional help, Enjolras. You can’t save him by yourself, so don’t feel like you’re failing him, because you’re not.”

Combeferre nodded. “Exactly. I knew Jehan could say it better than I could.”

Enjolras wiped at his eyes. He’d really needed to hear that, and it helped, but he still felt like he had some responsibility over the whole mess, considering how roughly he’d been treating Grantaire for the past three years.

“Thanks, but…he’s not just self-medicating with alcohol anymore. While we were kissing…I found cocaine in his pocket. He tried to say it wasn’t his, and I just got so mad, and scared…I lost it on him and that’s why he ran off. And now he’s hurt and if you still think it’s not my fault I’d love to hear why.”

“Enjolras, it’s not your fault he’s sick,” Jehan said, with a firmness in his tone they didn’t often hear from the dreamer.

“Depression is a serious medical condition, and Grantaire’s handling it all wrong. We’re all worried about him,” Combeferre said. “Frankly, if I’d found cocaine on him I’m not sure how nice and supportive I’d have been either.”

“I said he was disgusting. He’s been babbling that back to Courfeyrac.”

Jehan got up and gave him another hug. “I’m so sorry, Enjolras. It’s okay though. He’s at Courf’s, and he’s sick, but he’s alive. There’s still hope.”

Enjolras stiffly returned Jehan’s hug, fighting the urge to break down into tears, an urge he’d been fighting since he’d first found the drugs.

“Instead of ignoring his addiction and hoping his depression clears up on its own, we can all be better friends and start helping him,” Combeferre said, while reassuringly stroking Enjolras’ back. “I asked Joly to look up info on alcoholism, and Bossuet’s reading up on the mental health system. We’ll support him properly, and then he won’t be able to pin his emotional state all on you.”

The knots in Enjolras’ stomach finally started to loosen. “I think I’m ready to go see him now.”

Combeferre nodded. “I’ll call Courf and tell him we’re coming over.”

“We’ll head down to the car,” Jehan said, taking Enjolras’ hand and leading him to the doorway to get his coat and shoes.

Grantaire looked like death. His skin was pale and clammy, except for where it was blooming with vibrant bruises or littered with sharp scarlet lacerations. One of his eyes was swollen shut, and the cut on his lip was stained with blood so that it looked like he was wearing smeared lipstick. Marius had been patting his face with an icepack, but he got up and shot to the doorway when Courfeyrac showed Enjolras and Combeferre into the room.

“Jehan’s making tea in the kitchen. I’m going to join him in there,” Courfeyrac said pointedly.
Marius nodded and left, but Combeferre took up a post leaning against the wall by the closet. Courfeyrac shot him a significant look, but he remained where he was with his arms folded over his chest. Scowling, Courfeyrac left in a huff.

Enjolras nodded at Combeferre and gave him the best imitation of a smile he could manage. Then he sat down in a kitchen chair that had been placed at Grantaire’s bedside and took one of the pale hands in his. There was blood under Grantaire’s fingernails. Enjolras tried to ignore it. “I’m here,” he said, taking pains to keep his voice steady.

Grantaire’s open eye swiveled to fix on Enjolras’ face, and his cracked lips quirked into a weak smile. “Courf said you were coming, but I didn’t think you were really going to. Hi.” His voice was weak, and some of the words were almost lost for it, but he seemed to know who he was and what was going on. The fever must have gone down significantly.

He still felt warm though.

Enjolras smoothed some errant raven strands from Grantaire’s face and took the opportunity to feel his forehead. He was definitely still warm, but not as bad as he’d been.

Grantaire leaned into the touch, and his eye fell shut. “You keep seeing me when I’m a wreck. I swear, eventually I’ll have a good day again.”

“I’d like that,” Enjolras said. “I’m sorry I yelled at you. I don’t really think you’re disgusting.”

Grantaire opened his good eye, and made a strong effort to get the swollen one open too but had to give up on that. He looked at Enjolras as intensely as possible under the circumstances and squeezed his hand back. “Enjolras, I’m not on drugs. I swear on everything you believe in. I’d swear on what I believe in, but I know your beliefs count for more since they’re stronger. I took the drugs from Eponine because she’s seventeen and it felt wrong to give them back to her. I know it sounds ridiculous, and that you’re not going to believe me, but I wish you would.”

“It doesn’t matter-”

“It matters to me. I’ve only got so much dignity, you see. I’d like to keep what I can.”

Enjolras closed his eyes. “I certainly do want to believe you. I’ll try.”

Grantaire let out a pained sounding breath. “I thought I’d made you hate me.”

“You didn’t. You terrified me. And if you’ll think that one through, it’s because I care about you and I don’t want you hurting yourself. So, you know, way to follow that up by losing a fist fight and bringing your fever back up.”

“Sorry,” Grantaire said meekly, and he batted the lashes of the eye he could move. Enjolras let out a breathless laugh, and then covered his face with his free hand. The one that was still clasping Grantaire’s was tightly squeezed. “Hey, are you okay?”

“No, not really. I have no idea what I’m even doing,” Enjolras admitted.

Grantaire sat up in bed, letting out a pained exhalation and grimacing a bit as he did so, but he managed to get himself positioned in an almost upright pose against the pillows. “Well it could be worse. You could be trying to hold eye contact with the man of your dreams when it’s not entirely physically possible, what with having gotten your ass kicked less than eight hours after utterly fucking up and then getting into a car with sketchy near-strangers. I mean, really, the humiliation’s all on this side of the sickbed. So smile. You’re doing pretty good, Enj, and you’ve got a really nice
smile. That’s better.”

Enjolras was a little confused, but then he realized that he was smiling. He stroked his thumb over Grantaire’s palm, trying to figure out what to say next. Then he felt a hand on his back and he jumped, because he’d forgotten all about Combeferre.

“I’m going to head out to the kitchen. I think you’ve got this.”

Enjolras nodded, and watched Combeferre leave the room. Grantaire was trying to peer after him, but it was pretty obvious he couldn’t see further than the chair at his bedside. “Who was that? There was someone else in here?”

“It was Combeferre. He came for moral support. We’re alone now though.”

“Ah…y-you needed moral support?”

“I told you this morning, when it comes to…to whatever this is, I’m awkward. I’m completely out of my comfort zone here, and I needed a friend. You’ve got Courfeyrac and Marius badgering me, and Bahorel and Legle giving me dirty looks, and your little barista friend yelling at me. Telling my side of it all to Combeferre seemed fair.”

“I didn’t want anyone to badger you-”

“I know,” Enjolras assured him. With Grantaire’s self-esteem, he probably expected all their friends to jump down his throat.

A few minutes passed in tense silence. Enjolras couldn’t for the life of him think of what to say, and Grantaire seemed to have lost whatever light bravado he’d had. He sank back down on the pillows, eye downcast but occasionally glancing wonderingly at their still-joined hands.

“Are you alright?” Enjolras finally asked, as it was one of his chief concerns at the moment.

“I think so. Sadly, I’ll probably be in decent shape for class on Monday.”

“That’s good to hear, but it wasn’t what I was talking about. Are you…you said you’re not doing drugs, but you are drinking a lot, even for you. And those cuts…are you going to be okay?”

Grantaire swallowed, and nodded. “Yeah. I’ve just…just had a bad couple of weeks. I’ll shake it off. I always do.”

“You could have told us. We’d have helped.”

“No one likes listening to me whine. Besides, when you’re having a moment of weakness, do you like shining a spotlight on it for all your friends to see, or do you try to cope with it as best as you can until you can stand on your own feet again?”

“We want to help you. So lean on us,” Enjolras said, with more anger in his tone than he wanted to express. It wasn’t Grantaire he was angry at, not anymore.

“You keep using plural pronouns,” Grantaire pointed out. “But you’re holding my hand. Take some pity on the poor kid with a fever and possibly a mild concussion and give him a straight answer?”

Enjolras opened his mouth, but he still didn’t know what to say. He kept his eyes on Grantaire’s good one, hoping that somehow his feelings would be expressed without words, but he knew that was a longshot at best.
Grantaire seemed to get at least some of the message though. “This morning…god, I can’t believe it was just this morning—”


“Right. Well anyway, this morning…pretend I hadn’t taken the coke from Eponine and you hadn’t found it in my pocket. What do you think we would have done? How would it have been different?”

“Well I certainly wouldn’t have chased you out of the apartment.”

“You didn’t chase me, Enjolras. I ran. Because I’m a coward, you see,” Grantaire said.

Enjolras pressed his lips together and looked away. “I lost my temper, and then you took off into a blizzard and almost killed yourself. I’m sorry, Grantaire. That was so stupid of me.”

“I’m sorry I ran away crying and got you so worked up. But hey, I’m really not worth getting all that emotional over. I mean, if I had gotten run over by a plow or killed by Montparnasse or something, think how much easier your life would be, huh?”

Enjolras shot out of his chair and started violently pacing. He turned towards Grantaire, momentarilly losing control of his fraying nerves. “Don’t say anything like that ever again! That’s a horrible fucking joke to make and I don’t want to hear it!”

Grantaire somehow managed to pale further. “I’m a black hearted cynic. Self-deprecation’s my bread and butter.”

“Well I happen to be rather attached to you, and even if I weren’t in love with you, you’d still be one of my closest friends, so watch what you say,” Enjolras snapped, not even realizing what he’d said until the words were out of his mouth.

“Y-you do have a way of making people regret messing with your friends,” Grantaire said weakly. “Did…did you just say you loved me? Because if I’m hearing things then my fever’s probably coming back, and I should probably take more medicine.”

Enjolras let out a slow breath, then he sat down on the edge of the bed. He caressed Grantaire’s face, partially so he could reassure the brat that his fever was still going down, and partly just so he could touch him again. “You wore me down,” he whispered. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Grantaire said, voice cracking on the words. “I love you so much it hurts.”

“Well I don’t want it to hurt, so we need to fix that.” Enjolras lay back against the bed and curled towards Grantaire, resting so that their faces were barely a breath apart. “I want you to be euphorically happy, so tell me what you need.”

Grantaire pressed his lips to Enjolras’. It was a soft kiss, what with his split lip, but it was also the most tender gesture Enjolras had ever received. “Just that,” Grantaire whispered. “If I’ve got your love I’ll be a new man. This is my last night of sad-sackdom. From here on out, I’ll be worthy of you.”

Enjolras had a feeling it wasn’t going to be quite so simple, but he decided to let it go for now. Everything else could come later, and as Combeferre had suggested, with the rest of their friends supporting them. At the moment, the only appropriate course of action seemed to be to cuddle, carefully kiss the painfully swollen lips in front of him, pet the tangled black hair, and fall asleep in the too-thin scratched up arms.
Courfeyrac peeked in through his barely cracked bedroom door, smiled, and then crept back over to the kitchen table where Marius was killing Combeferre and Jehan at Uno. “They’re asleep,” he informed them. “And they’re cuddling. It’s actually really cute.”

“I want to see!” Jehan exclaimed.

“Me too,” Marius said. The two of them jumped up, and Combeferre grabbed their arms and tugged them back down.

“Leave Enjolras and Grantaire alone.”

“But…but…” Jehan whined.

Then they all noticed a slight flash coming from the other room. Courfeyrac appeared again a moment later with phone in hand. Combeferre shot him an exasperated look, which he met with a smirk. “Oh come on, they’re out cold.”

Marius and Jehan ran over to him to peer at the picture he’d taken. “Oh, they look adorable!” Jehan gasped.

“They’d look better if Grantaire’s face wasn’t a giant bruise, but otherwise it’s a lovely picture,” Marius agreed.

“Mm hm,” Courfeyrac muttered, thumbs busily moving over the screen of his phone.

“You’re not putting that on facebook,” Combeferre nearly growled.

“I am not, in fact, in the process of putting it on facebook. I already finished,” Courfeyrac said with an irritating smirk.

“If you keep pestering them like this they’re going to break up before they’ve properly dated,” Combeferre complained. “And I can’t be the only one who’s getting sick of their UST.”

“What’s UST?” Marius asked.

“Unresolved sexual tension,” Jehan explained. “You’ve only been dealing with it for a couple days, but we’ve been putting up with them for three years. It stopped being cute a long time ago.”

Courfeyrac was still fiddling with his phone. “I didn’t tag them…”

Jehan took his own phone out. “I can’t tell if it’s your caption or the picture itself that’s making it so popular. It’s already got twenty three likes.”

“What’s the caption?” Marius asked, while Combeferre smacked his hands over his face.

“Fucking finally. Seemed the most appropriate thing,” Courfeyrac said.

“I’m leaving. I’ve still got two articles to finish tonight if I want to stay on task for my weekend study plan. But call me when Enjolras decides to kill you all. I want the chance to do my ‘told you so’ dance before he finishes you off,” Combeferre said.

Courfeyrac cheerily waved at him, and he flipped him the bird.

“I guess I’d better leave too, since Combeferre’s my ride.” Jehan nodded a goodbye at Marius and
Courfeyrac, then followed after his friend.

Marius started packing up the Uno game. “I suppose you’re going to sleep on the couch in the living room then?”

“I guess. My bed’s a pretty good size, but three’s a snug fit,” Courfeyrac said with a bemused smile. He sat down at the kitchen table and propped his head up with his chin in his hands, looking almost giddy. “This is going to change everything, you know. I can’t even explain how much of our group dynamic is taken up by Grantaire and Enjolras snarking at each other. Well, I mean they still might end up snarking at each other, but it’ll be all lovey dovey now. Oh Marius, I’m so happy for my stupid babies!”

Marius popped the lid on the Uno box, something very like fear in his eyes. “Are you alright, Courf?”

“I’m running purely on coffee at this point. Let’s get to bed.”

“Okay.”

Courfeyrac had a hard time falling asleep that night. He watched as one and two am rolled around, and by three am Marius finally stopped texting his high school girlfriend under the blankets and actually fell asleep (the poor kid probably thought he was being stealthy by muting the phone, but the screen flashed like a frickin’ Christmas tree every time he touched a button). When Marius started snoring he admitted defeat and got up.

He peeked in on the lovebirds again. They were still blissfully dead to the world, Enjolras cradled in Grantaire’s arms, matching small smiles on the unearthly handsome face and the broken one. It almost looked like they’d been posed; real people didn’t look that angelic when they slept. They drooled, and snored, and if you were Marius, apparently hugged a pillow like it was a teddy bear and let out small whimpers at odd intervals.

He went into the kitchen, rinsed out one of the mugs they’d used for their tea and filled it with tap water.

Marius was probably going to start going out with Cosette before the week was out. They’d been in near constant communication since meeting at the café, and that was with all of Enjolras and Grantaire’s drama distracting the kid. Marius was only a sophomore…he really wasn’t that much older than Cosette. If her parents didn’t have an issue with it, it wouldn’t really be a problem.

So. Grantaire finally had everything he’d ever wanted, and Enjolras was just discovering something precious he’d been too preoccupied to see. Marius was on the verge of what promised to be a sickeningly adorable romantic venture. And Courfeyrac couldn’t sleep.

He banged his head against the table. “God I’m so lonely…”

Chapter End Notes
This chapter's a bit shorter than the other ones. Sorry for that, but it felt appropriate. I'm in the process of switching gears. Enjolras and Grantaire's drama has temporarily resolved, which means it's time to shift focus. Next on the agenda, Marius, Cosette, and Cosette's psychotically overprotective father XD

(There will still be lots of e/R, so nobody panic!)

Thanks again for reading. You guys are the best <3
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Grantaire settles into a life of sobriety. Marius asks Cosette on a date.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Courfeyrac was making his way through some particularly dense reading for his art history class through sheer willpower (and lots of distracted doodling in the margins with his highlighters) when Grantaire burst into his apartment unexpectedly. It had been almost a week since his grand adventure in the blizzard, so other than some intentional changes he was looking mostly back to normal. The bruise over his eye had faded, the cut on his lip was healing nicely, and he’d taken to wearing long sleeved shirts to hide the cuts on his arms (a wise move anyway, as it was still very much winter in New England).

Healing injuries aside, the kid actually looked really good. He’d been taking better care of himself since landing a boyfriend. The only stains on his clothes were from paint, as he now had the energy to throw himself into his schoolwork and even some passion projects again. His hair looked good too. Jehan had trimmed off the dead ends for him, so it was thick and healthy, and he was keeping up with brushing and washing it. Happiness was definitely a better look for him than his jaded cynicism.

“I think I might have to break up with Enjolras,” Grantaire announced.

“Mm h-wait, what the hell?” Courfeyrac shoved his homework aside and gaped at his friend in horror. “Are you just trying to break my concentration because you know I’ve got a serious exam tomorrow and you want to get me back for that facebook picture, or was that legit? You’ve been pining after the guy pathetically-absolutely pathetically, for three fucking years. Don’t tell me you’re ready to throw in the towel already.”

Grantaire took up his customary spot on the floor with his back leaning against the couch and rested his arms on his knees. “That was hyperbole, but I am kinda ticked off at him.”

“What happened?”

“So you know how he told me I had to cut back on the drinking?” Grantaire asked.

Courfeyrac frowned, because he was pretty sure Enjolras had said that Grantaire needed to quit drinking, not cut back. They’d all told him the same thing. Joly had actually put together a power point about alcoholism for Grantaire, which made Courfeyrac quietly wonder if he was going to use all that research for a class project (the opening slide had featured his full name and class and section numbers), Jehan had put together a book of AA affirmations and poems, including a few he’d written himself, and Bahorel had offered to quit drinking himself in a gesture of solidarity.

“Well anyway, I don’t think it’s as big a deal as you guys all do,” Grantaire said, “But I wanted to make him happy so I’m cutting back. He came by my place today to check out a painting I’m working on, and he saw some hard lemonade bottles on my table and flipped out. I mean it’s just hard lemonade! That shit’s barely alcohol. I didn’t even get buzzed. Next he’ll be telling me I can’t
drink fruity ass wine coolers either.”

“Oh…”

“Uh…”

“Oh fuck. You want me to quit entirely too, don’t you?”

Courfeyrac grabbed one of his highlighters and started coloring in a cube he’d drawn on the top corner of his notes, which conveniently kept his eyes averted. “We all do, actually.”

“Look, I could see your point if I was a messy drunk, but I’m not. I go to school, I take care of myself.”

“What about last weekend?”

“That wasn’t the alcoholism; that was depression!” Grantaire snapped. “They’re two different things.”

“No offense intended dude, but I think with you they’re related. Your drinking gets worse when you’ve hit a bad part of your cycle. And you’ve got us. We’ll help you. You don’t need to get smashed whenever you’re feeling under the weather, okay? Just come and talk to one of us.”

Grantaire scowled. “So what, are you going to quit drinking too?”

“If you want me to, then yeah. If it’ll help you out man, I’ll be as sober as Enjolras from here on out.”

Grantaire didn’t seem to have an answer for that. He gave a few false starts, trying to laugh off Courfeyrac’s uncharacteristic somberness, but he wasn’t convincing in the least. “You guys are really taking this too far.”

“That’s a bit rich, coming from you.” Courfeyrac climbed to his feet and started for the kitchen. Grantaire followed after him, still looking defensive.

The defensive expression turned to a dumbstruck one as he watched Courfeyrac open up the fridge, snatch up the cans of generic beer, the two bottles of artisan beer he had left, and a new pack of hard ciders and carry them over to the sink. One by one he opened them and emptied them down the sink. When he was done he turned towards Grantaire.

“I’ve never been more serious about anything in my life. We’re done watching you fall apart. Got it?”

“Y-yeah. I guess. Just didn’t think it was a big deal.”

“When your friends start forgetting what it looks like when you’re sober, it’s a pretty big fucking deal,” Courfeyrac snapped. He stalked into the living room and flopped back down by his books. Grantaire ambled in a moment later, idly playing with his phone.

“I suppose I ought to text an apology to Enjolras then.”

“Why?” Courfeyrac asked. “Wait, what did you say to him?”

“Well…when he got all dramatic over the hard lemonades, I kind of called him a prissy princess. I don’t think he liked that very much.” Grantaire absently rubbed at his upper arm, and Courfeyrac was willing to bet all his worldly possessions that that was where the fiery blond had hit him.

“Grantaire…please don’t fuck this up.”
“I’m not trying to!”

“…prissy princess? Really? You do realize you made a monarchy joke at Enjolras’ expense, right?”

“Well he is kind of a princess. He’s got that pretty golden hair, and his giant house is like a fucking castle-”

“You live in a rancid one room rat hole,” Courfeyrac said, cutting him off. “Of course a two bedroom apartment looks like a castle to you.”

“For starters, he’s only one person, so what’s he doing with a two bedroom? And secondly, the place is so big it’s cumbersome. He’s got two living rooms, a dining room, a study, and two bathrooms-”

“One of them’s a half bathroom.”

“I keep getting lost.”

“Wow. And you’re not even drunk anymore,” Courfeyrac said, shaking his head sadly. Grantaire flicked the back of his head and pouted.

“So where’s the puppy?” he finally asked, clearly hoping to change the course of the conversation.

Courfeyrac shrugged. “Isn’t back from class yet, I guess. Huh. You know what? He probably should be, come to think of it.”

Courfeyrac turned back to his books and Grantaire started texting his boyfriend. He got in a good twenty minutes of productivity before Grantaire either got bored or Enjolras stopped responding. Then suddenly Grantaire was leaning on his shoulder looking at his textbook. “Jesus, Courf, what the hell are you studying? Isn’t this for Margot?”

“Yeah. In addition to the exam tomorrow, I’ve got to lead a group discussion on red figure versus black figure pottery this week. She said I could narrow the subject however I wished.”

“So you picked gay orgy?” Grantaire asked. “I mean, I can’t say I’m surprised that you chose that, but that Margot’s letting you…”

“…Symposium would be the correct term, actually, and they had some heterosexual activity at those things too. But my topic is homoeroticism in Greek pottery more generally. I’ve got some good Ganymede imagery too.”

“What’s that giant penis thing there?” Grantaire asked, stabbing his finger at the page.

“That’s a herm. Didn’t you take Margot’s class? You must have talked about herms.”

Grantaire squinted at the picture and scratched absently at his neck. “We covered so much though, and I took the first section when I was a freshman. I am disappointed in myself for not remembering herms. I’ll have to bring those up to Enjolras later. He doesn’t like talking about sex, but I’ve found that I can sneak it in by going through the classics. Really, it’s very convenient that so many Greeks and Romans were perverts. And that they left so many records about it.”

“Got something else for you,” Courfeyrac said. He shuffled through his papers until he found an article he’d printed out on Antinous. “Here. Set the standard for male beauty in the ancient world, gayer than Ganymede, and he was actually real.”

“Get out.”
“No, seriously dude. Margot talked about him last week. He was a Roman emperor’s lover, and when he died Hadrian had him deified and commissioned a shit ton of statues of him. So we have more surviving depictions of Antinous than of any other Roman.”

Grantaire started flipping through the article, and his eyes widened. “Holy shit dude.” He held up the third page, as though Courfeyrac hadn’t already seen it (not only had he seen it, he’d also drawn little rainbow colored hearts around the graphic with his highlighters). “He looks like Enjolras!”

“I noticed.”

“No, really, the hair-”

“I know. Enjolras looks just like statues of a Roman god of butt sex. You should tell him. And say it just like that.”

Grantaire smacked him upside the head with the article. “I should roll this up and beat you with it.”

“I was thinking you might want to keep it.”

“Can I?”

“Yeah dude. I printed it for you.”

“You’re a good friend, Courf.”

“So does that mean I’m forgiven for the facebook pic?” Courfeyrac asked, trying to sound casual about it.

Grantaire scowled at him. “…you’re not that good.”

They were distracted from their argument by the door banging open. Marius all but danced into the room, looking wildly happy and so dazed that he might be in danger of walking off the porch. Courfeyrac once again set his homework aside. He was probably due for an actual study break at this point, or so he tried to tell himself.

“What’s got you so worked up?” Grantaire asked. Between his casual tone and the way his eyes were fixed on the Antinous article, it was clear he didn’t actually care. Marius didn’t seem to notice.

He clasped his hands together and made a loud, breathy noise. Courfeyrac quirked an eyebrow. “Dear god Grantaire, he’s just turned into a caricature. Marius, real people don’t behave like that.”

“Like what?” Marius asked breathlessly, still wearing a smile so big it looked painful.

“Like they’re going to burst out in a big song and dance number,” Grantaire said, still not looking up.

Marius giggled and scrubbed a hand through his hair. “Sorry, it’s just…she said yes!”

“Who?” Grantaire asked.

“Cosette, I assume,” Courfeyrac answered, cutting Marius off.

“Who the hell is that?”

“Really, dude? You don’t pay attention to anything outside your own little world, do you?”

“To be fair, he was rather distracted the entire time I’ve been talking to Cosette,” Marius started to
say, but Grantaire cut him off again.

“So what’d this chick say yes to?” There was a pause. “Oh, the puppy’s got a date. How sickeningly sweet.”

Marius had turned bright red, but the too-wide and possibly painful smile was still in place.

Courfeyrac smirked. “I thought you didn’t want to date a high school girl.”

“A high school girl?” Grantaire asked, finally looking up from his ancient Roman gay porn analysis. “You know kid, I’m pretty sure you could date someone your own age.”

“He doesn’t want someone his own age though, y’see. He’s been disgustingly stupid over Cosette since they met at Brammer Street.”

“Ah.”

Marius finally frowned. “You guys aren’t letting me get a word in edgewise. This is supposed to be my news.”

“Sorry. We’ll be good,” Grantaire offered.

“I’ll be good, anyway,” Courfeyrac said. “And Grantaire will try his best.” They took up exaggeratedly upright postures, pretending to be a rapt audience. Marius, mostly used to their antics after nearly a week of sleeping on Courfeyrac’s futon, chose not to comment on it.

“I do, in fact, have a date with Cosette. And she’s not sixteen, she’s seventeen.”

“Oh, well that changes everything,” Courfeyrac said. As Marius couldn’t seem to tell if he was joking or not, he shook his head. “Sorry, it really doesn’t. She’s still jailbait, dude.”

“Only if they sleep together,” Grantaire pointed out. “And I think the puppy’s more of a gentleman than either of us.”

“True enough. So her folks don’t mind her going out with a college kid, huh?”

Marius sat down on the futon and started fidgeting nervously with the strap to his backpack. “Um…I don’t think she told her dad yet. She said he’s a little overprotective of her. But it should be fine, right? I mean, just because he’s overprotective doesn’t mean he’ll hate me for being a little older than her-” He was cut off by a snort from Grantaire. Courfeyrac whapped Grantaire upside the head, and he ducked aside.

“Sorry, but damn. That’s not terribly encouraging, Marius.”

“Don’t listen to him, Marius. Grantaire sucks at dating. The only reason he’s going out with Enjolras is because of persistence. It took the guy three years to wear him down.”

“I’d hit you, but Enjolras actually did say I wore him down,” Grantaire grumbled.

“So where are you taking Cosette?” Courfeyrac asked.

“Oh, um, I was thinking we’d go see a movie-”

“Don’t take her to a movie, kid. It’s a first date. Take her somewhere a little less run of the mill. I’m sure the other high school kids have taken her to movies,” Grantaire said.
Courfeyrac nodded. “Plus you’ll want to take her somewhere where you can have a conversation. So she can get to know you better.”

“Maybe not, in his case.”

“Grantaire, shut up.”

“Though it’s definitely in the puppy’s best interest to go somewhere with good lighting. He’ll lose all his natural advantages if Cosette can’t see him properly.”

Courfeyrac turned an incredulous look Grantaire’s way. “I will throw you out. I’ve done it before.”

“Go right ahead. Enjolras is on his way to get me anyway.” Then his phone beeped with a text. “Make that Enjolras is waiting for me downstairs. See you guys later.”

They both nodded a goodbye, and once the door had shut behind him, Marius sat down next to Courfeyrac wearing an innocently troubled expression. “What’d he mean when he said I needed to go somewhere with good lighting? Is that important for dates?”

“Oh…that was Grantaire’s way of saying you’re very handsome.”

“Oh, that was nice of him.”

“Yeah…”

Grantaire’s blood had set into a nice stain on Montparnasse’s carpet. Eponine made a mental note to get a placemat to put over it, as she was pretty sure it was beyond the point of lifting out with soda water. She stepped over the stain on her way into the bathroom and started brushing out her hair.

She was working on her makeup when Montparnasse shuffled in a few minutes later. He was loaded down with shopping bags, which wasn’t entirely out of character for him, but it was irritating at the end of the month. Eponine pressed her lips together (an irritated tic that was also helpful, as it rubbed her lipstick in), and just as she expected, Montparnasse leaned against the doorframe and brushed his fingers down her back. “Hey Ponine, do you think you could kick in on rent again?”

“You’re really going to ask me that after coming back from the mall? Stop blowing all your cash on shoes and clothes and maybe you’ll have a little left over for necessities.”

“You’ve stayed over every night for two weeks straight.”

“I’ll leave when Gueulemer and Babet finally clear out of Mom and Dad’s. You know I don’t like the way they look at me.”

“It’s the same way I look at you,” Montparnasse said with a shrug.

Eponine smirked. “And you know I don’t mind when you do it. I don’t mind when you grope my ass, either. But them.” She gave a little shudder. “How much do you need for rent?”

“Sixty. But if you can spare more then we can get some groceries.”

“Mm. Can’t eat shoes, after all. So what’d you get this time?” She picked up her eyeliner pencil and started applying a thick line to her left lid as she spoke.
“Heeled boots, actually. They were on clearance so I figured I’d take advan…Ponine, you’re doing that all wrong.”

Eponine giggled. She turned around and held out her pencil invitingly. “Care to help, sweetie?”

“Sit down on the toilet. I’ll take care of it. As you’re getting ready for work, I suppose you want something artsy?” he asked. Eponine put the lid down, sat on the toilet, daintily crossed her legs at the ankle, and nodded.

“Cat eyes, please. I think they’ll flatter me.”

“Anything’d flatter you, pretty girl. Hm…maybe not this dollar store eyeliner though. And where’d you get that lipstick? It’s all waxy. Wash your face. I’ll go get my supplies.”

Eponine smirked, then did as instructed. Even if he was a short fused creep, there were some useful things about dating a prissy fashionista. And she had a definite interest in looking her best for work tonight. It was Thursday, and the Student Revolution was due in.

With any luck, Montparnasse would accidentally help her seduce a replacement boyfriend. Between her new pushup bra and Montparnasse’s makeup work, that Marius kid wouldn’t know what hit him.

Ostensibly Eponine was wiping down tables, but in reality she was watching the door like a hawk. There were nine college kids (ten if Marius had really become a regular in their circle) who usually came to Marguerite’s open mics, but unless that fruity one in the hipster scarves was doing something important, like featuring or hawking his cheap little book, they didn’t usually all show up at once. With her luck she was dolled up for nothing and Marius wouldn’t show.

So far the klutz, who never quite succeeded in hiding his bald spot with his cheesy fedoras, and the sickly looking male nurse were parked at a table with steaming mugs of two of Brammer Street’s cheapest teas. The fruity guy was sitting on the couch with Marguerite, showing off his latest scribbles and eating up her praise.

Eponine threw a stubborn glare at the door, as though looking at it hard enough would make the gorgeous brunette with the flaky smile walk in. Of course she summoned her damn ex-foster sister instead.

Cosette, as was her habit since getting out of the system, looked radiantly beautiful. She was wearing a dusty rose colored dress with faded brown knee boots and her hair was tied back with an actual satin ribbon. Because apparently she was either consciously or unconsciously emulating that ridiculous porcelain doll her adoptive father had given her when he’d taken her away all those Christmases ago.

“Hello Eponine,” Cosette said, sounding both sweet and sincere. Eponine made the effort to return the smile.

“Hey sis. What are you doing back in my dump?”

“Dump? I-I rather liked it here last week.” A faint blush touched her pale cheeks, and Eponine wanted to shake her cleaning rag at the pampered brat. “Are you expecting as large a turnout for the open mic tonight?”

“With Albert featuring? Kind of a tossup.” Eponine pretended she’d finished with the tables so that
she could stalk back behind the counter and ignore the girl. She occupied herself with a variety of tasks that could look more urgent than they were. As such, she was brewing an unnecessary backup pot of coffee when the door opened again.

Grantaire was the first through the door, and Eponine instinctually ducked. Much as she liked the guy, she had no desire to ever speak to him again. It was specifically because she liked him though. She’d only felt bad about Montparnasse losing his shit and wailing on whatever luckless loser was in his way twice in her life; when he’d given her baby brother a concussion, and when he’d punched Grantaire out and left him in a bloody heap in front of the bathroom.

Eponine wasn’t familiar with guilt. She didn’t like it.

However, she couldn’t stay ducked under the counter for her entire shift. She’d prepared for this, and was totally expecting what had been a budding friendship to be beyond repair. She was going to be fine. She didn’t need him.

But hopefully getting Grantaire’s ass kicked wouldn’t hurt her chances with his cute friend.

Eponine took a deep breath, and when she turned to face the room her work-face was on.

It looked like they’d gotten the reduced version of the Student Revolution that night. The jock, the crafter, and one of the nerdier of the pack were missing. The flirt and the marble statue had walked in with Grantaire though, and they’d brought Marius.

To Eponine’s intense displeasure, Marius had made his way over to where Cosette was sitting in the front corner. They were trading dazed smiles, and they were holding hands under the table. The flirt made to join them, but thinking better of it, he went and sat with the fruity poet instead.

Scowling, Eponine started restocking paper takeout cups with much more force than was necessary.

“You’re not going to get very good tips if you growl at your customers, you know.”

Eponine jumped. “Grantaire. Hi.”

“Hey.” He was leaning against the counter, just like before, just as though nothing the least bit awkward had passed between them to strain their friendship. The guy looked good. Eponine had to do a bit of a double take, actually. She’d had no idea he could clean up so nicely. And there was something kind of hot about the splatters of paint on his black jeans.

“So…” he peered at the menu with a look of intense concentration. “I’ve been persuaded to quit drinking, and the fact that it’s been so long since I’ve ordered a non-alcoholic beverage that I feel out of practice doing so makes me think my friends might have been on to something. Do you have any recommendations?”

Eponine shrugged. “Coffee?”

“Very helpful.”

“All I’ve ever seen you drink is beer and wine. And piss poor screwdrivers, I suppose. I don’t know what your preferences are.”

Grantaire squinted at one of the many artsy chalkboards behind Eponine and frowned. “Uh…what does Enjolras usually get?”

“Vanilla latte. Not soy though, because of some sort of issue with big business soybean production.
Seriously, don’t ask unless you’ve got a spare half hour. Your friend the poet gets herbal tea, the kid with the hat usually gets hot chocolate, but tonight’s black tea makes me think he’s short on cash this week. Hypochondriac gets chamomile because he’s always coming down with a cold and it’s good for your throat. The flirt gets a caramel macchiato with extra caramel or some other diabetes inducing concoction, and so far Marius is a freeloader. Someone ought to tell him it’s customary to get a drink as table rent.”

Grantaire nodded thoughtfully. “What do vanilla lattes taste like?”

“Seriously? And how many people had to use the word alcoholic on you?”

Grantaire rolled his eyes. “Yeah, laugh it up. I’ll remember that at tip time. Just give me two vanilla lattes. And I’ll cover a hot chocolate for Marius. He’s basically a five year old in a model’s body. I bet he’ll like the hot chocolate.”

“Coming right up.” Eponine stepped away to make the drinks, hands only shaking a little. The work kept her busy for a few minutes, while also providing a comforting sort of rhythm to her actions. When she got back to the counter with the cups she smirked a little, taking note of the barest bit of a dreamy smile that she most certainly did not expect to see on a bitter bastard like Grantaire. He looked oddly content for someone who’d been beaten into unconsciousness less than a week ago. Plus he hadn’t chewed her out.

“That’ll be twelve seventy five.”

Grantaire handed her a twenty. To her surprise, he left a five in the tip jar. “No hard feelings,” he muttered before taking the cups and heading over for his table.

Eponine was too startled to snag the five for herself (all the staff on duty split the tips at the end of the night even though she earned the majority of them, which was why she had a tendency to help herself to her fair cut of them early). She stared after Grantaire instead, and watched him set the vanilla lattes on the marble statue’s table. He kept the hot chocolate in his hand, but he leaned over to whisper something to Enjolras. The snooty rich boy tried to pay for his drink, and when Grantaire wouldn’t accept the cash, the notoriously cold and irritable asshole brushed his perfect pink lips over Grantaire’s cheek instead.

Eponine seriously thought she was seeing things. “Huh.”

Grantaire snuck the hot chocolate up to Marius, who thanked him more profusely than was really necessary for a four dollar beverage, and then he made his way back to the ice prince. Their body language confirmed it, as would the casual touches exchanged the rest of the night and the complete lack of castration threats: they’d somehow become a couple.

Eponine had no idea how Grantaire had managed to pull that one off, but she smiled for the boy. Besides, marveling over Grantaire’s success was something to distract her from the unpleasant and positively saccharine sight at the front corner table.

Marius and Cosette decided to go out for dinner Friday night. Accordingly, after the puppy finished his last class Friday afternoon he was in a bit of a panic.

“How do I look?” Marius asked.
The poor boy was radiating discomfort, so Courfeyrac decided to take pity on him and refrain from teasing him. “You look nice. Really nice, actually. Your high school girl is sure to swoon.”

“It’s the smell that might be a problem,” Grantaire chimed in from the floor, showing none of the tact or restraint Courfeyrac had been aiming for. “You smell like a fucking Abercrombie and Fitch. Do yourself a favor and go sit on the porch. Try to face into the wind. You’ve still got enough time to let some of that disperse.”

Marius’ face fell. “I was sweating a lot, since I’m nervous. Maybe I was a little careless with the body spray. Courfeyrac, do I really stink?”

“No, no!”

“I thought you liked Marius, Courf. You’re really going to lie to him and let him leave the house like that?”

Marius looked like he was going to cry, so Courfeyrac admitted defeat. “It is a little strong. But you’ve got time for another shower if you hurry.”

“That’s true. Okay, okay. I’m going to go shower. Watch my phone in case she calls!”

Marius tossed his phone to Courfeyrac, then went jogging towards the bathroom. He started stripping off his clothes as he went, and both Courfeyrac and Grantaire craned their necks to watch for as long as he was visible. Marius’ dress slacks (borrowed from Enjolras) wound up around his knees, and he tripped and fell into the doorway.

“Ooh,” Grantaire said with a wince.

“Are you alright?” Courfeyrac called.

Marius looked a little dazed. He was on the kitchen floor with his butt in the air, borrowed pants around his knees and nice collared shirt (Combeferre’s) bunched up under his arms and getting severely wrinkled. “M’okay,” he called.

“I think he busted his own lip,” Grantaire said. “Do you think Cosette will believe him when he says he walked into a door? Well okay, ran face first into a door.”

“Shut up, Grantaire,” Courfeyrac said, looking irritable. He walked over to Marius and tilted his face up by the chin. The poor kid’s lower lip was swollen and bloody.

“How bad is it? Ouch.” Marius winced and tenderly prodded his lip. He looked queasy when his fingers came back stained red. “Oh no…ouch.”

“Don’t worry, Marius. You’re pretty enough to work a busted lip,” Courfeyrac said, patting his back reassuringly. “Besides, Cosette’s really into you.”

The reassurance might have worked better without Grantaire laughing his ass off in the living room.

“Here, take your shower and then sit with ice on your lip until it’s time to leave. That’s all you can really do at this point,” Courfeyrac said. He helped Marius to his feet, shoved the boy into the bathroom, and then gathered up the date clothes to inspect them. He let out a sigh. “Guess I’d better get the iron out again.”

“Let him show up in his tightie whities. That’s got to be what Cosette’s after anyway, so really it’s a better impression than a bunch of borrowed yuppie clothes.”
Courfeyrac swatted Grantaire’s messy black head, threw the clothes over his shoulder, and went over to the kitchen closet to fetch the ironing board. “C’mon R, you know Marius has a lot more to offer that girl than a pretty face.”

“I was talking about his pretty body. He kind of fucked up the pretty face running into a door,” Grantaire said with a smirk Courfeyrac didn’t return. “Hey, I like the kid. But I don’t understand this weird urge to date him that’s overtaken so many of our peers. He’s so…”

“Nice?”

“Yes, I suppose that’s part of it. He’s too cute. And gullible. How do you have conversations with someone who believes everything you say?”

“Ever the cynic.” Courfeyrac began his ironing and, reassured by the sound of running water in the bathroom, asked Grantaire something that he hadn’t wanted to tease him over in front of an anxious Marius. “Y’know, it’s a bit rich of you to heckle Marius over going on a date with a strong odor. At least body spray’s potentially nice.”

“As opposed to my eau de BO, cigarettes, and cheap beer?” Grantaire asked. “And yet it worked for me. I landed my man despite smelling like a dumpster at the time, so call me a hypocrite all you want. I’m too happy to care.”

“Well, you did have to drop the cheap beer part of your distinctive musk. And I believe the cigarette stink is the next concession on the agenda.”

Grantaire mumbled something under his breath that vaguely sounded like “Pot’s next,” and went to sit down at the table. “Look, feelings can overcome aversions like smelling like a high school locker room, I’ll give you that. But it’s still not a good idea to show up for your first date stinking. I did shower and groom myself carefully the first time Enjolras and I went out for real. I still think it was a bad idea to tell Marius everything was fine.”

“I was going to address it! I just wanted to do it nicely. Since he’s nervous.” Courfeyrac had just finished with the shirt, so he laid it over the back of a chair and started ironing the pants.

“Uh huh. You sure you’re just not secretly hoping the date might go poorly? Some part of you is.”

Courfeyrac glared at him. “I would never sabotage Marius.”

“I know you wouldn’t want to. But subconsciously-“

“Get out.”

“Pardon?”

“You heard me. Get out of my house! I don’t need to deal with your shit.” Courfeyrac set the iron down, grabbed Grantaire by the arm, and shoved him out the door. Not entirely unused to such a reaction, Grantaire went with it, and looked completely untroubled as he ambled off on his way.

Courfeyrac stood in the living room entryway for a moment, trying to collect himself. He was getting awfully thin-skinned, if Grantaire’s stupid goading was getting to him like that. The asshole rarely meant what he said; he just liked to make noise.

He was brought out of his musings by a cry of distress from the kitchen. Courfeyrac ran over to Marius, and found him standing in a towel pointing in horror at the ironing board. Courfeyrac had set the iron on Enjolras’ pants in his haste to chase Grantaire away.
Shit.

Maybe Grantaire had a point about the unwitting sabotage.

Chapter End Notes

This is probably obvious, but Courfeyrac's art history class is based off of one of my favorite (but most demanding!) set of classes from my undergraduate career. His research project on homoerotic imagery in Greek pottery is lifted from a project I did for my second art history class. If you'd like to read up on Zeus and Ganymede or herms, here are the citations from the paper portion of the project:


Osborne, Robin. “Gay Abandon.”


J-Stor was my best friend for undergraduate research, and I've found some Antinous articles I look forward to printing up and browsing through for funsies. For anyone else lucky enough to be a Massachusetts resident, you can access the database's full collection by getting a Boston Public Library card. They even take electronic versions, if you can't get down to the library itself for a physical one. DO IT. Knowledge is a beautiful thing.

My info on Hadrian and Antinous came from class lectures, so I don't have any specific sources to cite...yet (there are many available and I plan on reading through them). You can't imagine my squeal of delight when I was rereading the Brick after that course and bumped into the lines, "Enjolras was a charming young man, capable of being terrifying. He was angelically beautiful. He was Antinous, wild." (536) My version was translated by Julie Rose and put out by Random House in 2008.

Next chapter will feature the promised crazily protective Jean Valjean. Also, I'm still trying to figure out who to set Courfeyrac up with. I'd be interested in hearing any opinions and suggestions.

Thanks again for all the wonderful attention people. You're a delight to write for <3
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Marius and Cosette have their first date. Jean Valjean responds the only rational way, really...

Chapter Notes

Thanks everyone for all your input about the Courfeyrac thing. Right now the main contenders are Jehan, Eponine, and Marius. I'm going to start throwing him into situations with the three of them, and whichever pairing produces the most chemistry will win.

When Jean Valjean was a teenager, he got busted stealing three bags of candy and a few bottles of soda from a convenience store in the mall. He’d been intending to sneak them into the movie theater under his coat for his nieces and nephews. The Valjeans were ridiculously poor, and getting the kids out for any kind of activity that cost money was a once-every-couple-of-years occurrence. Jean and his sister didn’t want the kids to know they were as destitute as they were, so they tried their best to hide it. You were supposed to have snacks at the movies, so he tried to get the kids snacks even though he didn’t have the money.

A young security guard named Javert had caught him, and he’d gotten Jean Valjean banned from the mall for six months. He’d also ruined Valjean’s nephew’s fifth birthday, which bothered him more than it probably should have, seeing as he’d accepted that he’d been in the wrong.

As Valjean had worked in the garden section of one of the department stores at the mall, getting banned for six months was problematic. He’d lost his job. Unfortunately, his widowed sister was sadly dependent upon the teenager’s paychecks. It took him weeks to find another job, which put them behind on rent, cost them an awful lot of desperately needed groceries, and killed their heating budget for the winter. Jean Valjean ate white rice and ketchup every night for two months, and his nieces and nephews complained that they were getting sick of Spaghettios. He made them a blanket fort in the living room and told them they were playing Antarctic explorers, and that’s why they had to wear coats in the house.

And that fucking security guard. Even after the six months had passed he still stalked Jean like a hawk every time he visited the mall. Jean got banned a second time when he punched Javert in the face and broke his nose. They’d pretty much been enemies since.

After assaulting a security guard, Valjean got banned from the mall for life. He didn’t really mind, as he didn’t want to shop anywhere Javert worked, but he also wasn’t qualified to do much outside of retail. He’d dropped out of high school to help support his sister’s kids, and he’d never managed to get any kind of specialized job training. In addition to being banned from the mall though, Valjean also got some court ordered counseling, and that’s how he met Father Myriel.

The old man was practically a saint. He turned Valjean’s life around. He encouraged Jean to get his
GED and go to college, an endeavor from which he emerged with a degree in business and the
discovery that he had a talent for it. Jean Valjean started a successful factory in Massachusetts even
after all the manufacturing jobs moved down south. He even kept it going when the American
manufacturing industry more broadly started moving overseas. He said it was only possible to
accomplish what so few other American businessmen were doing because he looked after his
workers. Father Myriel had inspired him in a way no other man had, and he wanted to spread the
love embodied by the good old priest. The workers of Madeleine Industries were always paid fair
wages, given full benefits, and they were allowed to organize.

For over a decade he was the toast of the tiny North Shore community he lived in. They even had
him elected mayor, which might have been the beginning of the end. Once he broadened his
commitments to civic duty he took less of a hands-on approach at the factory. Some middle men
started making some changes to increase productivity and profits. Valjean didn’t notice anything
going amiss. After all, the workers were being paid even better after the new managers implemented
their policies (Valjean always kept a comfortable, but far from extravagant living for himself, though
he could have been flamboyantly rich if he chose to). He had no idea his workers were being
exposed to hazardous materials.

He didn’t find out until an ex-employee, who’d been fired when she got too sick to work at the brutal
pace set by the new managers, cornered Valjean one night as he was leaving his office. The
woman’s name was Fantine, and she accused him of ruining her life. Not only had she lost her job,
she’d lost her health insurance just when she needed it most, and she’d fallen into such severe debt
that she’d turned to prostitution to try to support her daughter, whom she’d then lost in the red tape of
social services. Horrified, Valjean did everything he could to try to repair the damage, but an
investigative reporter broke the story about all the Madeleine Industry workers coming down with
lung cancer, and his successful business and respected public image came down around his head.

Valjean lost his business. Even after the lawyers finished with him he had enough money squirreled
away to live off of, but he wasn’t able to send his nieces and nephews to college as he’d hoped, and
he had to give up the brunt of the charity work that had made his life enjoyable. He did everything he
could to help Fantine, feeling that he’d personally wronged her with his oversights. They became
close friends, but the poor woman died before they were able to get legal custody of her daughter
back for her. She got a few visits with the girl though, and that was enough for the good woman to
face her death with peace.

Valjean took custody of Cosette, and she kept him from sinking into bitterness about his failures. She
was the light of his life, and he devoted what financial resources he had left to making her as happy
as possible.

In general, the small town he lived in neither praised nor slighted him. He’d fallen from grace, but
he’d fallen quietly, and the general populace was content to forget about him. Some idle gossips told
stories about the black-hearted businessman who’d poisoned hundreds of workers to line his own
pockets, but for the most part that was it.

Well, with the notable exception of detective Javert.

The overzealous mall security guard had gone through the police academy and slowly climbed the
law enforcement ladder in town. He’d spent a few years working at a correctional facility, spent even
more years as a traffic cop, and finally won his promotion to detective. Even though he policed a
small suburban town with a ridiculously low crime rate, he seemed to secretly believe that he was the
star of a procedural crime drama or an action movie. He treated the stoned teenagers hiding in the
graveyard the way television cops went after murderers and rapists. And he never forgot that time
when he was sixteen years old and he’d gotten the former mayor arrested for shoplifting.
He also hadn’t forgotten that when he was seventeen the former mayor had broken his nose.

Detective Javert drove his unmarked cruiser by Jean Valjean’s house so often that he complained to the station and got Javert reprimanded. Javert responded with increased scrutiny, and Valjean complained that he was being harassed. Javert’s superiors agreed.

Javert was sure that Valjean had known all about the hazardous materials he’d exposed his workers to. After all, he’d shown his true colors when he stole that candy as a teenager. And keeping company with prostitutes? What kind of upright man would do something like that? It didn’t matter how many reprimands Javert received. He was determined to one day catch the disgraced former mayor in the act of something horrible and put the cunning criminal behind bars, where he belonged.

But other than being stalked by a fixated whack job on a power trip, Jean Valjean lived a rather pleasant life. His friendship with Fantine had gone a long way in dulling the guilt and crushing responsibility he’d felt over the workers, and Cosette finished repairing the damage to his soul. He loved his adoptive daughter fiercely, and was accordingly fiercely protective. She loved him back almost as strongly, and put up with some rather ridiculous restrictions on her behavior just to make him happy. She spent a lot of time at home, and she’d promised not to date until she was financially independent and secure. Cosette didn’t really understand this rule, but then, her Papa hadn’t told her much about the struggles in her mother’s short, sad life, and he’d told her nothing of her birth father.

The girl wasn’t overeager to date, so it wasn’t much of an issue. Cosette accepted her father’s odd rules and spent her nights at home doing homework, playing board games with him, and watching family movies curled up on the couch with mugs of cocoa. It was a nice enough life, and she figured there would be plenty of time for dating later.

And then she met Marius Pontmercy.

Blinded by her infatuation, Cosette convinced herself that her Papa would love Marius as much as she did. After all, Marius was a good kid. He was responsible (he had to be; he was in college and living on his own!), he was really polite, and he had dreamy eyes. Well, she didn’t think her Papa would care about that last bit, but Jean Valjean did appreciate a sincere and friendly face.

After meeting Marius at the café she tried carefully bringing up her new friend in conversation over dinner. Her Papa smiled at her, said he was happy to hear her group of friends was expanding, placing careful emphasis on the word ‘friends’, and then he started chatting about a soup kitchen they volunteered at.

Undeterred, Cosette mentioned Marius again while they were watching a Hallmark Channel movie. She was still only getting to know the guy, so there wasn’t much to say about him. She’d already said that he liked poetry, so she told her Papa that he seemed to know Eponine too. When her Papa’s posture stiffened and his expression hardened, she amended her statement. Marius’ friends seemed to be friendly with Eponine. Because they hung out at the café she worked at. They were college kids. Well-educated, friendly, academics-oriented college kids who spent nights out at poetry readings. Not problem kids like Ponine.

She wisely refrained from bringing up Marius for a few days after that.

When Marius’ friend went missing, only to turn up in a bloody heap at Montparnasse’s, Cosette kept that to herself. She didn’t think Marius had done anything wrong (quite the opposite; running to his friend’s assistance was positively noble of him), but she knew it wouldn’t sound good to her father. She spent a good chunk of the night texting Marius though, asking after poor Grantaire and telling him what a good friend she thought he was, and how brave he was too.
She got a text from him Wednesday while she was out shopping with some of her school friends. He asked her out and, without thinking about it she said yes. She also bought two new dresses; one for the open mic on Thursday, and one for their first date. On Thursday night she sat with Marius during the entire open mic. They didn’t read poems, or even really hear what the others read. Cosette spent the night trying to decide if his eyes or his smile was nicer.

And now it was Friday night and he was supposed to be picking her up in an hour so they could get dinner together. Her father was in the kitchen downstairs cooking pasta for them. She really needed to work up the nerve and just tell him.

Cosette took a deep breath and marched downstairs. She was wearing her second new dress, an off white floral print with a drooping collar that showed off her shoulders, and she had her hair pulled back with a blue ribbon. Her father took one look at her and lifted his eyebrow. “You look lovely, my child, but that’s a bit fancy for such a simple meal.”

“I…I was actually hoping you wouldn’t mind if I…if I went out tonight instead. I know it’s short notice, and that I already went out last night. I’m sorry. I meant to tell you before I left for the café, but it slipped my mind.”

“Which friend is it this time? That girl from debate team?”

“No, um, actually-”

“The girl who volunteers at the library with you?”

“Papa, it’s, um, it’s a boy. He asked me out on a date.”

He turned away from her on the pretense of checking the pasta, but his shoulders had slumped. “I see. I thought we’d been over this, Cosette.”

“I know, I know we have and that I agreed to your rules, but Papa…he’s so different from any boy I’ve ever met, and-and I think that if you just met him and gave him a chance, I think you’d like him. I’m sure of it.”

He remained silent, and tears slowly filled her eyes. Cosette waited, too nervous to breathe, until her father finally turned and faced her. His expression melted to one of tenderness as soon as he noticed her distress. “Cosette, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“No, I’m sorry. I’m the one trying to change our rules. We agreed on this already. It’s just…”

“You feel for this boy, then?” he asked. Not trusting her voice, Cosette could only nod. “I want to meet him.”

“Of course, Papa! Of course you can meet him.”

“Right. I’ll give you my decision after that.”

“Oh thank you so much!” She leaned up on tiptoes to kiss his cheek, then ran off to text Marius. He was going to have to make one hell of a first impression.

Which of course he’d be able to do. She had perfect faith that her Papa would love Marius almost as much as she did.
Meanwhile, Marius wasn’t in much of a state to make any kind of impression. He was sitting in the backseat of Courfeyrac’s Volvo wearing a pair of How the Grinch Stole Christmas pajama pants with the dress shirt he’d borrowed from Combeferre and a nice pair of shoes he’d borrowed from Bahorel, clutching an icepack over his lip and praying for the swelling to go down. Courfeyrac was still babbling apologies, something he’d been doing almost nonstop since they’d found the ruined slacks, which were sitting in a plastic bag at Marius’ feet.

They were halfway to Enjolras’ when Marius got Cosette’s text. With a shaking hand he opened it and read it aloud. “Just to let you know, Papa wants to meet you before the date. He wants to make sure he approves of you before he gives his consent for our dinner out. Don’t worry, M. Just be as lovely as you always are and he’s sure to love you.’ Oh fuck. Courfeyrac, I can’t meet her dad like this!”

“Move the icepack,” Courfeyrac instructed. He watched Marius through the rearview mirror, and did a poor job hiding his involuntary grimace. “Alright, well keep it on the lip until we get to Enjolras’. It’s bound to go down some more before your date.”

Enjolras was waiting for them in the driveway. He walked over to the car and tapped on the driver side window. Courfeyrac rolled it down and leaned his arm on the frame, a cheery smile on his friendly face. “Hey Enj.”

“Hello Courfeyrac. Marius.” He nodded towards the backseat, and Marius gave a little wave. Enjolras turned his attention back to Courfeyrac. “Grantaire says you dislocated his arm literally throwing him from the house.”

“Well he’s a lying sack of shit. I barely touched him.”

“I figured as much. Here.” He passed a bag with a new pair of pants through the window, and Courfeyrac handed it off to Marius in the backseat. Without waiting to even look at the new slacks, Marius tore off the pajama pants and pulled on the new ones. “So what’s your plan?”

Courfeyrac frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Are you chauffeuring Marius around on his date?” Enjolras asked pointedly.

“Oh…I hadn’t thought of that. He’s supposed to be borrowing my car. Uh…can I hang with you?”

Sighing, Enjolras gave a brief nod and started walking towards his back porch. Courfeyrac turned off the car, then turned in his seat to face Marius. “How are you feeling?”

“I think I’ve numbed the lip, so better,” Marius answered. “Do I look okay? Tell me the truth, please.”

Courfeyrac looked him over, and finally smiled reassuringly. “You look great. Good luck, bro.” He gave Marius a fist-bump, then got out of the car and went over to join Enjolras, who waved cheerfully at Marius.

Marius waved back. He was still trying to figure out which button got the window to roll back down, as Courfeyrac had left it open, and he overheard some of their conversation while they were walking up the back steps.

“I hope you don’t mind being an awkward third wheel, Courf. Grantaire’s on his way over, and I’ve no intention of altering my plans to suit your comfort.”

“…I did apologize for the facebook picture, you know.”
“You still haven’t taken it down!”

“I didn’t tag you! What more do you want?”

“For you to take it down!”

Marius finally managed to get the window back up, and he set off for Cosette’s.

Marius parked Courfeyrac’s car as carefully as possible in front of Cosette’s house and took a slow, calming breath. He tried to tell himself that this wasn’t a big deal. Sitcoms had lead him to believe that a parent meeting the potential boyfriend before a first date was normal, and could possibly have hilarious consequences.

He still wished his first date ever wasn’t with the most enchantingly beautiful girl he’d ever seen in his life though.

Marius looked in the rearview mirror one last time, frowned over his sore and still slightly swollen lip, then got out of the car.

It took him a little longer than it should have to notice the crazy man chopping wood in the front lawn. Marius blinked a few times when he did notice the man, and then checked to make sure he had the right address.

The man looked to be somewhere in his sixties, but in remarkable shape for his age. He was tall and had the broadest build Marius had ever seen on a person in real life (though his physique would have come across as run of the mill in an action movie). And his wispy hair was pure white.

Chopping firewood in February wasn’t exactly an odd thing to see in New England. What made it odd was that he was doing it in the driveway. And that the house didn’t appear to have a chimney.

The man narrowed his eyes at Marius and then righted his posture. He kept the small axe in his hand, and turned it just right so that it picked up the light from a nearby streetlamp. “You must be Marius.”

“Are you Cosette’s father?” Marius’ voice broke on the word father.

The man grinned, but it wasn’t a comforting expression. He walked over to Marius and held out one of his massive hands. “I am. My name is Jean Valjean.”

Marius took his hand and subsequently had it crushed. He was surprised none of his fingers were broken when he was able to return it to his side. “M-Marius Pontmercy.”

“I know. Cosette’s told me about you.” That low, gravelly voice was going to haunt him for the rest of the night. How did he make such generic pleasantries sound so sinister? “You must be Marius.”

“You’re Cosette’s father?” Marius’ voice broke on the word father.

The man grinned, but it wasn’t a comforting expression. He walked over to Marius and held out one of his massive hands. “I am. My name is Jean Valjean.”

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“I know. Cosette’s told me about you.” That low, gravelly voice was going to haunt him for the rest of the night. How did he make such generic pleasantries sound so sinister? “Come inside, boy. Cosette’s still getting read.”

“Okay.” Trembling slightly, Marius followed Mr. Valjean into a charming, but terribly old fashioned looking sitting room. It reminded him of his grandfather and aunt’s house with one important difference; the giant crucifix on the wall over the couch. As Mr. Valjean sat on the couch, Marius ended up in a chair facing the nearly three foot tall depiction of his lord and savior in exquisitely rendered agony.

“So…you’re Catholic?” Marius asked, trying not to look at the expression of torment on Jesus
Mr. Valjean nodded. “Is that a problem?”

“No! No, of course not. I’m Catholic too. French Canadian, you know.”

“Ah. I don’t recall ever seeing you at church.”

“I only really go for Christmas mass.” This appeared to be the wrong thing to say. “But I’ve been
meaning to reconnect with my faith. I want to take it more seriously.”

“What do you study at school? Cosette said you were in college.”

“I’m an English major.”

Mr. Valjean frowned. He was still holding the axe. “What are you planning on doing with that?”

“I’m not sure yet. Teach, I suppose.” He couldn’t tell if that was a good answer or not. Marius knew
his major was a little impractical, but he’d taken it out of an enjoyment of the subject matter, which
some people found commendable. “What do you do?”

“I used to own a factory.” Drat. He was business-oriented then, and therefore probably didn’t like
learning for learning’s sake. “How did you get that cut on your lip?”

“I walked into a door,” Marius answered immediately, sounding far too stiff and nervous. And for
some reason he couldn’t stop clenching and unclenching his fists.

Mr. Valjean arched an eyebrow, but he didn’t say anything else about the cut.

Then he started cleaning his fingernails with the axe.

“You’re, um, quite dexterous with that tool,” Marius said, thinking he should compliment Cosette’s
father. He didn’t seem to appreciate it, based on his thunderstruck expression. “I, um…will she be
ready soon?”

“Papa, I thought I saw a car pull up. Is Marius…?” Cosette broke off when she walked into the room
and caught sight of him sitting in the armchair. Her face lit up and all Marius’ nerves disappeared,
replaced by appreciation for her beauty and goodness.

Then she turned to look at her father, and her face fell. “Papa, why are you holding an axe?”

“I was chopping wood.”

“We don’t have a fireplace.”

“There are some needy who have fireplaces that could use wood.”

“There are, but I’m pretty sure the only fireplaces in our neck of the woods aren’t being used as a
primary source of heat,” Cosette said, looking irritable.

Mr. Valjean stopped cleaning his fingernails and leant the axe against an end table. He had some
kind of silent communication with his daughter, and after a moment he made a slight nod. “Be back
by nine.”

“Papa, it’s seven thirty!”
“Nine sharp.”

“It’s not even a school night!”

“Argue again and your curfew’s going to be eight thirty.”

“Fine, fine. We’ll be back by nine. Come on Marius, let’s get going or we won’t have enough time to eat our dinner.” Even though she looked annoyed she still kissed her father’s cheek before she left.

Marius walked her out to the Volvo and opened the front passenger door for her. She smiled at him, and, feeling giddy, he tripped over the curb when he went to get into the driver side and fell into a pile of slush and mud. Marius wiped off the slacks as quickly as he was able, but it was already obvious he’d stained the knees.

Drat. Well that was two pairs of Enjolras’ pants he’d ruined.

“Are you okay?” Cosette asked, almost as soon as he’d sat down.

“Yes, fine,” Marius lied. He started the car and smoothly pulled out into the street, trying to pretend he hadn’t noticed the crazy man with the axe staring at them from behind the front room curtains.

“I’m…really sorry about my Papa,” Cosette muttered, cheeks turning red. “He’s just overprotective. He’s really a wonderful man, I swear.”

“He seemed it,” Marius said, giving a stiff nod.

“Marius, he held an axe the entire time he talked to you. I don’t blame you for being nervous.”

He released a breath he hadn’t been aware of holding. “So that was weird then? The axe thing?”

“Very weird. But you handled it well,” Cosette assured him. “And now it’s just the two of us, and we’re going to have a wonderful dinner.” She reached over and gave his wrist a comforting squeeze, and from that point on Marius felt like he was waltzing on fluffy white clouds.

Courfeyrac glanced with distaste at the wall clock in Enjolras’ second living room and scowled when he noticed that only five minutes had passed since the last time he’d checked the time. As he hadn’t expected to be stuck away from the apartment when he’d offered to drive Marius to Enjolras’ for the emergency pants switch, he hadn’t brought any of his stuff with him. He didn’t have his laptop, or his homework (not that he felt like working on it, but still, it was a principle sort of thing; he might have intended to be productive), or even his phone, as he’d left it in the Volvo by accident.

And Enjolras’ apartment was fucking boring. It was huge, but it was mostly full of books and tastefully arranged furniture. The only TV was in the other living room, and it was currently playing some foreign film in a language Courfeyrac couldn’t identify, which was just fucking rude because Enjolras was most certainly not watching it, as last time Courfeyrac had checked he’d had his tongue down Grantaire’s throat.

If he were able to go back in time, find himself a year ago, and tell his younger self that a year from now he’d be hiding out in Enjolras’ spare living room because his host had basically started making out with Grantaire on Courfeyrac’s lap (all three of them had been using that sofa, dammit!), his younger self would laugh in his face. Hell, he wouldn’t even have to go back that far. Just a couple of weeks would do it.
They could at least have put on a movie he liked.

Courfeyrac watched another two minutes pass before he decided he’d had enough. He went into the other living room and started flicking the light switch. “Just break apart for a minute so I can borrow one of your phones and call for a…” The movie was still on, but the living room was empty.

Courfeyrac walked down the hall and took note of Enjolras’ closed bedroom door. He thought about checking to see if it was locked, but the sounds he heard convinced him that checking was rather pointless. Sighing, he went into the main living room, turned off Enjolras’ horrible movie, and pulled up Netflix.

At least he wasn’t bored anymore.

Marius got Cosette back to her house at eight forty five. They’d had to get their desserts doggy bagged, but he thought it was worth it to be early, and hopefully make a good impression. He walked Cosette up to her front door, and then the two of them stood awkwardly for a moment, just looking into each other’s eyes with vapid smiles.

“I had a really nice time,” Cosette finally whispered. “Even though it was short, it was so nice spending time with you again.”

“Y-yeah. It was. Nice,” Marius said, sure he sounded like an idiot.

Cosette smiled hopefully, and Marius remembered that you were traditionally allowed to kiss someone at the end of a first date. He was about to lean in for what was sure to be a moment of romantic perfection, when he noticed the curtains being drawn back from the living room window.

And then he noticed that the axe was leaning against the porch railing.

Marius abruptly changed courses, and kissed her cheek instead. “Good night, Cosette. If your father is okay with it, I’d like to take you out again sometime soon.”

“I’m sure he'll be fine with it,” Cosette said, poorly attempting to stifle a giggle. “Goodnight, Marius.”

He turned on his heel and came very close to running back to the Volvo. With great effort, he managed to march over to it at an almost normal pace. His lips felt like they were tingling from having touched his angel’s cheek. Marius let out a dreamy sigh as he dropped into the driver’s seat.

Then an unmarked cruiser inched along past him, the cop driving it staring menacingly out the window as he went by the Valjean residence. He returned to a normal speed once he got to their neighbor’s house, and shortly after that he was out of sight.

Marius decided to drive directly to Enjolras’ to get Courfeyrac and get home as soon as possible, before anything else unsettling could happen to him.

“What the hell are you watching?”

“RuPaul’s Drag Race,” Courfeyrac answered without bothering to look up. “Are you all done
“Not exactly,” Grantaire answered. He sat down on the arm of the couch and Courfeyrac finally turned to look at him. His eyebrows shot right up. He couldn’t help but gape at the sight of his friend looking thoroughly ravished. Grantaire’s hair, though usually messy, was sticking almost straight up, he had three new visible hickies, and he was only wearing boxers and a red v-neck t-shirt that Courfeyrac was pretty sure Enjolras had been wearing when they’d disappeared from the living room.

“I thought Enjolras was a prude,” Courfeyrac said.

Grantaire shrugged. “I’m not questioning it.”

“No, I suppose you wouldn’t be. So what’s dragged you away from your less than prudish delectable blond?”

“Marius texted us to let us know that he’s on his way to get you. He said you left your phone in the car.”

Courfeyrac wrinkled his brow in confusion, then looked behind him at a handsome antique clock to check the time. “It’s only ten past nine.”

“Yes. Apparently high school girl’s father is crazy. Enjolras invited him up in case he wanted to chat about it.”

“Where is Enjolras?” Courfeyrac asked, not entirely sure he wanted the answer.

“He went downstairs to put my jeans in the laundry. I told him he didn’t have to, but he was rather insistent about it, since it’s his fault they got messed up—”

“You know what, I think that’s enough to satisfy my curiosity right there.”

Grantaire was grinning, looking far too self-satisfied for Courfeyrac’s current mood. He was not looking forward to discussing Marius’ date with his fucking dream girl, especially not in the presence of another sickeningly happy couple.

Enjolras joined them a few minutes later and frowned at Grantaire. “You could have borrowed a pair of my pants, you know.”

“I can wait for mine,” Grantaire said dismissively.

“You already borrowed my shirt,” Enjolras pointed out.

“Yeah, but I like your shirt. It smells like you. It’s kind of like wearing a hug.”

“Oh my god, you’ve turned so stupid with your damn happiness!” Courfeyrac yelled. “I think I liked the pessimism better!”

“You’re just jealous,” Grantaire said with a smirk. He was so content gloating over Courfeyrac that he didn’t notice the severe look his boyfriend was sending him.

Then the doorbell rang and Enjolras was off to let Marius in. Courfeyrac shut off the TV, and after a minute or so Enjolras returned with their puppy.

“You ruined both pairs of pants?”
“I’m really sorry, Enjolras. I’ll buy you new ones as soon as I find a job. I am looking, I promise.”

“Don’t worry about it, Marius. I’m not exactly in short supply of clothing. But do me a favor and borrow Courfeyrac’s clothes for the next date.”

“He tried. We’re different sizes,” Courfeyrac said. “Besides, you and Combeferre have nicer clothes than me. So how’d it go?”

Marius gave a few false starts trying to answer. For one horrible moment he had a vaguely terrified looking grin stuck on his face that he couldn’t seem to shake, then he buried his face in his hands and started sobbing. As no one had expected this reaction, they were all at a loss about what to do.

Oddly enough, it was Grantaire who walked over to Marius and gently patted his shoulder. “There there…uh…that’s all I’ve got.”

“Marius, what the hell happened?” Courfeyrac asked.

“Her father threatened me with an axe!” Marius yelped.

“He what?!” Enjolras exclaimed.

The three of them gathered around Marius and eventually got the story of Jean Valjean’s predate intimidation tactics out of him. Then Marius went on to describe what had been a lovely, but painfully short date, and ended by telling them that he and Cosette wanted to see each other again, but that he wasn’t sure he could face her father. “He’s so tall, guys. And his eyes…it’s like he looks through you. And he’s really strong, and quiet, and foreboding and I don’t think he likes me.”

“Marius, you can’t let him push you around like that,” Courfeyrac said.

“I don’t know dude,” Grantaire cut in. “Cosette’s a minor and Marius isn’t. Fighting back against the psycho dad probably isn’t the best course of action. He could have Marius arrested if he really wanted to.”

Marius’ face went white. “Not really?”

“It’s certainly not an ideal situation,” Enjolras said with a frown.

Courfeyrac tapped his fingers thoughtfully on his knee. “What if you went on a double date next time? That way you’ll have someone to back you up when you start getting scared.”

“And a witness,” Marius murmured. “Yeah, yeah! That might help. Courfeyrac, will you double with me?”

Courfeyrac’s face fell. “I haven’t got any prospects at the moment, actually. Damn dry spell.”

“Well I can see if Cosette has a friend-”

“Marius, I am not dating a high school girl. I want nothing to do with anyone under eighteen,” Courfeyrac said, waving his hands in front of him while sporting a look of stubborn determination.

Marius frowned and hung his head.

“Courf’s probably not the best choice in the world anyway,” Grantaire said. “What you really need is someone who can hold their own when the crazy old weirdo tries his intimidation tactics. Someone who wouldn’t even flinch at that stuff. Ideally someone with a glare impressive enough to…shit.”
He’d just described his own boyfriend.

Marius turned to face Enjolras with an eager expression on his face. “Enjolras, you’re scary! Wait, I mean that in a good way!”

To his credit, Enjolras’ expression remained impassive despite the awkward turn in conversation. “How do you think Cosette’s father would take it if you were to take his daughter on a double date with a same sex couple?”

“Oh…probably not great, come to think of it. He’s a devout Catholic.”

Enjolras and Grantaire both smiled in obvious relief.

And then Marius broke down in loud sobs. “I’m never going to see her again!”

“Enjolras, don’t you dare fold. You can’t!”

“Grantaire, he’s crying.”

And that’s how, Sunday afternoon, Enjolras ended up driving over to Courfeyrac’s to pick Marius up for their double date.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The double date. Well, at least Marius and Cosette have a good time.

Also, Jehan thinks he has some surprising news for Courfeyrac and Grantaire (and he's wrong).

Chapter Notes

Upon further reflection, I have decided to keep Courfeyrac and Marius as an epic bromance in this story. Not saying there won't be awkward making out if they both find themselves single at the same time, but they will not be a main couple...at least not for this fic ;)

So that means it's between Eponine and Jehan. If you guys wouldn't mind chiming in with your opinions as I progress this (which you've been lovely about doing so far), I'd find it incredibly helpful and be eternally grateful <3

(and of course there's a little Courf-voice in the back of my head telling me that he can totes handle dating both of them...)

Enjolras pulled into the narrow gravel drive at Courfeyrac’s and texted Marius to let him know he was waiting. He let out a sigh, reminded himself that he was being a good friend, and then set his phone in the cup holder and sat back to wait.

He was a bit startled when Grantaire jumped up on the hood of his car and splayed himself over the windshield. Enjolras glared at him and reached to put the windshield wipers on, but stopped himself at the last second.

He still beeped though.

After Grantaire picked himself up off of the ground and patted himself down for gravel, he walked over to the driver side and knocked on the window. Enjolras beeped again, watched him jump, and then rolled the window down.

“Just so you know, I’m not planning on enjoying myself. I’ve reminded you several times already that I don’t want to be going on a date with someone who is not you.”

“I know,” Grantaire said. “I came down to apologize for being so whiny about it.” He’d been making more of a pest of himself than usual since they’d come up with the double date plan, to the point where Enjolras had started ignoring his calls and texts and temporarily blocked him on social media.

“Oh.”
“…so you’re wearing that?”

Enjolras defensively glanced down at his outfit. He was wearing a pair of charcoal slacks (dress pants he rather liked and would therefore never loan to Marius), a black V-neck, and a crimson jacket. “Is there something wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“You look hot. Why the hell are you dressing up for some high school girl?”

“Honestly Grantaire, is there anything I could put on that wouldn’t make you think I was dressing up? You even try to jump me when I’m wearing flannel pajamas. According to you everything I own makes me look hot.”

“Alright, true enough.” Grantaire frowned. “I still wish you weren’t doing this.”

“Me too.”

“Do you know who your fake date is yet?” Grantaire asked. Enjolras shook his head. He just knew it was a friend of Cosette’s. “Oh. So I suppose you don’t know if she’s pretty.”

“Is that important?”

“As you’re going on a date with someone who is not me a week after we started dating, I’d like her to be as hideous as possible.”

Enjolras stared at him in befuddlement. “Grantaire…are you nervous that this high school girl might seduce me away from you? You must have figured out from your personal experience of it that seducing me is not an easy task.”

Grantaire muttered something noncommittally and looked at the ground.

“Also, I’m gay. Like, completely. Even if this girl turns out to be incredibly charming, she’s just not equipped to get my attention.”

Grantaire raised his head so that he was looking Enjolras in the eye again. “You’re gay?”

“You hadn’t noticed?”

“I noticed that you weren’t straight, but I guess I thought you were bi like me and Courf.”

Enjolras shrugged. “Nope.”

“Huh.”

“Do you feel better now?”

“Actually, yes. Uh…sorry for being an ass.” He bent over so that he could lean his arms on the car door. “It’s really good of you to sacrifice part of your weekend to help the puppy.”

“I’d rather be working on my take home for intro to sociology, honestly.” At the sight of a quirked jet eyebrow, Enjolras felt the need to elaborate. “Or spend the time with you.”

“See? Your flirting’s already coming along nicely.”

“I wasn’t lying, you know. I like sitting with you when I do my readings. You’re very comfortable, as far as pillows go.”
Grantaire smiled stupidly, and Enjolras leaned forward to kiss him. Grantaire made a soft noise of appreciation and parted his lips. Enjolras took the invitation, and leaned further out his car window to deepen the kiss. He could taste traces of an herbal tea on Grantaire’s tongue, which was so much better than the sweet wine and cigarette blend that had characterized their first kisses.

“Uh…guys?”

Grantaire tried to ignore Marius, but Enjolras broke the kiss and slumped back down into his seat. Scowling, Grantaire stood up straight and turned to face their friend. “I take it you’re finally ready to steal my boyfriend away?”

“He’s just borrowing me for a little bit,” Enjolras said. He reached out the window and lightly touched Grantaire’s wrist. “I’ll be back in a few hours, and then we can go out on a real date if you’d like.”

Grantaire smiled. “What about your sociology take home?”

“It’s half done already. I’ll meet you here when Marius and I get back, alright?”

“Sounds good.” Grantaire bent down for one last peck while Marius was getting in the passenger side, then he turned to walk back upstairs.

“I really appreciate you doing this for me,” Marius said, proving himself just as overly insistent with his declarations of gratitude as Grantaire had been with his declarations of displeasure.

“It’s alright, Marius.” He started driving to Cosette’s house, privately hoping that his presence would prove entirely unnecessary and that Cosette’s father would behave like a perfectly civil and overall normal human being. Because there was no way he was going to put Grantaire through this a second time. The boy was even more insecure than he’d expected, if he was that concerned about Enjolras taking out a high school girl.

“Did you know Enjolras was gay?” Grantaire asked.

Courfeyrac quirked an eyebrow. “I’d say the fact that he’s having butt sex with you is a slight indication, so yes.”

“We’re not having butt sex yet,” Grantaire said dismissively. “It’s mostly petting and hand jobs. I blew him a couple of days ago, and that was pretty awesome, but he hasn’t returned the favor yet.”

“Is this how you guys always talk together?” Jehan asked. His face was bright red.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Are we being too crass for you?” Courfeyrac asked. It was impossible for the others to tell if he was being sincere or not.

The three friends were sitting in Courfeyrac’s living room. Jehan had stopped by to give Grantaire the book of AA affirmations he’d promised, along with a bunch of other papers and poems that he thought the recovering addict might find interesting. He and Courfeyrac had been considering heading down to the Musain to kill some time when Grantaire returned with his bizarre question.

“I just didn’t know he was, like, exclusively gay,” Grantaire continued, as though Jehan hadn’t said anything.
“Is that a problem?” Jehan asked. “Seeing as you’re male, I’d think you’d find it reassuring.”

“Oh, I know. I just don’t get it,” Grantaire said. “I mean…he’s never even tried girls. How does he know?”

“Careful R,” Courfeyrac cautioned. “You don’t want to start defining someone else’s sexuality for them. People take offense. And when Enjolras gets offended he tends to make you cry.”

“I don’t cry! Why are you laughing, you stupid ass? He does not make me cry!”

Courfeyrac wiped at his eyes, and tried to get his giggles under control. “Hm…maybe you don’t remember all those times you wound up stumbling here in the middle of the night, sobbing about how Enjolras was never going to love you.”

“You showed up at my place a couple of times doing that too, Grantaire,” Jehan added.

“Okay, we can change the subject now,” Grantaire said, dropping onto the futon with a scowl.

“Um…would you fellows mind staying somewhere near this subject?”

“Sure Jehan. What’s up?” Courfeyrac asked.

“Well, um…apparently Enjolras and I have something in common. I’m gay too.” He had his eyes fixed on his elegantly slender hands, which were twisting the ends of his scarf, but he looked at them shyly from under his lashes after making his announcement.

“Uh huh.” Grantaire seemed to be waiting for more information. Courfeyrac was kind of curious about what Jehan was following that up with too.

“…I’m trying to come out of the closet,” Jehan muttered.

Grantaire laughed under his breath. “Jehan, you’re a waifish, dreamy poet who dresses like a total twink. You were never in the closet to begin with.”

“What’s a twink?”

Courfeyrac and Grantaire answered with poorly stifled giggles, and Jehan pouted at them.

“So does this mean you’d want to go pick up guys with us or something?” Courfeyrac asked, thinking that might be Jehan’s point in stating the incredibly obvious.

Grantaire quirked an eyebrow. “Us?”

“You can still be a wingman even though you’re taken.” Though he’d probably be a piss poor wingman, come to think of it…

Jehan’s face turned red and he dropped the scarf in favor of picking at a thread in his sweatshirt. “Something like that, I suppose. You know what, forget I said anything. I suppose I don’t have to bother coming out to anyone else, if they can all tell already.”

“Jehan, I’m sorry. No, it’s good, you should totally come out,” Courfeyrac said. He scooched over on the couch so that he was sitting closer to Jehan and gave his knee a reassuring squeeze. “Grantaire and I are just more prone to speculating on peoples’ sexuality than most guys. Y’know, since we’re not straight, we don’t just assume everyone else is by default.”

“I see. So you were speculating about my sexuality? Do you mind if I ask why?”
Grantaire smirked. “Well c’mon Courf, answer the boy.”

“We, er, might have speculated a little when we first became friends with all you guys. But no worries. You’re all firmly Friend Zoned now,” Courfeyrac assured him, and wished they’d managed to change the conversation. Jehan was the most sensitive of their friends (though Marius was turning out to be enough of a dreamer to be competition—if he weren’t too obtuse to notice when he was being teased), which meant Courfeyrac actually felt bad when he made the eccentric poet uncomfortable.

Jehan quirked his lips in the tiniest of smiles. “I see. So you speculated on who was most likely to be into boys as well, and if you’re reassuring me that I’m Friend Zoned, should I assume that you might have ranked us?”

Grantaire nodded, while Courfeyrac shook his head.

“We had Enj pegged as asexual, and I’ve never been happier to be wrong in my life, but he still ranked as most fuckable.”

Courfeyrac rolled his eyes. “He insisted on keeping it based on looks alone, not personality.”

“So you did rank us,” Jehan said, and Courfeyrac swore under his breath. He was going to kill Grantaire. “Who was number two?”

Grantaire scratched absently at the back of his neck. “I don’t remember. I was pretty loaded when we did the rankings, and I only really cared about number one. I pretty much just let Courf pick the rest.”

“Where’d you put me?”

Courfeyrac scowled, more bothered than he cared to admit about the turn in conversation. Jehan was so dreamy and romantic. It seemed wrong to corrupt him with his and Grantaire’s idle perversions. “Jehan, we made the stupid list freshman year. Like, early into freshman year. I still thought Bossuet was Legle’s real name at the time.”

“So am I to infer I wasn’t ranked as very fuckable?” Jehan teased.

Grantaire considered. “Wasn’t Jehan like fourth or something? We definitely gave you pretty points, but you’re not my type.”

Jehan murmured “Enjolras” and gave a nod. The muscular physique and the impassioned angry eyes were definitely features Jehan did not have in common with Enjolras, and they were features Grantaire seemed to be particularly fond of. Jehan was slender, graceful, and his eyes were almost femininely lovely. “So we’ve got Enjolras, space, space, me.”

Courfeyrac closed his eyes and let out a quick breath. “Enjolras, Bahorel, Combeferre, you, Joly, Feuilly, Bossuet. We never updated the list after that one conversation, and we never put ourselves in the rankings either.” And hopefully that could be the end of that.

And hopefully Bahorel would never find out that he’d ranked second, as the guy had once punched a perfect stranger out for grabbing his ass (Grantaire insisted that Bahorel just liked excuses to punch people, but he and Courfeyrac still kept discussions of their sexuality to a minimum around the guy just in case).

Jehan considered. “If we’re going to be completely objective here, and just go based on looks, then I think my list would go Marius, Joly, you,” here he pointed at Courfeyrac, who gave a start of surprise. “Enjolras, you assuming you’re showering regularly and brushing your hair,” and here he
nodded towards Grantaire, who rolled his eyes. “Combeferre, Bahorel, Feuilly…and sadly I’ll have to put Bossuet in last place as well. But his personality works in his favor.”

“You like brunettes, huh?” Grantaire observed.

Blushing, Jehan nodded. “That was fun. I’ve never talked about the kinds of boys I find attractive before.”

“Thanks for keeping my boyfriend out of your top three,” Grantaire said. “I’m already fucking insecure enough without thinking about all the other guys who’ve noticed how goddamn beautiful he is. Why the fuck is he dating me? How did I pull this off?”

Courfeyrac couldn’t resist an opening like that. “Technically, at the moment he’s dating a high school girl.”

“Courfeyrac, that’s terrible!” Jehan yelped. “Grantaire just said he was feeling insecure. Why would you rub his face in it?”

“That’s our dynamic. We banter.”

Grantaire muttered something darkly about Courfeyrac’s idea of banter, then stood up. “I need a… I’m going to make some tea.”

He distinctly did not like the way Grantaire had started that sentence. Courfeyrac was about to spring to his feet, but Jehan reached out a hand and gently kept him seated.

“Grantaire, we were thinking of heading down to the Musain. Would you like to come with us and get your tea there?”

“Feuilly and Bossuet are going to be there, and they’re trying to lure Joly along after them with vitamin C drops,” Courfeyrac said. “Lots of company…”

“Company’s good. Yeah, let’s go.”

This time there was no crazy man standing in the driveway chopping unnecessary firewood. Marius smiled, and cheerfully suggested that he might have made a better impression on Jean Valjean than he’d thought.

The unmarked cruiser took a pass by the house, and the smile slid right off his face.

Shaking his head, Enjolras got out of the car and started for the front door. Marius almost tripped into some slush as he rushed after him, but Enjolras caught him and helped him catch his balance. “Will you pay attention to what you’re doing? No one’s going to loan you date clothes ever again if you keep ruining them.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just still so nervous!”

“I know. That’s why I’m here,” Enjolras said, hoping he sounded reassuring, which was not how he felt but how he thought he ought to present himself. He rang the doorbell and then stood back to wait.

He assumed it was Cosette’s father that had opened the door, as the man glowering at them matched up with Marius’ description of a creepy muscular old giant. The man’s stare was rather intense.
Enjolras made sure he held it.

“Who are you?” Valjean asked.

As he was standing with Marius, Enjolras thought his identity must be rather obvious. Then he realized that Marius was cowering behind him. Trying not to scowl, Enjolras turned back towards Mr. Valjean. “My name is Enjolras. My friend Marius and I are here to take out your daughter and her friend.”


Valjean didn’t say anything. He just narrowed his eyes and stepped aside. Enjolras strode in confidently, and Marius rushed after him, keeping very close.

They were shown into the same sitting room Marius had been in the other night. Marius sat down in the arm chair with his hands folded in his lap, but Enjolras remained standing. He walked over to the bookcase and ran his fingers along the spines, reading over the titles and trying to keep his judgments to himself. The top shelf was almost completely devotional in nature, and below that were classic works of literature in handsome leather bindings that made impressive display pieces but poor reading material. There were only a few nonfiction titles, and they were almost all self-help books or manuals for counseling and charity work.

Staring at the books kept him from frowning in distaste at the massive crucifix on the wall though, so Enjolras kept his attention there while he waited for the girls.

Jean Valjean still wasn’t saying anything. He sat down on the sofa across from Marius and went back to the chore he must have been doing before they’d interrupted him. He was sharpening knives.

Marius looked like he might faint, but Enjolras merely rolled his eyes and went back to looking at the books.

“You’re a college boy too, I suppose?” Valjean suddenly barked.

“I’m a college student,” Enjolras said carefully. He didn’t mind when his friends dismissed themselves as boys and kids, but it really annoyed him when adults infantilized him in an attempt to put him in his place, or in this case, intimidate him. He was young, but he was most definitely not a child.

“And what do you study? Something as frivolous as your friend?”

Enjolras narrowed his eyes. “I’m double majoring in public history and political science, and I’ve got three minors so far. English, philosophy, and French.”

Marius’ eyebrows shot up. “I didn’t know you could have that many majors and minors.”

“If I take summer classes, I’ll have enough credits to tack on women’s studies as well,” Enjolras said. “But Combeferre thinks it’s a bad idea. He says having that many minors is excessive.”

Marius nodded his agreement, then tried to come up with some kind of pleasantry for Valjean, but the old man ignored them in favor of sharpening his knives. He’d clearly picked up on the fact that he wasn’t going to be able to intimidate Enjolras, so he focused on an activity that was unsettling the student he’d intended to unsettle.

Enjolras went back to looking over Valjean’s books, and just managed to hold back a derisive snort when he spied a volume of Eckhart Tolle. He couldn’t contain his derision when he spotted a Louise
Hay next to it, but thankfully he was facing away from his host.

Cosette brightened the atmosphere significantly just by walking in with a smile on her beautiful face. Then her shoulders sagged and she let out a disappointed sigh. She shook her head sadly at her father. Valjean shifted his eyes to her for a moment, then went back to what he was doing. Shrugging it off, Cosette walked over to Marius, who had jumped to his feet as soon as she walked through the doorway, and took his hands in hers. “Oh Marius, it’s so nice to see you again!”

“Hello Cosette.” They stared vapidly at each other a moment, the only sound in the room being their soft sighs of mindless happiness and the sharp noises of metal on metal as Cosette’s psychotic looking father did his work.

Enjolras approached the happy couple and waited for them to acknowledge him.

“Oh, right,” Cosette murmured, coming back to her senses despite the proximity of the object of her infatuation (Enjolras hoped he didn’t look half as stupid when he and Grantaire were together). “I just got off the phone with my friend. Unfortunately, she wasn’t able to borrow her father’s car, so would you mind picking her up? It probably makes sense for us to all travel in one vehicle anyway, right?”

Enjolras assured her that that would be fine, and then Cosette approached her father, bent down, and kissed his cheek. “What time do you want me home, Papa?”

It was four thirty on a Sunday. They’d intentionally picked an early start time in the hopes that Valjean wouldn’t give her another ridiculous curfew (after all, it actually was a school night this time). He seemed to realize he’d been trapped, and that only giving her an hour and a half would sound unreasonable.

“Be home by eight.”

Early, but still better than they had hoped. If they were careful, they’d be able to get dinner before their movie and still have enough time to get the girls home. Marius promised Cosette’s safe return and then the three of them left before Valjean could change his mind. Cosette and Marius got into the back seat together, leaving the front passenger open for Enjolras’ date.

He was starting to question if he really needed to go along with this anymore. The date was fake, after all, and they’d gotten Cosette out of the house without the girl showing up. Maybe he could just drive Marius and Cosette to the restaurant, go to Courfeyrac’s and kill time with him and Grantaire, and then go find them at the end of the date to return everyone to Cosette’s house.

Cosette seemed to pick up on his line of thought. “Papa won’t trust us if you don’t have your date with you at the end of the night.”

“Drat. Alright, where am I going? You did tell this girl that I have a boyfriend already, right?”

“Yes. Eponine’s well aware that she’s a beard.”

Why did that name sound familiar? Enjolras tried to think of where he’d heard that before while he pulled up the GPS on his phone. Then Cosette gave him the address, and he recognized the conjunctions of bars he was heading to.

Enjolras set his phone back in the cup holder, calmly turned off the car, then turned in his seat so that he could look at Cosette and Marius. “Let me get this straight. I’m doing you an intensely uncomfortable favor that is in fact making my boyfriend incredibly unhappy…and you’ve set me up with the girl who almost got him killed?”
Cosette looked horrified. “I hadn’t thought of it like that. Please, Enjolras, Eponine was really the only friend I could think to turn to. She’s the only person I know who would lie to my father. She’s not really a bad girl, I promise, and, and she knows about you and Grantaire, so she won’t–she’ll be respectful. Please don’t be mad.”

There was no fighting the glare off his face after that. But Enjolras dutifully drove to the sketch apartment where, a week ago, he’d found his boyfriend in a bloody heap.

Grantaire knew he shouldn’t be offended, that it was a ridiculous reaction that didn’t even make sense. Really, this was a show of affection, not an insult. No one was implying that he was weak, or needed to be delicately handled.

But he couldn’t stop looking at the line of beverages on their table in the back room of the Musain. Black coffee for Feuilly, hot chocolate for Legle, pomegranate green tea for Joly, white chocolate mocha for Courfeyrac, and spring water for Jehan. No one was drinking alcohol.

It happened from time to time, but not with this kind of consistency. And he was pretty sure he’d seen Feuilly jump to his feet and run a bottle back to the counter when he’d first walked into the room.

It wasn’t an insult. It wasn’t an insult. It wasn’t…

“Grantaire, are you okay?” Jehan asked.

“I’m fine. Fucking fine. Why wouldn’t I be fine?”

“Uh…no reason,” Jehan muttered, then took a sip from his water bottle.

“Grantaire, it’s okay. You can’t really think that Enjolras is going to do something with a high school chick-” Legle started to say, but stopped when he noticed Courfeyrac making a slashing motion across his throat.

“Let’s just talk about something else entirely,” Courfeyrac suggested. “Has anyone else been watching RuPaul’s Drag Race?” The entire table turned to look at him as one, with various expressions of confusion or surprise on their faces. “Sorry,” Courfeyrac muttered. “It was the only thing I could think of.”

“What the hell is RuPaul’s Drag Race?” Feuilly asked.

“It’s kind of like America’s Next Top Model for drag queens. It’s surprisingly addictive,” Courfeyrac explained. He went on to expound his opinions of various queens from the three seasons he’d seen so far (Feuilly made an incredulous comment about there being multiple seasons), and Grantaire happily tuned back out of the conversation.

He was glad not to be alone, but given the mood swings he’d been experiencing lately, he figured it was best to keep his mouth shut. Otherwise his attitude was going to remove all alternatives to a solitary lifestyle.

He took a sip of his jasmine tea and tried to convince himself he was satisfied with what he was drinking. Then his phone vibrated from a text.

‘They set me up with your barista friend.’
Grantaire read the text back and snorted. He covered his mouth with his hand, as he’d just burst into near hysterical laughter.

“What’s going on?” Courfeyrac asked.

Grantaire managed to get control of himself, and breathlessly explained. “They set him up with Eponine.”

“The chick from Brammer Street?” Legle asked. “Ooo, she’s cute. Uh, I mean…”

“She’s hideous,” Feuilly cut in. “Absolutely disgusting, and has no charisma, or charms, or-”

“Enjolras told me he’s completely gay. Guys, I’m not worried about Eponine trying to steal my boyfriend,” Grantaire said. He ran a hand through his hair and grinned. “I think this is the best case scenario for the whole thing.”


Then Grantaire got another text, this time from Eponine. He read it aloud. “’Guess who’s sexy bum I get to follow around all night? I’ll send you pictures so you don’t get lonely.’” The text was followed up with a few picture messages of Enjolras looking exceptionally surly while sitting with a dreamily smiling Marius and Cosette at a dinner table. Grantaire shared the phone around the table so they could all share the laugh, and for the rest of the night the friends followed the awkward date through Eponine’s colorful commentary, including a few opportunistic snapshots of Enjolras’ undeniably sexy bum.

Enjolras had never sat through a longer dinner or movie in his life. It didn’t help that the movie was thoroughly unappealing to him (surprisingly, Marius had been more insistent about seeing the romcom than either of the girls, but the end result was still Enjolras being firmly outvoted). He spent most of the movie fidgeting awkwardly in his seat, trying to avoid Eponine’s wandering hands. And dammit she knew that he wasn’t interested so why wasn’t she keeping them to her damn self?

He also didn’t like how active she was being with her phone. There was something kind of foreboding about the way she sent out texts every five minutes or so. Enjolras was tempted to join her, as texting Grantaire and Combeferre would greatly break up the monotony of the dull date, but he thought it was rude to use your phone in a movie theater. Eponine didn’t seem to have any qualms about it though.

Eight o’clock inched closer and closer, and finally it was time to bring Cosette back to her father’s. Eponine was busily texting during the ride, and as Marius and Cosette were lost in each other’s eyes again Enjolras was left pretty much to his own devices. He put on a playlist and lost himself in Joan Baez and Eddie Vedder until he got to Cosette’s house.

Marius walked Cosette up to the front door alone, leaving Enjolras to seethe in injustice as his presence was most certainly unnecessary. Then he saw Valjean watching them like a hawk from the front room window, and so supposed that it probably was a good thing he was still sitting next to Eponine.

“Have you ever seen anything more disgusting in your life?” Eponine asked, and Enjolras started at being directly addressed for the first time in over an hour.

“Yes, many times.” He assumed she’d been talking about Marius and Cosette, and whereas he did
think that Marius was making an idiot of himself with the sudden fervency of his devotion, disgusting was not the word he’d use for a happy and innocent looking couple.

“I think they’re being disgusting,” Eponine insisted.

“I don’t know how much weight your opinion can really carry, considering your tastes regarding romantic partners.”

“That’s good, Enjy. Laugh it up at the poor girl dating the least horrible of her father’s disgusting friends so he’ll protect her from the others. That’s very compassionate of you, you pampered fucking twat.”

Enjolras turned to look at her, trying to decide if she was being serious or just trying to get under his skin. He thought back to that night, when he and Courfeyrac had turned away and left her alone to wait for her abusive boyfriend. If he hadn’t been so worried for Grantaire at the time, he probably would have tried to do something about it. As he hadn’t, he’d been convincing himself that Eponine made her own choices, and that she’d need to want to leave for others to stand a chance at helping her.

“I’m sorry,” Enjolras murmured.

“I am too,” Eponine said. “For the record. I like Grantaire. If I had even the slightest suspicion that Montparnasse was going to flip out, I’d never have brought him back with us. We’d have left him at the Musain like he asked instead. I just…he looked so upset. I didn’t want to leave him alone.”

Enjolras nodded distantly. “So the two of you are friends then?”

She smirked. “Who do you think I’ve been texting all night?” She held up her phone, and Enjolras wasn’t sure if that was reassuring or not.

“Did you tell him you grabbed my ass?” he snapped.

Eponine laughed. “Not exactly. I just texted him my congratulations, but I think from context he could figure out that I’d gotten a grope. Oh don’t even. If the only thing you’re offering Grantaire in the relationship is incredible good looks, I’ve got a duty as his nosy and prying friend to make sure they’re actually worth it.”

“Excuse me, but I have a lot more to offer Grantaire than looks-”

“Alright, you’re also loaded, but he bought the drinks the other night so clearly you’re not throwing your cash around. Which is good, I suppose, as I can’t imagine Grantaire wants to be a kept man, but still. It means you being rich isn’t really much of an asset. You’re intelligent, but you’re aware of it and it makes you haughty. And you’re judgmental. So basically, Grantaire puts up with you because you’re incredibly pretty. You kind of treat him like shit.”

Enjolras narrowed his eyes in distaste. “And you put all that together from watching us sit together quietly at a few poetry readings, huh?”

“Well I also talk to the guy, not at him, and I listen when he talks back.”

“I do listen to-” Enjolras abruptly stopped speaking as Marius climbed into the backseat. He looked sweetly dazed, and didn’t seem to notice how pissy looking his companions were.

“Isn’t she a perfect angel?” Marius asked breathlessly.
Eponine made a fake gagging noise.

“She’s charming, Marius,” Enjolras assured him. “Will you text Grantaire or Courfeyrac and let them know that we’ll be on our way after I drop Eponine off?”

“Sure.”

“So when are we all doing this again?” Eponine asked brightly.

“Never,” Enjolras snapped.

“But Enjolras, you must have noticed him sharpening those knives. And that creepy cop drove by at least three times tonight.”

“Marius, either grow a spine and look her father in the eye or just meet Cosette someplace instead of taking her out. I’m not doing this for you again.”

Marius frowned. “It wasn’t that bad, was it? I thought it was kind of fun hanging out with you and Eponine.”

Eponine whispered something that sounded suspiciously like ‘he knows my name.’ If Enjolras hadn’t been driving he would have stared the girl down.

And of course, Marius was too lost in his head to notice the fact that Eponine visibly swooned when he complimented her.

“If you want to do a double again, ask someone else. Personally, I don’t think Cosette’s father is anything to worry about. He just wants to scare you because he’s worried about you mistreating his daughter.”

“I would never-”

“He doesn’t know that, Marius. He just met you,” Enjolras said, talking over Marius’ indignant exclamation. “In a few more dates he’ll probably even start exchanging small talk with you.”

Eponine rolled her eyes. “Yeah, good luck with that. Old man Valjean is a douche and a half. I’ve known him since I was eight, and he’s been a cold bastard to me and my family the entire time.”

“Oh gee, can’t imagine why,” Enjolras said sarcastically. Eponine crossed her arms over her chest and shot him a petulant look, while Marius seemed genuinely confused about it. Enjolras did himself a favor and tuned out of the general conversation in the car again.

Despite the fact that he’d decided Eponine was possibly one of the least pleasant people he’d ever had the misfortune of spending extended time with in his life, Enjolras was still hesitant to let her out of his car when they got to Montparnasse’s apartment building. Something of his thoughts appeared to have occurred to Marius as well, as the sight of the rundown looking building finally pierced the bubble of happiness he’d been trapped in for most of the night. “Eponine, are you going to be alright? Your boyfriend won’t be mad about you going out with us, right?”

“I told him I was playing a beard for the night. He knows. He’s fine.” She turned a sappy smile on Marius. “But thanks for asking, cutie. And let me know if you need my help again. I, for one, had fun tonight.” She blew Marius a kiss, then got out of the car and went around to the back of the bar.

Marius replaced her in the front passenger seat, continuing to frown after the girl. “We should see if we can set her up with someone else. She’s a nice girl. I don’t like the idea of her dating that
Montparnasse kid.”

“I don’t like the idea of that Montparnasse kid being on the streets, but Grantaire refused to press charges.”

Marius let out a small sigh, but by the time they’d turned onto a main street he was looking cheerful again. “I can’t wait to tell Courfeyrac the good news.”

“What, that you had a good date? I don’t think it’ll be as exciting for him as you think.”

“Not that,” Marius said with a laugh. “Enjolras, did you not pay attention to what Eponine and I were talking about?” Enjolras was forced to admit that he’d been ignoring them, though he phrased it more delicately than that. “Eponine said she’s pretty sure she can get me a job with her at Brammer Street. I’ll be able to start paying Courfeyrac back for all the help he’s giving me, and if I get enough hours I might even be able to get my own place.”

Given the cost of living in their area, Enjolras very much doubted that Marius would be able to accomplish that feat on a barista’s paycheck, but he still congratulated him on the good news. And he privately hoped that Eponine didn’t have any ulterior motives in getting Marius that job.

The night was finally starting to wind down at the Musain, much to the pleasure of Louison, the poor girl stuck waiting on them, who looked eager to get the place closed and be on her way. Grantaire eagerly jumped off his stool and bolted for the door at Enjolras’ first text. Marius came in briefly to share his news with his friends, then he and Courfeyrac left for their apartment. Legle and Joly left together after that, Feuilly complained of having to get up early for work and took his leave as well, and as all his friends had gone, Jehan decided it was finally time to be on his way. He smiled apologetically at Louison (they’d been the only customers for over an hour, meaning they really had kept her there), wrapped his scarf around his neck, and stepped out into the night.

He still didn’t quite feel like turning in though, so he shot Combeferre a text to see what he was up to. The answer was quick in coming. ‘What do you think the kid with three majors is doing? Studying, of course.’ Jehan smiled, and asked him when he was due for a study break. The next text invited him over, so Jehan unlocked his bike from the rack behind the Musain and started for Combeferre’s apartment.

The ride only took him about ten minutes, but Combeferre was still waiting for him on the porch when he got there. He must have been well past due for his study break, to be willing to tear himself from his books prematurely. Jehan waved, hopped off his bike, and carried it up onto the porch.

“So you told him,” Combeferre said, skipping over any kind of pleasantry.

Jehan frowned at him as he leaned his bike on the railing. “I…huh?”

“Courfeyrac. He and Grantaire were texting with me earlier. You told him, right?”

“I…I told them that I was gay, but I didn’t get around to, um…”

Combeferre let out a small sigh, then turned and walked into the apartment building. Jehan followed after, though he would rather have stood on the porch for another minute and let the chill air of the winter night cool his flushed cheeks. “There wasn’t really an opening…”

“No offense, Jehan, but you’re a romantic. I’m sure you could have thought of dozens of openings
tonight if you wanted to, hundreds of openings since the semester started, and hundreds of thousands of openings since you first told me about your crush when we were sophomores. Just tell him.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“I disagree.”

They’d gotten to what was probably supposed to be a dining room, but instead served Combeferre as a study. Jehan had to watch his step as he made his way through the room to get to one of the comfy armchairs by the window: there were stacks of papers and text books covering almost every spare inch of floor, and they were no doubt carefully organized by class and project.

Upon closer inspection, a few of the stacks were Enjolras’. “Why is Enjolras keeping his French homework here?”

“He’s got his social and political philosophy work here too,” Combeferre said, motioning towards a stack to the left of where he’d settled back in the thick of the study nest. “Grantaire’s been spending a lot of time at his place since they started dating, so he’s found it prudent to do some of the more finicky studying here.”

“Grantaire hasn’t been foolish enough to mess with his study nests, has he?”

“Grantaire’s an art major, and a half assed one at that. He’s never made a study nest before and doesn’t understand how they work.” Combeferre shrugged. “I can’t say I mind. You know how new couples are. If Enjolras didn’t retreat here to get some work done, I probably wouldn’t have seen him outside of school all week. Grantaire’s really needy.”

“Well he’s going through kind of a lot,” Jehan said gently. “I mean, the poor kid’s been a raging alcoholic as long as we’ve known him, and now he’s trying to quit. I don’t think we should discourage him from asking for help.”

“Neither do I,” Combeferre said quickly. “I just…I hope Enjolras doesn’t end up blaming himself when Grantaire has a relapse. If. I meant if.”

Jehan decided to let that one go.

“Anyway,” Combeferre murmured, still looking a bit embarrassed. “I promise not to be a jealous jerk when you start dating Courfeyrac. Although it’d be nice if you and Enjolras took turns ditching me for your boyfriends. The two of you could work out a rotating schedule—”

“Combeferre, stop it. Look, I’m not going to date Courfeyrac.”

“Why not?” Combeferre asked. “I thought you said you found Grantaire’s success encouraging.”

“I, I did, but…look…” Jehan took a deep breath, and finally just forced it out. “Courfeyrac said he’d Friend Zoned me. Which I should have expected, because we have been friends for so long, but I’d hoped…urgh. If only I’d started flirting with him or something back when I first realized I liked him.”

“Are you sure he didn’t just Friend Zone you because he thought you didn’t want to date him?” Combeferre asked. “That’s what people who aren’t Grantaire do when they realize the friend they’re crushing on isn’t interested.”

“You’re going to have to stop saying that now. Enjolras is very much interested in Grantaire.”
“Yes, thanks to three years of constant nagging.”

Jehan shrugged his shoulders and smiled thoughtfully. “Maybe I just need to be persistent then.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Marius starts his new job. Cosette helps the stupid boys be less stupid.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As it turned out, planning his next date with Cosette wasn’t actually a problem for Marius at all. Enjolras was thoroughly uninterested in doubling again, but almost every guy in the group volunteered. After hearing about Cosette’s creepy father they all wanted to see him first hand. By the time Valjean reached the end of a parade of college boys (After Enjolras with Eponine, Valjean met Bahorel with a girl he picked up at the Musain the night before, Legle with Louison, Combeferre with a girl from the history society, Joly with another nursing major, and lastly Feuilly with one of his coworkers), who all seemed oddly eager for whatever weapon or harsh question would greet them, he seemed to have lost his taste for badgering Marius. He stopped any pretense at hindering their dates, and even started showing small signs of approval.

Marius was downright giddy. He was dating the girl of his dreams, Eponine convinced her boss to hire him so he had his own spending money again (though getting a place of his own was still well out of the realm of his finances), and for the rare free moments he wasn’t spending with Cosette, he had a group of friends that was fast becoming surrogate family. Considering how lonely he’d been for so long, he couldn’t help but reflect on the recent changes in his circumstances and be grateful.

“What are you dreaming about now?” Eponine asked. She was leaning against the counter, idling away some time while they waited for the evening rush, while Marius wiped down the tables and rearranged the chairs.

Apparently he’d been doing so with a ditzy smile (Eponine had informed him that his default mode was a ditzy smile if he didn’t pay attention and catch himself). “Oh, just thinking about how lucky I am.”

“Lucky? You sleep on a cheap futon, your girlfriend’s father is a psychopath, and you make minimum wage.”

“I live with my best friend, my girlfriend is the best, most beautiful creature I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting, and I get to work every shift with my friend Eponine. I’d say life’s pretty good right now.”

Eponine rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. “It’s only that last bit that saved you. You’re almost too cute to be real, Pontmercy.”

The door swung open, and Eponine straightened her posture, obviously expecting the beginning of the rush. Then she noticed it was only Courfeyrac and went back to slouching.

“Oh no, Courfeyrac, you came too early,” Marius said with a frown. “I’ve still got another three hours of my shift.”
“I know,” Courfeyrac said. “But I’ve got a paper to revise, and I figured I was better off doing it away from my PS and my Wii. So I’ll just get my table rent and loiter here until it’s time to drive us home.”

“Caramel macchiato?” Eponine asked.

“Yes please.” Courfeyrac dropped his bag on the table in the back that Enjolras usually claimed on open mic nights (one of the only tall tables in close proximity to an electrical outlet) and then went up to the counter to pay. “So how do you like working with the puppy?”

Eponine shrugged, then inclined her head towards where Marius was bent over, scrubbing down tables and chairs and picking up straw wrappers and wooden stirrers from the tiled floor. Courfeyrac shifted his posture slightly so that he too could look at Marius’ ass. “He’s gotten very good at wiping down the tables,” Eponine said with a wink. “Since I have him do it every shift.”

“Smart of you.” Courfeyrac dropped a few dollars from his change into the tip jar. “How are things more generally? Still living with what’s his face the crazy asshole?”

Eponine scowled. “I don’t really live with him. I just hide out at his place when my parents’ house gets uncomfortable.”

“Wait, so his is the safe alternative?” Courfeyrac asked with a frown.

Eponine shrugged, then turned away to start making his drink. Courfeyrac reached over the counter and grabbed her arm. She flinched away from him, and for a moment he thought the girl was actually going to hit him. “Eponine,” he said gently. “If you need someplace safe to stay, you can always crash with me and Marius. And Grantaire doesn’t have a lot of room or anything, but I’m sure he’d make the same offer. We’re starting to worry about you, kid.”

“Well you don’t have to, because I’m fine. I know how to look after myself. Now will you let me make your fucking drink before all the artsy weirdos get out of work and come storming in here for their cappuccinos and lattes?”

Courfeyrac backed away from the counter with his hands in the air. “Go right ahead.” He went over to his table to set up his schoolwork, and silently hoped his offer would be better received with time and thought. As the evening rush was still a little ways off, Marius was the one to bring Courfeyrac his finished macchiato so he could join him at the table for a few minutes.

“What are you working on?” Marius asked. He wasn’t sure he’d ever seen Courfeyrac quite this invested in schoolwork. The guy did turn in all his projects and do all his homework eventually, but he was half-assed when he could get away with it, and he didn’t usually let his education effect his social life.

“I’m expanding a paper I did for art history.”

“Oh. Um…on gay orgies?”

Courfeyrac smirked. “No, on homoerotic imagery in Greek pottery.”

“Oh, right, I remember that one.” Marius frowned. “I thought you got a B on it.”

“I did. Any other teacher would have given me an A, but Margot said she could tell I’m capable of better.” He rolled his eyes.

“Oh. So is that why you’re revising it, even though you got a passing grade?”
Courfeyrac turned away from his notes and leaned his elbows on the table. “So you know those conferences Combeferre and Enjolras are always going to? Oh, of course you wouldn’t, you’re still too new. So the honors kids are always going to these big fancy conferences to share their original research. I always figured the things were dull as fuck. I mean, I’m sure to nerds like Combeferre and Enjolras they’re better than sex, but from the sounds of it they boil down to being shut up in a small room and having people talk at you, until it’s your turn to get up and have your work picked apart. Plus you’ve got to come up with some grand paper that’s well beyond the scope of what you usually need to get a passing grade. They sound like headaches, and I always thought Enj and ‘Ferre were a bit nuts for taking those things on.”

Marius nodded his agreement.

Courfeyrac leaned towards Marius, looking incredibly pleased with himself. “Except get this—the next Phi Alpha Theta conference is going to be in Orlando. Like, up the fucking street from Disneyworld. And the school’s paying for the trip. So if I can get this paper up to scratch, pay my fee for getting inducted into the honor’s society, then next semester the school’s going to fly me to Disneyworld.”

“So…you’re not really doing homework then?” Marius asked, confused.

“Nope. I’m scamming my way into a free vacation. Combeferre’s pissed. He doesn’t think my motives are pure, but he can go fuck himself. I’m a history major, and my GPA’s high enough for the honor’s society…just barely, but it still counts. There’s no reason in the world for them to leave me behind when they all go to Disney.”

“But aren’t they going there for the conference? You probably won’t actually get to go to the amusement park.”

“I’m sure I can find a way. Now leave me be. I’ve got to read up on gay orgies so my school will give me a free vacation.”

Eponine had been passing by so she could refill the milk pitcher, and her eyebrows shot up in response to what she’d heard. Clearly she’d missed the beginning of the conversation. Courfeyrac winked at her and she rolled her eyes at him.

The evening rush came and mostly went, though about half a dozen regulars lingered for a few hours, writing poetry, discussing politics, or staring at e-readers while they sipped their beverages. Courfeyrac spent his time working much more diligently than his friends had ever seen him when it was merely grades at stake, though he’d stop for the occasional break and chat with Marius and Eponine.

Eponine didn’t say anything, but Marius thought she was in a better mood for having company during their shift. He knew he was, and his mood improved even more when they finally closed and Courfeyrac helped them with some of their tasks. The three of them left the café together, chatting about some of the regulars and about the featured poet for the next open mic. Courfeyrac started to ask Eponine how she was getting home while she locked the door, and then they were joined by Montparnasse.

The guy looked a bit surprised to see Courfeyrac and Marius. He threw them both a suspicious look, then pushed past them to approach Eponine. “Hey pretty girl. Ready to head out?”

“Guess so. See you later boys.” She blew a kiss at Courfeyrac and Marius, and then strode away with her abusive boyfriend.

The boys frowned after her. “What is she even doing with him?” Marius wondered aloud.
“On the plus side, it’s only a matter of time before someone that short tempered and evil gets himself locked up. When he does wind up in jail, I say we all pounce and convince Eponine to make a fresh start.”

“Do you think that will work?”

“Probably not, but I can hope. I like that girl. She’s feisty.”

Marius looked at his friend bemusedly. “You know she’s Cosette’s age, right?”

“So?”

“So, if you like Eponine then you can’t make fun of me for dating jailbait.”

“I most certainly can and will, as I’ve said nothing about dating jailbait myself. I just think Eponine’s a cool kid. I don’t like thinking of her getting hurt.”

Marius didn’t say anything else on the subject, deciding to leave off where they were in perfect agreement.

“So…my parents want to meet you.”

Enjolras had walked into the room looking like he’d just come in from the scene of some kind of violent catastrophe, like a train wreck. He’d been in his bedroom taking a private call, which Grantaire thought it safe to assume came from one of his parents.

Grantaire was sitting on the living room floor with a pack of oil pastels and one of his larger sketchpads. He had smudges of color by his eyebrow and cheek from absently scratching his face, his fingertips being thoroughly stained. He looked up at his boyfriend with a deer in headlights sort of look, then calmly picked up a soft shade of orange and went back to work.

“Okay. I wouldn’t mind meeting them either. I, um, didn’t realize you’d told them about me.”

Enjolras never talked about his family. His incredible wealth was the only evidence he had any, as his friends knew that his parents had bought his car and were footing the bill for his school and living expenses, which was why everything was so ostentatious (Enjolras talking them into a hybrid was the only reflection of his personality in the purchases). Combeferre said that Enjolras’ parents were attempting to use him as a way to show off their status, and that that’s why they gave him the best of everything. It was a good thought, but there was no way to confirm it. Enjolras accepted their financial support, but he didn’t interact with them. He hadn’t been home for a visit once since starting college.

“I didn’t, actually. I think one of my cousins saw that picture of us on facebook or something.” Enjolras sat down on an armchair and ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Why not?” Grantaire asked, trying to tamp down the urge to be hurt by that. He was flooded with thoughts of his inferiority. He still didn’t think he was good enough for Enjolras, and that their relationship hinged on incredible good luck on his part. No doubt Enjolras’ parents would feel the same. They’d take one look at him, and then tell Enjolras that he needed to dump the useless, ugly, rude, and incredibly damaged sack of shit or they’d have to cut him off and…

Hm. That might actually work in his favor though. Enjolras might be the particular type of rebellious
twenty something who thrived off of parental disapproval. Shit. There really were too many unknowns here for Grantaire to even begin to formulate a plan.

Grantaire was jolted out of his thoughts by the feel of strong fingers carding through his messy hair. He must have disappeared pretty far into his own head, as he hadn’t noticed Enjolras cross the room and sit down next to him.

“It’s not a reflection on you, Grantaire,” Enjolras reassured him, voice soft, but still so strong, and providing a fitting auditory caress to compliment the fingers stroking through his hair. Grantaire set the sketchbook aside and leaned into a proper cuddle, melting into a secure embrace. “You must have noticed that I’m not close to my parents.”

“Uh…well you’re certainly guarded about them.”

“Mm hm. We have a complicated relationship, and I’d rather not expose you to that mess. But I understand if you’re curious about them. And as they don’t usually show much of an interest in the aspects of my life I find important, this is probably the best chance you’ll get to see them. So if you want to drive out to their house for dinner this weekend, I’m willing to go.”

Grantaire could feel a ridiculously sappy smile on his face, and try as he might to kill it he couldn’t, so he buried his face in Enjolras’ chest instead. “What the hell are you doing?” Enjolras asked, apparently confused by Grantaire’s delighted response to his comments.

“I’m an important aspect of your life?” Grantaire murmured.

“…I thought that had been implied.”

Grantaire leaned up for a quick kiss. “It’s nice to hear you say it. And I kinda do want to meet your parents, so can we do the dinner thing?”

“Yes, just…” Enjolras let out a slow breath, brow furrowed over troubled eyes. “I know you’re more sensitive than you let on. Please don’t let them get under your skin. Whatever they might say…I’m not like them.”

“Who’re you calling sensitive?”

“The kid who ran out into a blizzard crying when we had a fight-”

“Yeah, but-”

“And tried to drop out of school when he saw that Courfeyrac had posted a picture of us cuddling on facebook-”

“Y’know, that could have been a victorious moment for me, but as the picture also showed that I’d gotten the crap kicked out of me-”

“I don’t think Montparnasse got all of the crap out.”

“…you’re lucky you’re so damn pretty,” Grantaire grumbled, but he was still smiling.

Enjolras kissed the side of his face. “I just don’t want them to hurt you the way they’ve hurt me.” Then, as though that were a perfectly normal way to end a conversation, Enjolras got up, took out his phone, and most likely went into the other room to call his folks and let them know they could expect two for dinner.
He left a shell-shocked looking boyfriend staring after him from the living room floor. After a moment of gaping after Enjolras, Grantaire picked his sketchpad up and flipped to a new page. He’d just gotten a sudden, strong desire to commit a whole host of emotions to paper, and they didn’t match the portrait he’d been working on before.

As had become a habit for him, Grantaire followed Courfeyrac to his place after they’d both finished with classes on Friday. After they’d gotten in and divested themselves of their winter gear Grantaire went into the kitchen to brew them some tea while Courfeyrac began a staring contest with his backpack.

“I know I’ve got three papers due Monday, but I really don’t want to start you now,” he informed his homework. “Two of you are only reading discussion papers. You’re short. I could probably even bust one of you out Monday before class.”

“How much reading do you have to do to write those response papers?” Grantaire called from the kitchen.

“Quiet you! Your opinions and observations are completely irrelevant to this discussion!” Courfeyrac shouted back.

Grantaire emerged a few minutes later with two mugs and a ceramic teapot he’d purchased and left in the cabinets. So far Courfeyrac hadn’t commented on it. The guy had a pretty good sense of what he could joke around about and what he couldn’t, and it was fairly obvious that Grantaire’s sudden enthusiasm for tea was his way to replace some of the physical routine that had gone with his old vices.

“Are you going to do homework?” Grantaire asked while handing off a mug of blueberry green tea. Courfeyrac accepted the mug and shot his backpack a sideways look. “…No.”

“Want to play video games then?”

“Most definitely.”

They were both screaming inarticulate bursts of rage that weren’t quite full sentences, but contained some colorful if unconventional phrases, at the TV when Marius showed up about a half hour later. Courfeyrac looked to be enjoying himself, but there was something worrying in the level of Grantaire’s vehemence.

Grantaire tossed his controller at the couch, tugged at his hair, and turned a look of loathing on Courfeyrac. “You’re not even trying, are you? You’re just sabotaging me! We’re playing co-op! You won’t win just because I lose, you insufferable bastard! God, you make me want to rip your fucking head off, you know that?!?”

Courfeyrac and Marius both stared at him for a long minute, then Courfeyrac quietly turned the system off. “That’s usually how we play. We’re always dicks to each other. Everything okay, Grantaire?”

“Um…should I come back later?”

Grantaire and Courfeyrac whipped their heads towards the doorway. Cosette was so much shorter than Marius that they hadn’t noticed her walk in just behind him.
“No, it’s fine. If anyone should have to clear out it’s me, not you.” Grantaire sat down in front of the coffee table and took a sip from his tea mug with a shaking hand. “I’m the one being an asshole.”

Cosette sat down on the couch just behind him, reached over, and gently rubbed his shoulder. “Or maybe competitive video games are a bad idea right now. Um, it’s not that Marius has been gossiping.” Grantaire and Courfeyrac both rolled their eyes at this, because everyone knew Marius told Cosette everything. “But he did let me know that you’re quitting drinking. I just wanted to let you know that I’ve got some experience with counseling from some volunteering I’ve done with my Papa, so if you ever want to talk…”

“That’s nice of you Cosette, but he’s fine,” Courfeyrac said. “He’s three weeks sober tomorrow night.”

Cosette was a sweet girl. Everyone always said it. The hard experiences of her early life coupled with her father’s incredible kindness and strength had left her grateful and tender-hearted. Courfeyrac wasn’t used to her staring at him like he was an idiot. If anything, it was off-putting simply because he’d been unaware she was even capable of looking at a person with something other than compassion reflected in her pretty blue eyes.

“Three weeks is good,” Cosette said carefully. “It’s incredible progress and really, you should all be proud…but in the grand scheme of things…guys, recovering from alcoholism is a lifelong thing.”

Courfeyrac gave a start, and he glanced at the teapot sitting on his coffee table with some worry. “I mean, I’d known that, but…Grantaire hasn’t had any relapses or anything. He’s doing great. So basically we’ve got this licked and things can go back to normal only better soon.”

Grantaire sat up straighter at that, shrugging off Cosette’s gentle hand. “Sorry, so you quitting drinking in sympathy with me was a temporary thing?”

“Well I can handle drinking socially without a problem. I don’t have whatever it is you have where you can’t stop.”

Grantaire swallowed heavily, and nodded. He wasn’t sure why he was so surprised. Courfeyrac punishing himself with perfect sobriety when he hadn’t had an issue, just because Grantaire had fucked up, wasn’t really fair. But watching Courfeyrac empty all his booze down his sink had been one of the more powerful experiences of Grantaire’s life, and he’d found a lot of strength thinking back on that moment during the last three weeks.

Courfeyrac sat down beside him and squeezed his shoulder. “Hey, dude, I’ll stay dry if it means that much to you. I’m so happy you quit drinking, I promise. I guess I just didn’t realize how hard it was because you’re doing so well.” He turned to Cosette. “He has been pretty moody though. That’s a detoxing thing?”

Cosette nodded. “It’ll get better soon, but you’re resetting your whole system, Grantaire. Just remind all your friends to be patient for now.”

“How long’s it going to take for the insomnia to clear up?” Grantaire asked.

“It depends how much you were drinking and how dependent your body got on the presence of alcohol,” Cosette said with a frown. “Maybe a couple of months?”

“Okay, that’s not so bad. I’ve had insomnia on my own for longer than that before,” Grantaire said, trying to sound less horrified than he felt. Since quitting drinking, he’d only managed a good night of sleep the five or six times he’d slept over Enjolras’, but considering the side effects he was
experiencing he was wary of inflicting himself on his boyfriend too much. Enjolras had always been sober, and he’d never suffered from depression. He just wouldn’t get it, and the last thing Grantaire wanted to do was scare him off.

Then he realized that all three of his friends were sitting there looking at him with wide, sad eyes. He sucked in a quick breath and started tapping his hands on his knees. “We can play video games again now. Seriously, I’ll keep an eye on the short fuse this time, I promise.”

“If you need to talk about anything…” Marius said slowly.

“While Enjolras isn’t around?” Courfeyrac added, showing again that he knew his friends so much better than they even realized, and they already gave him credit for knowing them pretty thoroughly. “He certainly hasn’t noticed any sudden bursts of temper from you, but I’ve been seeing a lot of it the past few weeks. You’re walking on eggshells around him, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am,” Grantaire said with a laugh. There really wasn’t much of a question there. “He already knows way more about how damaged and crazy I am than I want him to. I’d rather he not actually see me being crazy. Sorry though. I probably shouldn’t be unloading the instability on you.”

“It’s cool. We can handle it,” Courfeyrac said dismissively. Marius nodded, and Cosette gave his hand another encouraging squeeze. “But he wants to help you too. You should open up a little.”

“No thank you. Cosette said some of these symptoms will be going away soon. I think I can keep hiding it until then.”

“And what if you do slip up and scream at him over nothing, and he’s not expecting it because you haven’t warned him that you’ve been having a hard time keeping your emotions in check?” Courfeyrac asked. “I love the guy to death, but he’s a little slow on the uptake when people respond to situations differently from how he handles them. And he’s certainly never tried to quit drinking before, so he has no reference point for what you’re going through.”

“I only want to look so weak to him though,” Grantaire said.

Courfeyrac was about to say something else, but Cosette ever so subtly shook her head, then rubbed her hand soothingly over Grantaire’s back. “You gave him your advice and he heard it. Now it’s his choice to think it over and put it into practice if he wants to. I’d like to add, though, that I think Courfeyrac made some good points. You should really think about sharing a bit more with your boyfriend.”

“Thanks Cosette.”

“You don’t feel like we’re ganging up on you, do you?” Marius asked. Grantaire shook his head.

It was actually kind of nice, in a way. Since he’d stopped drinking it had become a sort of elephant in the room. No one wanted to bring it up because no one wanted to say the wrong thing, but everyone was altering their behavior and thus giving token acknowledgment to a large fucking elephant. No one was ordering alcohol around him, and for the first couple of days they’d even tried to avoid establishments that served it. Grantaire had had to insist, loudly, that he’d be fine at the Musain, Brammer Street, and the Corinth, cafes that served a variety of beverages other than beers and wines. When Jehan had given him the book of affirmations and poems he’d shoved it between a stack of papers and books that he was also loaning Grantaire, for no good reason other than to keep the resource he’d actually needed hidden from sight, as far as he could tell.

It was kind of nice to get to admit that he was struggling, and that things weren’t normal for him yet.
“Grantaire…do you think it’d help if you talked to other recovering alcoholics?” Cosette asked.

“I’ve looked AA up before,” Grantaire said, an admission that seemed to startle Courfeyrac and Marius. “I don’t think it’s my thing. It’s kind of God heavy, and I’m an atheist. I don’t think committing to a power higher than myself would help.”

Cosette smirked. “Probably not. But there are other groups out there. I can get some resources together for you, if you’d like.”

“I’ll certainly take a look at them.”

“Great. I’ll send you some links on facebook.”

Courfeyrac held up his hand. “Wait, wait. When did you look up AA?”

“Um…once back in high school and a few times more recently,” Grantaire said with a shrug. “Why, is that important?”

“So you thought you had a drinking problem even when we were still teenagers? You noticed how bad you were hurting yourself, and you kept doing it anyway? Did you notice what you were doing to us?” It was pretty clear that by ‘us’ he meant ‘me.’

“I’ve never been in denial about my dependence on alcohol. I just thought I was functioning well enough around it, and I’ve never had much of a motivation to get sober. I can’t afford therapy, and, well…”

Enjolras had changed everything, and they all knew it, but Grantaire had the decency not to say it. No, his friends, even a friend as good as Courfeyrac, hadn’t been enough for him to quit. But Enjolras loving him back was.

Courfeyrac seemed to catch everything, even though Grantaire hadn’t said it, and he looked hurt. “Great. Good to know.”

“Courf…I’m sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Courfeyrac said, even though it did. “What matters is that you’re quitting now. I’m proud of you, dude. Keep it up.” His smile looked almost painful, and definitely didn’t match his eyes.

Grantaire decidedly did not like the sinking feeling that seemed to have replaced his internal organs. He felt a sharp stab of longing for the familiar feeling of a bottle in his hand, but he reached for the mug of tea instead. It didn’t do shit to make his thoughts slow, sleepy, and manageable, but it was something.

“Guys, I, uh…I think I’m gonna head out.”

Marius and Courfeyrac both shot to their feet and started talking over each other, trying to get him to stay.

Cosette tapped Marius’ arm and inclined her head towards Grantaire with a slightly arched brow.

“W-what makes you say that, Grantaire?” Marius asked, darting his eyes nervously between Grantaire and Cosette, as though he wanted someone to tell him that he’d picked the right question. Cosette smiled at him and he visibly relaxed.
“I’m not falling off the wagon, okay?” Grantaire assured them. “I think I’m going to go home and paint for a little while.”

“Call us if you need anything,” Courfeyrac said. Grantaire promised that he would, gathered his things, and left.

He was putting his Feuilly-scarf on just outside the door when he heard Courfeyrac round on Cosette, asking her if they’d really done the right thing by letting Grantaire take off alone when he looked so haunted.

“He doesn’t need his friends to be constantly nagging babysitters. Right now all he needs from you guys is to know that you’ve got his back when he needs it. And you did that. Very nicely, I might add.”

Grantaire smiled, and decided that he liked Marius’ high school girlfriend. He hadn’t accomplished his goal in tagging along with Courf (well, other than wasting some time before he was supposed to meet up with Enjolras). He’d wanted to discuss how fucking nervous he was about meeting Enjolras’ parents, but this had been important too. It wasn’t a wasted afternoon by any means.

He decided he wanted to paint something for Cosette, and he spent the walk to his studio brainstorming for it.

Enjolras jogged up the stairs to Grantaire’s apartment, doing his best to keep his displeasure over the complete and utter lack of security hidden. Grantaire didn’t live in the worst part of town (Enjolras had discovered that when they went to get him from Montparnasse’s), but it most certainly wasn’t the best neighborhood either. It would have comforted Enjolras immensely if at least one of the locks in the building worked.

They’d already argued about it once though, and Enjolras had been left with the impression that Grantaire didn’t want him meddling in his life like that. As Enjolras was determined to meddle fully regarding Grantaire’s terrifying self-destructive behaviors, he decided that the ‘your home is a death trap’ stuff was not the battle he wanted to focus on.

He knocked on Grantaire’s door on principle, not practicality as it didn’t shut properly, and it swung open. Rolling his eyes, Enjolras stepped into the room. “Are you ready to go?”

“Just about.”

Enjolras did a double take. Grantaire was leaning over his bed putting neatly folded clothes in his backpack. He was clean shaven, had washed all traces of art supplies from his skin, and he’d cut his wild hair to something tame and conventional.

Enjolras frowned. “You don’t need to worry about impressing my parents. I don’t care about their opinions.”

“Maybe I did it for myself. You’re always presentable. Why shouldn’t I be?”

“Grantaire, this isn’t a big deal.” Enjolras walked over to him, frowning as he looked over the neat, but thoroughly un-Grantaire dark strands. “I liked your messy hair.”

“I didn’t. It was hobbit hair, and I didn’t keep it very clean. The short hair’s not so bad.”
“This was really just because you wanted to do it, right?” Enjolras asked, keeping his voice firm and steady.

Grantaire paused in his packing and turned to face Enjolras. He ran a nervous hand through his shorn hair. “Does it look that bad?”


“Except when I drink, or smoke cigarettes, or smoke pot, or blow off school, oh and how I live in squalor.”

“Grantaire, stop it!” Enjolras snapped. “Just because I don’t want you to hurt yourself doesn’t mean I want you to-”

“So Enjolras-approved changes are a go, but anything else and I’m being a bad boyfriend because I’m destroying the few quirky details you somehow enjoyed. Got it.”

“That’s not what I’m…Grantaire, what’s going on? You’ve never snapped at me like this before,” Enjolras said. “If there are any right answers available for me here I’d appreciate you letting me know what they are.”

Grantaire took a slow breath, then sat down next to his bag. Enjolras carefully moved it to the floor, sat down next to his boyfriend, and wrapped an arm around him. “What’s going on?” There was definitely more than a haircut involved in this conversation.

“I…I’ve been having a hard time quitting drinking. It’s, um, I’m not trying to wallow in it or anything, but it’s been-I’ve been struggling more than I’ve let on. Courf said today that I should probably let you know. So yeah. The right answer right now is for you to tell me I’m still pretty with short hair, and I’ll try to believe you and calm down.”

“Okay. It’s a very flattering haircut. You look incredible.” Even though he didn’t look like him. “So what’s been difficult? Talk to me. I want to help you.”

“I know, and you are,” Grantaire said, looking up with a fragile smile. Enjolras framed his face in his hands and kissed him. Grantaire’s eyes fell shut, and he let out a small hum when their lips parted. “I love you so much. I’d never get through this without you.”

“So why aren’t you talking to me about it?” Enjolras asked. “If you’re opening up to Courfeyrac you should definitely be opening to me.”

“Look, being an unstable recovering alcoholic is depressing, difficult, and fucking exhausting. When I’m with you I forget about that shit for a little while, and I want to take advantage of that. I don’t want to dredge up all the other bullshit. It’s…I just want to be happy for a little while, and I’m happy with you.”

It was understandable, but it still wasn’t an encouraging response. Enjolras pulled Grantaire close, reassured by the feel of his boyfriend in his arms. Grantaire was still hurting, but he was getting better. Enjolras was determined to help him, and eventually Grantaire would be able to smile even when he was by himself.

Chapter End Notes
Nothing much to say this time, except the usual. You're all wonderful and I love getting your feedback. Thank you for being an awesome audience <3
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Grantaire finds out some unexpected things about his boyfriend. Jehan decides to confront Courfeyrac with his feelings (okay, Combeferre bullies Jehan into confronting Courfeyrac with his feelings, but he still runs over to Courf’s to tell him, whatever the motivation).

Chapter Notes

I honestly did not expect to get this done today. Woo! Go me. Anywho, obviously I'm taking some liberties with pure creative input in this chapter, as Enjolras' parents are OCs. More on them in the end notes. Also, I'm just not addressing the fact that most of the boys are clearly using their last names. I don't want to make up new names for anybody, so Enjolras' parents call him Enjolras.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Enjolras’ parents didn’t technically live that far from them, but they passed through an awful lot of traffic going first by Boston and then by Salem, so the ride ended up taking just under two hours. Grantaire spent most of it either napping or pretending to nap.

Now that he was preparing to meet and be judged by Enjolras’ relatives, Grantaire felt bad for teasing Marius about Cosette’s father. He’d never dated anyone in enough seriousness to care about making a good impression on their family, so this was new territory for him. Terrifying new territory, at that. And no matter how much Enjolras insisted that he didn’t care what his family thought, Grantaire still couldn’t find comfort in that. Enjolras’ parents, while not being an active presence in his life per se, were still present in the background. They controlled where he lived and where he went to school. If they had a reason to be upset with him, they could definitely show their displeasure.

After he got off the highway, Enjolras pulled into a gas station and parked so that he could pull up the GPS on his phone. Intrigued, Grantaire feigned waking up. “What the hell are you doing?” he asked, pretending to sound groggy.

“Putting their address into my GPS so I don’t get lost.”

“Um…aren’t we going to your childhood home? I’d think you’d know how to get there.”

“We’re going to one of them,” Enjolras muttered, keeping his eyes on the screen.

“One of…”

“They’ve got three houses and a condo in Boston.”

Grantaire let that sink in for a moment. “Just how wealthy are you, Enjolras?”
“Considerably. And I strongly suggest you drop this subject.”

“Okay, okay…” Grantaire furrowed his brow, still regarding his boyfriend in open curiosity. Enjolras must have elected to go to a state school (and a pretty shitty one at that). He had the brains and the drive for an Ivy, and clearly finances weren’t an issue. Grantaire dismissed it as just another thing about Enjolras he’d probably never understand.

Enjolras got the directions to the particular family home in question, and then they set off again. Grantaire glanced out the window, studying the buildings of the charming little city they were driving through. They passed through a section of the downtown area, and Grantaire was treated to the sight of street art, galleries, cafes almost as intentionally quirky as Brammer Street, and hipsters galore.

“There wouldn’t happen to be an art school in town, would there?” Grantaire asked.

“We’re going to pass the main campus in about a minute.”

“Ah.”

Grantaire stared at the main building as they went past and frowned thoughtfully. If he’d had the finances it might have been nice to go to a school that specialized in art, or even to one that had a strong art department. Of course, he wasn’t always in a good enough headspace to make use of his training, so it probably wouldn’t have been worth it to go to one of those places anyway, but he still thought about it every now and then.

Besides, he wouldn’t have met Enjolras if he hadn’t followed Courf to their school…

They passed by the city commons, a large and dismal looking graveyard, and then took a turn heading for some of the largest, nicest looking houses Grantaire had ever seen. An awful lot of them weren’t even visible from the road, as they had massive lawns in the way. Grantaire wondered if Enjolras’ house was going to be one of those ones.

After about ten minutes of navigating side streets, Enjolras turned into what Grantaire initially took to be a narrow street but turned out to be a driveway. The house was an old New England masterpiece, surrounded by landscaping that was probably very impressive in the springtime, though it still looked nice with a covering of fresh snow. The property had a magnificent view of the ocean, and unless Grantaire was mistaken, a stretch of private beach. Grantaire realized he was gaping at it, and that that was annoying his boyfriend, but he couldn’t stop himself.

He’d grown up in subsidized government housing. They didn’t have houses like that in his hometown.

“Will you at least shut your mouth while you stare like an idiot? Honestly, it’s just a house.” Enjolras climbed out of the car and irritably retrieved his bag from the backseat. Grantaire made to follow, trying hard to remember how to act naturally when he was intimidated out of his mind.

He got his own bag and followed Enjolras up to the front step. Enjolras rang the bell and stepped back to wait. After a minute or so, a middle aged woman in an unflattering paisley blazer opened the door. Her face lit up when she recognized Enjolras, and to Grantaire’s surprise Enjolras returned the smile in a muted capacity. He hadn’t been expecting that. Considering how Enjolras had been behaving so far, he’d rather expected his boyfriend to be cold and aloof around his family.

“Hello Yvette.” And to not address his mother by her first name. What the fucking fuck?

“Enjolras! Oh sweetheart, it’s been too long since you’ve come back for a visit. Your mother said
you were going to, but I almost didn’t believe her. Come on in, come on in. And this is your friend? It’s so nice to meet you, dear. Let me take your bag.”

“Uh…I’ve got it. It’s fine, thanks.”

“Grantaire, it’s expected for us to leave our bags with the housekeeper. Did you need anything from it?” Enjolras whispered.

“You have a housekeeper?” Grantaire whispered back.

Yvette overheard them, and started laughing. “With the size of this place? Of course the family has some help. I promise, your belongings will be safe with me.”

“I’m not worried,” Grantaire insisted. He and Enjolras set their bags down so Yvette could take their coats and scarves.

“So I heard you made Dean’s List again,” Yvette said. “Not that I’m surprised. That’s every semester so far. Do you still have a perfect GPA?”

“I dropped down to a three point nine…something or other, actually. I had a disagreement with a lit professor and he took it out on my grades. Am I still neck and neck with Felicia, or is she beating me now?”

“I’m not sure, dear. I know her GPA wasn’t perfect, but it was close. You’ll have to ask her.”

“Who’s Felicia?” Grantaire asked.

“Yvette’s daughter. She works for my parents part time when she’s home from school,” Enjolras explained. “Speaking of Mom and Dad…”

“Your father’s out at a meeting, but your mother should be roaming around somewhere. The last I saw, she was on the ground floor running between the kitchen and the den.”

“Thanks, Yvette. I guess we’d better get this over with.”

Yvette touched his arm, an encouraging smile on her face. “Good luck, sweetheart.”

Enjolras started walking out of the entryway and towards a massive room to the left. Grantaire made to follow, but turned to nod a goodbye when he realized the housekeeper wasn’t going with them. To his great surprise, as soon as Enjolras’ back was turned the woman threw a hateful look Grantaire’s way.

Unnerved and more than a little confused, Grantaire stayed close to Enjolras as they passed through a few grandly decorated rooms that frankly all looked like dens to him. The house was Enjolras’ apartment on a more massive scale, and Grantaire was already having a hard time trying to remember the layout.

They’d passed through three or four rooms before they finally heard another voice in the house. A young looking woman was making her way towards them, talking on a cell phone as she walked at a brisk pace. Grantaire gave a small start when she came into view; she was basically the female version of Enjolras. Tall, smooth skin, hard blue eyes, and wavy blond hair that probably would have been curly if she wore it short.

“I thought you were an only child,” Grantaire muttered.
"I am. That’s my mother."

Grantaire was gaping open mouthed again, but he managed to get better control of himself by the time the woman was in conversation range. Now that Grantaire could see her better, he saw that she wasn’t quite as young as she’d appeared from a distance. He would have taken it as an encouraging sign for how well Enjolras was going to age (not that he was all that concerned), but it looked like some of the woman’s artificial youth came from a scalpel.

"Heidi, I’ve got to go. My absentee son is finally home and I’ve got to meet his new beau. I know, I was surprised as anyone…Yes, facebook. That’s how you find out everything when your only child won’t even call you. Alright dear, goodbye.” She ended the call and then smiled charmingly at them. “Darling, welcome home!”

“Hello mother,” Enjolras said, voice low and guarded.

“That was your father’s sister, if you were curious. She was just calling to let me know that your cousin William is getting married. Just think of that! He’s only two months older than you, you know.”

“Mm hm.”

She didn’t seem at all phased by her son’s lack of enthusiasm. Still smiling widely (odd to see when her eyes were so much like her son’s), Enjolras’ mother turned to address Grantaire. “So you’re the young man I’ve heard next to nothing about. Grantaire, wasn’t it?”

“Y-yes.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Marie.”

“And…you’re okay with me calling you that?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t have introduced myself that way otherwise.” She smiled again, giving off a creepy Stepford Wife kind of vibe. Grantaire couldn’t tell if the smile actually was completely fake or if it just seemed that way because she so thoroughly resembled her son (and Grantaire would die of shock if he ever saw Enjolras smile like a Barbie).

“Come on, handsome, let me show you around the house.” Marie gave a shrill laugh, then took Grantaire’s arm and led him through the room. Scowling, Enjolras trailed behind them.

Marie spent almost an hour with them, first giving Grantaire a tour, then sitting with the boys in the parlor (which was not the den, dining room, sitting room, study, home office, or library) and chatting about just about everything. She wanted to know all about Enjolras’ life; from what classes he was taking, to who he was still friends with, and what he was doing outside of school. She asked a fair few questions about Combeferre, who had apparently been friends with Enjolras since they were in elementary school (something Grantaire felt like he should have noticed sooner), and then she asked Grantaire many of the same questions about his hobbies and studies.

There was definitely an air of the superficial clinging strongly to the woman, but she was pleasant enough. Grantaire didn’t like the idea of spending a lot of time with her, as conversing with her was almost exhausting, but he certainly didn’t dislike her.

By the time he and Enjolras were left to their own devices in the study, Grantaire was more confused
than ever. Despite Marie’s best efforts, Enjolras had been close to monosyllabic. Grantaire only had one guess about why that was.

“So…you’re the one percent.”

Enjolras glared at him. “I’d say that’s fairly obvious, yes.”

“…it’s not exactly a bad thing, you know. I mean, it’s not like you can help it.” He figured that Enjolras, as a psycho radical leftist, was carrying some guilt for his charmed station in life.

Enjolras rolled his eyes. “Grantaire, I made peace with being privileged a long time ago. I’m not embarrassed by my family’s wealth. I despise them for a whole host of other reasons, some of which are marginally related to our financial status.”

“Why the hell are you slumming it at a crappy state school with us though?”

Enjolras shot him a bitter smirk. “To be a rebellious brat. Also…urgh, I don’t think there’s a way to say this without sounding like a tool. I wanted to see what normal people were like.”

“You’re right. You do sound like a bit of a tool when you say it like that, but I guess I can see where you’re coming from.” Grantaire waved his arm to indicate the opulent surroundings. “I only ever saw shit like this on TV growing up. Are poor people like that for you?”

“Grantaire, I grew up travelling between three houses and a condo, with trips to Europe whenever my mother got bored. Middle class people were fascinatingly foreign to me when I left for school, let alone the poor. And…having spent time with the ninety nine percent, I’m more determined than ever that the wealth in the world needs to be redistributed. My parents don’t need all this crap. They could live more than comfortably in just one of their houses, or just a normal sized house. I don’t think you even appreciate just how rich they are.”

“Oh, I’m getting an idea,” Grantaire said.

Enjolras laughed, completely without mirth. “My father works so he can leave the house and get away from my mother for a few hours every day, not because he has to. We’re still rich off of the textile mills my ancestors built in the nineteenth century and the East India trade they participated in in the eighteenth. And my ancestors only got disgustingly rich by exploiting laborers. My parents are poster children for the ignorant and abusive one percent.”

“Ah huh. So dinner conversation when you were in high school must have been interesting, huh?” Grantaire guessed. Enjolras let out a sigh and scrubbed a hand through his hair. “Rich and privileged aside, your mom doesn’t seem so bad.”

Enjolras’ face hardened. “She’s having a good day so far,” he said, though it looked like it cost him something to admit it.

“Enj…you keep hinting that something’s really up with her, but I haven’t seen anything so far. Do you want to tip me off so I don’t accidentally poke the emotional scars, or do I have to wait and find out for myself?”

Grantaire stepped closer to him. He wanted to take Enjolras in his arms, kiss the side of his face, and tell him that he knew all about screwed up families, having come from one hell of a gene pool himself, and that he just wanted to give some support back if he could. However, they were standing in the center of a massive and well lit room (giant fucking floor to ceiling windows) with open archways on either side, so anyone could step in and see them at any moment, and until Grantaire got to know the family better, he’d decided to keep public displays of affection for their son to a
Marie didn’t seem to mind that he was male though, which was a weight off his chest. If Grantaire still talked to his own family, his mother would have had some words about Enjolras’ gender.

“I…I suppose there is something I should warn you about,” Enjolras finally whispered. “I should have told you before you agreed to come, it’s just, it’s really hard to talk about.”

“What is it?” Grantaire asked.

Then they heard the harsh click of high heels on the hardwood floors, and the boys stepped apart from each other. “Oh don’t stop on my account!” Marie trilled cheerfully. “But actually, do. Enjolras, your father just got home and he wants to meet Grantaire. Come on, this way. He’s in the dining room. Yvette’s going to have dinner on the table any minute now.”

“On our way,” Enjolras said heavily. His stare was troubled, and it lingered on Grantaire for a long moment before he turned guarded and followed after his mother.

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Jehan started walking up the steps to Courfeyrac’s apartment building, then turned and rushed back down them. As soon as his boots touched the gravel drive he turned around and jumped back on the steps. But he couldn’t get himself to walk up them. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and tried not to chicken out.

He let out a girlish shriek when his phone buzzed in his pocket. Once his heart rate returned to normal, Jehan fished it out and opened his text.

Of course it would be Combeferre: ‘Get your ass in the apartment and knock on the damn door.’

He texted back: ‘How did u know I was stalling?’

The response was quick in coming: ‘Because you’re you ;) Seize this opportunity Jehan. Courf is never home alone. You can do it. I believe in you.’ It was a rare opportunity, actually. Marius was out with Cosette, Grantaire was on his trip with Enjolras, the majority of their friends were camped out at the Musain, and Courfeyrac was home revising the history paper Combeferre had goaded him about. It was the best opportunity Jehan could hope for.

‘And you’re still on call for when he rejects me?’ Jehan texted back.

‘Irrelevant. Carpe Diem.’

Jehan stuck his tongue out at his phone, then jammed it back into his pocket and finally jogged up to the apartment. He knocked on the door, shook out his hands, let out a few more anxious breaths, and then fixed something like his usual distant smile on his face.

Courfeyrac opened the door, eyes a bit unfocused from peering at dry history sources and his laptop screen for more hours than he was used to. He rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck, then ran a hand through his hair. “Hey Jehan. What brings you by?”

Jehan swallowed around a suddenly dry throat. Courfeyrac was barefoot, wearing a baggy pair of university sweatpants that had slid down pretty low on his hips. There was something about the thought of him padding around the house in bare feet that was oddly erotic for Jehan.
“I, um, I was wondering if we could hang out for a little while. There was something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Oh. Sure, c’mon in.” Courfeyrac stepped aside, still rubbing sleepily at his hair and sending the wild brown strands on end. “I think I’m due for a study break at this point. I was just about to make some cocoa. Want anything?”

“Does Grantaire still have a collection of fancy teas stashed here?”

“Of course.”

Jehan followed Courfeyrac over to the cabinets to browse. He opted for an earl grey, then sat down at the table to wait for the water to boil. Courfeyrac got some mugs out for them then leaned back against the counter. “How’s the studying going?” Jehan asked.

“Fucking miserable. My back’s aching from hunching over all those damn books, I’ve got a reading headache, and my brain is so tired that I can’t tell if I’m actually having brilliant insights about my thesis or if I’m just grasping at straws because I’m fried and I want to be done. This is why I try not to actually put effort into my schoolwork. It’s a fucking nightmare, is what it is.”

“When do you need to have the paper done by?” Jehan asked.

“The deadline for the conference is Wednesday, but I’ve got two tests Monday and a power point presentation Tuesday, so I want to try to get it done this weekend. I think I’ve had it for the night though.”

“You do look tired,” Jehan murmured, thinking it might be more considerate of him to come back later.

“I’ll live,” Courfeyrac said with a shrug. “So what’s up with you? How’s coming out of the closet going?”

“Well enough. So far everyone’s responding like you and Grantaire.” Jehan had been a little surprised when he discovered that even his own mother seemed to think he’d been out since high school.

“Even though you weren’t very good at it, you were closeted for kind of awhile. I mean, ‘Taire and I fessed up about liking guys as well as girls almost right away, and no one gave a shit. Why’d you wait so long to tell us you were gay?”

“…I told a few people, but um…I don’t know. I just felt like it was kind of…” Jehan rubbed at the back of his neck, and wished he’d just written a poem instead. Combeferre said that this was the type of thing you should tell a guy in person, but Jehan was so much more eloquent when he had the time to think his words through. “It just felt so private. I didn’t like talking about it.”

They were interrupted by the kettle whistling. Courfeyrac busied himself making the tea and cocoa, in the process turning away from Jehan’s increasingly red and flustered looking face. “So what changed? Or rather, who’d you meet?”

“H-huh?”

Courfeyrac grinned. “Oh come on, Jehan. You’re prepping all your friends for an announcement. Clearly you wanted us all to know you liked guys before you introduced us to one. Now have you landed him yet, or are you still just crushing really hard?”
Courfeyrac handed off the mug of tea, still wearing that encouraging, friendly smile, and Jehan tried to return it. “Um…the latter.”

“So who is it? Someone we know? You've got to tell me, if you want me to be able to do anything to help you.”

This was the best opening he could ever hope for. Combeferre would stab him if Jehan had to tell him about this conversation and admit that he’d passed over an opening like that. Jehan licked his lips, trying to think of one of the many times he’d pictured such a scenario, and all the beautiful words he’d planned to use to express his feelings left him. He was too lost in Courfeyrac’s friendly smile, and his warm eyes.

‘It’s you. Always has been. Just tell him. Tell him.’ His inner voice sounded oddly like Combeferre at the moment. Before he could act on his inner voice’s instructions, they were interrupted by a loud banging on the front door, and just like that the moment was gone. Jehan could have sworn he felt it as it slipped through his fingertips.

“I’ll be right back,” Courfeyrac said. He set his cocoa on the counter and then padded through the apartment to greet his new guest. And it was just as sexy as Jehan had thought it would be.

It turned out that Enjolras had gotten all of his looks from his mother. Which wasn’t to say that Paul, his father, was ugly. Quite the opposite. He was actually really attractive for an older man; he just didn’t look a thing like his son.

Actually, he looked a little like how Grantaire always thought Batman would look. He was even taller than Enjolras and Marie (which was probably good for Marie; if he was any shorter then she wouldn’t be able to wear heels), he had shapely but thick black eyebrows, sharp grey eyes, a broad built, and dark hair with streaks of grey in it. The man was broody and silent, so Grantaire decided to play it safe and keep his mouth shut. Enjolras was too busy staring his parents down to be much in the way of conversation, so that left all the talking to Marie, which seemed to suit her perfectly.

It was uncomfortable as ass, but Grantaire had been in worse situations. His family had never kept their animosity to themselves the way Enjolras and Paul were doing, so really, sitting silently and trading glares was a nice change of pace. If Marie hadn’t been tossing back blush wine like Kool Aid, Grantaire probably would have been able to relax. As it was, he was sitting to Marie’s left, and he could smell it. It smelled like a nicer version of this boxed stuff he used to get from time to time, and even though boxed blush tasted like crap it had done its work so fast and so very well, and just one glass would be really good…

Enjolras reached over and squeezed his hand under the table, and Grantaire released a breath he hadn’t been aware of holding.

“Is everything alright?” Batman asked.

Grantaire gave himself a little shake. “Yeah, fine.”

“You look a bit pale. Are you feeling well?” His voice was really rich. He wondered vaguely if Enjolras would sound like that when he got old.

“I’m, I’m fine,” Grantaire repeated.

“That’s too bad. If you were sick it might explain why you were such an ugly little thing,” Marie
said. Enjolras glared at her, and Batman rubbed at his eyes with his hand.

“Good God, we’ve reached the pivot drink early tonight.”

“Well am I wrong? He’s ugly! I mean I’m sure you’re a lovely boy, don’t get me wrong, but Enjy’s so handsome. I just, I’m a bit surprised he’s not dating someone good looking, that’s all. That’s all it is, darling. It’s nothing to be upset over, so stop looking at me like that.”

“Mom, I’ve asked you not to call me Enjy,” Enjolras said. He was outwardly calm, but the intensity of his stare was getting worrying. “And as I happen to find Grantaire attractive, what you think of him is of no concern.”

Marie tipped back in her chair, an exaggerated expression of amusement on her face. “Oh really! Is that so?”

“Marie, you’re embarrassing us in front of company,” Batman murmured.

“Some company!” Marie exclaimed. “It’s just some weashul-weaselly? Weasel-looking beast that’s decided to prey on our little angel. You know Enjy, if you’re going to degrade yourself and everything we’ve given you by getting your jollies off with a boy, you could at least pick a decent looking one. I mean, that way it might even be worth going to hell for your perversion. I’m just saying.”

“And I’m done.” Enjolras jumped up from the table, coming very close to tipping his chair over.

“Oh no you’re not! I say when we’re done and we are most certainly not-”

“You wonder why he never comes home and visits, Marie? This is why! Because you’re an embarrassment!”

“He’s the fucking sodomite, not me! He’s the embarrassment! I’ve never been more ashamed in my life. William’s getting married you know! To a woman, because that’s what normal people do! How am I supposed to explain this to our relatives?!"

“Maybe we’ll all get lucky and you’ll finally drink yourself to death before the wedding!” Paul roared.

Enjolras grabbed Grantaire by the arm and pulled him from the room. His parents’ shouts echoed out of the dining room and followed them as they raced up the staircase and down the hall to Enjolras’ room. Enjolras shut and locked the door, then started pacing with his back to Grantaire.

Grantaire leaned against the door, since his legs felt weak. “Y-your mom…she’s…?”

“An alcoholic, yes,” Enjolras said, voice deceptively calm. “The pivot drink is the one that turns her mean. As you noticed earlier, she’s pleasant enough until then. Dad came up with the term.”

Grantaire felt like he was just seeing Enjolras for the first time. He also felt like he was going to be sick.

Their clique had started forming the first semester of freshman year, when most of them had been under twenty one. It took them awhile to notice that Legle was a little older than your average freshman, but once they’d realized that if he’d had money he’d have been capable of buying booze they started having drinking parties at Courfeyrac’s. Everyone had teased Enjolras about continuing to nurse sodas instead of alcohol, and Grantaire had been the most vocal of the group (because, you know, if one of them wasn’t drinking then he might start thinking about how much he was drinking).
And then when Enjolras turned twenty one everyone had once again tried to pressure him into having just one drink, now that it was legal. Combeferre had eventually gotten everyone to stop, but more than half of Enjolras’ party was wasted with their nagging and wheedling.

Grantaire felt like such an asshole. And now he had to wonder more than ever just why his boyfriend was dating him.

Enjolras finally stopped pacing and walked over to Grantaire. His eyes were a little wet, which was a terrifying sight to see because Enjolras wasn’t allowed to cry. He was too beautiful and perfect for that.

“I’m so sorry, Grantaire. I should have just told you everything, and then we could have skipped this. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Grantaire smoothed back the soft blond curls he loved so much and made his best effort to keep his voice steady. “I’m glad you brought me here. Enjolras, look, my family’s not exactly a prize either, so I’ve seen those kinds of fights before. And your mom’s not the first person who’s called me ugly, and she won’t be the last either. I can deal with it. But…it’s, I think it’s good that I got to see where you came from. I needed this. I promise you, no matter how hard it gets, I will never touch a drop again. I don’t want to hurt you the way they’ve hurt you.”

“You…you wouldn’t. You’re not that kind of, I mean, you don’t get mean like that. I’ve been worrying for completely different reasons,” Enjolras said, but the words lacked his usual conviction. Grantaire leaned in for a soft, tender kiss.

“I won’t hurt you like that,” he repeated.

Enjolras’ breathing was still uneven, but his eyes looked less haunted. He hugged Grantaire, burying his face in his neck until his breathing returned to normal. “There is one thing you could do for me if you really wanted to cheer me up,” Enjolras murmured.

“Anything,” Grantaire breathed.

“Grow your hair back out? I really miss the hobbit hair.”

Caught completely off guard, Grantaire laughed at the request. “You mean neglect my hair and just let it do its own thing? Yeah, that’ll be a piece of cake.”

“Good.” Enjolras kissed him again, then pulled away and went to get his bag from where the housekeeper had left it at the end of his bed. “I know we were supposed to stay the night, but…”

“I wouldn’t mind bailing early.”

“Good. I just need to find Yvette so I can say goodbye. Um…meet you at the car in a few minutes?”

“Sure.” Grantaire smiled warmly, then went across the hall to the guest room that had been prepared for him. He rushed for the bed, grabbed his phone out of his backpack, and frantically started texting Courfeyrac.

Meanwhile, Courfeyrac’s phone was sitting on top of his art history textbook in the living room, so he failed to notice Grantaire’s texts.
He was still feeling a little loopy from uncharacteristic hours of intense focus, and so was sure he looked out of it when he threw the door open. He wished he’d gotten a few more sips of cocoa in. And then he thought he might be seeing things, because there was a teenage girl standing on his doorstep with a suitcase and a tipsy smile.

Eponine saluted him with a bottle of chick wine. “So that offer to crash here still good? You gonna be my new safe man, Courf?”

Courfeyrac stared at her, trying to piece together the significance of the troubled high school girl, the full suitcase, and her odd greeting. And then it all clicked into place and he rushed forward to envelop her in a hug. Eponine let out a wild squeal when he lifted her in the air and spun her around.

“You left him! You really did it! Oh, I knew you could do it, you wonderful little bitch!”

“Put me down! I’m going to spill my wine.”

“Sorry, sorry.” Courfeyrac set her down on her feet, still beaming with joy. “C’mon in, Ponine. Marius has been sleeping on the futon, so that leaves the couch. You know what, forget that, I’m being stupid. You’re the only girl. You should take the bedroom.”

“Oh, so you can be the one to ogle Pontmercy when he’s half dressed in the morning? I’ll take the couch,” Eponine said. She dragged her suitcase into the living room and set it at the foot of the couch in a claiming motion. “Grantaire says he wears tightie whities. He doesn’t happen to wear them to bed, does he?”

“Sadly no; the puppy wears pajamas.”

“Drat.”

“I know, right?”

“Well you could set a better example,” she teased, throwing him a flirty smile.

“Tell you what, you start the sleeping in your underpants trend and I’ll see if I can get Marius to jump in on it.”

“Alright, I will.” Eponine set her wine bottle on the coffee table with a loud thunk, then started taking her shirt off.

“So I’m just going to head out, I think.”

Courfeyrac snapped his head to the doorway leading to the kitchen and frowned apologetically. He’d forgotten all about Jehan. “Hey, did you hear the good news at least? Eponine left her abusive boyfriend! Woo hoo!”

“And now I’m stuck in my shirt,” Eponine complained. It was a little muffled, as the t-shirt was mostly over her face.

Laughing under his breath, Courfeyrac walked over and tugged it back down. “Let’s just keep our clothes on for now, okay Eponine?”

“I guess. If you want to be boring. Oh hey, it’s whatsisname! The fruity poet! Hi. I like it when you talk in Japanese. It’s very sexy.”

Jehan’s brow furrowed. “Fruity poet?” He let out a quick breath, gave himself a shake, then started
walking towards the door. “Sorry. I’ve got to get going. I’ll see you both later. Good luck, Eponine.”

“Thanks!” Eponine said, voice loud and grating from her drunkenness.

Courfeyrac matched paces with Jehan and met him by the door. “Hey, is everything okay? You still didn’t tell me whatever it was you needed to say.”

“I…I’ll talk to you later. You’re probably going to have your hands full with Eponine.” He tried to smile, but there was something sad in it. “Goodnight, Courfeyrac.”

“Night Jehan.”

Courfeyrac shut the door after his friend, then went over to the couch and sat down next to Eponine. “So what changed your mind?”

“Hm? About Montparnasse?” Eponine reached for her bottle and took a sip. “Okay, so we were sharing a packet of ramen because he went and blew the cash I gave him on more fucking clothes, and when I told him that that was fucking stupid of him he back handed me, and then I realized…I was being pretty fucking stupid. I mean, I don’t know you and Marius that well or anything, but I know you well enough to know that you’re the only decent men I’ve ever met. And even if you weren’t, you’d still probably be better than Montparnasse. So I left.”

“Well, you’re welcome to stay as long as you want,” Courfeyrac assured her. “I’ll certainly never kick you out.”

“You really mean that?” Eponine asked. Courfeyrac nodded. “So this can be my home? I’ll have a home again? Oh sweetie!” She grabbed his face and pulled him into a messy kiss. Instinctually, Courfeyrac went with it, such were his habits in these situations. In addition, he really had been suffering from quite the dry spell (he blamed Marius for taking up so much of his time, and Grantaire for taking up even more with his damn drama), and he’d desperately missed this kind of physical contact.

But she tasted like chick wine and she was a minor. Courfeyrac’s brain caught up with him and he broke the kiss. “Hey, jailbait, stay on your own cushion, okay?”

Eponine giggled, but nodded. “Fine. But as soon as I’m not jailbait anymore, I say we get a friends with benefits arrangement going.”

“Alright, princess. I’ll think about it.” He took the wine bottle from her hands and set it back on the table. “I think that’s enough of that. Sleep it off. I’ll help you with the hangover in the morning.”

“You’re a good guy, Courfeyrac. And I mean that from th’bottom of my heart.”

Courfeyrac kissed her forehead, then went to get her a pillow and blanket. When he got back to the couch Eponine was already snoring.
I don't know how well this comes across, but I based Enjolras' dad (physically, anyway) off of Michael Maguire (the Batman joke came in because I read that he was 6'4”, which is how tall Neal Adams says Batman is, and Neal Adams is the fucking authority on what Batman looks like). It just struck me as cute to make his dad an older Enjolras. I pulled his mother out of thin air, so have fun cobbling together your own older female Enjolras images ;)

I thought I might as well explain where my mental images of the characters are coming from, while I'm at it. I'm intermingling the Brick with the 2012 movie. Enjolras is very much Aaron Tveit in my head, and Grantaire is definitely George Blagden. I have a tiny issue there though, because Hugo describes Grantaire as being unnaturally ugly, and I think George Blagden is pretty hot. So I've reconciled this problematic head canon by deciding that Grantaire's habits hit his looks hard, and when he's taking care of himself he cleans up nicely (plus it's more fun to write steamy stuff about pretty people).

But my mental image for Jean Valjean still is, and probably always will be, Colm Wilkinson.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Combeferre and Enjolras corner Jehan for a pep-talk. Marius discovers he has a new roommate.

Chapter Notes

I have made some decisions and have developed a plan for Courfeyrac's romantic endeavors. This is not to say that feedback is unwelcome, because it totally isn't. I'd like to know how I'm doing progressing this story arc. However, you will no longer be able to sway me as I'm in the process of spinning my web already ;)

Combeferre closed his biology textbook with a feeling of intense satisfaction. It had taken his entire weekend, but he'd managed it. He’d finished all his homework. Hell, he was even ahead in two of his seven classes.

Intensely pleased with his progress, Combeferre extracted himself from his study nest and started packing away his finished assignments. He glanced with some annoyance at the four stacks that belonged to Enjolras, which hadn’t been touched since Thursday afternoon. Combeferre considered texting him about it, but the poor guy was probably stressed out enough, what with taking Grantaire to meet Marie and Paul (a venture Combeferre could not see ending other than terribly). Then again, falling behind in two of his most demanding classes was only going to lead to more stress. He probably should give Enjolras a call…

No. Combeferre had been working his ass off all weekend, and he deserved a small break before he invited in the unique stress that only his friends could bring him. He all but skipped into his room and snagged the book that had been sitting on his nightstand as a reward for all his diligent work. It was called The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory, and Combeferre had thought it looked phenomenal when he’d fortuitously come across it in the library stacks while looking for sources for a paper for his philosophical perspectives of women class. He bellyflopped onto the bed and eagerly cracked it open.

It was a tease. He got in just enough to realize that the author, Cynthia Eller, had a wonderful snarky turn of phrase that made what could be dry, academic jargon an enjoyable read, when his phone and doorbell simultaneously commanded his attention.

Highly reluctantly, Combeferre set the book down. “You’ll just give yourself a reading headache,” he murmured sadly. He felt like he was going to cry when he glanced back at the open book on the end of his mattress before dejectedly exiting his bedroom.

He decided to deal with the front door first, so Combeferre stowed his phone in the pocket of his sweatpants and went to his entryway. Jehan was waiting for him, wearing frumpy pajama pants, a sweatshirt that was at least three sizes too large for him, and a hideous puce colored scarf that Feuilly had made with yarn Legle had bought him as a joke. The poor kid looked close to tears.
Combeferre’s stomach sank. “He didn’t say no, did he?”

Jehan shook his head, but his was still blinking back tears and his lip was trembling.

“Did you tell him?”

“I-I tried, but then that girl, she was there, and I panicked and I ran and now, um... he hugged her, and then she was taking off her clothes.”

“Wait, what?” Combeferre rubbed at his temple, and then his phone went off again, not with a text but with a call. “Just go sit down in the living room. I’m going to see what this is, and then we’re going to talk this out. Okay?”

“Mm hm.” Looking thoroughly miserable, Jehan shuffled off for the couch.

Combeferre shut and locked his door, then answered the call with a small sense of foreboding. “Hey Enjolras. How’d it go?”

“Horrible, but not as horrible as I expected. Mom was asking after you, by the way.”

“Ah. Tell Marie I said hi.”

“We’re home already, actually. Mom got shitfaced and made a scene so we took off.”

Combeferre was having an incredibly difficult time trying to gauge Enjolras’ mood. As was his habit when confronted with his family, he’d turned guarded. There was little emotion reflected in his voice, so even a friend as close as Combeferre couldn’t quite tell if he’d been further traumatized or not from the brief visit.

“How’d Grantaire handle it?” Combeferre asked. He wanted to pretend it was to draw out further conversation and thus give him an opportunity to counsel his friend, but in truth he was just plain curious. Morbidly curious, even. He wanted to be a supportive friend, he really did, but there was a small part of him that also wanted to see Grantaire fuck everything up so Enjolras could move on to a less flawed partner. It was a small part, and generally he tried to ignore it, but every now and then that little voice in his head eagerly crowed at the thought of Grantaire failing a relationship test.

“Grantaire was perfect,” Enjolras said, some pleasant emotion creeping into his voice. “I was really worried about him, and he did look really awful when he was sitting next to Mom and she reeked of her wine. But when Mom pounced on him he just kept his cool, and then we went upstairs and talked a little, and we spent the entire ride home talking even more. He was wonderful. And he said he’s more determined than ever to stay sober.”

“Oh.” Combeferre bit back his desire to ask what Marie had said about Grantaire, and tried to remember how supportive best friends were supposed to behave in these situations. “So he gets it then?”

“I should have told him sooner.”

“Ah. Well good for you guys, I guess.”

“Ferre, is everything alright? You sound preoccupied. I didn’t interrupt a free read, did I?” Enjolras asked, gently mocking what was in fact mutually shared nerdery.

“You would have if Jehan hadn’t gotten here first. He’s waiting for me in the living room.”
“Oh. I guess I’d better let you go then. Is it anything serious? Should I come over too?”

Combeferre glanced around the corner and saw Jehan curled into a fetal position on his couch.
“Yeah. But hit up Starbucks first and get one of those scones that he likes.”

“Oh. I’ll head out now.”

Armed with three scones and a tray of steamers (he figured it was too late for espresso at this point), Enjolras approached Combeferre’s apartment and hit the bell with his elbow. Combeferre opened it a minute later, looking amused. “I thought I gave you a key.”

“Hold these drinks so I can get it out, then.”

Combeferre waved him into the living room, where Jehan was still curled into his fetal position on the couch. Enjolras set the drinks and scones on the coffee table and sat down on the loveseat. Combeferre urged Jehan into a normal sitting position and then sat down next to him.

“He didn’t say no, did he?” Enjolras asked. He didn’t know as much as Combeferre about the situation, but considering the way Jehan had been mooning over Courfeyrac for the last year or so, there really were only so many options as to what could have their poet looking so dejected (and it was far too early for grad school rejection letters to be coming in).

“No. He backed down from asking. Again,” Combeferre said, taking advantage of the fact that Jehan’s stare was fixed on his shaking hands to roll his eyes.

“Jehan, you’ve got to say something if you want to get anywhere with this.”

“I, I know, it’s just…look…Courfeyrac’s really flirty, okay? So don’t you think that if he liked me back he might have said something on his own by now?”

It was a good point. Courfeyrac was nothing if not candid with his emotions. Or, it certainly seemed that way to Jehan and Enjolras. Combeferre was shaking his head though.

“Courf is a flirt, no argument there. But he’s never flirted with one of us in sincerity. He jokes about it sometimes, but it’s a far cry from when we see him with strangers and acquaintances at school or at bars and cafes. He respects you too much to flirt with you, Jehan.”

“Whoopee,” Jehan muttered dismally. “So I should be glad I’m Friend Zoned?”

“You should be glad he hasn’t categorized you as a potential casual fling. If he does have feelings for you, they’re more serious than that,” Combeferre said.

“Combeferre, honestly and not just because you think it’s what I want to hear…do you really think he might like me back?” Jehan asked.

Enjolras frowned. He, personally, didn’t think it was outside the realm of possibility but he also didn’t think it had really occurred to Courfeyrac (having been blindsided by how far his feelings had developed regarding Grantaire, Enjolras now somewhat expected that of other people). Courfeyrac obviously liked Jehan as a friend, but he was also weirdly protective of him. Enjolras had noticed Courfeyrac altering his behavior subtly whenever Jehan happened to be in their group, which puzzled him greatly until Combeferre had shared a theory with him.
“I think he does, yeah,” Combeferre said, and Enjolras hesitantly nodded his agreement.

“Then why doesn’t he say anything? He knows I’m gay now, but he’s still…I mean, he’s more confident than me. If he felt something, wouldn’t he have said it?”

Enjolras decided to be blunt about it, as harsh measures were obviously in need to advance the conversation. “He doesn’t see you in a sexual light, Jehan.”

Combeferre and Jehan both shot him surprised looks, and he shrugged his shoulders. Jehan looked incredibly embarrassed by the turn in conversation. “I, um, I’m not sure this is really your field of expertise, Enjolras.”

“What, because I’m a virgin?”

“Oh good, you still are,” Combeferre muttered, and Enjolras shot him a look.

“That was me being picky, not ignorant. And quiet, ‘Ferre. I’ve already heard your opinion about my choices.”

“I just think ‘I’m picky about my first time’ and ‘I’m dating Grantaire’ is a really nonsensical combination, personally. You’re going to make him get a blood test before you do sleep together the first time, right?”

Enjolras smirked. “Joly’s already working on that for me, actually.” Combeferre looked shell shocked, but before he could jump in again Enjolras pressed on with his original point. “Look, Courfeyrac isn’t treating you like any of the people he marks for casual flings, which is a good thing, but he doesn’t treat you exactly the same as any of the rest of us, and I think the distinction is in your favor.”

“How does he treat me differently?” Jehan asked, looking an odd combination between unreceptive and hopeful.

“He’s more respectful of you,” Enjolras said.

Combeferre nodded his agreement. “He tones down his crassness, he swears less, he doesn’t talk about his romantic partners, and he generally tries to present himself in a better light than when you’re not around. He doesn’t seem to want you thinking he’s the lazy, happy go lucky slut the rest of us know him to be.”

“And he also doesn’t say anything that he thinks would make you uncomfortable. He seems to think you’re very pure,” Enjolras added.

Jehan scowled. “Well, lucky me then. I haven’t Friend Zoned myself. I’ve just turned myself into an asexual and innocent maiden. I’m sorry, but how is any of that supposed to be encouraging?”

“It means he has feelings for you, you imbecile,” Combeferre said with a laugh. “Are you trying to be dense?”

“His feelings are strong enough that he wouldn’t want to get involved in anything meaningless. I think there’s a possibility that it hasn’t occurred to him why that is, because again, he doesn’t see you in a sexual light,” Enjolras said.


“I’d say so,” Combeferre said. “You said before that he offered to go pick up guys with you. Take
him up on it. Go to a gay bar or something, and maybe in a different atmosphere, with just the two of you, you’ll change his perspective and lead him to a sorely needed epiphany.”

“And if I really have Friend Zoned myself, it should be easy enough to retreat and rebuild the defenses. Yeah, I think I’ll do that.” Jehan smiled brightly. “I’m going to ask Courfeyrac to go to a gay bar with me!”

“Text him now,” Combeferre instructed. “Before you can overthink it and back out.”

“Okay. Okay.” Jehan took out his phone, and promptly dropped it on the floor. “I can’t do this.”

“Yes you can,” Enjolras snapped. He scooped the phone up from where it had rolled over to him and started typing out the text himself.

“Enjolras, what are you doing?!” Jehan yelped. Enjolras darted off of the loveseat and made his way across the room. Jehan tried to run after him to steal his phone back, but Combeferre grabbed him around the waist and hauled him back onto the couch. “Enjolras, stop it! You’re a terrible friend! I’ll hate you forever if you send that text!”

“And done.” Enjolras tossed the phone back to Jehan. He caught it with trembling hands.

“What did you say?”

“That you’d thought about his offer and that you really could use more exposure to the gay community. You asked him if he could recommend any bars or clubs, and if it wouldn’t be too much trouble, would he mind coming with you at least the first time.”

Jehan pouted. He’d pulled up the text for himself to check that Enjolras was telling the truth (not that there was much chance of him lying). “That really does look like something I’d write.”

“Mm hm.”

“I can’t believe you did that. I’m never going to trust you again, you know. I wasn’t ready, Enjolras! You shouldn’t be putting pressure on-” the phone suddenly vibrated with a new text and Jehan dropped it again. “OHMYGODHEANSWERED!!”

“So open the text!” Combeferre yelled. “Come on, what’s it say?”

“I can’t! My hands are shaking.”

Enjolras grabbed the phone again and read back the text. He smiled at Jehan before handing the phone to him. “He knows just the place. If you can stand to miss the open mic on Thursday, he’ll pick you up at eight.”

Jehan’s eyes went wide with disbelief. “Not really…oh my god. I’m going to a gay bar with Courfeyrac.”

“Calm down, Jehan. It won’t be a date unless you play your cards right,” Combeferre reminded him.


“I don’t think you’re really putting him out with that one.”

Jehan eyed Enjolras curiously. “Um, we’ve been rather preoccupied with my…business. I didn’t even ask. How did visiting your parents go?”
“It was mildly traumatic, but it ended well enough. I’ve decided that I’m ready.”

His friends turned to stare at him, Combeferre incredulously and Jehan in wonder. “I thought you were joking about the blood test,” Combeferre murmured.

Enjolras shook his head, an embarrassed and uncharacteristically self-conscious smile on his face. “No, I, um, I really did it. I haven’t told Grantaire yet, of course. He has enough to think about for the moment, but um…if he’s ready too then I want to sleep with him. Possibly Thursday.”

Jehan let out a small squeal. “Oh I’m so happy for you guys! Things must be really good if you’re at that point already. And you know what, that will definitely keep Grantaire distracted Thursday, so I’m all for it. Oh Enjolras, it’s so nice to see you happy and in love. I thought this was never going to happen. Good for you!”

Enjolras could feel his face growing warm from Jehan’s insipid rambling, but he couldn’t actually deny the content of it. He did feel strongly for Grantaire, and a physical union seemed the next and most obvious course of action.

Combeferre looked less than thrilled though. “You’re sure this is what you want? You’ve put a lot of stock into losing your virginity, Enjolras. Once it’s gone you can’t get it back.”

“I think losing it to my first love is appropriate.”

“Alright. As long as you’ve thought this through.”

Jehan shook his head, still wearing a stupid smile. “You silly boys and your obsessive logic and rationality. This is a matter of the heart. You’re supposed to be a little dreamy and impulsive. Don’t analyze it to death or you’ll kill all the romance.”

“I’m inclined to listen to Jehan on this, ‘Ferre,” Enjolras said. “He’s the expert.”

Combeferre snorted. “Of the three of us I’m the only non-virgin present, but he’s the expert? Alright, fine. Let the blind lead the blind. I’ll buy the lattes and scones when you both show up here Friday night to unload about your romantic exploits of the previous evening.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Enjolras said, meeting Combeferre’s gaze with a challenging one of his own. He raised his steamer in a sarcastic toast.

Jehan flicked his eyes back and forth between them. “Thanks for the scones, by the way,” he murmured, hoping to diffuse the tension.

“You’re welcome,” Enjolras returned with a smirk.

Marius got in much later than he’d expected from his date with Cosette. They’d gone to the symphony this time (alright, he’d probably stand a better chance of being able to move out if he didn’t spend half his paychecks on his dates with Cosette, but he told himself that this was important too), and when they’d gotten in Mr. Valjean had been waiting for them, not with an axe, knives, or a fencing foil (Legle and Louison had been the lucky couple to see that one), but with mugs of homemade hot chocolate and a friendly smile.

Marius had finally succeeded in earning the old man’s respect and good opinion.
And he discovered that the only thing more terrifying than struggling to get Jean Valjean’s good esteem was to succeed and then need to keep it. He’d stayed at their house until one in the morning, first drinking the cocoa and chatting with the two of them, and then playing a few rounds of Yahtzee. At least it was a Saturday, so he didn’t have classes in the morning.

Then he remembered that he’d agreed to go to eight o’clock mass with them. There was definitely going to be a lot of coffee in his system before he stepped into that church.

Marius stumbled into the apartment, stripping off articles of clothing as he went, such was his haste to get into pajamas and fall into bed. The apartment was dark, but he knew it by heart at this point and so didn’t bother turning on a light.

Then he smashed his leg into something with a hard corner (he would later discover it was a suitcase), lost his balance, and fell onto the couch. More specifically, he fell onto the soft body that had been sleeping on the couch.

“Aaaugh!” Eponine shrieked, suddenly waking to what she assumed was an attack. She elbowed Marius in the eye, and he fell off of her and landed painfully on the floor. She scrambled to the other end of the couch, her pillow and blanket falling on the floor with her movements, and raised her fists, ready to strike again.

Marius was moaning, trying to clutch both at his face and his leg in turn. He was also shirtless, with the button to his jeans popped and the fly undone.

Then the light switched on. Courfeyrac rubbed blearily at his eyes, clearly trying to make sense of the odd scene. “Marius, Eponine’s living with us now too.” He turned the light off and disappeared back into his bedroom.

Eponine woke for the first time Sunday morning when Marius’ alarm went off at six thirty. She pulled her pillow over her head and fought her way back to sleep.

The second time she woke up she wasn’t aware what time it was. It was just too fucking bright and her head felt like it was going to crack open. Groaning, she pulled herself up from the couch and started stumbling through the apartment looking for the bathroom.

She found a closet and an empty bedroom. Her mouth already tasted like vomit. “Where the fuck is the fucking bath…urgh…” She cupped a hand over her mouth and ran into the kitchen.

Courfeyrac was standing in front of the counter fiddling with the coffeemaker. Eponine shoved him out of the way and threw up in the sink.

She jumped when she felt gentle fingers pulling her hair back for her. She would have thanked him, but she was far too busy puking. When it finally subsided, Courfeyrac rubbed her back and turned on the tap for her. She rinsed her mouth out, and then straightened up and tried to smile at him.

“You look like ass,” he greeted. He looked annoyingly chipper, but then, he also wasn’t hung over. Actually, mornings were pretty good to Courfeyrac. She couldn’t help checking him out a little, and wishing she presented a better image than retching over his kitchen sink.

“Do you have any idea how much wine I chugged last night?” Feeling a bit guilty, Eponine turned and started rinsing out the sink, thankful that there hadn’t been any dishes in it.
“I know you got through at least three quarters of that chocolate wine you left in the living room. I’ve been hoping it was celebratory in nature?”

Eponine nodded, then winced at the unhappy aftereffects of putting her head in motion. She touched a hand to her forehead. “Yes, it was celebratory. I’m making a fresh start. New apartment, new friends. From here on out life is going to stop sucking so badly.”

“That’s good to hear.” He handed her a glass of water and some aspirin. “Here, fight that hangover off. I’ve got some coffee brewing, and when you’re feeling human again I think we should go out for a celebratory ‘Ponine’s no longer dating a creeper’ breakfast.”

Eponine swallowed the pills and drained half the glass to delay answering. Already feeling better for the hydration, she managed to keep her gaze steady when she looked at him. “That sounds great, but I’m going to be low on funds until payday. My ex-creeper cleaned me out before I had the sense to leave.”

“Don’t worry, jailbait. It’s on me. I’m going to grab a shower and then I think we should go someplace with bacon. Lots of bacon.”

“If you insist.” Eponine watched him head off for his room to get his clothes, unaware of the soft smile on her face. Maybe Marius dating Cosette wasn’t the big tragedy she’d thought…

Then before she realized it Courfeyrac was in the room again, heading to a door that she’d thought went to a pantry or something. When she heard the pipes rattle as the shower started, understanding dawned. “So that’s where the bathroom is.”

Jehan was staring at his computer screen in befuddlement when Grantaire finally returned his call. “Hey dude, what’s up?”

“So you know how the other night you and Courfeyrac said I was a twink?”

“Well, we said that you dressed like one. But yeah, you’re a total twink. What about it?” Grantaire sounded intrigued, and more than a little amused.

Despite the fact that he was sitting alone in his bedroom where no one could see him, Jehan fought the urge to pout. “I’m trying to figure out exactly what that means, and whether it’s a good thing or a bad thing. None of the search results I’m getting are in agreement. Can you help me out by explaining what you meant?”

There was a pause, and when Grantaire spoke again it was around a low, rumbling laugh. “I guess that you’re femmie? Um…I don’t really know how to explain it. Why? What’s up?”

“Did Courfeyrac tell you he’s taking me to a gay bar this week?” Jehan asked, and Grantaire immediately jumped in with why he couldn’t tag along with them. Jehan smiled to himself, then continued. “No, that’s fine. It’s just, I’m trying to figure out how I should present myself. I’ve never really tried to interact with the gay community before. Should I play up being a twink?”

“They’ll eat you alive, kid. But I suppose you couldn’t pull off being a bear, so yeah, by all means. Twink it up.”

“Well what do you and Courf do when you go to gay bars? I mean, you guys aren’t twinks or bears.” He’d just put the two words into google images together, and instantly regretted it as he
almost dropped his laptop on the floor in horror at seeing his search results. But he did manage to ascertain that his friends conformed to neither of those particular gay stereotypes.

“Honestly, we just go as ourselves. Jehan, don’t worry too much about being the right kind of gay, okay?” Grantaire said, taking Jehan by surprise by the uncharacteristic gentleness in his tone. “I mean, yeah, you might bump into some of those rainbow mafia type of guys who play up the gayer than thou thing, but it’s not worth buying into that kind of drama. You’re actually really cute, and beyond that you’re a nice person. Just don’t shut yourself down by overthinking this shit, and you’ll definitely meet someone.”

“Grantaire, that was really sweet! Thank you!” Jehan gushed.

“Yeah, well don’t tell anyone. I’ve already lost enough of my cynic cred by being stupidly in love with Enjolras. Speaking of my Antinous…he just told me I wasn’t available to go bar hopping or clubbing or what have you with you and Courf on Thursday, but he didn’t tell me what my plans were. Did he mention anything to you?”

Jehan grinned. “Not really, no.”

“He told you something. What’d he tell you?” The boy sounded suspicious. It was kind of adorable.

Jehan’s grin widened to the point that it was almost painful. “That you’re going to have a really good time Thursday night.”

“Can you be a little less vague?”

“Il va vous donner la petite mort.”

“Was that fucking French?” Grantaire snapped, and Jehan giggled.

“I’ve been sworn to secrecy, and besides that, if you paid any attention to my poetry you’d know what that phrase meant.”

“…I pay attention sometimes.”

“You’re going to have a lovely time, Grantaire. Just trust your lover.”

“I guess.”

“I’d better get going,” Jehan said, glancing at his laptop with a sigh. He still had no idea what to do with himself for his hopefully friendly-outing-turned-date, and he figured he’d gotten as much advice as he was going to out of his friend.

“Yeah, I’d better get going too. Eponine’s going to swing by to check out my paintings once she’s done with Courfeyrac, so I should probably tidy this place up a little. I know she’s not exactly a lady, but it still seems wrong to have a chick in this sty.”

Jehan felt his throat tighten. “Courfeyrac’s out with Eponine?”

“Yeah, they went out to grab food.”

“…like a date?”

“No…like a friend spotting a broke friend who can’t afford to feed herself. And is also jailbait. Uh… you okay, Jehan?”
“Fine, yeah. Bye.” Like an idiot, he ended the call there. “You dull, stupid fool!” Jehan collapsed backwards onto his bed and dramatically clutched a pillow to his chest. He would be insanely lucky for Grantaire not to tell Courfeyrac about how horrible and transparent he’d been. He’d completely tanked his chances at any kind of surprise transformation and seduction.

And meanwhile, while Grantaire gave his dingy studio a surface cleaning in preparation for Eponine’s visit, his mind was far too focused on trying to remember what ‘la petite mort’ meant, or wondering if there was any particular significance in Jehan referring to Enjolras as his lover instead of his boyfriend, to spare much effort analyzing Jehan’s odd behavior. He just chalked it up to the eccentricities of being a poet.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Enjolras plans a night in for Grantaire. Jehan plans a night out for Courfeyrac.

Three of them have a good time.

Chapter Notes

This one took me a little longer to write than the others, but hey, at least it's longer. Also, my little sister is reading this fic now. This is directed at her: there's a scene in this you're not allowed to read! Seriously, I don't want you to read my smut, so when the boys start getting frisky you jump down to the last scene. Or better yet, just ask me for an edited copy of this chapter. Everyone else, enjoy the smut :)

Also, Carloadrian made a photoset illustrating the fic! It makes me ridiculously happy, so I'm sharing it. Everyone check it out!

For the first few days, Marius was surprised how little effect bringing Eponine into the apartment had had. She lived pretty well out of her suitcase, and wasn’t at all phased by the annoyances of living with two college guys, such as a sink overflowing with dishes, laundry drying from the ceiling fan, late nights of studying and partying coupled with early morning classes, and their tendency to forget she was a young girl and just treat her like one of the guys.

If anything, Eponine was worryingly well adjusted to their unconventional living arrangement. She was amazed and appreciative of things that Marius thought she ought to consider standard, like having her own toothbrush and being able to shower for as long as she wanted with the door locked.

Overall Marius was glad to have her there. He liked Eponine immensely, and was grateful that she’d found an alternative to her horrible ex-boyfriend and neglectful parents. By Thursday morning though, he did start to question his initial thoughts regarding Eponine being one of the guys.

Marius and Eponine were both working at Brammer Street that night, Thursdays being their busiest shift because of the open mic. They couldn’t get a ride in with Courfeyrac this time, as he had plans with Jehan (which struck Marius as odd; he’d thought the only reason the Student Revolution went to the open mics was because of their poet), so Joly was giving them a ride after his last class finished. This meant that Marius would be leaving for work right from school, with no time to run home and change. He forgot about that when he woke up at six in the morning and threw on Courfeyrac’s Buzzcocks t-shirt. He’d found it on the ceiling fan, which meant it was clean, but sadly, it was not appropriate for work.

So Marius spent the break between historiography and Shakespeare II, when he usually had lunch,
running back to the apartment for work clothes. As he didn’t have a lot of time and was out of absences in his Shakespeare class, which he needed to graduate, he raced into the living room as fast he was able, and ran smack into the middle of a strange tableau.

Courfeyrac and Eponine were lying together on the rug in front of the TV, both fast asleep. Eponine had her head pillowed on Courfeyrac’s bare chest, and he had an arm slung around her with his fingers splayed over her hip. She was wearing a pair of Courf’s boxers and a bra, while he was only wearing a pair of old sweatpants. The house stank something awful. Marius didn’t recognize the smell, but figured it was coming from some odd looking cigarettes that were resting on a ceramic plate on the coffee table. Which was weird. Courfeyrac didn’t let people smoke in the apartment in defense of his security deposit.

It looked like they might have had sex, but that was ridiculous. Courfeyrac had already said he wouldn’t date a high school girl, because he didn’t date minors.

But Eponine was wearing his underpants…

Deciding that whatever was going on, he didn’t want to be involved, Marius tip toed through the house, found some work clothes, and made a hasty retreat.

Eponine started awake when the front door slid shut. She fuzzily stared at it for a moment, but as no one had come in she decided to continue nuzzling against Courfeyrac and enjoy the cuddles for a bit longer rather than bother with an investigation.

After a few minutes he murmured something at her, voice thick with sleep and still a little slow from the joints they’d shared. “Don’t you have to work tonight?”

“How for a few more hours.”

“But you’ve got to meet Joly at school so you can get a ride.”

“You’ve skipped two classes today.”

“You skipped all your classes today and besides, my classes don’t pay the bills.”

Eponine sat up a little so he could see her smirk. “Your classes cost money and create bills, so really you’re being more irresponsible.”

“I’ll still pass my classes even if I skip from time to time. I haven’t blown off much Victorian lit or world drama this semester. Besides, you won’t be able to watch Marius clear tables if you don’t go to work.” He touched the side of her face while he teased, idly playing with a strand of her hair.

Eponine laughed, but only because at this point she was well practiced in hiding her emotions. So they were still bantering about Pontmercy’s cute ass after spending the morning and afternoon screwing around. Had Eponine been imagining things? She’d thought their sex had been unusually tender and emotional…

Then again, upon further reflection Eponine had never slept with someone who wasn’t at least a little bit sadistic before, so maybe that’s just how nice guys like Courfeyrac had sex with their friends. The thought that the sex might be meaningless on his end stung a little, but at least it was nice to cuddle without having to be careful of fresh bruises.
“I guess I’d better get ready for work then.” Eponine leaned up for a quick, apparently platonic kiss, then climbed to her feet and stretched out her back.

“Speaking of the puppy…I’m not sure how he’d handle this,” Courfeyrac said, motioning to the plate with their joints. “The kid’s a little…well, painfully innocent.”

“Right. I’ll keep the drugs and alcohol to a minimum around him then,” Eponine said with a mock salute. She picked up the makeshift ashtray and carried it with her into the kitchen. Courfeyrac joined her, trying in vain to get his messy hair to lie flat and only making it worse.

“I’m thinking maybe we should, er, not mention the friends with benefits thing either. I mean…I just don’t think he’d get it.”

Eponine grinned, completely naturally, and nodded. Courfeyrac seemed to have no idea that inwardly she’d turned hard and even a little angry at the mention of friends with benefits (though she did vaguely remember being the one to suggest it in the first place the night she’d moved in, but that was irrelevant; he should have noticed that her feelings had changed).

“I don’t even get how someone winds up as naïve as that boy. I mean, sometimes I have a hard time remembering he’s older than me.”

Courfeyrac shrugged. “He said he was home schooled until college, and I guess he lived with a strict grandfather and a busybody aunt. He may be older than you, but the guy hasn’t lived as much as you.”

Eponine gave a little snort and shrugged her shoulders. “No one’s lived as much as me.”

Courfeyrac gently grasped her shoulders and kissed her forehead. “Don’t worry, princess. It’ll all get better from here. Now grab that shower or you’ll keep our puppy and hypochondriac waiting.”

“If you wanted to join me, I think the boys could stand to wait a little…”

Courfeyrac laughed. “Maybe some other time. I’ve got to work on getting presentable for Jehan. And, y’know, air out that pot smell before he gets here. Jehan’d totally rat me out to Enjolras and Combeferre.”

“Sounds like a good friend,” Eponine said sarcastically.

Courfeyrac only smiled. “Jehan? Stick up the ass hang ups about drugs and alcohol aside, he’s the absolute best kind of person. Seriously Ponine, shower. Work.”

“Right, right.”

Eponine dutifully took her shower, and when she emerged the apartment was tidied up and aired out. Courfeyrac had febreezed the surfaces and even lit a couple of scented candles. He kissed her cheek when he rushed past her to take his own shower. With the bathroom in use, she occupied his bedroom to do her hair and makeup. He was still showering when there was a knock on the front door.

Eponine glanced at her cellphone to check the time and frowned. “Hm. The fruit’s early.” She went to let him in, and felt her stomach churn when she caught sight of what was undoubtedly competition.

The fruity little poet looked hot. He must have had help to pull it off, but the end results were worth it.
Jehan was wearing tight fitting patterned jeans that called attention to his slender, graceful build. He was carrying his black wool coat slung over his arm, no doubt so that if it had been Courfeyrac who opened the door he would have been treated to the sight of Jehan’s low collared, almost translucently thin t-shirt and all the smooth chest and collarbone it showed off. He’d done his eyes with electric blue liner, artfully smudged, and had a little bit of glitter on his high cheekbones. The boy looked stunning.

Eponine wanted to throw him down the stairs. First her fucking stuck up bitch of a foster sister stole Marius away before she could even flirt with him properly, and now this prissy wuss thought he was going to take Courfeyrac. There was no way Eponine was letting this one go without a fight.

Jehan looked a bit startled to see her, but he covered it with a strained smile that quickly turned warm. “Hello Eponine.”


Jehan set his coat down on the futon but remained standing, glancing around the room in some wonder. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen it this clean before.”

“Yeah, fancy that,” Eponine muttered. Courf had missed a few spots though. One of Grantaire’s old tea mugs was sitting on the end table, and there was a foil condom packet by the couch.

If she were a nicer person, she’d get that out of view before Jehan could see it. But Eponine wasn’t feeling particularly nice. She kicked it into prominence when she walked past the couch to get to her suitcase. She was digging through it looking for all the things that were supposed to remain in her purse but somehow wound up scattered when Courfeyrac finally walked into the room.

“Oh hey, you’re early. And wow. You’re early and hot. Really fucking…Jesus. Jehan, you cannot leave the house like that.”

Eponine smacked a hand over her mouth to cover her laughter. The expression on the fruity poet’s face was just too much.

“Why not?” he asked, looking crestfallen.

“Because we’re going to a gay bar. I mean, not only will you get hit on looking like that, but guys are going to get grabby. And when guys start getting grabby with you, I’m going to wind up in jail because then I’ll have to cut a bitch. You don’t want me in jail, do you? I thought we were friends.”

Jehan’s cheeks went pink, and Eponine felt like gagging. God, he was playing the cute and innocent thing, just like fucking Cosette. And it was probably going to work for him just as well as it had worked for her.

“We are friends. And if it helps, I have full faith that you’ll manage to control yourself and avoid a police entanglement.”

Courfeyrac grinned. “You think so? Damn, maybe we’re not as good friends as I thought, because clearly you have too much faith in me. But fine, walk around looking like sex. Just don’t blame me when you get harassed. I did try to warn you.”

“I, um, I probably should have called or something to let you know that I was going to be early. I was just thinking that maybe we could get food or something first…”

Courfeyrac grinned. “That sounds great.”
Jehan’s answering smile was tiny and hopeful looking. Not only did Eponine want to throw him down the stairs, but she wanted to jump on his ribcage, grab him by his ridiculous hair, and smash his head into the ground. She tried to distill that all into a glare, but even if she was successful with it, it was rather pointless; Jehan wasn’t looking anywhere near her.

Courfeyrac snagged his sweatshirt from the futon and started towards the door. “See you later, Ponine. Have a good shift.”

Eponine glanced up at him and nodded. “Bye guys. Have fun.”

She was going to have to do something about that damn poet.

Enjolras walked around his apartment looking over his preparations, fighting back nerves that he definitely wasn’t used to. He could get up in front of a crowded room and deliver a speech or a presentation without ever feeling nervous. When he was a freshman, he’d taken a course meant for junior and senior geology majors on human impact and the environment, and he’d stood up and told a visiting lecturer that he was wrong about climate change. It hadn’t even fazed him. Enjolras wasn’t the type of person to back down from any kind of confrontation.

Confrontations he could handle. Intimacy, on the other hand…

Of course, this was one of few subjects that Enjolras felt uncomfortable researching. He’d conferred with Combeferre and Jehan a little, but as Combeferre’s principal advice came down to blood tests and condom use, he’d eventually stopped asking for help. And Jehan was so ridiculously over the top with his romantic suggestions that Enjolras couldn’t even think about putting them into practice without blushing. If he did do something lovey-dovey like recite poetry, he’d probably just confuse Grantaire, who rightfully wouldn’t expect it from him.

Enjolras had decided to use some of his friends’ suggestions though. He kept the lighting soft, making use of some strategically placed candles, he’d picked out a movie Grantaire liked, and he’d tried his hand at making a home cooked meal. Having been raised with a series of nannies and housekeepers to do all his cooking for him, Enjolras wasn’t very good at it, but he’d heated up their soups and seasoned them a little, and he’d made his own breadsticks. It was something.

Satisfied that the apartment looked as romantic as it was going to get, Enjolras went into the bathroom and took a quick look at his reflection. His eyes were a little puffy from staying up until three thirty to work on a paper, but he doubted Grantaire would mind. As his boyfriend was particularly invested in Enjolras’ looks though, he thought it considerate to make himself as appealing as possible, given his intentions. Grantaire had been wanting to do this for so long; Enjolras wanted it to be perfect for him.

He brushed his hair again, not sure if he was being paranoid about a possible cowlick in the back or if his hair was really sticking up, and then the doorbell rang. Enjolras calmly set the brush back on the bathroom counter, took a deep breath, and went to answer it.

It looked like Grantaire had come directly from school. He had a large portfolio and some sketchpads under his arm and his backpack was hanging off of one shoulder.

They stood in the doorway and just stupidly stared at each other, as though they hadn’t been spending ridiculous amounts of time together for the past month.

Grantaire had gelled his hair. It still wasn’t the same as the soft, messy strands that Enjolras loved
burying his fingers in, but the wayward spikes reflected his personality much better than his initial haircut. Upon further reflection, this new style was almost as appealing as the old one.

Grantaire had also taken some care in how he’d dressed, which made Enjolras wonder if he’d been tipped off (but he couldn’t see Jehan or Combeferre doing that to him). He was wearing a striped green shirt Enjolras vaguely remembered complimenting him about once long before they’d started dating, along with a pair of smoke colored jeans with some artful rips and a clunky pair of black work boots. He was clean from head to toe; no stains on his clothes or fingertips, and he smelled like cologne instead of varnish or paint. Which was actually oddly disappointing. Enjolras liked when Grantaire carried visible signs of his passion.

Meanwhile, Grantaire’s eyes were working their way over Enjolras’ red V-neck tee (according to Jehan, it made his arms look yummy, which partially explained why Grantaire was so quick to strip him out of this particular shirt when they were alone together), his favorite charcoal slacks, and stopping at his bare feet.

“Am I to assume we’re hanging in?” Grantaire asked.

Enjolras stepped aside. “I made us dinner, and then I figured we could watch Reservoir Dogs.”

Perhaps that was a bad suggestion. Grantaire was staring at him like he had two heads.

Enjolras cleared his throat. “Um…is there something wrong with Reservoir Dogs?”

“No, it’s one of my favorite movies. But um…it’s not very date-y. And you never put on movies I like.” He kicked his boots off and set his things down by the doorway. “Y’know, if you want to just tell me why we’re really skipping open mic night, you can.”

Enjolras frowned. He couldn’t help but feel like he was already screwing this up. “Dinner’s in the kitchen. I made soup.” Without looking behind him to make sure that Grantaire followed, he quickly strode into the kitchen and started fussing with the table.

Grantaire ambled in a moment later and quirked an eyebrow when he saw the setup. Enjolras had used the nice china his mother had insisted on buying him for his first apartment, which up until now had sat on the top shelf of the most inconvenient cabinet in the kitchen, still in its original packaging. He’d borrowed some elegant glass taper holders from Jehan and lit a couple of green candles, and there was a fair trade white rose sitting in a bud vase between their plates.

Upon second thought, the whole thing looked rather silly for tepid canned soup with cracked pepper and celery salt sprinkled over it.

Grantaire easily could have made some sarcastic dig at the unnecessarily elaborate scene. He was witty, and well-practiced at tearing down sentimental drivel. Instead, he simply sat down at the table, unfolded his cloth napkin, and placed it over his lap. Breathing a small sigh of relief, Enjolras joined him.

“I assume this is something vegan, ethically farmed, and purchased from a store or restaurant where all employees are paid a fair wage and given benefits?” Grantaire asked with a small smile.

Enjolras took pains to keep his voice even. “I seasoned it.”

“Ah. It’s good. Um…I don’t think anyone’s ever cooked for me before.”

Enjolras couldn’t tell if that was a good thing or not, as Grantaire looked more confused than anything. They were mostly silent while they ate, and then Grantaire awkwardly offered to help
Enjolras clean up the dishes. “It’s alright, I’ve got it,” Enjolras said, sounding equally awkward. “You can go to the living room. I’ll be in in a minute, and then we can start the movie.”

“Kay.” Grantaire eyed him curiously for a moment, but he did as instructed. Enjolras snuffed out the candles, then rested his arms on the table and dropped his forehead onto them.

He was tempted to call the whole thing off, pack up, and go to the open mic.

He’d gotten too far into it to back down though. It’d probably be weirder to stop his odd and uncomfortable seduction attempt partway through. Enjolras was learning one thing very quickly though: trying to behave like a conventional romantic partner was never going to work for him. Not only was he bad at it, but Grantaire didn’t seem to want bland sentimentality either.

Feeling slightly better for the brief pause, Enjolras got up, set the dishes in the sink, then went into the living room and sat down on the couch next to Grantaire. He had an arm snaked around his waist and a head pillowed on his shoulder before he’d even settled down, and a small smile graced his lips in response. That certainly felt more normal than looking at Grantaire from across a formal table setting.

“Have you even seen Reservoir Dogs?” Grantaire asked.

“No, but it’s got a ninety six percent rating on Rotten Tomatoes. I-I thought you liked it.”

“I do. It just doesn’t seem very…you. I mean, for one thing, it’s in English. For another, it’s hard to sleep through,” Grantaire teased.

Enjolras flicked one of Grantaire’s gelled spikes and started the movie.

It didn’t take him long to regret his choice. The opening conversation had him wide eyed and red faced, and was making him desperately wish he’d thought to watch the movie before incorporating it into what was supposed to be a romantic evening.

Grantaire seemed to be having a good time though. He was cracking up at Enjolras’ obvious discomfort. “I take it you’ve never thought about Madonna’s music like that before?”

“Um…not exactly.” The vulgarity wasn’t what was bothering Enjolras though.

Grantaire swiped the remote from him and paused the movie. “Enj, are you okay? You look really freaked out.”

“I’m fine. It’s fine. Just, um, let’s just keep watching the movie.” He needed to relax, or this was never going to work. Although this might not be the film to help him accomplish that goal.

Grantaire let out a shaky laugh and shook his head. “Come on, Enjolras. What is it? You can talk to me.”

Enjolras quickly weighed his options, and then decided to just be honest. Otherwise that dialogue was going to haunt him for the rest of the night. “Does losing your virginity really hurt?”

And apparently that perfectly valid question was even funnier than his discomfited expression. Grantaire hid his face in his hands until he recovered from his giggles.

Enjolras was tempted to hit him.

“Sorry, sorry…” Grantaire gasped. “It’s just, of all the things I’d thought you’d say in response to
Tarantino’s interpretation of Like a Virgin, that was not it. I was figuring you’d have some kind of impassioned speech about objectifying women or something.”

“…is it too late for me to make a more characteristic speech?”

“Yeah, it kinda is. Look, don’t worry about it. Yeah, penetration hurts at first, but it’s only an issue if your partner’s a selfish shit whale about it. When the time comes, I promise I’ll be gentle.” There was a teasing lilt to his voice, but it quickly disappeared as something occurred to him. “Wait, why are you asking about that? You’re not…but the dinner, and staying in, and…”

Enjolras buried his face in his hands, wishing to be anywhere else talking about anything else.

It would have been so much easier if Grantaire had just initiated everything. Enjolras had expected him to, but the bastard was so damn respectful! Every time they made out and Enjolras started getting really excited he expected Grantaire to take the next step, but he never did. He made lots of comments about how hot Enjolras was, and that when he was ready the sex was going to be phenomenal, but he also ‘didn’t want to rush him.’

Enjolras didn’t feel rushed. He felt frustrated and embarrassed.

Grantaire gently touched his shoulder. “Hey, Enj, look at me. Can you look at me please? Can we talk? I’m not right, am I? About you being ready?”

Enjolras slowly lowered his hands, but he didn’t meet Grantaire’s eyes. “I told you I suck at seduction.”

“It’s probably in my best interest to deny that, but…Reservoir Dogs.”

“Yes.”

“Enjolras…it’s okay. I wish you’d just talked to me instead of working yourself up like this, but the night isn’t going poorly.” Grantaire took Enjolras’ hand and twined their fingers. “And if we’re on the same page, the night’s only going to get better from here.”

Enjolras finally met his eyes again and was immediately reassured by the affection he saw shining back at him. He turned off the TV, then tossed the remote aside and leaned back to make room for his sudden armful of boyfriend. Grantaire straddled Enjolras, trading soft, lazy kisses while he slowly rocked his hips against him.

This was reassuring and familiar territory. They’d spent plenty of time making out on Enjolras’ couch. The only difference this time was that when things escalated Grantaire now knew how far Enjolras wanted it to escalate. He let out a sigh that turned into a moan when Grantaire dragged his lower lip with his teeth. He followed it up by leaning down to suck on Enjolras’ neck. Enjolras gave the best kind of shiver in response, and reached up to bury his fingers in…damn. Rather, he stabbed his fingers against unyielding spikes.

“Your hair needs to grow faster,” he whispered in a broken voice.

Grantaire kissed the hickey he’d been working on, then looked up with a mischievous glint in his eyes. “That sounded way more hot than it should have. I bet you could make reciting the periodic table sound hot right now.”

“If you could recite the periodic table, that’d actually turn me on under normal circumstances,” Enjolras said with a smirk. Grantaire started rubbing him through his slacks and his eyes fluttered shut. “Hydrogen-Helium-Lithium!” he gasped.
“Oh baby, oh baby, oh baby,” Grantaire said dryly. He curled his fingers around the growing bulge and then pressed with the heel of his hand. Enjolras bit his lip and swore. “That wasn’t an element I’ve ever heard of.”

“Beryllium, now can we think about losing our pants?”

Grantaire’s breathing hitched and he closed his eyes. “Slow it back down again. Enjolras…you’re really ready? Because I’ll keep waiting for you. I know that you’re…I mean, you said when you told us about the abstinence thing when we were freshmen, y-you said—”

“I said that if I was ever going to change my mind about sex, it would have to be for someone worth making an exception for.”

“Y-yeah. So…that’s really me?” Grantaire looked vaguely terrified, insecurities and doubts putting a definite damper on his lust.

Enjolras leaned up so that there was barely a breath between them. “It’s really you.” He hoped to someday make Grantaire believe him. Really, it would have been nice if Grantaire believed him already, but he thought this show of trust might go a ways in convincing the notorious pessimist of the depth of his feelings.

Then they were kissing again, hungry, passionate things that felt like fire and claiming and so, so good. Enjolras had ceded control at some point, but he didn’t care as long as Grantaire kept kissing him like that, and touching him everywhere with his long, artistic fingers.

“Mmph…mm, Enj, hold on…”

“No.” Enjolras leaned forward to try to reclaim Grantaire’s lips, but he turned away.

“We’re not going to do this the first time on your couch, are we? I mean we could, but you’ve got a really nice bed.”

Enjolras stared at him in mute incomprehension for a moment, mouth hanging open, and then finally nodded as Grantaire’s words sank in. “My bed. Y-yeah. That’d probably be better.”

Grantaire smirked, then, reluctantly it seemed, climbed off of him. He held out his hand and helped Enjolras off of the couch. “You seem a little unsteady on your feet there, gorgeous.”

“Your fault, you bewitching creature. You have an uncanny knack for robbing me of sense. And, apparently, basic motor function.”

“You’re still pretty eloquent for a guy who’s trying to convince me I’ve turned his brain to mush with the power of my lovin’.”

Enjolras snorted out a laugh that was almost painful, but took Grantaire’s arm while he guided him to the bedroom. He was starting to feel nervous again, now that there was space for thought (Enjolras felt a brief flash of annoyance at the cumbersome size of his apartment; if the living room and bedroom were closer together then this wouldn’t be happening). What if he was terrible at this? Would his looks balance out awful sex? Worse, what if Grantaire really did only want him for his looks?

Enjolras gave himself a little shake and tried to forget the barista’s stinging words. He’d barely thought about Eponine’s jab since that horrible double date, and now was definitely not the time to discover that it had hit its mark.
Grantaire got to the bedroom first, and he visibly tensed when he saw the interior. Then he swore under his breath and Enjolras’ heart sank. “Wh-what?”

“No, sorry, it’s not you!” Grantaire said quickly. He turned around, cupped Enjolras’ face in his hands, and planted a quick, reassuring kiss on him. “It’s just, Jehan knew, didn’t he?”

Enjolras pressed his lips together and nodded. “I talked to him and ‘Ferre. You could tell?”

“Well unless you held up a candle store and a florist…”

Enjolras leaned around him and anxiously peered at his room. “Is it too much? I just, I have a big bedroom. I thought it’d look silly if I didn’t…it does look silly, doesn’t it?”

Grantaire shook his head, but he was grinning in amusement so Enjolras didn’t believe him. “Enj, no, really. It looks beautiful in here. It’s tasteful. I mean, I think it’s tasteful but I suppose I’m not classy enough to really know.”

“Then why do you look like you’re about to laugh at me?”

Grantaire closed his eyes and took his smile down a notch. “I’m smiling because I’m happy, you twit.” He slowly opened his eyes, features fixed in a look of love bordering on reverence. “Enjolras, no one’s ever tried to do anything like this for me before. No one ever thought I was worth the trouble. I mean, I’m just a…I’m actually kind of a loser. This is all…you cooked for me, you know what kind of movies I like, and I get fucking candles and shit. This is amazing.”

“Grantaire, you thought I was worth three years of trouble. Anyone else would have given up, especially considering how I was treating you. And how I treated you…it’s why you still won’t believe me now when I describe my feelings.”

“Enj-”

“I was cruel to you.”

Grantaire frowned. “I wasn’t good enough for you, but I wasn’t changing or backing off. I was a pain in the ass. I deserved every threat of castration and vivisection. I know I made you uncomfortable, it’s just, it was like verbal diarrhea. Whenever you were around my brain shut off and I lost my filter. I did anything to get your attention, even if it meant pissing you off.”

“I thought you weren’t supposed to talk about bowel movements when you were trying to flirt with someone,” Enjolras said with a small smirk. Grantaire smiled, and nodded. “This conversation is important, but can it wait? I spent a long time lighting those candles. I’d like to lose my virginity before they all burn down.”

“I’m still not sure I deserve to be the one to take it, but if you insist…”

“I absolutely insist,” Enjolras said, tugging Grantaire close and fixing him with an intense gaze. “It’s you. I want it to be you.”

He allowed Grantaire half a minute to bask in that, and it really looked like he was. He smiled in open mouthed wonder, eyes softly lingering on Enjolras, who did his best to convey his affection. After that half a minute though, Enjolras all but jumped him.

They crashed onto the bed together, and Enjolras initiated passionate kisses, silencing his fears by surrounding himself in a sensory overload of his dear cynic, his gifted artist, his lover. Grantaire was beautiful like this. He was beautiful more often than he gave himself credit for, which was sadly
never, but they would work on that later.

In the meantime, he’d managed to get Grantaire’s shirt off, and there was smooth, pale skin for him to mark up with expressions of tenderness. Though Grantaire never had any qualms about getting Enjolras out of his clothes, he was usually at least a little reluctant to shed them himself. Enjolras couldn’t tell if his insecurity stemmed from being thin (which was ridiculous—Enjolras thought he was gorgeous), or if it was because of the faint scars from his years of cutting.

Enjolras didn’t like the cutting scars either, but he was reassured every time he was able to take a fresh inventory of them and confirm that there were no new ones. The cuts on Grantaire’s arms hadn’t scarred, and all the other ones were at least a few months old, if not older. Enjolras kissed every scar he found, wishing he could erase them, and determined that no new ones would join their number. For his part, Grantaire writhed under him, panting and moaning deliciously, one hand clutching the bedding while the other grasped Enjolras’ curls.

He was tempted to make a snide remark about how he’d have liked the opportunity to grip a handful of soft hair himself, but he decided to work on getting Grantaire’s pants off instead.

“Enj…” Grantaire shifted, trying to lean away from him a little, and Enjolras made a sound that was frighteningly close to a growl.

“We’ve agreed we’re having sex, Grantaire. I’ve been trying to get you naked for weeks. Will you kindly stop impeding me?”

“Y-you’re still fully clothed,” Grantaire pointed out. Then he silently mouthed back ‘weeks’ to himself.

Enjolras rolled his eyes, but he pulled away enough to quickly strip out of his clothes. Then he lay down next to Grantaire so that they were almost nose to nose, and lightly ran a hand down his back.

“You really shouldn’t be nervous, ‘Taire. You’re the one who’s done this before.”

“Not you. You’re not terrible at anything.”

“I’m terrible at getting into your pants, as they’re still on,” Enjolras pointed out. Keeping his eyes on Enjolras’, Grantaire leaned up just enough to remove his jeans and underpants.

Then, as though to distract himself from a feeling of inadequacy coupled with vulnerability, he drank in the sight of Enjolras nude. “God, but you’re fucking beautiful.”

Enjolras knew he meant it well, but considering where his own feelings of inadequacy derived from, complimenting his looks wasn’t helping. “You are too,” he insisted, and then copied Grantaire’s strategy by losing himself so completely in his lover that he couldn’t be bothered by doubts.

They held each other, touching everywhere, kissing everywhere, and all without the barrier of clothing. It was making out squared. Making out cubed, even. Grantaire had become Enjolras’ entire world; the noises of his panting and moans, the sight of his lust blown eyes, the feel of his slick skin and those red, bruised lips claiming every inch of him. Enjolras wasn’t sure he’d even need air anymore. He was sure he could subsist off of this, just him, forever.

Enjolras gasped and buried his face in Grantaire’s neck. Grantaire’s cock was rubbing against his
every time their hips crashed together, and it was fucking fantastic. And then when he got his hand around both of them and stroked…

“Oh fuck!” Enjolras gasped. Grantaire tried to make some kind of quip, but it died in a moan when Enjolras started wildly bucking against him. He was starting to doubt his ability to last long enough for real sex.

Grantaire seemed to have come to the same realization. “Enj…you’ve got condoms and lube, right?”

Enjolras reached under his pillow where he’d stashed a new bottle of lubricant and pressed it into Grantaire’s hand. “I…I started to research this, but I…you already know what to do and I trust you.”

“I promise, I won’t hurt you. Now what about condoms?”

Enjolras was a little thrown by his insistence. “Are they that important?”

“Um…kinda, yeah.”

“Oh. I’d thought they were simply to prevent the transmission of diseases. I didn’t think they served another function.”

Grantaire blinked a few times, clearly confused. “H-huh? No, they only block diseases. They don’t make sex better or anything.”

“Oh. We’ve had blood tests. We’re fine.”

“…you tested my blood? You know what, we can talk about that later. Now isn’t the time.”

Enjolras was in full agreement there. “What should I do?” he asked. Grantaire had uncapped the bottle of lubricant and squeezed some out onto his fingers. He arched an eyebrow in question.

“It depends. What do you want to do?”

Enjolras licked his lips. “Whatever you want to do. I was thinking that you’d be the one to…to, that is, that I’d be the one to, er…”

“Get fucked?” Grantaire prompted. Sure that he was blushing anew, Enjolras nodded. “I figured. Just lay back, then. I’ve got to stretch you, and I want to be able to look at you. The angle’s a bit better for you if I take you from behind, but I won’t be able to see your face. And I’d rather cut my dick off with a rusty knife than hurt you.”

“…can we add rusty knives to things that are not to be mentioned when we’re in bed together?” Enjolras asked in a small voice. Grantaire answered with a smirk, followed by a long, slow kiss. Enjolras’ eyes fell shut. He focused on that kiss, on Grantaire’s skillful tongue plundering his mouth, and tried not to think about where Grantaire’s hands might be moving right at that second…

And then there was a slick finger hesitantly pushing into him. Their kiss was interrupted by a sharp gasp, and Enjolras instinctively shifted his hips away from the intrusion. Grantaire kissed his forehead. “Try to relax, Enj, and trust me. I won’t hurt you.”

“I know. I know.” Enjolras breathed deeply, and willed himself calm. He spread his legs further apart, and still taking measured breaths, opened his eyes so that he could see Grantaire.

Grantaire was still obviously turned on, but there was a good deal of concern in those soft blue eyes. His swollen lips were just barely parted, ink black eyebrows lifted in worry.
“I love you.” Enjolras wasn’t aware of having spoken until he saw the change in Grantaire’s expression. He’d just been so caught up in his feelings that he couldn’t think of anything else, even the finger pressing further into him.

“I love you too,” Grantaire murmured. “You’re my fucking world.”

Enjolras watched him from half lidded eyes, grasped Grantaire’s bony shoulder, and smiled. “Keep going. It doesn’t hurt yet. It’s just…odd.”

“I finger myself thinking about you sometimes, you know.” Grantaire’s voice was deep and throaty. He barely sounded like himself, but in a good way. It went straight to Enjolras’ cock.

His eyes fell shut again, his head falling back against the mattress. “I think about you too,” he whispered raggedly. “In bed, in the shower, when I should be studying, when you’re here and I can’t get your pants off, I think about you all the time.”

“Yeah?” Grantaire’s finger was in down to the knuckle. He started carefully thrusting it in and out. “You’ve been my only fantasy since I met you. You’ve been invading my dreams and extending my showers all this time.”

Enjolras took his cock in hand and started stroking, bucking up into his own strong grip and falling down onto the fingers (he hadn’t even noticed that second one) inside him. “The first time…the first time I touched myself thinking of you,” here he gave himself a long, strong stroke, pinched his head, and then dragged his hand back down his shaft, “It was after that, that party when you tried to recite Robespierre to impress me. You fucked it all up, of course, but Courf had just thrown you into that pool and you were sopping wet and your shirt was clinging to you—”

Grantaire abruptly stopped his ministrations. “That was the beginning of sophomore year. You jerked off thinking about me sophomore year?”

Enjolras fell silent, worried he’d said something wrong. The dirty talk seemed to have been helping. Then Grantaire kissed his temple, and his fingers started moving again. “Keep going. You jerked off that night?”

“Yes,” Enjolras whispered, though he wasn’t sure if he was replying to Grantaire’s question or a third finger.

“I did too,” Grantaire whispered against his ear. “You were still tan from summer, and your hair was sun bleached gold. I wonder if we were doing it at the same time. I wonder if we came together.”

Enjolras hoped so, because if he hadn’t been so stupid and stubborn, they might have been doing this sooner. They might have been doing this that very night, where they most certainly could have come together.

“’Taire, please…” He wasn’t even sure what he was asking for anymore, but that’s what he had Grantaire for.

Grantaire removed his fingers, Enjolras giving a little whimper as he did so. He closed his eyes and waited. Then Grantaire lovingly ran a hand down his face. “Eyes open, beautiful. I want you to look at me.”

Enjolras obediently forced them open, and smiled fondly when Grantaire’s face came into view. ‘Love you,’ he mouthed, and Grantaire responded in kind. “You ready?” he asked. Enjolras nodded, and Grantaire slowly began entering him.
It did hurt a little, but only a little. Enjolras breathed deeply, eyes locked on Grantaire’s, and waited it out. Grantaire’s eyes were locked on him and he stopped his careful penetration entirely when he saw the smallest sign of discomfort on his lover’s face.

Enjolras rather wished he wouldn’t. The pain was actually exciting him a little. “Keep going,” he urged.

“You’re sure? You’re okay?” Grantaire’s whisper was harsh. It sounded like it was costing him something to be so steady and careful.

“I am…I’m…oh fuck, ‘Taire, please move.”

That was all it took. The first few thrusts were slow and careful, but when Enjolras threw his head back and erupted with noises he didn’t even know he was capable of making, Grantaire finally lost his reservations. He started thrusting in earnest, driving into Enjolras’ willing body. He’d never felt anything like it before, but oh was he planning to feel it again. Enjolras met Grantaire’s driving thrusts with his own sharply moving hips, incoherent with pleasure and a sense of perfection.

The union of their bodies felt something like a joining of souls. He wanted it to last forever.

Grantaire’s movements started becoming more frenzied, his moans and gasps more frequent, and Enjolras realized he’d been babbling some of that aloud. He was still babbling, even, grunting swears and declarations of love and desire and his determination to never stop doing this, to never leave the bed again. Then Grantaire wrapped his hand around Enjolras’ cock and his words died in his throat. His entire world had shrunk down to a calloused, long fingered hand, the powerful motion of the cock burying itself in him repeatedly, and beautiful blue eyes that kept falling shut from their own rapture.

Enjolras’ orgasm tore through him powerfully and suddenly. He tensed, taken by surprise by his body’s decision to end everything so abruptly, but oh what an ending. He fell back against the mattress, breathing heavily, slow and stupid, limbs feeling heavy as lead.

Grantaire followed him, shouting something that was part profanity, part ecstasy, and almost Enjolras’ name. Then he collapsed onto Enjolras, trembling slightly. Enjolras managed to get his arms around him, but it was a clumsy embrace at best, as he was blissed out.

“Fuck,” Grantaire gasped. “Oh my fucking god, Enjolras. You’ve got to have been lying. That was not your first time.”

“Wh-what?”

But Grantaire didn’t answer. They lay together for a few minutes, coming down and getting their breath back. Enjolras gasped again when Grantaire pulled out of him. He felt an undeniable sense of loss.

The feel of semen and lube sliding down his thighs was perhaps not the best sensation of the night. But Grantaire tenderly wiped him down, then pushed his bangs out of his face and kissed his forehead again. “If that really was your first time,” he whispered, “you’re a natural born sex god. Not that I’m surprised, mind you. I knew you’d be good at this.”

Enjolras grinned stupidly, relieved by Grantaire’s praises (though he thought Grantaire would say much the same thing even if he had been awful). Enjolras tried to convey something of his own feelings in a kiss, but he was still moving too slowly and sluggishly to do more than rub his mouth against Grantaire’s.
Laughing, Grantaire broke the kiss and helped Enjolras settle in his arms. “You really are fucked out, aren’t you?” Enjolras made a small noise of protest at the term, though it probably was fitting. It still didn’t sound flattering though. “It’s okay, my wild Antinous. Go to sleep. I’ll ask you about the blood test when you wake up.”

Enjolras murmured something that was supposed to chastise Grantaire for the nickname, but his message was lost as his eyes drooped shut.

Meanwhile, Jehan’s night could have been going better.

Considering Enjolras’ advice, he’d been sure that dressing flirty had been the way to go. And Enjolras had been unusually insightful about Courfeyrac’s feelings. He definitely thought of Jehan as pure and innocent.

He was demonstrating this by behaving like an insanely overprotective big brother. He hadn’t let Jehan take his coat off all night, and anytime someone tried to make eye contact with him, let alone engage him in conversation, Jehan's would-be suitor got stared down or physically chased off. Courfeyrac even escorted Jehan to the bathroom, thus foiling his plan to sneak away and check his coat.

On the plus side, Courfeyrac was so busy guarding Jehan’s virtue that he wasn’t trying to flirt with anyone else. Jehan may not have changed their dynamic, but he was enjoying having Courfeyrac’s undivided attention. Considering how large their group of friends was, and how much time they spent together as a group, having one on one time with his crush was a rare treat.

“So did you get that conference paper finished?” Jehan asked.

Another nice thing about their one on one time in a new location; the little club was incredibly noisy. They had to sit very close together to have a conversation. Their thighs kept touching, and even though there were two layers of denim and a thick layer of wool between them, Jehan could still feel some heat from Courfeyrac’s body if he focused on it (and he was very much invested in focusing on it).

“Yep. I submitted it to the Phi Alpha Theta advisor on Monday. She said there are a bunch of spots open, so as long as I get inducted in May I’ll be good to go to the conference in the fall. I’m getting a free trip to Disney, and Combeferre, Enjolras, and all the other devout nerds can suck it.”

Jehan had a hard time keeping a straight face at Courfeyrac’s word choice, as there was every chance Enjolras was, in fact, sucking something at that very moment.

Courfeyrac shot him a funny look, and Jehan quickly switched the subject. They talked about school for a few minutes, which naturally evolved into a conversation about poetry and grad school, and then somehow that turned into talking about Eponine. Jehan smiled politely, giving warm responses about Courfeyrac’s new roommate, though this particular subject felt something like a slowly twisting knife between his ribs.

“How long do you think she’ll be living with you?” Jehan asked.

Courfeyrac shrugged. “Hopefully ages. I definitely don’t want her to go back to her ex, and from talking to the girl her parents actually were worse. Poor thing. I can’t help but admire her though. She’s been through so much, and she’s still so…I dunno, vivacious? You’re the poet. You should have a word for her. How do you describe someone who’s amazingly strong and vibrant and funny
when they have no right to be?”

Though Jehan could think of many colorful adjectives for the high school girl, he wasn’t comfortable expressing them to Courfeyrac, so he remained silent. To his deep disappointment, Courfeyrac was perfectly comfortable carrying on the conversation on his own for some time, as long as it remained on Eponine.

It took him nearly ten minutes to notice how withdrawn Jehan had gotten. “Hey, everything okay? You need another drink?”

Jehan glanced at his half full Shirley Temple and shook his head. “I’m a little hot though.”

“Ah, shit, it is warm in here. Alright fine, take the fucking coat off. I may not want you to get groped, but I don’t want you to faint either.”

Jehan grinned cheekily at him, then shrugged out of his coat. Courfeyrac let out a low whistle, then crowded Jehan further back from the main floor by scooting his chair closer to him. “I can’t believe you came out dressed like that.”

“It’s just jeans and a t-shirt, Courf.”

Courfeyrac shook his head. “It’s a see through shirt, and those jeans are sinfully tight. You’re supposed to be bookish and innocent, Jehan. I don’t know what to make of this.”

That was an invitation if ever there was one.

Jehan arched his brow and tried to muster a flirty smile. “Make whatever you want of it. This is a part of me too.”

“I guess I’ll have to get used to it then.”

“I’d like that.”

The moment stretched between them. Jehan basked in Courfeyrac’s undivided attention, loving the crooked little grin Courfeyrac was wearing. He was about to be unthinkably bold and lean in for a kiss, but then Courfeyrac’s attention was pulled away by a change in the club’s music and a ridiculously flamboyant announcer.

Jehan turned to regard a stage opposite the bar in some confusion. Courfeyrac looked pleased though. “Yes! I thought I had the right night, but then when I didn’t see anybody in heels I figured I must have gotten it wrong.”

“What are you talking about?” Jehan asked.

“They’re having an amateur drag night tonight,” Courfeyrac explained, and Jehan suddenly remembered Courfeyrac’s recent addiction to that show about drag queens.

Great. There went the undivided attention.

The drag queens did turn out to be pretty amusing though, and as their performances and the responses they provoked were louder than the music and general chatter had been formerly, Courfeyrac had to lean closer than ever to Jehan to deliver commentary. Jehan was considering writing an ode to Courfeyrac’s body wash and cologne combo when his companion gave a violent start.
“Is everything okay?” Jehan asked.

“Holy fucking shit. Jehan, does that queen look the least bit familiar to you?”

Jehan hadn’t been paying more than token attention to the queens since Courfeyrac had come close enough to need to wrap an arm around him to keep balanced on his seat. “Uh…not really, no. I like her wig. What’s her name?”

“Guillotina. Look at her eyes, and then imagine that instead of that wig she had short, spiky auburn hair with aviator sunglasses perched on her head.”

Jehan squinted at the stage, and then let out a startled gasp.

“Holy fucking shit indeed!”

It was Bahorel.

Well. No wonder he skipped so many of Jehan’s open mics.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who haven't seen Reservoir Dogs A) Track it down. Seriously, you're missing out on a pop culture landmark and a fabulous movie. B) Here's the speech that bothered Enjolras:

MR. BROWN
What the fuck was I talking about?

MR. ORANGE
You said "True Blue" was about a guy, you said it's a girl who meets a nice guy
But "Like a Virgin" was a metaphor for big dicks.

MR. BROWN
Ok, let me tell ya what "Like a Virgin"'s about.
It's all about this cooze who's a regular fuck machine.
I'm talking, morning, day, night, afternoon,
Dick, dick, dick, dick, dick, dick, dick, dick.

MR. BLUE
How many dicks is that?

MR. WHITE
A lot.

MR. BROWN
Then one day she meets a John Holmes motherfucker, and it's like, whoa baby.
I mean, this cat is like Charles Bronson in "The Great Escape." He's diggin tunnels.
Now she's gettin this serious dick action,
She's feelin something she ain't felt since forever. Pain. Pain
JOE

MR. BROWN
It hurts. It hurts her. It shouldn’t hurt.
You know, her pussy should be Bubble-Yum by now.
But when this cat fucks her, it hurts. It hurts like it did the first time.
You see the pain is reminding a fuck machine what is once like to be a virgin.
Hence, "Like a Virgin."
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

And everything had been going so well for everyone too...the Friends experience a sudden increase in drama.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Combeferre dutifully stopped by Starbucks on his way home Friday evening for scones and lattes. He found a bike leaning against the porch railing when he got there, when he got upstairs he found a dejected looking Jean Prouvaire leaning against his door.

“Still didn’t ask him?” Combeferre guessed.

Jehan hung his head. “Nope.”

“Jehan-”

“I was going to! I was actually really close to saying something, but then…we kind of got distracted.”

Combeferre sighed. “Well wait until Enjolras gets here to tell me about it. Can you take the tray for a sec so I can unlock the door?”

“Yep.”

They shed their boots and jackets once they got to the entryway, then Combeferre led Jehan into the study. “How come we’re not hanging out in the living room?” Jehan asked. “You’re not going to do homework, are you?”

“I don’t know how long Enjolras is going to be,” Combeferre said, though that wasn’t the full reason.

His own study nest was neatly organized into manageable stacks. He had three long term projects going that he’d been steadily chipping away at since the start of the semester, and two small piles for Monday. And then there were Enjolras’ stacks: the French and philosophy mountains were looking positively terrifying. Combeferre wanted to make sure his friend saw and appreciated that.

He and Jehan had just sat down when Combeferre’s phone rang. He checked the screen and then answered the call. “Hey Enj. Jehan’s already here. Where are you?”

“You know, I was absolutely right about sex,” Enjolras said, visibly startling Combeferre based on Jehan’s giggling. “It’s incredibly distracting, and a wasteful expenditure of energy. Seriously, there are so many more productive ways one could use their time than in pointless hedonism and gratification.”

Combeferre was shaking with the effort of suppressing his own laughter. Jehan eyed him curiously and he shrugged. “Um, alright Enj. No one ever tried to say sex wasn’t distracting. It was fun
“Incredibly. I skipped class today to have more of it, and if you and Jehan are alright, I think I’m going to stay in tonight as well. You won’t miss me, will you?”

Combeferre’s face fell. Somehow he hadn’t seen that coming. He didn’t want to let on that he was hurt about Enjolras blowing them off (even if he was half joking), so he focused on the first part of that statement instead. “You blew off class? Enjolras, I’m surprised at you.”

“Me too. We were doing a discussion on slavery in Europe in the Age of Enlightenment today, and I was really looking forward to it.” He didn’t sound the least bit bothered by his decision, despite what he was saying. Combeferre could hear the smile in his voice. “‘Ferre, everything’s been so good since last night. I don’t want it to end.”

“Well you’ve got to get your pants back on and rejoin reality eventually.”

“I know.”

“But I’m glad it went well,” Combeferre said, mustering a smile of his own. It sounded like he’d been worrying for nothing. Well, unless Enjolras actually had caught some kind of STD from his boyfriend. It sounded like if the kid was carrying something (and Grantaire had questionable enough judgment that Combeferre wouldn’t put it past him), Enjolras had given him ample opportunity to pass it along.

“How did Jehan’s night go?” Enjolras asked.

Combeferre glanced at his friend and chewed his lip for a moment. “Not as well, I’m afraid.”

“Damn. How is he?”

“Er…if you can drag yourself away from bed, I think he’d like to see you.”

Jehan tried to jump in with assurances that he was fine, and if Enjolras wanted to stay with Grantaire then Jehan wouldn’t dream of separating them just on his account, blah-blah-blah. Enjolras told Combeferre he’d be on his way in a minute and then ended the call.

Jehan crossed his arms and pouted. “I don’t want to be a burden on Enjolras while he’s this happy. You should have lied and said I was fine.”

“Jehan, their date started sometime after classes ended yesterday, and Enjolras just said they skipped school today to keep at it. If that’s true, then there’s a chance they’ve been fucking around and trading happy sighs for twenty four hours.”

Jehan smirked. “When you put it like that, I guess Grantaire can spare Enjolras for a couple of hours.”

“Damn right he can.”

They heard Enjolras calling for them from the living room after about twenty minutes. “We’re in the study!” Jehan yelled.

Enjolras poked his head in and frowned at them. “Why are we in the study? There are only two chairs.”

“Combeferre thought he might work if you were running late. It’s okay, I like the floor.” Jehan was
stretched out between two of the paper and book stacks. One of Combeferre’s cats had curled up at his feet, an obese orange tabby named Gladiator. Jehan reached down to scratch his ears, and looked almost content for the kitty cuddles coupled with a healthy dose of sugary caffeine.

Enjolras set his bag down, took his latte from the tray, and sat down on the open armchair. He barely looked like himself. For starters, he’d left the house in pajama pants and an old t-shirt, something Jehan did all the time and Combeferre did during finals, but never Enjolras, who considered himself a perpetual activist and always wanted to make a strong physical impression in case he had to do an impromptu lecture for one of his causes. His hair wasn’t brushed, making it almost as messy as Courfeyrac’s or Grantaire’s pre-haircut wilderness of tangles. He hadn’t shaved either, so even though the stubble was blond, by this hour of the day it was visible. He was also unusually languid, and thoroughly unconcerned about his visible hickeys and love bites.

It wasn’t actually a bad change for him. Combeferre had been thinking for ages that Enjolras needed to learn how to relax. As long as he didn’t relax to the point where he neglected his responsibilities entirely, maybe Grantaire really was good for him.

“I take it you had a good time last night,” Jehan murmured, and Enjolras nodded.


Jehan took a little too long answering, so Combeferre filled in what little he knew already. “He still hasn’t confessed his feelings. He said he was going to, but they got distracted.”

“By what?” Enjolras asked, looking distinctly annoyed and matching Combeferre’s mood on the subject from the looks of it. It was hard to keep patiently supporting Jehan when he habitually backed down like this.

Jehan picked Gladiator up and pulled him close for a hug. The cat let out a squawk of a meow in protest, but otherwise didn’t try to struggle against it. “I’m not at liberty to say.”

“Bullshit,” Combeferre said, and Enjolras jumped in with his agreement. “We’re your friends and we’ve been keeping secrets enough for you already. What happened?”

“Really guys, it’s not my secret.”

As Jehan was such a good friend it took them quite a lot of wheedling to get the story out of him, but Enjolras and Combeferre were nothing if not persistent. After nearly a half hour of badgering they wore him down.

“There was this amateur drag show going on, and um, one of the queens, uh…so yeah. Bahorel’s a drag queen.”

Combeferre waited to see if that was a joke. No one was laughing though.

Enjolras cleared his throat. “That is distracting, I suppose.”

“Yeah, a bit,” Jehan said with a pout. “Courfeyrac couldn’t stop talking about it for the rest of the night.”

Combeferre’s brow was wrinkled in confusion. “I thought Bahorel was straight.”

“Me too,” Jehan said. “I mean, I suppose he still might be, but…he’s probably not. I wonder why he didn’t tell us.”
“I don’t know, but as he’s obviously not ready for us to know we should keep this to ourselves,” Enjolras said. “Courfeyrac’s not going to tell anyone, is he?”

“No, he figured we should keep quiet too. We left after Bahorel’s performance was done so that he wouldn’t see us. He’s actually really good at it. I didn’t recognize him at all until Courfeyrac pointed it out. He was wearing the most incredible wig, guys, and the way he moved around on those ridiculously gigantic heels—I had no idea he was that graceful.”

Combeferre was intrigued. “I kind of want to see him perform now.”

“Me too,” Enjolras added. “I wish he’d tell us about it.”

“I know. Courfeyrac was pissed. He loves drag. He says Bahorel keeping it from him is an insult, as Courf’s a theater major and should be helping him with his stage persona.”

“Anyway, back to the main topic. What are you going to do now?” Combeferre asked. Enjolras also turned an expectant look Jehan’s way. Jehan stuttered a little, then buried his face in Gladiator’s fur, as though the kitty was going to help him. “Jehan, the correct answer is ‘call Courf up and ask him on a real date.’”

“I don’t think I can.” Jehan’s voice was a little muffled by the cat in his way, but from what Combeferre and Enjolras could hear, it sounded like he might have been crying. Combeferre crouched next to him, took the cat out of his arms, and gently grasped Jehan’s shoulder. Jehan wiped at his eyes.

“So it wasn’t just the unexpected sight of Bahorel in killer heels holding you back?” Combeferre prodded.

Jehan shook his head. “I-I think Courfeyrac might be involved with Eponine. It’s just, when I got there she answered the door—”

“She’s living there now,” Enjolras reminded him.

“Yeah but…they flirt with each other, and she had a, um, mark on her…” Blushing faintly, he touched his chest. “And there was an open condom wrapper on the floor.”

“Ah. Well that’s discouraging,” Enjolras said with a frown. Combeferre turned away from Jehan momentarily and shot Enjolras a significant look. Enjolras lifted his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders, meaning he didn’t get it. Scowling, Combeferre stood up.

“Jehan, is it cool if Enjolras and I talk for a sec?”

Logan, Combeferre’s other cat (a less obese grey and white tiger) had had the unfortunate luck to come within cuddle range of the distraught poet. Combeferre felt that he was safe leaving Jehan to his cat-snuggling therapy, and so took Enjolras’ arm and pulled him into the kitchen.

“What do we do?” he asked.

Enjolras crossed his arms over his chest and scowled. “I have no clue. Do you think Courfeyrac’s really sleeping with Eponine? I thought he didn’t sleep with minors.”

“I thought so too, but I don’t think it stems from moral fortitude on his part. I think he’s just trying to avoid a statutory rape charge. Eponine’s parents don’t even know where she’s living right now, let alone who she’s sleeping with.”
Enjolras frowned at the valid point. “I really did think Courfeyrac liked Jehan.”

“I still think he does though. Enjolras, Courfeyrac sleeps around kind of a lot when he’s not attached, and that thing he has with the barista…it seems almost like a bromance to me.”

“I thought bromances were between two men,” Enjolras said. “Thus the bro part?”

“Don’t be so anal about it. You must get what I’m talking about. They hang out like friends. It’s almost like how he is with Grantaire or Marius.”

Enjolras looked lost. “What are you implying about Courfeyrac, Grantaire, and Marius?”

“That’s they’re friends, not…love interests.” For lack of a better term, Combeferre supposed. “I don’t think he likes Eponine like that. But if he’s sleeping with her…shit. I don’t know if we should encourage Jehan anymore. Maybe he should back off a little. But if he backs off now he might lose his chance.”

“But if he goes for it and Courfeyrac is invested in this girl, he’s going to be hurt,” Enjolras finished. “Shit. I don’t even like Eponine.”

“I know. You’ve mentioned it a few times.” In that he’d mentioned it at least once a conversation since he’d been forced on that awkward as ass double date.

“Do you really think Courfeyrac would sleep with Eponine without having feelings for her?” Enjolras asked. “I mean, even if he only had friendly feelings at first, wouldn’t something else develop from engaging in that kind of intimacy?”

Combeferre couldn’t help but smirk, and Enjolras’ expression hardened. “Sorry, it’s just…you’re uncharacteristically naïve and adorable right now.”

“Shut up. I’m already getting teased enough from Grantaire.”

“It’s just really weird coming from you. Look, Enjolras…when he’s not dating someone, Courf’s a slut. We’ve all known that. Well, except Jehan because Courfeyrac doesn’t want him to know, but even he’s gotten an inkling of it. There is such a thing as casual sex.”

“Which I would think one would reserve for strangers.”

“I think it’s smarter to do it that way, certainly, but to each his own. Eponine wouldn’t be Courfeyrac’s first friend with benefits.”

Enjolras paused for a second, looking more confused than ever. “Really?”

“Yeah, he used to sleep with…I mean, so yeah, Jehan! What are we going to do about Jehan?”

Combeferre could have kicked himself. Though that might have proved redundant. Enjolras looked a breath from volunteering to kick him plenty. “Who did Courfeyrac used to sleep with?” he asked in a low, deadly voice.

Combeferre scrubbed a nervous hand through his hair. “I’m sorry, Enj. I thought you knew. I mean, we all knew, even Jehan. But I don’t think Grantaire and Courfeyrac have hooked up since before Christmas break, if it helps.”

Enjolras closed his eyes. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking; Combeferre mentally cursed his friend’s uncanny poker face. “Enj, it’s not a big deal, I promise. It doesn’t change Grantaire’s
“Don’t. It’s…just don’t. I’ve got to go. I need to process this.”

“Enjolras, really, this isn’t something to make a big deal of. It was just a part of their friendship.”

“Combeferre, we’ve been friends for a very long time, but doing the things I’ve just done with Grantaire to you has never once occurred to me. There are certain actions that are friendly and actions that are…something else.”

“That’s your perspective, but it’s not universally shared.” On a personal level, Combeferre agreed with Enjolras. He couldn’t see himself sleeping with the same girl multiple times without developing at least some feelings for her (nor was he interested in doing a friends with benefits thing; he could handle periods of abstinence without climbing the walls). But he didn’t think less of his friends for feeling differently.

And then there was Enjolras, who was starting to look sickened at the thought of his lover and their friend together. Dammit. Combeferre really had thought that Enjolras already knew. It’s not like Grantaire and Courfeyrac had been subtle.

But Enjolras had been willfully naïve about sex owing to his long years of disinterest. Apparently Combeferre had failed to appreciate the extent of his prudery.

“Enj, don’t start a fight over this. It’s not worth it,” Combeferre pleaded.

“I need to talk to him, at least! He’s going to be able to tell I’m upset. I can’t just sit on this.”

That was fair. “Just be careful. Our cynic's still pretty fragile.”

Enjolras nodded. “I know. I’ll…I’m going to take a drive. Can you tell Jehan something for me? I don’t know what to…just tell him something. I’ve got to go.”

“Text me later?” Combeferre asked. Enjolras nodded, though it looked like he might not have heard what he was replying to. He looked to be in an absolute daze when he left out the back door.

Combeferre felt pretty dazed himself when he got back to the study. Jehan, at least, looked more like his normal self. He was dangling a toy for the cats, who were thankfully too lazy to do more than bat at it from where they were lying on the floor. Their bulk could have wreaked havoc with Combeferre and Enjolras’ papers.


Combeferre opened his mouth to say something, then shook his head. “I think I just stabbed Grantaire in the back. Oh fuck. Jehan, I’m the worst friend in the world.”

Jehan’s eyes widened, and he carefully set the cat toy down. “You know what, I could use a break from worrying about what I’m going to say to Courfeyrac the next time I see him. Let’s tackle that. Sit down and drink your latte, dear.”

Jehan pressed the paper cup into his hand and Combeferre numbly took a sip.

“Do I want to know what you’re doing?” Eponine asked. She was leaning on the back of the couch
so she could peer over Courfeyrac’s shoulder at his laptop screen.

“I think it’s fairly obvious what I’m doing,” Courfeyrac returned. “I’m internet-stalking a drag queen. Now leave me be. This requires intense concentration.”

Eponine rolled her eyes. She ran her hand through Courfeyrac’s hair, then stood up straight and continued into the kitchen. Courfeyrac watched her leave, and once he was satisfied that he was alone again he pulled Guillotina’s facebook page back up.

Because yes, Bahorel had in fact created a duplicate facebook page for his drag persona, and it looked like he was more active on it than on his real one. Courfeyrac didn’t really think Eponine would be able to spot that Bahorel was Guillotina from his facebook pics, but he still didn’t want to take the chance of accidentally outing the poor guy to anybody else. He hoped the girl took her time microwaving her burrito though, because he was really enjoying creeping Guillotina’s page.

“Where does he keep his stuff?” Courfeyrac murmured to himself. It looked like Bahorel had a variety of elaborate costumes, wigs, shoes, makeup, props…basically things that weren’t exactly inconspicuous. It’s not that the group of friends spent a lot of time at Bahorel’s apartment or anything, as it was pretty small and out of the way, but Courfeyrac had definitely been inside often enough to ascertain that Bahorel’s closets were small and that he couldn’t possibly be hiding his drag wardrobe there.

He was tempted to friend request Guillotina. Only his appreciation for what a bad idea that was for his continued friendship with Bahorel held him in check.

Eponine plopped onto the futon a moment later with her burrito and a cup of coffee. She rooted around in her suitcase for a moment, secured a bottle of Baileys, and dumped a generous portion into the coffee cup. Courfeyrac quirked an eyebrow in response. “What?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking that Baileys probably tastes pretty nasty with a burrito.”

“It’s a microwaveable burrito. It tastes pretty nasty on its own. The Baileys is to drown it out when I’m done.”

“Ah.”

“Want some? I brewed enough coffee for two.”

Courfeyrac glanced up at her with a friendly smile, shook his head, then went back to the computer. “I quit drinking.”

“Why?” Eponine asked with an almost comically startled gasp.

“To help Grantaire. Bahorel quit too, and everyone else is cutting back. Well, Enjolras never drank to begin with, but you know. We all want to support him.”

“Yeah, you know what, I’ve actually had some questions about all that.” Eponine set her burrito aside but kept a grip on her coffee mug. “Why is Grantaire quitting drinking anyway?”

Courfeyrac shot her a sideways look. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Well, okay, I figured it was because the Ice Prince told him to, but…what? Courf, you’re looking at me like I’m crazy.”

Courfeyrac made the effort to smile at her. It wasn’t her fault. She was new to the group, after all, she
couldn’t know better. “Ponine, Grantaire’s drinking was getting really scary. He was well beyond the point of drinking to excess. We were starting to worry that he was going to kill himself with it. I didn’t drink that much anyway. Just socially, mostly on the weekends, and since Grantaire’s always in my social circle and it’s unforgivably rude to toss ‘em back in front of a recovering alcoholic…it’s really not a huge deal.”

“I think it’s a shame, personally. Grantaire wasn’t a mean drunk. He was more fun before he got whipped.” She made the whipping motion, then added more Baileys to her mug.

Courfeyrac, who usually tried to see the good in people or at least try to understand what made them flawed, felt a sudden and uncharacteristically intense dislike for Eponine in that moment. He shut down his computer, and by the time he clicked the laptop shut that sharp stab had ebbed away, mostly settling into pity and compassion for the girl.

“Ponine…keep that to yourself. Grantaire’s struggling to overcome years of addiction and a dramatic depressive cycle. He hides a lot of it with sarcasm and humorous self-deprecation, but I saw the full extent of it. It might look like Enjolras is pressuring him into changing, but that’s not the case. Enjolras is probably saving his life right now.”

Eponine snorted and rolled her eyes.

“Eponine.”

“Fine. I won’t pressure the kid to have a drink with me. But I still think you should.” She held out her mug invitingly.

“Sorry kiddo. I made a promise to Grantaire and I intend to keep it.”

“But you’ll smoke pot with me?”

Courfeyrac sighed. “That was different.” And probably a bad idea, come to think of it. “Christ, Ponine. I keep forgetting how young you are.”

“And just what the fucking fuck is that supposed to mean?” Eponine asked, crossing her arms.

“I just forgot what it was like to be under twenty one. When you’re legally able to drink whenever you want, it instantly loses a lot of its appeal.” He stood up, patronizingly patted her head, and went into the kitchen to fix a snack of his own. She was still pouting when he got back, and now taking sips from a bottle of vodka.

Courfeyrac shot her a look. “How many containers do you have hidden in here anyway?” Eponine shrugged her shoulders. “Come on, this is serious! If Grantaire finds one of those—”

“And he gets shitfaced it’ll just prove that I’m right and he didn’t want to quit in the first place. I thought you were cool, Courf, but you’re a judgmental snooty shit like the rest of them, aren’t you?”

“What, because I want my friends to be happy? We’re not talking about harmless social drinking, Eponine. He was hurting himself, and you weren’t the one watching him fall apart so keep your own damn judgment in check. And maybe you need to look into your own substance intake if you’re hiding booze from your roommates. That’s kind of a sign.”

“See! Fucking judgment!” Eponine shrieked, splashing some vodka out of the bottle and over her wrist.

Courfeyrac gaped at her, tempted to slap the fucking bottle out of her hand. Then the front door
banged open and they both jumped.

Marius stood there, lower lip trembling and handsome eyes filled with unshed tears. He was looking distinctly like a kicked puppy.

“Marius, what the hell happened?” Courfeyrac asked. He and Eponine both jumped to their feet, completely forgetting their own argument at the sight of their friend’s distress.

For a long minute Marius didn’t say anything. He just looked at the two of them, and then the tears finally leaked down his face. “Cosette dumped me. I think I’m just going to go drown myself in the shower. S-sorry to ruin your night.”

Eponine dropped the vodka onto the floor and covered her mouth with her hands, while Courfeyrac rushed forward and pulled Marius into a hug. Marius broke down, crying noisy, desperate tears that wrenched Courfeyrac’s heart.

“Oh Marius, I’m so sorry!” Eponine joined their hug, patting at his back and cooing reassuring nonsense. They maneuvered him onto the couch, each friend taking one of his hands. “What happened? Why would that stupid little twit dump you? She’s clearly dumber than I thought.”

“She’s not!” Marius sniffled. “She’s a perfect angel. It’s just…” Courfeyrac got up to snag him some tissues, realized he’d somehow spilled ketchup into his one box of Kleenex, and fetched him a roll of paper towels instead.

“Marius, what’d Cosette say?” Courfeyrac prompted. The two of them were clearly stupid for each other. He was sure that whatever their fight had been about, there’d be an easy solution that would have them sighing dreamily into each other’s eyes again in no time.

“S-She said her father,” here they had to stop for a moment so Eponine could get her snort of derision and scowling out of the way, “h-her father thought we were moving too fast. And, and I guess she said that she agreed and that she needed time and…so she dumped me.”

“But Cosette loves you,” Courfeyrac said.

Eponine squeezed his hand tighter. “She’s stupid though. Her own mistake. Trust me, honey, you’re better off.”

Marius snatched his hands away from both of him, hid his face in them, and let out loud, wrenching sobs. Courfeyrac glared at Eponine over the top of Marius’ head and she mouthed ‘what?’ at him.

Courfeyrac rubbed Marius’ back and made a soothing noise. “It’s okay, Marius. You’ll be fine. Cosette’ll probably realize her mistake by morning.”

“I don’t know that I’d take someone back if they treated my heart that casually.”

“Eponine, cut it the fuck out!” Courfeyrac snapped, startling Marius as well as Eponine. The puppy sat up and dabbed at his face with a paper towel, looking thoroughly confused. Courfeyrac felt his face grow warm. “S-sorry. But I don’t think you’re helping.”

“You know what? I’m sick of what you think. I am going out for the night. Because I am a strong, independent woman, and I don’t need either one of you selfish fuck sticks.” She grabbed her coat and her purse, stuck her tongue out at Courfeyrac, and then slammed the door shut behind her.

Courfeyrac slumped down on the couch and rubbed at his eyes. He could feel a headache coming on.
“Um…is everything okay?” Marius asked, sounding and looking a little shell shocked. He tore off a paper towel and handed it to Courfeyrac.

Courfeyrac’s eyes were resting on Eponine’s abandoned vodka bottle. It had been open when she dropped it, and so a generous portion had spilled out onto the carpet. He reached over to pick it up and took a long sip, then he pressed it into Marius’ hand.

“Courf?” And now the puppy was too horrified to cry. Courfeyrac decided to count that as progress.

“Come on Marius. Drink with me.”

“But Grantaire—”

“I won’t tell if you don’t. And you do look like you could use a drink.”

Marius shrugged, and did as instructed. “Can we drink Eponine’s Baileys instead? I like the way that tastes better, and if we’re going to do this then I still want to drink for the taste.”

“Go for it, kid.” Courfeyrac took the vodka back and settled on the couch while Marius went to make his drink.

Now that there wasn’t a divinely beautiful blond draped over him, Grantaire was starting to worry a bit about his decision to skip class. With said divinely beautiful blond clinging to him, whispering sweet nothings in his ear and expressing his need to be tutored in the joys of sex, cutting for the day seemed like the most logical thing in the world.

Sitting alone in Enjolras’ gigantic apartment trying to compose emails for his professors while thinking of all the classes he’d missed during his most recent depressive cycle, Grantaire couldn’t help but think that he might have finally tanked his grades for the semester. He was only allowed so many absences in core classes before he automatically failed, and even his upper level major related classes had their limits on absenteeism. Grantaire didn’t care about getting straight As like Enjolras and Combeferre, but he did need to keep his GPA at or above 2.0 to get his financial aid, and if he lost his financial aid he couldn’t afford to stay in school.

What the fuck was he going to tell his professors? Well, obviously not the truth, but was there a legitimate sounding excuse he hadn’t already used? Grantaire stared at Enjolras’ laptop screen and tried to think, but he was too worked up. He needed to relax.

He needed a…

He got up and went to the kitchen to make tea. But he was so fucking sick of tea and honestly it wasn’t the same. Wasn't even fucking close.

Technically he was supposed to be off cigarettes by now too, though he was still smoking them when he stayed at his own apartment. Enjolras had out and out forbidden him smoking at his place, but Grantaire needed to do something to calm himself down. Indulging in just one tiny vice couldn’t hurt too much. And things were awfully good between them. Even if Enjolras caught him, he’d probably be sympathetic enough.

Grantaire dug his cigarettes out of his backpack, couldn’t find his lighter, and so snagged a pack of matches from where they were resting in one of the clusters of candles that still adorned the apartment from Enjolras’ date preparations. He went into the bathroom, opened the window, and
leaned as far out it as he could while smoking his cigarette.

What was he going to say? He couldn’t claim illness; he’d already used it too much this semester. Maybe some kind of accident? No, his professors wouldn’t buy it without some visible sign of injury, like a cast. Maybe Joly could hook him up?

That was a terrible idea. He needed another cigarette, which was also a terrible idea, and pushing his luck…but it wasn’t a drink. Grantaire was already lighting a fresh cigarette from the stump of his finished one before he noticed it, the motions smooth and practiced from years of experience.

Then he heard footsteps in the hall. Fuck.

“Grantaire? Are you still here? I need to talk to you about something.”

Shit. Grantaire started for the toilet, intending to flush the cigarette in his panic, and hoping he’d had the sense to lock the bathroom door.

He hadn’t. Enjolras caught him from the doorway and stared at him like a deer in headlights. “I thought you’d stopped smoking.”

“I’m working on it.” Grantaire extinguished the cigarette from the bathroom sink and tossed it in the trash, all the while keeping his eyes averted. “S-sorry.”

“I suppose you’ve got a lot of vices.” There was something off about Enjolras’ voice. It was oddly formal, but there was something else going on. Some other weird quality that Grantaire had never heard from him before, though he felt like he should have been able to put his finger on it. “It’s okay, Grantaire. It was pretty selfish of me to expect you to suddenly become someone you’re not.”

“Enjolras…is everything okay? You’re supposed to freak out at me for smoking in your apartment, not…this.” He’d just realized why that tone of voice sounded so wrong coming from Enjolras, and why there was a smidge of familiarity about it. It was defeat, something he recognized perfectly when it came out of his own mouth.

Enjolras rapidly blinked a few times, touched a hand to his forehead, then turned and walked back into the hallway.

“Enjolras!” Grantaire shouted. He ran after him and grabbed his arm. “Hey, what the fuck’s going on? Come on, say something. You’re scaring the shit out of me right now.”

Enjolras’ eyes were troubled, the sight of which gnawed at Grantaire’s insides. The guy kept pressing his lips together, and though it was reminiscent of when he was brooding over some grand human rights issue, even when the injustices of the world upset him he still seemed lit from within with his righteous indignation. Enjolras never looked dejected. That was for black-hearted cynics, known for defeating themselves before they bothered to put an effort in.

“I don’t know how to talk about this. I don’t think there’s an appropriate way to start the conversation,” Enjolras finally murmured.

Grantaire swallowed around a sudden, painful lump in his throat. “Enj, you’re my world. You can talk to me about anything, I swear. I promise; you’re not capable of making me fall out of love with you. Whatever it is, I want to know. So let’s just sit down and talk this out, okay?”

Enjolras nodded, and Grantaire ushered him into the living room. By the time they’d sat down on the couch he was feeling tempted to smoke the rest of his pack and follow it up with a bottle of whiskey, but obviously that would only make things worse. He did his best to hide the way his hands were
Enjolras’ eyes had been downcast, but he suddenly sprung that piercing blue gaze on Grantaire, who was not prepared for the pain in them. “Did you really sleep with Courfeyrac?”

Grantaire wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting Enjolras to say, he only knew that wasn’t it.

“‘Taire?” Enjolras prompted.

“I…uh, yeah. Yeah, Courf and I used to hook up, but it wasn’t anything, I mean it was just friendly stuff. I used to have a thing for him when we were in high school, but I haven’t felt that way in ages. I thought you knew about it already.”

Enjolras shook his head. “It seems like everyone else did though.”

Enjolras looked transparently hurt, and Grantaire felt a sudden desire to hurt himself for making his love feel that way. He was momentarily consumed with self-hatred and guilt, but then it sharpened into anger and that anger found a new target: Combeferre.

Because really, Enjolras had left to hang out with that judgmental prick for one hour and came back like this? Grantaire desperately wanted to know what Combeferre had said when he’d thrown him and Courf under the bus. Though he was upset Enjolras was upset, Grantaire still didn’t think he’d done anything wrong. He and Courf were adults, and they’d been single every time they’d hooked up. They hadn’t hurt anyone. So what kind of spin had Combeferre put on it to make Enjolras look the way Grantaire usually felt?

He was going to punch Combeferre in his fucking stupid face the next time he saw him.

However, the matter at hand needed to be attended to first. “Enj, I’m sorry.”

“No, you don’t have to be. We weren’t together when it happened, and you weren’t trying to keep it from me or anything. It’s not infidelity.” Enjolras sounded like he was trying to convince himself more than Grantaire. For whatever reason, he also didn’t seem to be blinking enough. “I don’t know why it’s bothering me so much.”

“That’s something we have in common, I suppose,” Grantaire murmured, and Enjolras eyed him with defensive curiosity. Grantaire ran a hand through his hair, though the nervous habit wasn’t quite the same with his shorter hair. “I just don’t understand your views on sex, I guess.”

“I don’t understand yours either,” Enjolras said, voice low and turning a little cold. “Everything between us felt right and…special. I don’t understand doing that with someone you don’t love.”

“Well we were making love.” That seemed pretty obvious, though Enjolras still looked reassured for hearing it from Grantaire. “It’s not the same thing as fucking.”

“What’s the distinction?”

“When I fuck someone I’m not in love with…it’s just different. It’s a distraction, and gratification, and trying to forget loneliness for a little while. It’s just physical. All the emotional stuff wouldn’t filter in.” Grantaire shrugged his shoulders and looked away. He didn’t want to see the judgment aimed at him.

“So…unless you’re making love, for you sex is one of your myriad distractions from reality,” Enjolras murmured thoughtfully. “Like the drinking and the cutting.”
Grantaire considered that. “I’d never really thought of… I suppose you’re right. I mean, mostly. I wasn’t always depressed when I stumbled over to Courf’s…” Except he couldn’t think of a single example to disprove that. “Um…I guess I kind of was, actually. I usually turned up when I didn’t want to be alone for another night. Um… don’t tell him that, okay?”

Enjolras wrapped an arm securely around him and kissed the top of his head. Grantaire curled against Enjolras, tucking his head under his chin and relaxing into the embrace. His hands weren’t shaking anymore.

“Come to me,” Enjolras said. “Whenever you feel that way from now on, let me know. I know you don’t like me to know how badly your depression is affecting you—”

“I’d actually prefer it if you didn’t know I was fucking crazy to begin with,” Grantaire interrupted.

Enjolras sighed. “Would you rather I thought your self-destructive habits had no legitimate origin and that you just liked hurting yourself and those around you?”

Fair point. Grantaire grumbled something darkly and hid his face against Enjolras’ chest.

Enjolras caught at least some of the grumbling though, because he answered it. “You’re not weak. You’re struggling, and there’s a difference. I want to carry some of that burden for you. You’d do the same for me if our situations were reversed.”

“I would,” Grantaire said without any hesitation. “Um… you’re not going to, like say anything to Courfeyrac or be mad at him for this, are you?”

Enjolras let out a surprised laugh. “We’ll just pretend I already knew, as that’s what everyone seems to think. Besides… I can’t say I blame him for wanting to get in your pants.”

Grantaire let out a startled squawk of a laugh. “Considering my state at the time, I can. But thank you.” He leaned up for a quick kiss, and when their lips parted both of them were smiling.

That might possibly have been the first time he’d talked over issues with someone and felt better for it at the end. Grantaire decided then that Enjolras really was magic.

“Do you really think Cosette will take me back?” Marius asked.

Courfeyrac shrugged. “Who fucking cares? You’re a good puppy, Marius. It’s her loss if she doesn’t.” He reached over and patted Marius’ head, as though he really were his nickname. Then he cracked up at Marius’ befuddled expression. “That’s right. Sorry, I forgot you didn’t know that… we called you that. Grantaire started it, I think.”

“You guys think I’m a puppy?” Marius snorted. “You know what, never mind. It works.”

“Yep. Good puppy.” Courfeyrac petted him again and Marius laughed.

A few hours of drinks and Drag Race had substantially improved the night. Courfeyrac felt warm and fuzzy. He was even almost warm and fuzzy enough not to think of Eponine and worry about where she’d gone more than once every ten minutes or so.

Shit. He really hoped the girl was okay. He’d practically chased her out of the house. Should he send out a group text? Should they go looking for her the way they had when Grantaire had disappeared?
But then he’d have to admit that he was too buzzed to drive, and if he did that then Grantaire would feel betrayed, and if Grantaire felt betrayed…

Courfeyrac was interrupted from his brooding thoughts by a dark head dropping into his lap. Marius had curled up on the couch, pillowing his head on Courfeyrac, eyes drooped shut. Courfeyrac absently petted his hair. “You okay, kid?”

“Mm hm. You’re a good friend, Courf. You’ll help me get over Cosette.”

Courfeyrac smiled sappily at his friend. “Course I will. And you will bounce back, I promise. It’s a shame, of course, but Marius…you’ll definitely find someone, okay? I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life. Guys as good as you don’t stay lonely for long.”

“I should’ve taken you to dinner instead,” Marius murmured.

Courfeyrac laughed. “Maybe. But I think your heterosexuality would have been a bit of an impediment. Y’know, just a slight smidge.”

Marius pushed up onto his arms and looked up at Courfeyrac with wide, hopeful eyes. “I’ve never checked though. I could be part-gay. Who knows? And it’d be easier that way. I could just fall in love with you, and then you'd love me back. It’d be perfect.”

“Marius~” Courfeyrac started to object to the overly simplistic drunken rambling, but then Marius was kissing him, and to be fair, he was pretty drunk too.

Courfeyrac’s eyes fell shut. He tangled a hand in Marius’ thick, gorgeous dark hair, and groaned his appreciation into the kiss.

Cosette was out of her mind for giving this up. She’d seemed like such a smart girl, too.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys. I probably should have done this shameless plugging earlier, but I've been too distracted by all the fun I'm having working on this story (also, I suck at self-promotion). So I'm actually a newly published author. I've been writing fan fiction for fun since before I knew it was a thing, and I've always gotten a pretty good response (even back in the days of my cliche filled Phantom Menace fics from Middle School), so over the summer I thought I'd give professional publishing a go. Much to my surprise, my very first submission got accepted and sold in e-book form this past December. I'll be getting my first ever royalties check at the end of the month. It's not much, but symbolically it means quite a lot to me. My first story is somewhere between a short story and a novella. It's called A Turning Point, and it's a Christmas tale about a dysfunctional couple resolving some of their issues, and also sex. Pretty boy sex. It's still available, and if you'd like to read a sample you can find it here: http://www.mlrbooks.com/ShowBook.php?book=VMTRNPNT

Also, I don't have an active Tumblr or anything at the moment, but I made a facebook page for my professional pen name. If you'd like to friend me, find me here: https://www.facebook.com/valerie.maiers
Sorry about the shameless plugging. I just thought if you guys liked the story, you might like my writing in general.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

The drama keeps going. Combeferre and Feuilly decide that they've had enough.

Chapter Notes

I know I promised a lot for this chapter. I wasn't able to deliver all the resolutions I wanted in my usual word count. Basically, the chapter felt finished before I accomplished any of my goals for it. Rather than have you all kill me for being an awful tease, I decided to force out another chapter today. So basically, don't panic and yell at me when you finish this chapter. There will be another chapter hot on its heels.

And then I'll need to take a break from writing for a little while because I am pooped.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Marius wanted to end the kiss almost as quickly as he’d started it. He would have too, had Courfeyrac not been so obviously into it, and so he immediately started worrying about Courfeyrac’s feelings, because two things became fairly obvious as soon as he initiated the kiss; Courfeyrac still had some non-friendly feelings for him that he’d been taking great strides to overcome, and Marius was completely, one hundred percent sure of his heterosexuality.

Well this was going to be really awkward.

Not sure what to do, Marius just kind of went still and after a moment Courfeyrac pulled away. “Sorry,” he murmured, face going red. “M’just really drunk right now.”

No he wasn’t. Courfeyrac was tipsy, but this was the first time Marius had heard him slur all night.

“Yeah, me too,” Marius agreed. He forced himself to laugh a little and rubbed at the back of his neck. “I don’t know what I was just thinking.”

“I’m thinking we should stay out of Eponine’s stash from now on,” Courfeyrac said, face still very much red. He trained his eyes on the television screen and kept them there.

Marius did likewise. They finished the episode of Drag Race in almost total silence, and when it ended Courfeyrac turned off the TV, stood up, and stretched. “I’m going to bed. Wake me up if Eponine turns up, okay?”

“Will do. Um…Courfey-”

“Tomorrow, Marius. If you want to, we’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

Marius hung his head and nodded. “S-see you tomorrow then.”

“Yeah. G’night.”
As soon as Courfeyrac’s bedroom door shut behind him Marius dropped down against the couch cushions and hugged a pillow to his chest. “Excellent job, Pontmercy. You lost your girlfriend and your best friend in one night. Fucking brilliant.”

He was so never drinking again as long as he lived.

Meanwhile, Cosette had locked herself in her bedroom, buried her face in her skirt, and had been sobbing uncontrollably for most of the night. She was blasting every breakup album she owned, which turned out to be a startlingly large collection for someone who’d been forbidden to date. At the moment she was on Jagged Little Pill, with Rumours and Little Broken Hearts lined up to follow.

Jean Valjean was standing outside her bedroom door with a tray of food, feeling pretty heartbroken himself, and unsure of how to proceed. He tried knocking, but he figured it was a futile action. The odds of Cosette even hearing it over the sound of Alanis Morissette’s contempt were slim to none.

Admitting defeat, he set the tray down next to the door and went back downstairs, all the while telling himself he’d been right. However deep and meaningful Cosette thought her feelings were, they were just the excited first passions of a lovesick child. And they were potentially dangerous, as demonstrated by the girl’s own poor mother.

Marius seemed like a good enough boy, but then according to Fantine, Felix had seemed angelic. Valjean didn’t trust anyone with Cosette’s heart. Not while she was this young, this fragile. There would be time enough later.

And in the meantime he’d probably be putting up with a lot of Alanis Morissette.

By the time she got to the Chain on Rumours one of their neighbors must have filed a noise complaint, because the doorbell rang, and when Valjean threw it open he found himself face to face with a gleeful looking detective Javert.

Valjean was tempted to slam the door in his face, but he managed to restrain himself. Javert had been spoken to a number of times about harassing the former mayor. For him to be standing on the doorstep at this point he had to be there on official business or he risked another reprimand. “Yes?” Valjean asked icily.

“Excuse me, Mr. Mayor,” Javert sneered. “But your neighbors have complained about the noise.”

“And they sent a detective?” Valjean asked, casting a dubious glance at the pest. He curled his fingers into a fist at his side, and tried not to savor the sense memory of a nose shattering against his knuckles. It wasn’t a very Christian thing for him to dwell on.

“I happened to be in the neighborhood,” Javert returned.

“Ah. Well, I’ll attend to it. Good night, detective.”

“Just a minute, Valjean-”

But Valjean had already slammed the door shut. He bolted it and did the chain for good measure.

Still, he dutifully went upstairs and knocked on Cosette’s door again.

“Listen to the wind blo-o-o-o-ow-” Cosette wailed along with her CD. Valjean pounded on the door
with more force. “Down comes to night! Running in the shado-o-o-o-ows, damn your love, damn your lies! Break the silence, damn the dark, damn the light!”

“Cosette, open the door!”

“You will never love me again! I can still hear you saying you would never break the chain—but you didn’t Marius, it was me! Oh my God, oh my God it was me-e-e-e-e!”

“Cosette, I mean it! Enough of this!”

“I hate my life! The chai-ai-ain will keep us together…”

Deciding there was nothing else for it, Valjean went down to the kitchen and fetched some tools. He returned a moment later and removed Cosette’s bedroom door by the hinges.

At this point she was sitting on her bed with her skirt thrown over her head, holding her knees and wailing along with Oh Daddy. She flung her skirt back down and stared at him with wide, horrified eyes. Really, the poor thing was a sight. Her hair looked bushy and wild around her pale face from how she’d been tugging at it in her distress, and Valjean discovered that Cosette wore makeup when he saw it dribbling down around her eyes from her tears.

“Papa!” she shrieked.

He calmly walked over to her CD player and turned the power off. “My child, the neighbors have been complaining. Detective Javert came by to chastise us.”

Cosette turned away from him and sniffled. “I don’t care. I don’t care about anything anymore.”

“Cosette-”

“Get away from me! Leave me alone! You made me choose between you and Marius and I did! Can’t you let me alone while I suffer for it?!”

Valjean had been reaching out a hand to try to comfort the girl, but he instantly pulled it back to his side.

Was that really what he’d done?

“My child…please use headphones for the rest of the night. I’ll leave you to your reflection.” He fixed her bedroom door, then went back downstairs to the sitting room for further reflection of his own.

There was a chance Cosette’s words were no more than a petty jab characteristic of teenagers who were angry at authority figures looking out for their best interest, but there was also a good chance the jab hadn’t been petty. Valjean had truly believed he’d been acting in his adoptive daughter’s best interests. But if he was wrong then he’d done two innocent youths an incredible disservice.

Jean Valjean closed his eyes, folded his hands, and reconsidered everything anew.

Grantaire and Enjolras were sleeping on the couch when their phones both went off. Grantaire nuzzled closer against Enjolras, trying to use his chest to block out sound and light, but Enjolras shrugged him off and thrust his phone into his hand. “Answer it.”
“Meh…” Grantaire flung the phone behind him and it went skittering into the hallway.

Enjolras rolled his eyes and answered his own phone. “Hey ‘Ferre. Yeah, sorry I forgot to text last night…no, everything’s fine…uh huh. We talked.” Enjolras poked Grantaire’s shoulder. “Hey, you’re not going to try to kill Combeferre the next time you see him, right?”

“Huh? Uh…no, probably not.” Grantaire yawned and rubbed at his eyes. “Frankly, I don’t think I could. He’s bigger than me.”

“I think that’s why he said ‘try.’ So you guys are both good then?”

Grantaire sat up and stretched. “I suppose. His attempted sabotage didn’t work, after all.”

“Attempted…” Enjolras narrowed his eyes in confusion, then sat up straighter and clutched his phone to his ear. “What? ‘Ferre, calm down…he’s walking away, I can’t ask him-let me hang up and I’ll ask him…no. Look, just shut up.”

Grantaire was already halfway to the bathroom. He continued rubbing at his eye with the heel of his hand and let out another yawn. He could hear Enjolras padding after him, but he continued on his way without turning around.

“‘Taire.” Enjolras leaned against the bathroom doorway, then abruptly looked away when Grantaire started peeing. “Hey, I’m right here.”

“Uh huh. Following me to the bathroom first thing in the morning. Besides, it’s not like you haven’t seen my penis before.”

“Yes, but I put that thing in my mouth,” Enjolras said, and for the first time in his life Grantaire found himself suffering from shy bladder.

“You did not just say that.”

Enjolras smirked and walked away.

Without his snarky audience, Grantaire was able to finish his business in peace. He found Enjolras in the kitchen waiting in front of the toaster. He also had the kettle on the stove and two mugs waiting beside it on the counter. Grantaire walked up behind him, wrapped his arms around his waist, and dropped his head onto Enjolras’ shoulder blade. “For the record, I have every right to be pissy with Combeferre.”

“No you don’t.”

“Yes I do. He got you all freaked out about me and Courf. Unless Jehan was being a gossipy bitch, which I sincerely doubt as he’s practically too nice to be a real person.”

Enjolras parted Grantaire’s hands, stepped out of his embrace, and turned so they were facing each other. He was wearing a ‘none of your bullshit’ stare that he’d perfected over years of dealing with Grantaire’s insolence. “Combeferre’s my best friend.”

“He doesn’t like me.”

“Yes he does. You befriended him before you befriended me, remember? Combeferre introduced us when you came to his Halloween party freshman year.”

“Oh yeah.” Grantaire shrugged. “He still doesn’t like the fact that we’re dating.”
“I don’t think he has a problem with it.”

Grantaire couldn’t help but laugh at that, which seemed to annoy Enjolras further. “Sorry, it’s just… maybe you haven’t noticed the way your bestie constantly glares me down. And he pulled me aside to do the traditional ‘hurt my friend and I’ll kill you’ intimidation thing. I mean, I know it’s just something friends have to do, but ‘Ferre was pretty into it. He probably will mangle my face if I screw up.”

Enjolras was staring at him with his mouth hanging open. “Combeferre threatened you?”

“Well yeah. Wait, did Courfeyrac not threaten you? That bastard. I thought we were friends.”

Grantaire would have to mention that later. Of course, if Courf didn’t think they were that kind of friends then that saved him some trouble if the kid ever did settle down and choose a partner. Because Grantaire figured if he had to try to do the scary best friend intimidation, he’d just make the guy or gal in question bust a gut laughing.

“I’m sorry, Grantaire. I’ll have a talk with Combeferre, and whatever this is will stop.”

Grantaire snorted. “Don’t worry about it, Enj, it’s not a big deal.” He kissed Enjolras’ cheek, then sidled up next to him and took up the post in front of the toaster. “Combeferre can be scary when he wants to, but he’s not going to chase me away from you.” He wrapped an arm around Enjolras’ waist, sneaking his fingers under his shirt to idly rub at soft skin. “I love you too much to be bothered by tiny things like self-preservation.”

Enjolras leaned into the half hug, letting out a slow sigh. “’Ferre was probably just joking or something. I know he’s happy for me. He was a little worried about the possibility of me catching an STD, but other than that—”

“Yeah, about that. When did you get my blood tested?” Grantaire asked. “That’s a little weird.”

“Joly did it for me. He got mine tested too. I know you were my first partner, but I figured it was only fair. Besides, there’s an outside chance a virgin could pick something up.”

“So Joly, Jehan, and Combeferre all knew about your lascivious intentions before I did? Interesting.”

The kettle whistled, highly convenient for Enjolras as he didn’t appear to want to respond to Grantaire’s observation. He busied himself with the tea, so Grantaire buttered him some toast and set it on the table, then grabbed a Poptart out of the cupboard for himself and ate it untoasted.

“Are you going to see who was calling you?” Enjolras asked.

Grantaire shrugged. “I suppose I’m awake now. Might as well.” Enjolras eyed him expectantly. “…after breakfast.”

“It’s a Poptart. I don’t think that it requires much of your concentration.”

“You’d be surprised. So what are you up to today?”

Enjolras considered. “Homework, most likely.”

“Well that’s a waste of a Saturday.”

“I didn’t get anything done Wednesday or Thursday because of…y’know. And then we spent all day yesterday together. You know how demanding my classes are. I’ve fallen pretty far behind.”
“So the golden child might get a few Bs instead of his usual straight As. I think you’ll live.” Plus Grantaire didn’t want to be thinking about school right at that moment. For as long as he and Enjolras stayed in his lovely, sunny apartment without any interruptions from the outside world, he could forget about his impending failed grades, lost aid, and subsequent homelessness. For the moment, he had everything he needed sitting across the table from him.

“I think I’m going to give Combeferre and Jehan a call after breakfast,” Enjolras said. “We can meet up at the Musain and study together. Would you want to come? You must have projects of your own you’re ignoring.”

“Art kid,” Grantaire said dismissively. “I can’t haul all my materials down to the Musain and work on my pieces. Well, I mean I could, but it’d be a pain in the ass. My room’s already in the perfect state of ordered chaos for me to get my work done.” And hopefully that could be the end of that discussion.

“You’re taking non-major core classes though. I thought you were finally finishing your lit sequence this semester. African American Lit II, right?”

“Wow. I think you pay more attention to my schoolwork than I do.”

Enjolras smirked. “That wouldn’t be terribly difficult. Come on, ‘Taire. Study with me.” He reached across the table and brushed his fingers over Grantaire’s.

And Grantaire really liked it when Enjolras called him ‘Taire…

“I’ll think about it.” Grantaire took the last bite of his Poptart and then got to his feet. “Let me see what that call was about though.” Hopefully it was something that could get him out of spending his Saturday worrying about school.

He went into the hall to retrieve his phone and found a voicemail from Courfeyrac waiting for him. Without bothering to listen to the message he called his friend. “Hey dude, what’s up?”

“You haven’t heard from Eponine since last night, have you?”

Grantaire frowned, distinctly unnerved by how, well, unnerved Courfeyrac sounded. “No, why? What happened?”

“We…we got into a bit of a fight and she took off. She said she was a strong, independent woman and then she called me and Marius fuck sticks. Shut up, Grantaire, it’s not funny.”

“I beg to differ.”

“Actually, I’m in a bit of a crisis over Marius too. Uh…are you busy?”

Grantaire leaned around the corner to peek into the kitchen, where he spied Enjolras making a list of study goals for the day on a notepad a saner man would have reserved for grocery shopping.

“Actually, no. No plans. I’ll see if Enjolras can give me a ride to your place when he leaves for the Musain.”

“Just tag along with him to the Musain. I could stand to get out of the house for a bit. Text me when you get there and I’ll head out.”

“Will do. See you later.” Grantaire ended the call and walked back into the kitchen. “Courf’s having an emergency.”
“I suppose you’re excused then,” Enjolras said without looking up from his list. “I guess studying together isn’t much of a date, anyway.”

“Mm. For future reference, I wouldn’t consider having Jehan and Combeferre present much of a date either. Y’know, unless we’re doubling.”

“Combeferre’s straight.”

“Oh. Did he tell you that, or are you just assuming?” Grantaire asked. He finally had Enjolras’ full attention again.

“He told me, and I’m also taking into account his history. He’s only ever dated girls. Why? Did you think he was gay?”

Grantaire picked his mug of tea back up and innocently shrugged his shoulders, but there was no mistaking the protective, almost possessive look on his face while he looked his boyfriend over. “I’d wondered about it a few times. Is it cool if I use your shower before we head out?”

“Go nuts. I’ve still got to gather all my books together and call Combeferre and Jehan. Oh, maybe I should invite Joly too. Nursing majors are always swamped with work.”

“You do that.” Grantaire dropped a kiss on the top of his head, then disappeared into the bathroom.

By noon the Musain was crowded with college kids. Enjolras and Combeferre had pushed two tables together and then covered them with stacks of papers, open notebooks, heavy, unpleasant looking books, and their computers. By the time Jehan joined them he complained that not only was there no room for his books, but that they also couldn’t fit their beverages, and they did have an obligation to buy some table rent. Combeferre and Enjolras packed up a project each, which gave Jehan some study space and cleared room for a pot of tea for them to share.

Grantaire watched them from a table in the corner while he waited for Courfeyrac. As far as he knew, this happened every time the nerds got together for group studying, which made him wonder why they were so insistent about making studying a social activity. When Joly showed up with a full to bursting backpack and an armful of medical texts the struggle for space began anew, and ended up with them acquisitioning a third table.

Courfeyrac was forty minutes late, which was odd because he lived almost as close to the Musain as Grantaire. And then he spent ten minutes flirting with the barista while he waited for his macchiato, which was just inconsiderate. Grantaire probably could have gotten a decent amount of schoolwork done just while he waited for his friend, something that seemed to occur to Enjolras as well as he periodically shot his boyfriend dark glances from the table of nerdery.

But eventually Courfeyrac did sit down across from Grantaire and his long empty tea mug with a sugary beverage. Grantaire remained slouched down on the stool with his arms crossed, but he did lift an eyebrow to acknowledge Courfeyrac.

“Sorry. I, uh…I didn’t want to leave Marius alone. Bossuet’s kidnapped him for the afternoon.”

“So the puppy needs to be taken for walkies now? This is getting ridiculous, Courf. He’s only like a year younger than us. I don’t think you need to look after him to this extent.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s…Cosette broke up with him last night and he’s taken it really hard.”
“Well of course he’s taking it hard!” Grantaire exclaimed. He felt dizzy from the sudden flood of emotion, sure that if he’d just been told his own parents were getting a divorce he wouldn’t be more impacted by the news of a couple’s sudden decision to part ways. “That girl’s a saint. What the fuck did he do to screw up?”

“Nothing, as far as I can tell. It was the psycho dad.”

“Damn,” Grantaire murmured, and felt a twinge of worry completely unconnected to Marius’ woes. He still worried every now and then that his dinner with Marie and Paul was going to come back to haunt him at some point. “Do you think Cosette will still talk to the rest of us?”

“Who cares? Marius is our friend, and right now I think it’d destroy him if he had to see her. They’ll need some time apart. I mean, I’m not saying we have to be mean to Cosette or anything, but she’s a bit outside our regular social circle and it’d be cruel to throw her and Marius together.”

Grantaire frowned at the valid point. Damn Courfeyrac and his logic. Well, he could still talk to her on facebook even if they didn’t bump into each other at Courf’s and Brammer Street anymore. He hadn’t told any of the others about it, but Cosette had been sending him information and resources for recovering addicts and she faithfully checked in with him about how he was doing at least once a day. Much as Grantaire liked Marius, he wasn’t willing to sacrifice his most sympathetic cheerleader for the kid’s comfort.

“So why are you here with me instead of out with the puppy?” Grantaire asked, voicing his confusion. “I’d have thought he’d want his bro while he was heartbroken. Did you just need a break or something?”

Courfeyrac chewed his lip, eyes fixed on his caramel macchiato. He looked nothing like his usual affable self, which was not only worrying, it was uncomfortable. “Courf?”

“He kissed me. Last night, and I…I didn’t want to talk about it.”

“He kissed you?” Grantaire asked. “Huh. I thought he was straight.”

“Yeah, he is. We figured that out pretty definitively last night.” And now he looked bitter, which was worse than the quiet discomfort. Courfeyrac was supposed to point out all the ridiculousness of Grantaire’s bitterness and pessimism, making it impossible for him to stew in his negative emotions without feeling like a tool. Courf was a pro at getting someone out of a sulk. Grantaire wasn’t sure if he could handle reversing their roles on this.

He reached across the table and touched Courfeyrac’s arm. “I’m really sorry. I thought you’d gotten over him though.”

“Almost,” Courfeyrac whispered. He smiled sadly, and his eyes were glassy. “I thought, I mean, but then when he kissed me at first it was nice and I just got hopeful. But then he went all rigid and I knew, and now it’s all fresh again. I guess, I mean it’s just, it was a stupid crush. I barely knew him when I fell for him, and living with him has turned him into one of my best friends, so it’s almost platonic but I guess it wasn’t quite there. I dunno. Maybe if I weren’t so fucking lonely it wouldn’t be hitting me like this, but I don’t have any other prospects and I just…I’m getting kind of sick of the kind of company that only lasts a night. But that’s been the best I could manage, so…yeah. Shit, I bet I sound really pathetic right now.”

“No, you don’t,” Grantaire assured him. Actually, it was kind of a relief to hear that Courfeyrac wanted something a little deeper than screwing around with friends and whatever pretty face he could charm into following him home. “You’ll find someone, Courf. You’ve got a lot going for you.
Besides, you and the puppy would have been terrible together. He’s too cute for you. You need someone with a little more depth.”

“Marius has depth. He just hides it by dazing out all the time. When you can provoke him into a proper conversation, his angle on things is actually really stunning. I love talking to him. Fuck.” Courfeyrac nervously ran a hand through his hair, then started wiping at his face with a napkin. “I hope that kiss doesn’t ruin the friendship.”

“He’ll have to get over it. Dude, he’s living on your futon. He doesn’t have a choice.”

“True enough, I suppose.”

“So what the hell happened with Eponine?” Grantaire asked. He wanted to be a better friend and really go into the situation with Marius, but seeing Courfeyrac vulnerable and hurt was painful for him too. He’d have to think it over on his own before taking another crack at it.

Courfeyrac gave a lost little shrug and let out a bitter laugh. “I have no fucking clue, really. She’s been acting weird since we started fucking—”

Grantaire let out a loud noise that sounded something like a goose being kicked. He got more than a few curious looks from around the café, but he couldn’t be bothered as he was too busy gaping at Courfeyrac. “Wait, so you made out with one roommate while you were fucking the other?”

“Please, you make it sound like it happened at the same time,” Courfeyrac returned. “Eponine mentioned wanting to do a friends with bennies thing when she moved in, and, well…her birthday’s only in a month. Seemed silly to wait until she turned eighteen.”

“Ah huh. And she’s been weird since you started sleeping together?” Grantaire prompted. Courfeyrac nodded. “Are you sure you’ve got no prospects? The only reason for that to happen is if she’s got feelings for you.”

Courfeyrac considered that, then wrinkled his nose and shook his head. “Nah, I don’t think she does. She’s really fixated on Marius. We’re just keeping each other company while we pathetically moon over him.”

“You sure, dude? People are capable of having more than one crush at a time.”

“Why would Eponine like me? She goes for pretty boys,” Courfeyrac said. "Like Marius. And even though Montparnasse is an asshole, he's inarguably a pretty one."

Grantaire tried his best approximation of Enjolras’ ‘cut the bullshit’ look, but he knew he couldn’t hope to pull it off. “You’re going to make me say it, aren’t you?”

“Say what?”

“That you’re hot.”

Courfeyrac laughed. “No I’m not.”

“Yeah, dude, you are. And don’t make me repeat it, because as someone who’s supposed to give you shit, that felt incredibly uncomfortable.”

Courfeyrac rolled his eyes, but he did look a bit more cheerful for the reluctantly bestowed compliment. Then he frowned as his thoughts returned to the subject of their conversation. “Argh… she ran out of the house last night after the fight, and she spent the whole night out. I just hope she
hasn’t gone crawling back to the asshole.”

“She has to know Montparnasse would beat the shit out of her for going back after leaving in the first place. Eponine’s too smart to do that,” Grantaire said, though he didn’t believe it himself. He and Eponine had a certain amount of damage in common, which gave him some insight into the way she thought and acted. If he were feeling awful enough, he could see himself running head on into a dangerous situation. “Let me step outside and give her a call. I’m not on her shit list at the moment.”

“Please do. I’m going to snag another coffee and get a snack. Want anything?”

“Careful, Courf. I’ll have to retract my comment on your looks if you start to get chubby.” Grantaire reached over to poke his belly, and Courfeyrac smacked his hand away.

“You could use a few cookies, fucking stick insect.”

“Hey, I halved my caloric intake, at least, when I quit drinking. And also, bite me.”

He went outside and leaned against the wall. There were a few texts waiting for him on his phone; Bahorel asking where the fuck everybody was (Grantaire texted back that he’d rather not know unless he wanted to be interrogated about his lack of work ethic regarding school again), Feuilly letting him know that the art supply store across town was running a sale, and Cosette doing a daily check-in. He texted Cosette back, then dialed Eponine.

It rang for awhile, but eventually she answered in a guarded tone. “I don’t want to talk about the stupid fucking boys, so if that’s why you’re calling you can piss off.”

“I am calling on Courfeyrac’s behalf,” Grantaire began, “But it’s only because the guy’s worried about you. He wants to make sure you’re safe.”

“Let him know I didn’t go back to Parnasse’s.” Grantaire breathed a quiet sigh of relief. Apparently Eponine was smarter than him. “I went to my parents’ house.” But not by that much.

“You’re going to go back to his place though, right? I thought your parents were sketchy.”

“They are. And one of their friends followed me into the bathroom last night. If he’d been any less drunk I’d probably have been raped.”

“Ponine-”

“So I left and slept on Cosette’s couch. I’m fine, Grantaire. I can look after myself. And I’m not going back to Courfeyrac’s.”

“But you can’t stay on Valjean’s couch forever.”

“No, I suppose I can’t. I’ll figure something else out though. I always do.”

“Not to be unnecessarily disparaging Ponine, but your last solution was less than ideal. Did you leave your suitcase at Courf’s?” he asked. Eponine responded that she had, and started to say that she’d be by for it later but he cut her off. “Don’t bother. I’m going to haul it to my place. I’d leave a key out for you, but the doors don’t lock so you won’t need it. See you tonight, roomie.” Then, before she could argue, he hung up on her.

He checked his texts again, sent an answer to Cosette, and then went back into the café to give Courfeyrac the update.
“You know, if you guys aren’t actually going to work I could use the space for my anatomy book. It’s heavy, and it’s crushing my lap,” Joly complained.

Enjolras gave a start. “Huh? Oh, sorry. I am making progress with my French take home though.”

Joly pouted. “Actually, I was talking about Jehan and his untouched three volumes of Victorian romance.”

“Yeah, you guys are both out of it,” Combeferre said, nodding his agreement with Joly. And it was pretty obvious that the table in the back corner was the culprit behind their wandering attention.

Jehan frowned, eyes downcast and a tad guilty. “It’s just, Courf looks so unhappy. Do you think he’s okay?”

“Go talk to him,” Combeferre said listlessly. He rolled his eyes and the table gave a collective groan when Jehan stuttered out why he couldn’t possibly do that.

“Grantaire seems to be tending to him well enough though,” Enjolras said.

“Yes, Grantaire’s attending to everything fine. He doesn’t seem in the least need of any kind of assistance or interference,” Combeferre said pointedly, and Jehan and Joly snickered. Enjolras balled up a post-it and threw it at him. “I swear to God, Jehan, I’m beginning to reconsider my support of you and your crush. Because I don’t think I can deal with it if you both have boyfriends at the same time and you’re behaving like this.”

“Don’t worry about it, ‘Ferre. It’s a new couple thing.” Joly started to say, but Combeferre interrupted him to point out that Enjolras and Grantaire were a month and a half in. Joly shrugged. “Anyway, I’m behind on the gossip. Jehan, who’re you crushing on?”

“Really?” Joly said, giving Enjolras a funny look.

“Well…it took me over a year to realize he was being serious about it. At first I just thought he got grabby when he was drunk.”

“I can see that. Now Jehan, who is it? They’re making me feel stupid.”

Jehan unintentionally answered Joly by gazing at the back corner table with his head propped on his hand, letting out melodramatic sighs. Joly grinned, then turned to Enjolras and Combeferre for confirmation. “Really? How long?”

“For fucking ever,” Combeferre answered.

“They’d be good together, wouldn’t they?”

“We thought that too,” Enjolras said. “Last year.”

“Oh. Yeah, that’s got to get trying after awhile.”

“Mm hm,” Combeferre agreed. He sat up and started closing up his books and gathering his papers.

“ ‘Ferre?” Enjolras asked.
“I’ve given up on getting anything accomplished here. Besides, Feuilly’s getting out of work in twenty minutes and I said I’d meet him for a drink. I’ll see you guys later, okay?”

Enjolras nodded at him, and quietly worried that maybe he did need to be concerned about the effect his first relationship was having on his oldest friendship.

Meanwhile, Combeferre was brooding over the exact same subject from a different end. He felt like a bit of a jackass for grumbling about Jehan’s crush, and even more of a jackass for hinting that Enjolras should put his impeccable grades over an emotionally fragile boyfriend. “You like Grantaire,” he reminded himself for what felt like the billionth time that week.

Feuilly was waiting for him at a table in the back of the Corinth, still wearing his work shirt and nametag from the convenience store he was currently working at. He already had beers for each of them. “How was the group study?”

“Meh. I got a paper revised and a few articles read. I think Enjolras and Jehan might have finished one assignment each between them.”

“How about my roommate?” Feuilly asked.

Combeferre sat down across from him and took a sip of his beer before answering. “I guess he was productive enough. He seemed cheerful, anyway.”

“Well he should have. He and Bossuet were screwing like bunnies all night, and he didn’t move from bed until it was time for him to meet you at the Musain. I’d think he was having a stellar weekend.”

“Have they still not told you they’re a couple?” Combeferre asked, and Feuilly answered with a scowl.

“You know, I wouldn’t mind, really. I mean, I can tell they’re happy and all, so it’s not like there’s a problem. It’s just, I’ve been fucking living with Joly for two years now, and Bossuet practically lives with us too since his dorm room’s such a disaster. It’s just, it feels like an insult to my intelligence at this point, that they think I haven’t noticed.”

Combeferre let out a long sigh and slouched down a little in his chair. “When did our group of friends start getting so damned dramatic?”

“When we realized half of them were gay and fucking each other. Seriously, it’s just you, me, Bahorel, and Marius now.”

“Actually, I’m not even sure about Bahorel anymore.”

“Really? Huh. I suppose he is very well groomed.”

Combeferre almost snorted beer out of his nose, and Feuilly shot him a look of concern. “Yeah, about that…shit, but I promised I wouldn’t tell. But you know what, that’s horse shit too, because this isn’t something to be embarrassed about either. He shouldn’t be keeping it from us.”

“What?” Feuilly asked.

“Okay, you didn’t hear this from me, but Bahorel does drag.”
“Yeah? No shit. That’s kinda cool.”

“I think it’s very cool. I’d like to see him perform, but of course he’s not telling anyone so we can’t exactly crash one of his shows without traumatizing him.” Combeferre frowned. “What we need is a group intervention. Air everybody’s secrets, make them deal with their shit. Then maybe we can have some peace again.”

Feuilly considered. “You know, ‘Ferre, that’s not a bad thought.”

“What, really?”

“Yeah. I think an intervention about all this fucking drama could only help. We can remind everyone that we don’t care about them being gay and in love, or gay and doing drag, or whatever else they might have going on. Maybe remind all the drama queens that we’ve signed petitions and picketed at the state house for gay rights despite our heterosexuality.”

“Wouldn’t it be nice to talk about petitions and protests again?” Combeferre asked, feeling a bit pathetic and embarrassed about how much he missed talking about social politics with Enjolras and Jehan.

Then their phones both went off with texts. Both young men scowled when they read them. “You first,” Combeferre said.

“Joly just texted me to say that Bossuet’s coming by again tonight, and he’s bringing a movie so I shouldn’t worry if I hear any odd noises coming from his room. God, they’ve got no respect for my intelligence at all. What’s yours?”

“It’s Jehan, telling me that the reason Courfeyrac looked so out of sorts was because he’d made out with Marius last night-”

“Oh shit, Marius is gay too? What about Cosette?”

“No. He’s straight, and he’s already back together with Cosette. I guess they broke up for half a day. Anyway, Jehan’s all worried about Courfeyrac and now he’s definitely not going to say anything about his crush, and I shouldn’t blame him or call him a coward this time because circumstances.” Combeferre rolled his eyes.

“So more of the same bullshit,” Feuilly said. “I wonder if they even realize how they sound?”

“I don’t think they do.” Combeferre started typing out a mass text on his phone.

“What are you doing?” Feuilly asked.

“Telling everyone to head over to my place. We’re doing that intervention.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter fourteen will be up as soon as I can edit it! I’m sorry and I love you all <3
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Combeferre and Feuilly lead an intervention and force their friends to confront some of their issues.

Courfeyrac realizes that he is loved, and returns it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Is there any reason we couldn’t do this at the Musain?” Grantaire grumbled. A few of the other friends murmured mutinous grumbles of agreement.

“We’re not doing this at the Musain because I don’t want strangers listening to us, and also, I want you all to listen to me.” Combeferre crossed his arms over his chest and leveled his most impressive glare on his friends. It wasn’t up to par with an Enjolras-glare, but it was effective. Legle stopped squirming, Courfeyrac put his phone away, and though Grantaire continued to visibly sulk, he didn’t say anything else.

“You know, at the Musain they have refreshments,” Eponine said, and Combeferre turned his glare in her direction. The brat returned it unflinchingly.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’ve got spring water, green tea, cola, and coffee.” His friends all shouted out their requests, and he and Jehan left for his kitchen to prepare everything. Enjolras followed a moment later, anticipating further trouble and pre-empting it by snagging a bag of chips, a bag of pretzels, and some plastic bowls.

After a few minutes beverages had been distributed, the coffee maker had been set up on the coffee table, and the snacks were making their rounds.


“May we begin?” he snapped.

“Shouldn’t we plan out a schedule for bathroom breaks before we-” Bahorel tried, but Combeferre talked over him.

“Right, so we’re beginning.” Combeferre looked at each of his friends in turn.

Marius and Cosette were sharing the loveseat, looking a tad curious and definitely behaving the most politely of the group. Eponine was perched on the arm of the loveseat, poised to fall on Marius’ lap at the first, most flimsy excuse of an opportunity. Enjolras, Jehan, and Bahorel were on the couch, Grantaire sitting just in front of it on the floor with his back pressed against Enjolras’ legs. He had a sketchpad open, which was annoying as even Jehan had his ever-present notebooks closed for once, but then, if Grantaire was sketching he wasn’t otherwise making a nuisance of himself. Courfeyrac had snagged a beanbag chair that usually went in the study. He’d set it up between the couch and the loveseat, which had him positioned in front of the coffeemaker, which was probably not a coincidence. Legle was seated in the armchair, Joly half on the arm and half in his lap, and Feuilly
was standing just behind them.

Combeferre nodded at Feuilly, and Feuilly joined him at the front of the room.

“Right. So, basically, you’ve all become disgustingly dramatic. You’re driving each other insane, which is driving me and Feuilly insane, and we’re not leaving until something is done to address the problem.”

His opening didn’t go over very well. The group at large took issue with being labeled dramatic, and the individual members eagerly shouted defenses, determined to exonerate themselves and push the blame elsewhere. Combeferre waited it out.

Then Courfeyrac was able to make himself heard above the general clamor. “And why do you two get to stand there and judge us? Even if we have gotten a little dramatic lately, so what? What makes you guys so different?”

Feuilly nodded at Combeferre. “Just say it.”

“Fine.” Combeferre had everyone’s undivided attention. “Look, as the only two heterosexual males not involved with the high school girls, Feuilly and I are the only ones observing all your messes from the outside. We’re the only ones not involved, and we think we can help.”

Silence, stunned, absolute, horrified silence reigned for almost a full minute. Then Jehan shot a hand up as though he were in class, looking incredibly confused. “But you’re not the only heterosexuals, aren’t…?”

He trailed off as Joly struggled to get just on the arm of the chair and out of Legle’s lap. Bahorel looked slightly traumatized.

Okay, how many of us are gay?” Courfeyrac asked.

“I think it’d be quicker to go through who’s straight,” Feuilly said. “I mean, I know it’s inconsiderate to out people before they’re ready, but we’re all friends here, and keeping these secrets from each other is really messing things up. So just so everyone knows, I’m straight.”

“So am I,” Combeferre added.

“Me too,” Marius chimed in. He looked at his girlfriend expectantly. “Um…Cosette?”

“Oh, um, well it doesn’t really matter as I’m in love with you, but Marius, I do consider myself bisexual.”

“What? Oh, um, well okay then. Didn’t know that.”

“Oh hey, me too!” Eponine chimed in. “Fancy that. We have something else in common.”


“If I was homophobic I wouldn’t be friends with you guys,” Bahorel pointed out. “I punched that asshole out because he was being an asshole. I’m gay too.” He didn’t look happy about being forced out of the closet though, and turned an angry look on Combeferre and Feuilly. “How did you guys figure it out anyway?”

“Jehan and Courfeyrac were the ones who put it together, actually,” Combeferre said. Everyone
turned to look at either the beanbag chair or the couch, regarding the uncomfortable slacker and dreamer perched on them.

“I told you in confidence, ‘Ferre. I…, um…” Jehan looked like he wanted the couch to swallow him whole. Enjolras gave his arm a squeeze.

“We saw one of your shows and recognized you,” Courfeyrac cut in. “I mean, I suppose it didn’t prove you weren’t straight, but…”

“Yeah, no. a lot of cross dressers are heterosexuals, but drag queens are generally gay,” Bahorel said. The room turned almost painfully quiet as those who hadn’t already known processed that. Then, as though they hadn’t put it together, Bahorel came out and said it. “So yeah, I’m a drag queen.”

“You asshole!” Grantaire shouted. “How long have you been doing shows without inviting us! We’ve been going to fucking pretentious ass poetry readings for over a year now every Thursday night, and we could have been at a motherfucking drag show? Are you fucking kidding? Er…no offense Jehan.”

“None taken,” Jehan murmured, though it looked like a little bit of offense had indeed been taken. Enjolrás lightly kicked his boyfriend.

“That is really inconsiderate of you, Bahorel,” Eponine added.

“You couldn’t go anyway, Ponine. Most of my shows are twenty one plus.”

“Because with parents like mine you really think I don’t have any fake IDs? I can hook Cosette up too. We’re fucking going to your next show.”

“And every one thereafter,” Grantaire agreed.

“Guys!” Combeferre yelled. “So my point was, we can be honest with each other. Bahorel, you don’t need to hide this from any of us. The fact that you’ve been lying about where you’re going so often is what bothered us, not that you do drag. Frankly, I think it’s really cool.”

“Me too,” Feuilly added.

Jehan reached over and touched his hand, smiling brightly at him. “We’ll have to switch off between poetry and drag from now on.”

“Thanks guys,” Bahorel murmured. “It just seems like such a weird thing to want to do. So far only the other queens I know get it.”

“Hey, power to you, dude,” Courfeyrac said, toasting with his coffee mug.

“How’s he look in a dress?” Grantaire asked. “Sorry if this is insensitive Bahorel, but you’re such a muscle head. I just can’t picture it.”

“The guy’s fucking graceful in heels,” Courfeyrac said.

“Kay, so while we’re being honest and not judgmental in the least, does anyone else have anything they want to say?” Feuilly asked.

“Before Feuilly and I say it for you?” Combeferre added. The two of them were looking at Joly and Legle.
The two of them traded a quick look, and Joly finally nodded. It was Legle that addressed the group though. “Um…we’ve been dating for six years.”

“In June,” Joly added.

Feuilly looked dumbstruck, but it only lasted a heartbeat. “Six years?! That’s longer than I’ve even known you guys!”

“Feuilly, you’re the one who said-” Combeferre started, but Feuilly cut him off.

“I figured out they were dating last spring, you know, because Joly is my fucking roommate! Why the fuck have you guys been sneaking around? We’ve lived together for two of those six years. Why did you hide it from me?”

“Habit, I suppose,” Joly muttered. The poor kid was bright red. “It wasn’t anything personal. It’s just, every person we’ve ever come out to responded badly. My family disowned me, Bossuet’s old roommates kicked him out…we just got used to keeping it quiet.”

“We should have noticed you guys were different though,” Legle said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Feuilly said quickly. “I just don’t want you guys to feel like you have to hide.”

“And, y’know, it’d have been nice to say congratulations a long time ago,” Combeferre added.

“Congratulations on six years in June!” Cosette suddenly shouted, and the girl led them all in a round of applause. Joly was blushing furiously, but he didn’t resist when Legle pulled him onto his lap and gave him a kiss. They were both smiling like idiots, as was the room in general.

They were still smiling for the happy couple when Combeferre got their attention again by clearing his throat. “Okay, so obviously those announcements were good things.” Here Bahorel, Joly, and Legle all looked around with wondrous smiles, startled but pleased at hearing their carefully hidden secrets referred to as ‘good’. “But from here on out it gets awkward. Apologies in advance for the tough love.” He turned to Feuilly. “Who did we say we wanted to start with?”

“Marius, I think.”

“Right. Okay. Marius?”

“Yes?” Marius sat up a little straighter, hands folded in his lap, facing Combeferre and Feuilly with a wide eyed gaze. Combeferre refused to let the puppy’s charming innocence distract him from what needed to be done.

“Marius, other than that one big fight you and Cosette just had, would you say you’ve been happy with her?” he asked. Marius nodded enthusiastically. “Alright. And do you have plans or expectations of breaking up with Cosette again in the future?” Marius just as enthusiastically shook his head, and Cosette frowned at Combeferre. “Then will you please stop flirting with your friends? They’re enamored of you, so leading them on like this is actually cruel.”

“And we know you don’t mean to be cruel,” Feuilly added. “That’s why we’re calling your attention to it. It just really needs to stop.”

Marius rapidly blinked a few times, adorably puzzled. “Who’ve I been leading on?”

“Eponine!” half the room shouted.
Cosette scoffed at that. “It’d be harder to do if she weren’t throwing herself at him.”

“Is she?” Marius asked.

“Yes!” Cosette shrieked, sounding nothing like herself. “Marius, why do you think she got you hired at her work?”

“…because I needed a job.”

Eponine slid off the loveseat arm and sat on the floor next to Courfeyrac. “I… I have been flirting, but… look, it’s just, I’m not trying to break you guys up, I swear. I just, I can’t help but feel the way I do.” She hugged her knees to her chest and let out a few shaky breaths. Courfeyrac rubbed her back soothingly. She flinched away from him and he looked like he’d been slapped.

“Eponine, I’m so sorry. I had no idea,” Marius said.

“I know,” Eponine returned with a wince. “It never even occurred to you to think of me that way.”

“So Marius needs to be more sensitive, and Eponine, you need to respect Marius’ commitment to Cosette and move on. Okay?” Combeferre said gently. “You’re a great girl. We all think so. No one’s enjoyed seeing you pining like this.”

Eponine nodded, then hid her face in her knees.

Marius looked stricken. “I really had no idea. I’m so sorry. Who else? Didn’t you say I’d hurt someone else with my inattention?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake!” Grantaire yelled, surprising everyone in his vicinity with the sudden exclamation. “I don’t care how innocent or flaky or lost in your own head you are—no one is that stupid! Marius, are you fucking kidding me?!”

Marius stared at him in surprised horror.

“Grantaire, if you’ve got something to say would you just say it?” Enjolras asked.

Grantaire shot to his feet and pointed accusingly at Marius. “He made out with Courfeyrac when he was on the outs with Cosette! Like fucking really? And don’t tell me you didn’t know about Courf’s crush because I know he told you about it! Did you just forget? Or are you really that fucking stupid and selfish?!”

“Grantaire, shut up!” Courfeyrac yelled. “I’m going to talk to Marius about it myself! It’s between us and everything’s going to be fine!”

“It’s not fine,” Grantaire snapped. “He hurt you.”

“And we’ll deal with it. Us. Not the entire fucking group,” Courfeyrac snapped, shooting a nasty look at Combeferre and Feuilly.

Cosette was staring at Marius as though she’d never seen him before. “We broke up for twelve hours and you made out with one of your friends? I thought you said you were straight.”

“That’s, er, how I confirmed it.”

Courfeyrac tried to laugh that comment off, but it clearly stung. “A lot of people find out they’re not attracted to men that way. One of the more useful services I provide, I guess.”
“Courfeyrac, I’m sorry. I thought you said we were cool though.”

“We are,” he said, though he was glaring at Grantaire rather than looking at Marius. “It’s not the first time that’s happened to me and it probably won’t be the last. It’s my own fault for being a flirt.” Still slightly red in the face, he turned his attention to Cosette. “I’m sorry I pounced on your boyfriend at the first available opportunity. That was rude.”

Cosette pressed her lips together, then finally let out a slow breath. “We were broken up at the time, I suppose. But thanks for the apology.” She turned towards Marius. “We will be talking later.”

“Al-alright. Please don’t tell your father about any of this.”

“Oh for the love of-”

“So to close out this part!” Feuilly yelled suddenly. “Marius agrees to stop flirting with Courfeyrac and Eponine, and Courfeyrac and Eponine agree to respect his feelings for Cosette. Agreed?”

Still looking incredibly uncomfortable, the four of them nodded.

“Next on the agenda,” Feuilly said, casting an anxious glance at Combeferre. Combeferre avoided his eyes, totally fine with letting Feuilly lead the next one. “Um…alright then. Uh, Courfeyrac, two people in this room want to date you. Are you interested in pursuing this, or do you need some time to get over the thing with Marius?”

“Hm?” Courfeyrac looked up, expression stunned. “No, I’m good. Shit, I thought I Friend Zoned myself with everyone. Whoever it is could have said something.”

“Considering we slept together, I thought I’d made myself pretty obvious,” Eponine cut in, sounding irritable.

Courfeyrac gaped at her. “I thought that was friendly sex.” That earned him a few looks, and there was some murmuring about Eponine being a minor.

Marius had gone pale. “I’d thought you guys were, but then I didn’t think you would…while I was at home? You did do it while I was home, didn’t you?” Cosette gave his hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Courfeyrac, I slept with you because I like you. Protection aside, I’m not actually that casual with sex. And I thought we could help distract each other.”

“So you’d want to date?”

“If you’re okay with me being a high school girl.”

“As your parents aren’t likely to have me arrested, I consider that completely inconsequential.”

Eponine smiled brightly, Cosette looked relieved, and Jehan looked like he was going to cry. Combeferre fixed an unwavering stare on his friend. “If the other friend with feelings doesn’t speak up, I will be forced to do so for them.”

Jehan’s eyes went wide, and he started shaking his head. Enjolras took his hand. “You’ll regret your silence later,” he murmured lowly, hopefully so that only Jehan could hear.

“I…I like you too,” Jehan finally managed to choke out. He covered his face with his hands. “But you know Eponine’s probably better suited for you really so all the best means she’s fun and I’m not and you’ve got loads more in common with her but can we still be friends?”

Courfeyrac stared at him incredulously with his mouth hanging open, absolutely gob smacked.
Eponine swore under her breath. “So is everyone going to fucking reject me tonight?” she snapped, throwing her hands up. “Well I suppose half of you can’t, as you’re gay, but this still isn’t exactly encouraging.”

“I…I don’t know what to say,” Courfeyrac muttered. “Is it okay if I take a walk? Do you need me for the rest of this thing? I need to think.”

“Go ahead,” Combeferre said and, nodding thanks, Courfeyrac fled the room.

Eponine sank against the floor, looking thoroughly miserable, while Jehan was failing at his attempt to hide his freely flowing tears. He had a death grip on Enjolras’ hand.

‘Tough love,’ Combeferre thought to himself.

“Unless you’ve got a complaint for Cosette, it looks like Grantaire and I are the only ones left,” Enjolras observed. “I can’t imagine whatever dirty secrets of ours you think you have to expose, but I’d rather get this over with, so by all means…”

Grantaire’s bravado appeared to have abandoned him. The poor kid looked rattled. “I haven’t fallen off the wagon, and we’ve been talking out our issues. Whatever I am doing wrong, just tell me so I can fix it.”

He was sitting at Enjolras’ feet once more, so Enjolras extracted his hand from Jehan’s, leaned forward, and touched Grantaire’s shoulder. “You haven’t done anything wrong.” He slowly trailed his hand up Grantaire’s neck and gently ran his fingers through the short, dark hair. “I don’t care what anyone else has to say; I’m happy with you.”

Combeferre took a deep breath, and then plunged ahead with the confrontation he’d been dreading most. “You guys do appear to be solid, and I’m happy for you. Really.”

“You don’t sound it,” Eponine observed.

Combeferre glanced away from them all and frowned. “I suppose I don’t. Look, guys, it’s been over a month now and you’re still smothering each other like you just hooked up yesterday. I miss my best friend. Enj, we haven’t had a conversation in private since you started dating him.”

“We have.”

“That wasn’t about your boyfriend,” Combeferre amended, and Enjolras fell silent.

“You talk about me?” Grantaire asked.

Enjolras squeezed his shoulder again. “Of course I do. I’ve needed advice. I know you talk about me.”

“I guess, but…urgh. Look, Combeferre, I really don’t see Enjolras that much more than you do,” Grantaire said, and Combeferre let out an involuntary snort of derision. After seeing Grantaire’s expression harden he wished he’d managed to hold it in. “I really don’t. He spends ninety percent of his time on homework or activism, which you could definitely be present for whether or not I’m around. And then there’s five or six hours a night for sleep, maybe a healthy eight if I can bully him into bed. I’m around all the frickin’ time, but most of it’s not exclusively boyfriend stuff.”

“He’s not wrong, ‘Ferre,” Enjolras said. “If you were feeling neglected you should have said something.”
“Look, it doesn’t matter what you’re doing. The problem is that he’s always there.” Combeferre ran a hand through his hair. “I admit, I’ve been spoiled. You’ve been my best friend since second grade, and you’ve never dated before so we’ve always had a lot of time together. I know this is mostly my own issue. I’m trying to address it. But it would help if we could hang out every now and again.”

“You do realize you sound like a jealous girlfriend right now, Mr. Straight Outside Observer?” Grantaire pointed out with a scowl.

“I am not in love with Enjolras,” Combeferre near growled.

“And yet you’ve been a total bitch to me since we started dating,” Grantaire said. “And now you’ve organized this stupid fucking confrontation where you’re trying to make your jealousy sound reasoned and dispassionate and like I’m some kind of smothering nag. Well you know what? If you were just friends you’d have had no problem addressing this without an audience. You’ve forced everyone else to face their shit today, so man up and face your own.”

“I’m still straight,” Combeferre snapped. Everyone was staring at him. He felt ridiculously exposed, which was not how this was supposed to go.

And Grantaire was glaring at him as though he’d done something heinous. “Fuck this shit,” he finally spat out. He climbed to his feet and tucked his sketchpad under his arm.

“Grantaire, wait.” Enjolras got up and grabbed his arm. “We should talk about this.”

“I’m not going to stand here getting attacked by everyone. If Combeferre has a legitimate issue with me he knows where to find me.”

Enjolras briefly looked away from Grantaire, eyes searching out Combeferre. He looked hurt, and dammit, that wasn’t what he and Feuilly had been going for.

“So hey, why don’t the rest of us clear out and the three of you can talk this over in peace,” Bossuet suggested.

“All in favor say aye,” Eponine said, and the others followed with immediate ‘ayes.’ “To the Musain!” she crowed. Before Combeferre could react properly his living room emptied out and he found himself facing a highly emotional looking couple. Grantaire looked surly and offended while Enjolras looked lost.

Which was actually not so bad, because Combeferre felt pretty lost too.

“Guys, I’m sorry. It wasn’t supposed to go like that.”

“Oh fuck off!”

“‘Taire,” Enjolras started in what was definitely a warning tone. “You’re speaking to my best friend, so watch it.”

“Your best friend just attacked me in front of all our friends, and he’s been trying to bully me for weeks. I’ve been respectful, but it’s getting me nowhere and I do have limits. He’s not going to be happy until we break up.” Grantaire shot an accusing look at Combeferre. “And way to chase Courfeyrac out before you turned on me, because god forbid I get to have my best friend present when we throw down.”

And then his anger gave way, and Grantaire visibly deflated as it was replaced with the more familiar, but infinitely more tragic crushing doubt. Grantaire turned away and covered his face with
his hand.

Enjolras snaked his arms around his boyfriend’s waist and rested his chin on his shoulder. “Even if Combeferre were trying to split us up, which he’s not…it wouldn’t work. I love you. I’m happy with you, I promise. And he’s not sabotaging you.”

“I’m really not,” Combeferre insisted.

“We have been talking about you a lot, so I can understand why he’s getting sick of the conversation topic,” Enjolras said. “Ferre’s been counseling me. He’s been helping me.”

“But you don’t need help. You’re perfect,” Grantaire said in a ridiculously small voice. He pulled away from Enjolras and turned away from the both of them, arms wrapped around himself protectively.

“Grantaire, you’re my first boyfriend ever. And you know I don’t like getting into new situations without conducting some research first. I’ve been discussing the progression of our relationship with Combeferre and Jehan. They both know and appreciate my feelings for you.”

Enjolras stood between his lover and his friend, regarding them with a contemplative air. Combeferre was tempted to apologize again, but he thought Enjolras might hit him if he did. “Alright, clearly we need to talk,” he finally said, looking at Combeferre. “But first the two of you are going to.”

“I have nothing to say to him,” Grantaire snapped.

“Oh yes you do,” Enjolras returned. “You two are the most important people in my life, and because of that you can’t stand each other. You’re going to fix this, right now, or I’ll have to find new important people to care about. You’re both adults. I don’t plan on choosing between you.”

Combeferre nodded heavily, resigned to an uncomfortable but necessary conversation. Grantaire, on the other hand, grabbed Enjolras’ arm and clung to him. “Don’t make me do this. Enjolras, please-”

“I’ll be back for you in an hour.”

“I can’t do this right now. I promise you, if you leave me to talk this over now it’s not going to end the way you want it to.”

Enjolras pulled his arm out of Grantaire’s grip and started for the door. Grantaire threw his sketchpad on the ground, sending papers spilling out all over the hardwood floor. The door shut behind Enjolras, and Grantaire almost fell onto the couch, curling himself into a ball. “I fucking hate you,” he snapped.

Combeferre took a measured breath. “I think I’m going to go get some more water. Want anything?”

“For you to jump off the top of the fucking building.”

“So green tea? Good. I’ll be right back.”

For lack of a better destination, Courfeyrac had wandered to the campus of their college. He found the maple tree they sometimes sat under when the weather was nice. It was a mild day, but the ground was wet and soggy from melting snow so he remained standing under it.

Thinking back on the conversation he’d had with Grantaire earlier that afternoon, he couldn’t help
but laugh at himself. Really, with things this utterly ridiculous and dramatic, there was no other option. He’d been incredibly stupid. Almost as stupid as Marius, even, for not seeing it.

“Alright Courf, you whined about being a lonely, sad sack. Now you’ve got a beautiful, feisty girl and an equally beautiful, gentle poet to choose from. How in the world did I manage this?” He tried to laugh again, but he couldn’t muster even a chuckle.

He still couldn’t believe it. Well, he wasn’t as blown away about Eponine. He was just surprised she liked him as much as he liked her. He’d thought she’d been too hung up on Marius to see him as a potential boyfriend.

Courfeyrac leaned against the tree and thought about what it might be like to date Eponine. There’d probably be lots of nights out, going to loud, exciting places. Dancing and making fools of themselves, public displays of affection, buying tacky gifts for each other at sex toy shops. Everything he pictured was high energy and even a little wild. He found himself smiling when he opened his eyes again.

Of course, those would be the highlights. He couldn’t ignore the significant reverse of that. Eponine had a lot of passion and energy, but she had her fair share of issues as well. She had substance problems to rival Grantaire’s, and she’d suffered years of abuse that had played havoc with her emotions. Courfeyrac was sure he could be her friend, but he wasn’t sure he was stable enough himself to be more than that.

He let his eyes fall shut again, and pictured what it would be like to date Jean Prouvaire. Well, there wouldn’t be as many wild nights out, that’s for sure. They’d keep going to the Musain and Brammer Street and the Corinth, but after they parted with their friends they’d head back to his apartment or Jehan’s, and probably cuddle under one of Jehan’s old lady quilts, trading soft kisses and snatches of conversation. He could almost feel the fey like boy nestled in his arms, soft auburn hair brushing his throat while he rambled about his conference paper, or something stupid Grantaire had said to Enjolras. And then Jehan would tell him Enjolras’ side of it, and they’d smile about their needlessly complicated friends and marvel at how easy things were between the two of them…

It would be easy, wouldn’t it? Courfeyrac tried to think about what drama might arise between them, but very little came to mind. Because this was Jehan he was thinking about, and Jehan was so sweet and caring that Courfeyrac couldn’t ever see himself fighting with him. Because he’d rather gouge his eyes out with a broken spork than give that gentle soul a reason to cry.

But if that did ever happen…Courfeyrac wasn’t sure he could live with himself if he did hurt Jehan. And Eponine was so well suited for him. She could keep up with him. She was just as loud and trashy and crass. He wouldn’t need to alter himself in the least. He could just be Courfeyrac.

Mind made up, Courfeyrac started walking back towards town.

“Well I feel like a perfect ass. How did I somehow manage to fall for someone on the verge of falling for someone else twice in a row? I mean, that’s not just bad luck. That’s fucking atrocious,” Eponine said, resting her chin on her hands and letting out a long sigh full of self-pity.

Jehan patted her arm. “It’s a little early for that kind of talk, Eponine. He might pick you.”

“Not fucking likely,” Eponine said. “I’ve seen how he looks at you.”

“I’ve seen the way he touches you,” Jehan returned.
“Touché. Well, whoever he does pick, no hard feelings?” she asked.

“Of course not.” Jehan reached across the table and shook her hand. “When he picks you I’ll probably run out of the room and cry though. But I’ll do my best to be happy for you after that.”

“If he picks you I’ll try my best not to be bitter. And if it makes you feel better, I’m moving in with Grantaire.”

That did make him feel better, come to think of it.

“I wonder how long Courf’s walk is going to take,” Legle said, glancing down at his cellphone to check the time. “The anticipation’s killing me.”

“Really? It’s bothering you, you say?” Eponine asked, clasping her hands and staring at him with exaggerated sympathy. The whole table burst into loud, relieved sounded laughter at the broken tension, and Legle apologized to Eponine and Jehan.

“So six years?” Cosette said suddenly, turning to Joly and Legle. “You were in high school when you started dating then, weren’t you?”

“I was,” Joly said. “Bossuet’s a couple years older than me.”

“Ah. Six years is really something though. You must really be in love,” she said, looking a bit dreamy.

“You live in Massachusetts, you know,” Eponine said. “Six years and still in love? Why don’t you get married?” Their friends all gave their enthusiastic support to the suggestion, but Joly and Legle both turned red and tried to change the subject. Rolling her eyes, Eponine let them.

They pestered Bahorel about drag for a few minutes, checked their phones a few more times, and loudly wondered about Courfeyrac, Enjolras, Combeferre, and Grantaire.

Then Eponine got a text. “Oh! It’s Courfeyrac. He wants me to meet him outside. Um…”

“Good luck,” Jehan said weakly. Eponine looked mutely at her phone, conflict written all over her pretty young face. She suddenly darted forward and gave Jehan a tight hug, then she ran from the café before he could respond. Jehan mustered a smile when he turned towards the ring of sad, sympathetic faces around him. “He’ll be happy with her. Sh-she’ll make him happy.”

“He just asked to talk to her first, Jehan,” Cosette reminded him.

“It’s okay. I’ll be okay,” Jehan said.

“You know, if you don’t mind fussy fashionistas, I know a few guys I could set you up with,” Bahorel offered.

Jehan laughed nervously, and shook his head. “It’s okay. But thank you. Um…can we talk about something else for a little while?”

“It’s almost springtime,” Cosette said brightly, rising to the challenge magnificently. “I’ll be taking a trip out to the nursery with Papa so we can get some new plants for the yard in a few weeks. Do you have any tips, Jehan?”

Jehan smiled gratefully, and rambled about flowers for the next twenty minutes or so. Then he got a text. The table went silent while Jehan read it back. “H-he wants to talk to me now. I guess I get an
“Jehan, think positive thoughts,” Joly said.

Jehan shook his head. “That’ll make the rejection hurt more. I’ll see you all later.” He wrapped his scarf around his neck and then reluctantly headed out to the street. Eponine brushed by him on his way in, but she was moving so quickly that he couldn’t see her face.

Courfeyrac was waiting for him by a streetlamp. Jehan drank in the sight of him, savoring his last chance to look his crush over hopefully without feeling guilty about ogling someone else’s boyfriend. Then he smiled nervously and approached Courfeyrac. “H-hi.”

“Hey. Walk with me for a bit?”

“S-sure.” Why couldn’t he stop stuttering? His heart was going a mile a minute, which was just stupid because he knew Courfeyrac had picked Eponine. He must have. He’d asked to speak to her first, and they’d been sleeping together, and she was beautiful and fiery and the way he’d looked at her when he’d found out she wanted to date him…the way he talked about her…he had to have chosen Eponine.

So why was he feeling truly hopeful again?

Then Courfeyrac reached over and clasped his hand, twining their fingers together. “If you’re still interested in a slow, stupid fool like me…”

Before Courfeyrac could finish his faltering sentence Jehan grabbed him and crushed their mouths together.

And meanwhile, Eponine had just burst into the backroom of the Musain with red rimmed eyes. “You’re straight, right?” she said to Feuilly. “You said that, right?”

“Uh…”

Then she plopped onto his lap, straddling him. “I’m not saying I want to date you or anything, because I don’t know you yet, but I’m not having a very good week. Can you just tell me I’m pretty?”

“You’re pretty?”

Eponine kissed his cheek. “Thank you.”

“…can you get off my lap now?”

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to finish off that conversation between Grantaire and Combeferre, but I just don’t have it in me tonight. This was a ridiculous word count for one day as it is. I’ll open the next chapter with that confrontation. And probably follow it up with some fluff what with the new couple :)
Also...any suggestions for Eponine?
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Grantaire and Combeferre remember that they're friends as well. Marius does much the same with Courfeyrac. Grantaire finds an urchin in his room.

Chapter Notes

Apologies in advance for the lack of face-punching between Grantaire and Combeferre. They were surprisingly mature about everything. I blame Combeferre :P

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Combeferre spent a few minutes pacing in the kitchen, trying to find his center. By the time he went back into the living room he still wasn’t looking forward to the necessary confrontation with Grantaire, but he was mostly confident in his ability not to fuck it up.

He almost dropped the mug of tea he was carrying when he saw the kid. Grantaire was still curled into a ball on the couch, but he looked like an absolute wreck. He’d bit one of his thumbnails jagged and he was using it to claw at the tender flesh on his wrist.

“Grantaire!” Combeferre set the mug on the coffee table, then darted forward and forced Grantaire into a sitting position. He grabbed Grantaire’s arm and peered at his wrist. The scratches were light and shallow. If anything, it looked like he’d gotten into a bad fight with an angry cat. The expression on his face was worrying though; it looked like he’d checked out. “Grantaire?” Combeferre repeated, feeling unsure of himself. “Should I call Enjolras? Or maybe Courfeyrac?”

Grantaire stiffly shook his head. He wasn’t blinking nearly enough for Combeferre’s comfort. “I don’t…n-no, don’t call him yet. Said we need to talk.”

“Yes. Yes, we definitely need to do that, but it can wait a few minutes. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but can you yell at me and call me a selfish asshole or something? At this point I’d find that reassuring.”

“You’re a selfish asshole,” Grantaire obediently whispered, entirely without venom. He rubbed his head. “Combeferre…I really can’t do this now.”

“We’ve got to have it out at least a little or Enjolras will kill us. Besides, the goal here is for us to both feel better when we’re done.” For good measure, he decided to just come out and say it, as Grantaire seemed to need it stated as flatly as possible. “Grantaire, I like you. I’m glad you’re dating Enjolras.”

Thankfully, Grantaire didn’t fight the assertion this time, he just hollowly nodded.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to call Courfeyrac?” Combeferre asked. He was starting to get really freaked out. He’d never seen Grantaire like this before, and the temptation to pass off the
responsibility was increasing the paler and shakier Grantaire got.

Again, Grantaire shook his head. He rubbed at his scratched up wrist and nervously darted his eyes towards Combeferre. “So you’re not trying to break me and Enj up. If I accept that premise, can I just go?”

“Er…we’ve got an hour. We might as well talk a little. Uh…”'Taire, have you maybe thought that, um, quitting drinking cold turkey might not have been the best course of action for you?”

Grantaire let out a shaky laugh. “No shit. But what the hell else was I supposed to do? Enjolras said he wanted me, but only if I was clean and sober. And he expected me to do it all like right away. He’s surprised I’m still sneaking cigarettes. I mean, I mean fuck. This is fucking impossible. I’m cracking up and I’ve given up all my coping mechanisms, so please believe me when I say that now is not the time to have a rational conversation with me.”

“Fair enough. How can I help?”

Grantaire stared at him like he wasn’t quite sure Combeferre was real. “You sound like him.”

“Who?”

“Enjolras. He keeps trying to help, but he doesn’t get it.”

“He’s trying.”

Grantaire nodded, a small smile on his lips. “I know. I don’t actually want to share this shit with him though.”

“Actually, I think that’s probably for the best,” Combeferre muttered.

Grantaire eyed him curiously. He sat up a little straighter, engaged in the conversation and less defensive looking for it. “Okay, that’s actually the opposite of what everyone’s been telling me.”

“Well, no one knows Enjolras as well as I do.” Combeferre tapped his hands against his knees and let out a nervous breath. He had Grantaire’s undivided attention, and the guy was looking less spacey. He wasn’t sure telling him everything was still the best idea, but he was also sure Grantaire needed to know. “Look, my misgivings really aren’t related to jealousy. I’m annoyed that you and Enjolras are spending so much time together, but I know that that’s me being petty.”

“And a dick.”

Combeferre smirked. “And a dick, yes. Look…did you know that when he was thirteen Enjolras had a mental breakdown? He was hospitalized for almost two months.” Based on the expression on Grantaire’s face, he had not known that.

“What the hell happened?” he asked, horrified.

“What do you think? The guy took on a million and one projects, he was still getting highest honors in school, and he was fighting with Paul and Marie like crazy. To top it off, he got so busy he pretty much stopped sleeping. He actually got addicted to caffeine. Like, when Paul brought him to the hospital, the doctor asked him if his eighth grader was on heroin, because he was showing withdrawal symptoms.”

Grantaire gaped at him. “Are you shitting me? That can’t be a real thing. Fucking caffeine? You’re lying!”
Combeferre shook his head. “Wish I was, man. I wasn’t allowed to visit Enjolras while he was in the hospital, and he couldn’t write to me because he wasn’t allowed to have pens. I wrote him while he was there though. It was a really hard couple of months. Um…god, this is still hard to talk about. I just don’t ever want to see him like that again, okay?”

“Yeah, I can see that. Um…I don’t want that either. But he’s not going to catch my crazy.”

“No, I know that. And honestly, the involuntary commitment did him some good. He worked out some of his issues in group, and Paul kept him in therapy for a few years after he got out. It’s just…the whole reason it happened was because Enjolras martyrs himself. He gets so lost in his causes that he forgets to look after himself. And sometimes I worry that you’ve become another cause to him. If you don’t get better…I think it’d destroy him. That’s what’s got me so rattled, because I mean, look we all know it’s insane to expect you to just recover from alcoholism and depression. We all know it’s not that simple. But Enjolras, he’s such an idealist, and he doesn’t do anything halfway. If you have a relapse he might not get it. And I’m afraid he’ll blame himself.”

There. He’d finally said it.

Unfortunately, he wasn’t sure how to gauge Grantaire’s reaction to his revelation. The kid still looked emotionally deadened, but there was something in his eyes, some deeper feeling. Combeferre just couldn’t read it.

“Obviously, I don’t want that to happen,” Combeferre continued. “I’m…I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t be. Um…I’m guessing Enjolras doesn’t know you’re telling me this.”

“No, he doesn’t. He’d probably kill me, but I thought you should know.”

Grantaire nodded. “Yeah, I think that was a good call.” His voice was passionless, but he looked troubled. “I don’t know what to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean…” Grantaire dropped his head and tangled his hands in his hair. “I can’t even tell you how many times I’ve been on the verge of getting hammered just this week alone. Hell, just even today.”

“But you haven’t-”

“Yet. I’ve been so fucking close though. And it’s only going to get worse when I get kicked out of school-”

“Wait, what?” Combeferre yelped. Grantaire quickly ranted off about all his absences from his last depressive cycle, and that he couldn’t hope to pass any of his core classes. He’d lose his financial aid, and then he’d be homeless because he wouldn’t be able to pay for even his ratty little studio apartment.

Shit-shit-shit. If Combeferre had known about all of that stress he’d have kept his mouth shut.

And then he realized that Grantaire wasn’t looking up because he was crying. Fucking hell.

“I should just break up with him. I won’t drag him down with me.”

“Grantaire, no!” Combeferre grabbed his shoulders and gave him a gentle shake. “He’s too invested already. It wouldn’t help. Besides, you deserve to be happy and Enjolras makes you happy.”
“I don’t deserve him.”

“Yes you fucking do. And for the record, he doesn’t expect you to be some sort of inhumanly perfect boyfriend. Frankly, Enjolras would be satisfied with you as you are if you were happy.”

“Cosette thinks I should be talking to a therapist,” Grantaire muttered, still hunched over with his head in his hands.

“That sounds like a good thought.” But if he got kicked out of school he’d lose his health insurance. Although if he lost the school health insurance he’d probably be able to get it through the state instead, and they could still hook him up with a therapist that way. “I’ll look into it for you. I think that’d be a big help. In the meantime, talk to Jehan-”

“Jehan’s a poet, not a therapist.”

“He’s not a therapist, no, but he’s really into Buddhism,” Combeferre reminded him. “And therapists use a lot of the same philosophies Buddhists do. Seriously, I’ve read a few books on meditation and psychology. It’d help.”

“I didn’t go to AA because I didn’t want to get drowned in God talk. I’m not going to seek solace in a religion, ‘Ferre.” Grantaire finally sat up, regarding him with cynicism that would have been annoying if the familiarity of it weren’t so damn comforting at the moment.

“Buddhism’s easy to secularize, if you want to take it that way. I’m just saying, until we can get you to a godless therapist, this could help. We need to do something, ‘Taire, because if you break Enjolras’ heart I’m going to kill you. And that’d make me sad for a variety of reasons, my feelings for you as a friend chief among them.”

Grantaire rolled his eyes, but he was finally smiling again. “Thanks. For the record…I don’t hate you either. I just got defensive because I’ve been a bit paranoid lately.”

“I figured.” He actually hadn’t, and it was incredibly good to hear, but he felt stupid for not figuring it out on his own. Combeferre gave Grantaire’s knee a reassuring squeeze, and the next time silence fell between them it was comfortable.

When Enjolras came back once the hour was up, he found Grantaire sitting on the floor with his sketchpad open. All traces of tears were gone from his eyes and he looked calm again. Enjolras was a little concerned about the Spiderman Band-Aids on his wrist, but he decided against asking about them.

Combeferre was stretched out on the couch just behind him skimming through Thoughts Without a Thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist Perspective. It struck Enjolras as more of a Jehan-read than something Combeferre would go for, but the two bookworms trading reads was far from unprecedented. He shrugged it off and took a seat next to his boyfriend.

“How’d it go?”

Combeferre looked up from the book. “We’re good.”

Grantaire nodded his agreement. “You can keep both of us.”

“Good,” Enjolras said. “I was thinking about spending some time with ‘Ferre tonight, so do you
mind if I give you a ride back to your place and then disappear for the night?”

Grantaire was about to answer, but Combeferre cut him off. “It’s okay, Enj. You guys have the night. I’m still swamped with school work.”

“I am too. We could work on it together-”

“Enj, seriously. I’d rather hang in, and…” Combeferre glanced at Grantaire, who ever so slightly inclined his head. “He needs you for at least a little while.”

“‘Taire?” Enjolras was surprised to hear it. Grantaire seeking Enjolras’ company out to help him work through something wasn’t new, but he never admitted that that’s what he was doing. Consequently, Enjolras didn’t always realize when he was supposed to be providing emotional support. “What’s wrong?”

“Kind of a lot,” Grantaire muttered. “You’d probably have more fun if you stayed here and nerded out or whatever it is you two dorks do when you’re alone together, but if you can deal with me I could stand to lean on you a little.”

“Yeah, of course. Always.” Enjolras slung an arm around him and kissed the side of his face. He and Grantaire left the apartment shortly thereafter, but not before Enjolras threw Combeferre a grateful glance.

He was rewarded with a patient smile, and the fantastic comfort of continuing to have Combeferre as his best friend.

Enjolras drove around aimlessly while Grantaire spoke about his recent stressors. He was still more guarded than Enjolras would have liked, but Grantaire being as candid as he was without a trace of sarcasm or self-deprecation was still progress and he took it for what it was. Besides, now that he knew what was bothering Grantaire he could help.

“Cosette and Combeferre are right. We should get you into therapy.”

“And apparently meditation,” Grantaire said, some of his cynicism coming out for a derisive snort.

“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it,” Enjolras returned evasively. He glanced at Grantaire out of the corner of his eye and smirked when he saw his startled expression. “Jehan and Combeferre have made the occasional observation that I’m…somewhat highly strung-”

“Yeah, bit of an understatement, that.”

“Anyway, the point is I’ve gone to that place in Cambridge with Jehan a few times for beginner’s drop-in meditations, and they’re helpful. I try to go during finals week every semester.” Enjolras returned his full attention to the road, even though there were only a couple cars anywhere near them on the highway. “I think we can keep you from failing out of school too.”

“How? My professors are never going to pass me with all the class I’ve missed.”

“You know, you could have mentioned that Friday when we decided to skip together. I did specifically ask if you could afford to miss any more classes.”

“Yes, but you were naked at the time. If we’d gone to class, you wouldn’t have been naked
anymore.”

Enjolras rolled his eyes, but he was laughing. “Anyway, I think if we go to health services and explain about your depression we can probably work through the school and get some of your absences excused. I’ll go with you. We should meet with your professors too. I’ll ask them what you need to do to pass. It’s still early enough into the semester for you to come across as sincere. And if you have to do extra work, I’ll help you.”

“You’ve got an awful lot of schoolwork on your own. You don’t need my shit.”

“I think I could stand a few Bs without the world collapsing. Besides, I want to help you.” Enjolras reached over and squeezed his knee. “Is it working? Do you feel any better?”

Grantaire nodded. He looked thoughtful, which wasn’t bad per se, but Enjolras would have preferred to see him smile.

Enjolras pulled off at the next exit and started heading for his apartment reflexively. It took him a few minutes to catch himself. “Are you coming home with me tonight or should I bring you back to your place?”

Grantaire considered. “I probably should go home tonight. Eponine’s going to crash with me now and she’ll probably need the company, but…I’d rather stay with you.”

“Then stay with me. Eponine can look after herself,” Enjolras said. “Sorry. That was bitter.”

It was Grantaire’s turn to squeeze his knee. “It’s too bad you guys got off on the wrong foot. Eponine’s actually pretty cool, I swear.”

“Uh huh. Why is she staying with you though?” Enjolras asked. He hadn’t heard about that one.

“Things got weird with her and Courfeyrac and Marius. She tried to go back to her parents, and then she wound up at Cosette’s, but Valjean won’t let her stay permanently, so I stole her suitcase and set her up in my room. Enjolras, she’s got nowhere to go.”

“But you don’t have any room. What are you going to do, share your crack head mattress?”

Grantaire shrugged. “I guess. Enj, I’m not going to just turn her out on the street.”

“Well no, of course not, I just…” he trailed off, as there was no acceptable answer available. He remained silent while Grantaire took his phone out and texted the girl. They went back and forth with messages for the rest of the ride. Enjolras parked in the driveway and turned to Grantaire. “Is everything okay?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah. She’s going to stay with Cosette tonight though. Doesn’t want to be alone. I guess Courfeyrac rejected her and she’s feeling down about it.”

“Cosette’s probably good company then,” Enjolras said, thinking that Valjean would keep any expressions of Eponine’s discontent reeled in. Then he paled as something else occurred to him. “Grantaire, you cannot live with Eponine.”

“I just told you-”

“But doesn’t she do drugs? And isn’t she a heavy drinker?”

Grantaire slowly nodded. “Still though, I don’t have a choice here. She wouldn’t go back to Courf’s,
and I didn’t want her to…look, maybe my good intentions will rub off on her. Maybe she’ll quit all that stuff too.” He shrugged. “Weirder things have happened.”

“I suppose.”

“You don’t like it. I’ll keep that in mind, but really Enjolras, there’s not another option here. I’m not going to kick the kid out to go do god knows what.”

Enjolras nodded. “I know, I know.” But he was going to worry.

And he was going to kill Eponine himself if she got Grantaire drinking again.

They got out of the car and went upstairs. Neither mentioned Eponine again, although it did belatedly occur to Enjolras that if the girl had been rejected, his friend was probably having a good night. He made a mental note to text Jehan in the morning.

In the meantime, Grantaire fixed them teas and the two of them had a large bed to curl up in while Enjolras did some reading for Europe in the Age of Enlightenment and Grantaire worked on some sketches.

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Enjolras dropped Grantaire off at his apartment around noon on Sunday. He wasn’t sure if he should expect Eponine to be there or not, so he prepared himself for the possibility of a teenage girl being present while he jogged up the stairs and into his room.

He was a bit surprised to find a little boy instead. “Uh…” Maybe he should have bugged the landlord about the door not locking after all.

“Hi,” the kid chirped. He was an adorable little blond thing with a button nose. Something about him looked too cute to be trustworthy. “Where’s Eponine?”

“Uh…do I know you?”

“No, I don’t think so.” The kid looked at him expectantly.

Grantaire continued staring at him in confusion. “So what the hell are you doing here?”

“Looking for Eponine. Duh.”

Okay, clearly he needed to try again. “How do you know Eponine?”

“She’s my big sister. I’m Gavroche, by the way. You’re the wino that fell in love with a statue, right?”

Grantaire was suddenly reminded that he did not like children. “Wait a minute, time out. I knew Eponine had a sister. I didn’t know she had a brother.”

“She’s got three brothers, actually. Well, that we know of. Considering there are five of us, we always figured there was a chance there’s even more. Mom and Dad aren’t great at keeping track of us as is.”

True enough.

“Eponine slept out last night. I haven’t seen her all morning.”
“Oh. Well her stuff’s here. Is it okay if I hang out and wait for her?”

“I guess. But I’ve got to work on some of my homework or my statue’s going to kill me. I’m not going to be much of a babysitter.”

Gavroche laughed. “Believe me drunky, I’m not even sure I could handle it if someone tried to look after me properly.”

He could definitely see some Eponine in the brat.

Eponine showed up about an hour later, apparently as surprised to find her little brother in the studio as Grantaire had been. “Gavroche! How the fuck did you get here?!”

“Don’t swear, Eponine. He’s little and impressionable,” Grantaire chided. He was sitting on the mattress rereading the Antinous article Courfeyrac had given him.

“He’s a Thenardier. He learned how to say stupid fucking twat before Mama.” Eponine plopped down next to Grantaire on the mattress and whapped him upside the head. “And you’re the one looking at gay porn.”

“Hey, this is educational.”

“Can I see?” Gavroche had been playing with an app on Grantaire’s phone, but he tossed it aside in his eagerness to see the supposed porn. Grantaire set the article on the mattress and sat on it, and the kid turned a wounded look on him.

“So what are you doing here, pipsqueak?” Eponine asked.

Gavroche frowned. “Mom and Dad got intolerable and I got sick of being at home. It’s still a little too cold to sleep at the beach though, so I tried tracking down Azelma, but she’s at Montparnasse’s and he doesn’t like me. So I found you instead. I heard you were hanging out with a better crowd, but I guess I must have heard wrong because this place is worse than Brujon’s.”

“It is not,” Eponine insisted. “It just needs a lady’s touch. Besides, Grantaire’s a nice guy.”

“Am I?”

“Is he?”

Eponine rolled her eyes. “Yes he is. And you know you are.” She whapped him again and he pouted at her.

“You’re not treating me very nice.”

“Well I didn’t say I was nice in return. But Gavroche, it is pretty crowded here. I don’t think we can put you up until beach season.”

“But Ponine, you know me. I can make do with anything. Just give me a bit of floor space and I’ll be quiet as a cat.”

Grantaire sat up on his elbows, then shifted as his changed position had made Gavroche think he had a shot at grabbing the article from under his butt. “Eponine, we’re not kicking your baby brother out.”

“You’re not going to try to save all of us, are you Grantaire? I’m one of five, and I promise you, the lucky Thenardier children are the ones that are only being neglected. The ones that haven’t been
forgotten are getting the worst of it."

"True enough. Last time I saw Azelma she looked like hell," Gavroche piped up. "I don’t think
Parnasse was happy when you took off, Ponine. Looks like he might be taking it out on her."

Eponine narrowed her eyes. "It’s her own stupid fault."

Grantaire, meanwhile, was horrified. He snagged his phone from where Gavroche had dropped it
and sent out a group text. While he was distracted, Gavroche grabbed the Antinous article, and
before Eponine or Grantaire could reach him, he raced clear across the room and let out a victorious
whoop.

His face fell when he started flipping through it. "This isn’t porn at all! It’s just pictures of a bunch of
statues and lots of boring words. And some idiot’s gone and drawn rainbow hearts all over it." He
looked positively betrayed. "College kids are weird."

"Yep," Grantaire agreed. "Get your coats on, kiddos. We’re meeting the others at the Musain in ten
minutes."

"Whatever for?" Eponine asked.

"To save your little brothers and sister. Now come on. I’ll buy you guys hot chocolate or
something."

"Oh cool. Guess I’d better give you your wallet back then," Gavroche said. Grantaire started to
laugh, then he felt his pocket and realized the kid wasn’t joking. Gavroche pulled Grantaire’s wallet
out of the pocket of his ragged old sweatshirt and handed it to him with a smile. Grantaire snatched it
and stuffed it back into his pocket.

He decided to get one with a chain at the next available opportunity.

Marius had spent most of Saturday night walking in circles around the campus of his college in an
effort to avoid the apartment. His friends were too preoccupied with the night’s many revelations to
notice his distress, and besides that, he was doing his best to hide it. He was carrying the weight of a
guilty conscience, and it made him want to disappear for at least a little while.

It was nearly one in the morning when he did show up again. Eponine’s belongings were gone (with
the exception of her alcohol, which was neatly arranged on the kitchen counter), but the couch had
an occupant. Marius squinted in the dim light, and was finally able to make out Jehan’s soft auburn
head on what had until recently been Eponine’s pillow.

That was going to make the morning awkward.

Marius briefly considered leaving again and seeking shelter with one of his other friends, but it was
already so late. Deciding there was nothing else for it, he undressed and dropped onto the futon.

He was woken around noon to fantastic smells, which were somewhat foreign to a kitchen chiefly
occupied by two college boys more than content to stick a plastic spoon in an open can of
Spaghettios and call it a meal. Marius was eagerly sniffing the air as he sat up, blanket pooling
around his lap. "Wha’s that?"

"Good morning, Marius!" Jehan cheerfully chirped from the kitchen. He waved into the living room
with a spatula, then ran back to tend to the stovetop. While still little more than half awake, Jehan looked something like an angel of breakfast stuffs.

Marius yawned and stretched his back out, and when he looked up again Courfeyrac was walking through the room with damp hair, clutching dirty clothes and a used towel in his arms for the hamper. “Hey Marius.”

“Hey.” That didn’t feel terribly awkward. Maybe things were good with them then, since Courfeyrac had wound up with a boyfriend so quickly after their issues had been put on display? Marius could only hope.

Though he was sad for Eponine (the look on her face when she’d basically accosted Feuilly had been nothing short of heart wrenching), he felt that Courfeyrac had made the right choice. Marius still didn’t know Jehan very well, as the kid was shy and a bit guarded (especially around Courfeyrac, which now made sense), but Marius still felt that he’d gotten to know the gentle poet in the ways that counted. He was different from Marius’ boisterous roommate, but only in good ways. They complemented each other and could help each other grow.

He hoped Eponine could find someone who would do that for her though.

Courfeyrac returned a moment later sans dirty laundry and sat down on the couch. “Jehan’s made us blueberry pancakes and sausage. I can’t help but feel like I’ve done well for myself in life.”

“Wait until you actually eat the food before you heap on praises,” Jehan called. He walked in from the kitchen balancing three heaping plates on his skinny arms, and Marius’ mouth started watering.

“I’m afraid there wasn’t much to work with in your kitchen. When I ran out to the store to get the sausages and the blueberries and the flour and whatnot, I didn’t realize I’d need all my own seasonings too, so the sausages aren’t quite up to my usual standard.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen a real sausage since I left Grandfather’s,” Marius said in awe. “Just those little hockey puck things they serve in the dining commons sometimes.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever had blueberry pancakes with blueberries that weren’t freeze dried,” Courfeyrac added.

Jehan stuck out his lower lip in a pout. “That’s terrible. Okay, so I’m going to be cooking for both of you a lot.” He handed off the plates and received praise in the form of continuously moving forks and utter silence until both plates had been cleared of all but a thin layer of syrup.

Courfeyrac got up first, and when he returned from bringing his plate to the kitchen he had a pad of paper and a pen with him. He handed it to Jehan who, being a bit more polite and much less of a pig, was still only halfway through eating his own meal. “Here. Make a list. I’ll buy whatever you think you need if you’ll keep cooking like that.”

“I’ll chip in too!” Marius said. “I make really good tips at the café, so don’t even worry. You said you need seasonings, right?”

Jehan glanced between the two of them, looking a bit wary. “I can’t tell if you’re kidding or not.”

Courfeyrac took one of the fine boned hands in his, fixing a serious stare on his boyfriend. “I swear to you, Jehan: I would never joke about something as important as blueberry pancakes. Now make your list, love.”

He still looked half-convinced he was being mocked somehow, but Jehan started scribbling down kitchen staples. Marius curiously leaned over his shoulder, wondering what sorts of things a person
needed if their cooking was going to get more advanced than pressing buttons on the microwave.

All their phones went off with a text at once: Jehan’s was Bart Simpson chiming *Nevermore*, Courfeyrac’s was the sound of Mario getting a coin, and Marius felt a pang of inadequacy when his phone let out the text alert noise it had come with. As one, the boys located their phones and read back their message.

“We can’t have another emergency,” Jehan said with a pout. “I’ve actually got to write my literary criticism paper at some point. I was going to start on it after I finished the dishes.”

“You’re not allowed to do dishes,” Marius and Courfeyrac both said at the same time.

“O-okay then.”

“Well you cooked,” Marius said by way of explanation. “I’ll do the dishes.”

“Nah, just leave them,” Courfeyrac said, waving a hand. “We should at least head down to the Musain to see what’s going on. Grantaire never calls group meetings. It could actually be important.” Jehan still looked reluctant. “And if it isn’t, you can work on your homework there.”

“I suppose.”

It took the boys a little longer to get presentable than usual; Marius because of his default flakiness (He had a tendency to do things like walk out of the bathroom with his unused toothbrush still in his hand and start looking for socks until Courfeyrac reminded him he’d already been occupied with a task), and Courfeyrac and Jehan because they kept finding stupid reasons to keep touching each other.

By the time they got to the Musain most everyone else was gathered around three tables that had been pushed together. Combeferre and Enjolras were sitting at one end, thoughtfully with only one book a piece open in front of them. Joly was in the process of wiping his chair down with antibacterial wipes, while Legle perched next to him, periodically tickling his neck with a straw wrapper and scaring the bejeezus out of him.

Marius took a seat near Courfeyrac and Jehan, peering around the room for the rest of their clique. He saw Feuilly waiting for his coffee at the counter, chatting up an imposing looking but drop dead gorgeous redhead as he did so. And then, to Marius’ surprise and pleasure, Cosette walked in and took a seat in an open chair next to him. He hadn’t expected her to be included in a group text, but was thrilled about the show of inclusion.

The only people Marius hadn’t located were Bahorel, Grantaire, and Eponine. And considering the group text had originated from Grantaire, that surprised him a little.

Feuilly walked over to the table, handing cups to Joly and Legle and sitting down with his own. The redhead sat down next to him, surprising more than Marius based on the expressions on his friends’ faces. Still, everyone tried to be polite.

“Feuilly, are you going to introduce us to your friend?” Combeferre asked.

Feuilly and the girl both smirked. There was something familiar about the girl’s smirk, come to think of it.

“Guys, this is Tina. Take a real good look at her.”

“Okay…”
Silence reigned for the next couple of minutes as the friends tried to figure out what Feuilly was getting at. Then Cosette gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. Enjolras was next, eyebrows shooting up and posture going rigid as he studied the “stranger”.

“Wow Bahorel, Courfeyrac and Jehan weren’t kidding when they said you could pull off heels,” Enjolras said.

“Bahorel?!” the rest of them collectively gasped.

Then “Tina” started cracking up and the illusion was gone. They could all see the brawler they knew and loved, despite carefully applied makeup, well placed padding, a gorgeous crimson wig, and a stylish outfit. “Sorry for the deception, but you all said you really wanted to see me in drag. I’m usually not as classy as this, but y’know, full drag isn’t really appropriate for a Sunday afternoon coffee with your friends. Still, you can get the idea.”

“Oh my god, you’re like a magician,” Joly whispered. “Bahorel, I study anatomy and I couldn’t tell you weren’t a biological woman. How’d you do it?”

He shrugged. “Years of practice, I suppose.”

“He had me going for a minute,” Feuilly said. “I was going to try to get your number.”

“I could tell. You need to work on your pick up lines, dude.”

They all took turns teasing Feuilly and admiring Bahorel for the next few minutes. By the time Eponine and Grantaire did finally show, Bahorel was giving Cosette makeup tips (and unless Marius was much mistaken, Courfeyrac was oddly invested in their conversation as well). Eponine arched an eyebrow, but she didn’t comment on Bahorel’s outfit.

For some reason, Grantaire had a herd of small boys with him. They were cute little things, with mops of tangled and dirty blond hair, crooked, gap toothed smiles, and shrewd looking eyes that feigned innocence if they noticed someone looking. Grantaire shooed them over to the counter while Eponine sat down by Joly and Legle. “Hey guys.”

“What’s with the munchkins?” Courfeyrac asked.

“Those are my little brothers. The oldest one is Gavroche and, well, we don’t remember what Mom and Dad put on the birth certificates so we’ve just been calling the little ones Thing One and Thing Two. Don’t worry, they respond to it.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Marius asked.

Cosette rubbed at her temple with a frown. “I wish she was.”

They had to raid the room for a few more chairs, but eventually each of the Thenardier children was settled with a hot chocolate and a muffin, and after a few minutes Grantaire even got his wallet and his debit card back from Gavroche.

“Hey boys, girls, and lady-boy,” Grantaire said. Bahorel smiled and nodded approvingly in response to his special address. “So I guess you probably figured out why I texted you already.”

“I assume it’s something to do with the small children,” Combeferre said.

“Oh, yeah. There’s also a fifth Thenardier, but we couldn’t find Azelma,” Grantaire said with a frown. “Um, anywho…so Eponine’s taking up sanctuary at my place, and Gavroche asked if he can
crash with me until the weather warms up and he can start sleeping on a park bench at the beach again.” Here he sent a significant look around the table.

“He didn’t so much ask as he waltzed in and sat down,” Eponine said brightly. “Sorry ‘Taire, but I don’t think we can call it breaking and entering if your door doesn’t actually shut.”

Enjolras murmured something about actually agreeing with Eponine for once.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute. What the-has anyone called social services?” Legle spluttered.

At this the little boys all looked up from their muffins and cracked up as though Legle had told a joke.

“Course people have. My teacher used to call social services all the time back when I still went to school,” Gavroche said. “But really hat-guy, do you think the system could actually help us? I mean, back when the Lark was in, the state placed her with us.”

“I’m the Lark,” Cosette explained, as the guys all looked confused. “The kids speak almost exclusively in nicknames and code words. And Gavroche is right.”

“Course I’m right.”

Cosette smiled patiently at him, then turned back to her friends. “The system moves slowly, and there’s really not much to hope for. They might take the boys out of the house, but they won’t touch Eponine and Azelma since they’re almost legal adults. If the boys are removed, they’ll probably be split up and sent to foster homes, and there’s no guarantee their foster parents will be any better than their biological parents.”

“So am I the only one bothered by the thought of the nine year old sleeping on a park bench?” Grantaire asked.

“I’m eleven,” Gavroche grumbled.

“No you’re not, sweetheart,” Eponine said. “You’re still ten until the fall.”

“Oh yeah.”

“And you should be in school and, and sleeping in a bed!” Grantaire snapped. “I mean, fuck! I thought my parents were bad, but at least they covered basic necessities. Look, between all of us, there’s got to be something we can do, right?”

“Yeah, of course,” Combeferre said. “I’m just trying to puzzle out what we can do. Are you guys sure calling Social Services isn’t an option?”

“There’s been a file open on us practically since we were all born,” Eponine said. “And might I remind you, the state thought that my folks were responsible enough guardians that they put Cosette under our care, even though Mom couldn’t have made it more obvious that she was just after the stipend for having a foster kid.”

“Alright then.” Combeferre reached into his bag and took out his homework planner and a notebook. “I can take the boys on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I’m on a Monday-Wednesday-Friday class schedule this semester.”

“I’ve got Mondays free,” Joly said. He shot Feuilly and Legle each a look. “Is that okay?”
“No, that’s fine. And I’m home all day on Fridays,” Feuilly added.

“So we just need Wednesdays and weekends,” Combeferre said. “Any volunteers?”

“I’ve only got one class on Wednesday,” Jehan said. “I don’t have a lot of space, but I’ll happily share it.”

“Same,” Grantaire said, shooting a surprised and even disappointed look at Enjolras, who remained silent and disapproving. “I’ll take weekends if no one else can.”

“Are you all being serious?” Enjolras finally erupted. “We can’t just decide to take three boys away from their parents. This is ridiculous.”

“Three boys and a teenage girl,” Grantaire corrected. “We’re going to track down Azelma at some point.”

“Enjolras, we can’t just abandon them,” Jehan said.

“But the notion that we can substitute as parents is delusional. Some of us can’t even take care of ourselves, let alone—look, this isn’t the answer. If we keep thinking we can come up with something better.”

Thing One and Thing Two turned wide eyed innocent stairs on him and he fell silent. “But mister statue man, if we promise to be really good can we play with your friends?” the younger of the two asked in a small, scratchy voice.

“We’ll give mister wino man his credit card back and everything,” the other one added.

Grantaire took his wallet out and checked the pockets. “Son of a bitch! Hey, you took my student ID too. Come on you brats, you can’t even use that!”

“It’s good practice though,” the older one said as he handed the cards over.

“Can I keep the coupon for a free McFlurry?” Thing Two asked, and Grantaire decided to let him have it. “Cool! That can be lunch.”

Everyone turned disgusted looks at Enjolras, and he folded under the weight of the group’s combined judgment. “Fine. But can we consider this a temporary solution while we keep looking for something permanent?”

“Of course,” Combeferre said, as though that were obvious. “Eponine, how will your parents respond to the boys taking off?”

Eponine shrugged. “They didn’t notice me go missing. But I’ll let them know that we’re all going to be staying with my friends on the off chance they feel obligated to look for us.”

“Good enough.”

Enjolras grabbed the schedule Combeferre had been working on and crossed Grantaire’s name off the weekends. He scribbled out his own instead and then sat back with his arms crossed over his chest, looking pissy. He shot his boyfriend a look. “I still expect you to come over and do all the childcare, but you are not hosting sleepovers for small children in your deathtrap when I’ve got a spare bedroom.”

Grantaire grinned appreciatively. “As it’s Sunday, looks like we’ll be spending the night at the palace
Boys.” Gavroche, Thing One, and Thing Two all erupted into cheers for mister statue man. Hopefully they were cute enough to appease the beautiful, but frighteningly angry looking slab of marble.

Unfortunately for Grantaire, it looked like Enjolras was resistant to the charms of fresh faced little children.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you wondering, you can actually get addicted to caffeine. Enjolras’ experience is loosely based upon some experiences my friends and I had. And I don’t mean to be harsh on social services. I know they do the best they can with limited resources and more work than is fair. I have heard some horror stories though, and social services being incompetent is just convenient for my storytelling here.

Also, I couldn’t remember off the top of my head if the youngest Thenardiers had ever been given names, thus Thing One and Thing Two. I’ll get them proper names by the next chapter (though probably not the ones written on their birth certificates!)
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Enjolras and Grantaire practice being daddies.

Also, d3r remembers that there are other Amis besides Enjolras, Grantaire, Courfeyrac, and Marius :P

Chapter Notes

Hey guys. Updates might slow down a bit. I've started a new job, and it's been kicking the crap out of me and depriving me of writing time. It's also given me some ideas for Joly and Feuilly too, which I consider an almost-fair trade off :3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Enjolras and Grantaire’s day with Thing One, Thing Two, and Gavroche began easily enough. They let the boys finish their cocoas and muffins at the Musain, which took longer than it might have since Grantaire was arguing with Gavroche over who would win in a fight, Batman or Superman. Grantaire kept saying that it wasn’t theoretical: he had the comic books to cite, and as long as Batman had enough prep time he would win, but Gavroche kept insisting that Superman must be letting him win, whatever the comic books said. Their friends took off one by one, Cosette and Marius to meet Valjean for a late brunch, Feuilly and Joly to get ready for work (at the convenience store and a nursing home, respectively), Bahorel to de-drag and think about doing his homework while actually playing video games, Courfeyrac and Legle to do the same (they decided to coordinate their “studying” when they all realized they had the same plans for their Sunday), and Combeferre, Jehan, and Eponine to see if they could locate Azelma.

Once the Thenardier boys were finished with their snacks Enjolras herded them out of the Musain and into the backseat of the Prius. He winced when he saw the dirty little boys sitting on his pristine light colored seats, and he grabbed Grantaire’s arm to pull him aside before he got into the passenger side. “You’re vacuuming the car tomorrow after school.”

“Okay. You, er, don’t have anything valuable back there, do you? The boys have really sticky fingers.”

“I’d noticed. And no, I don’t keep my car filled with shit the way Courfeyrac and Bahorel do.”

“Kay.”

Their first stop was a thrift store downtown to get the boys clean clothes and a pair of pajamas apiece. The boys seemed a little confused about the purchases, but they weren’t inclined to complain about being handed anything that was free, so they took the clothes with thank yous that ranged in politeness (there was something ironic in Gavroche's delivery, though it was hard to pinpoint exactly why. Grantaire thought he might have himself a little hipster-in-training).
The next stop after that was the grocery store, as Enjolras did not have the supplies on hand to feed himself, Grantaire, three small boys, and possibly Eponine and Azelma if they turned up. They had a time keeping track of the brats in the store. Enjolras felt ridiculous yelling for Thing One and Thing Two to get back to the carriage this instant while they were in the candy aisle, and he turned to Grantaire with a sour look that he was getting distinctly sick of wearing. “We’ve got to figure out their real names or think of something else to call them.”

“I’ve always been partial to the name Bob, but I suppose we should take their input on the subject.”

“You need to take this more seriously. You’re responsible for the children, not me.”

“Okay,” Grantaire said with an infuriating grin, knowing full well that the boys had already dismissed him as the fun one. They’d sniffed Enjolras out as the authority figure he was within seconds of meeting him.

Considering how the kids had been about his wallet, Grantaire gave them a shakedown when they got to the register. Every pocket the Thenardier boys had was lined with snacks, arranged with such skill that it had been impossible to tell from looking at them. There hadn’t been a single discernible bulge in any of their clothing, and yet, Grantaire found at least sixty dollars’ worth of junk food on each of them.

“You know, if you had asked, I might have bought you guys some of those,” Grantaire scolded. He gathered up all the goodies and gave them to their bewildered looking cashier, then turned back to the kids. “You don’t need to steal, guys. Me and Enjolras are going to take care of you.”

“For how long?” Gavroche asked pointedly.

“As long as you need it,” Grantaire returned without missing a beat. He went to pay the cashier and Enjolras stepped in front of him.

“I’ve got this.”

“You got the clean clothes.”

“Considering what we talked about last night, you’re not spending a dime until we figure out your finances tomorrow. Now put your wallet away.” Enjolras turned a severe look on Gavroche. “And you-keep your sticky little fingers out of his pocket. He’s trying to help you. Show some appreciation.”

Gavroche edged away from Grantaire, who started suspiciously patting his pockets. “Kill joy,” the brat muttered.

“He really is,” Grantaire agreed.

Enjolras scowled, but he fixed his expression into something polite when he turned to hand his debit card to the cashier. She ran the card as quickly as possible, visibly eager to get them on their way, but encountered a problem. “Sorry hon, your card was declined.”

Enjolras regarded her with confusion. “I’ve got three thousand dollars in that account.”

Grantaire spluttered a little bit at that. Except for when his student loan and aid checks came in at the start of the semester, he’d never even seen that much money before. “You’ve got three grand?”

“I should…” Enjolras frowned. “Can you run it again?”
The woman did as instructed, but it was declined again. “Sorry.”

“Okay…” Enjolras dug through his wallet and took out another card. “This one’s definitely got money in it. I haven’t used it all semester.”

“I should think not, if your first card has three grand.”

“Shut up, Grantaire.”

The second card was declined as well. Enjolras was about to switch to his credit cards, but Grantaire reached around him and gave their relieved cashier a couple of crumpled twenties. Enjolras was in a sour mood when they left the grocery store. His expression only got worse when the boys started whispering to each other about how there was no point in looking through the statue’s pockets, since he didn’t have any money.

Once again, the kids clambered into the backseat and obediently buckled themselves in while the adults stood outside for a moment to talk. Grantaire touched Enjolras’ arm. “Is everything okay?”

“No. The second account is for my rent, utilities, tuition, and car payments. Mom and Dad deposit into it every month for me. There’s no way in hell that card should have been declined.”

“Maybe the bank’s having tech problems or something?” Grantaire offered. Enjolras shrugged. “You used it fine at the Musain and the thrift store, right?”

Enjolras shook his head. “Combeferre got the coffees this morning, and I used cash at the thrift store.”

“Y’know, once you fix this banking error I’m never covering anything again. I can’t believe how much money you have.”

Enjolras rolled his eyes, but he looked less tense for the gentle teasing. “Come on ‘Taire, you knew I was a rich kid.”

“Yeah, but you don’t act like it so it’s easy to forget.”

Enjolras’ face lit up at the observation that wasn’t actually meant as a compliment. Grantaire wondered if he should be worried that Enjolras responded better to being told he fit in with the ninety nine percent than any declaration of love he’d ever made, but ultimately dismissed the fear. That’s just the way his boy was wired.

They joined the boys in the car and set off for Enjolras’ apartment. Grantaire herded the Thenardiers into the bathroom while Enjolras set up his laptop in the kitchen to check out his online banking.

Though Enjolras had said all the childcare was going to be Grantaire’s responsibility, Grantaire had still hoped that Enjolras would come and help him as soon as he was done yelling at his bank. Sadly, it was not to be. After about forty traumatizing minutes, Gavroche, Thing One, and Thing Two exited the bathroom with their angelic blond hair damp, smooth and shiny, their skin scrubbed pink and fresh, and wearing their new clothes.

And Grantaire trudged after them soaked through and hating life.

“What do we do now, Mr. Wino?” Thing Two asked.

Grantaire bit back a growl. “I actually quit drinking. Can you give me another nickname?”
Gavroche grinned. “How about Whippy?” He made the motion with his hand, and then his brothers were both doing it. Grantaire actually did growl that time. He rubbed tiredly at his eyes.

He shooed them into the living room, taught them how to use Netflix, then retreated to Enjolras’ room to steal some dry clothes. He checked on the boys after that, relieved to see them sitting on the couch engrossed in an episode of South Park. “Can I leave you in here for five minutes without you taking everything that’s not bolted down?”

Gavroche considered. “I suppose. Even if I did want to take a pile of books, I wouldn’t want these ones.”

“Good enough.”

He went to see what the fuck Enjolras was still up to, and found him in the kitchen with his head in his hands, slumped in front of the computer. All Grantaire’s irritation gave way under a flare of worry. “Enjolras?”

Enjolras jumped. “Grantaire! Sorry, I, uh…sorry.”

“What the hell do you think you’re even apologizing for?” Grantaire pulled up a chair next to him and touched a hand to his back. “What’s wrong?”

Enjolras pressed his lips together, brow furrowed. “The bank didn’t make a mistake. Mom and Dad closed my accounts. All of them. They cut me off.”

Grantaire’s stomach sank. “They what?”

Enjolras licked his lips and swallowed nervously. “They were paying for everything. Essentially, I’m fucked.”

And there was only one reason that could have happened. “Shit. It’s my fault.”

“Don’t. Grantaire, this is not your fault, or your responsibility. Mom did the best she could to bait you, and you didn’t feed into any of it. You were perfect. This is just how they are.” He blinked a few times in rapid succession. “Why is your hair wet?”

“The boys were a bit resistant to getting clean, and don’t change the subject. You got screwed over because I pestered you into dating me. How is that not my fault?”

“I’ve been defying them since I learned how to talk. They do this sort of shit to me all the time. Granted, normally they only suspend my private account, not the one for bills, but it’s all from the same playbook. And really, I’d appreciate it if I could just freak out a little and then sort this out without having to calm you down.”

Naked hurt flashed across Grantaire’s face, then he looked away and shakily nodded. He got to his feet and started backing towards the door. “Y-you’re right. Sorry.”

“Grantaire, wait, I-I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Uh…I probably shouldn’t leave the munchkins alone for much longer,” Grantaire choked out. “I’ll let you handle this and, um, not be another burden while you’re stressed out.”

“If you truly don’t want to be a burden then wait five seconds. I don’t want to fight with you on top of everything else.” Enjolras stood up and positioned himself between Grantaire and the doorway. “I’m sorry I snapped at you.”
“It’s okay. I was being a whiny bitch.”

Enjolras smirked. “True enough. I’d like if you stopped that. Seeing as one of my goals right now is to make you happy…”

Grantaire finally smiled again, and leaned in for a quick kiss. “For the record, I’ve been scared of exactly this happening. I’m sure I made a shit impression on your parents, and I didn’t want them taking that out on you.”

“Don’t worry about it, ‘Taire. I’ve always had a terrible relationship with them. I mean this without malice: there’s nothing you can possibly do to make it worse. It’s not worth stressing out over. And I’ll figure out my finances.”

Grantaire nodded. “Okay. Well…guess I’d better tend to the kids.”

“Now that I might not be so quick to forgive you for. Those thieving, ungrateful little brats-”

“Have been abused and neglected their entire lives. If you’re not sure of your next meal, you’ll steal whatever you can get your hands on to keep off hunger,” Grantaire said, a touch of warning in his tone.

“Speaking from experience, are we?” Enjolras asked, and was taken aback by the answer he got.

“Actually, I am.” Grantaire flashed a familiar sarcastic grin when he said it, but there was something off about his expression when he turned and headed off for the living room.

—

Oh my fucking god I hate my job.” Feuilly let out a low groan and trudged wearily into the living room of his and Joly’s apartment. He didn’t bother kicking his boots off or shrugging out of his coat. Instead he flopped gracelessly onto an old armchair and let his eyes fall shut.

Joly was sitting on the floor surrounded by stacks of schoolwork. He’d changed out of his scrubs in favor of pajamas. His hair was still damp from his post-work scrub down, and he smelled faintly of citrus from the vitamin C drops he was popping as treats for every time he finished a particularly grueling part of his current assignment. Despite the fact that Joly worked just as hard as his roommate, if not harder, there was a serenity about him when he settled in for the night. The nursing major's default mode included a small smile and relaxed posture, and it came from contentment with his lot in life.

Feuilly wished he could get just a taste of that.

Joly set his notebook aside and turned to face his roommate, a sympathetic frown chasing away his habitual smile. “I’m sorry. Was it worse than usual tonight?”

“We got a huge fucking shipment in that had to be done, but under no circumstances were we to leave the floor unattended, even for a minute. And since my useless piece of shit of a coworker called out, we were short. Apparently I was supposed to magic the twenty five fucking boxes onto the shelves.”

“That’s terrible. Um…on the plus side, I bet your customers are less likely to infect you with deadly diseases than my residents,” Joly said, attempting to be upbeat.

Feuilly smirked. “The convenience store is up the street from a rehab clinic, so that’s doubtful. Your
dementia patients are being sterilized and cared for. My meth-heads on the other hand…”

Joly paled, looking tempted to throw the bag of vitamin C drops at him. “Oh Feuilly, we’ve got to find you a new job! If only so I can sleep at night…” The last part of that was quiet, so Feuilly suspected his roommate hadn’t meant to say it out loud.

He laughed and shook his head. “I’m not qualified for anything but retail. At least, not until Enjolras and ‘Ferre start their new world order and give me a leg up.”

“Please. Even if they do manage to topple our corrupt capitalist state, you know the republic they replace it with will function under meritocracy. We’ll all have to apply for jobs. Well…maybe not Grantaire.”

“They’ll give him something light duty, I’m sure, to keep him from being a pest.” Feuilly smiled thoughtfully. “He could make political cartoons.”

“He’d hate that. Yeah, I can totally see Enjolras putting him in charge of propaganda for the socialist paradise, just to tick him off.”

“I guess I’d better let you get on with your studies so you have some free time for Bossuet. When’s he coming over?”

Joly shrugged. “He’s still out with Courfeyrac and Bahorel. Whenever they finish whatever they’re doing, I suppose. You know Feuilly…you don’t have to run away when he shows up. I do like hanging out with you too.”

Feuilly sat up straighter and cracked his neck. “Hey, the cool part about finally being out to your friends is that you can have as much private time with your boyfriend as you want now.”

“We’re hardly a new couple. I promise, we’ve had plenty of private time together over the years, and we’ll continue to carve out more without you trying to make yourself scarce. You and I work opposite schedules, and with how crazy my workload is at school, I feel like I never see you anymore. And we live together so that’s just inexcusable.”

Feuilly shrugged. “I guess I can hang out for a little while then.”

Joly beamed at him. “Cool! Bossuet’s bringing a pizza and JC Superstar is streaming on Netflix, so we were going to watch that.”

“Oh. Showtunes…”

Joly looked unsure of himself. “Is that okay?”

Feuilly rolled his eyes. “For the record, you two were never in the closet.”

Joly pouted. “We weren’t as bad as Jehan.”

“I’m being serious this time. We can’t keep calling you guys Thing One and Thing Two.” Enjolras finished passing out bowls of organic P’sghetti Loops with soyballs and sat down with the army of terrors on the couch. Grantaire had been trailing behind him with juice boxes, and he paused to appreciate the sight of Enjolras surrounded by little blond children. If their hair curled, they’d have looked an awful lot like him. They certainly resembled him more than Eponine.
He gave himself a little shake when he realized his thoughts were trailing sickeningly near cheesy domestic fantasies worthy of Jehan. Being in love really was killing all his cynic cred.

“Why can’t I keep being Thing One? I like it.”

“It’s not a name,” Enjolras said.

“It’s my name.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes it is.”

“No it’s not.”

“Yes it is!”

“Enjolras!” Grantaire snapped. “You’re arguing with a six year old. If he likes being Thing One then he likes being Thing One. I don’t see what the big deal is.”

“So he’s going to have the other children call him Thing One when he goes to school?” Enjolras asked pointedly.

Gavroche started laughing. “Come on Statue, be serious! We’re Thenardiers. We don’t go to school.”

“Eponine does,” Grantaire said. “I mean, not as often as she should, but she’s going enough to graduate.”

“Does Azelma go to school?” Thing Two asked. Thing One shrugged. “She goes somewhere, so I thought it might be school.”

“Any luck on tracking the last one down?” Enjolras asked in a quiet voice. Grantaire shook his head. They both had their phones on them, but Enjolras was simply waiting for a text while Grantaire had been texting with Eponine on and off all day.

“They’re going to go to Montparnasse’s and look for her there, but they want to wait until he’s left for the night. Eponine doesn’t want to run into him.”

Enjolras frowned. “Is anyone else going to go with them, or is it just Eponine, Jehan, and Combeferre?”

“Enj, don’t worry. They’ll be fine.” It was actually just Eponine and Combeferre, as Jehan had run away to write a paper, but damned if Grantaire was going to mention that to a worried looking Enjolras.

“So that’s a no.”

Grantaire sighed. “That’s a no. So boys, what do you want to watch now?” He picked up the remote and turned on the kids version of Netflix.

Gavroche let out a groan. “Can’t we just watch more South Park?”

“Sorry kiddo. Enjolras thinks it’s inappropriate for your younger brothers.”

“It’s inappropriate for him too! He’s only ten.”
“Kill joy,” Grantaire and the Thénardiers chorused together.

“So you kids must watch something that’s actually intended for your age group,” Grantaire said, flicking through show after show.

“We really don’t,” Thing One said.

“I like Jerry Springer! Mama watches that. Do you have Jerry Springer?” Thing Two asked.

“…no. Let’s just watch this.” Grantaire selected the show that was highlighted at the moment, set the remote on the coffee table, and then went into the kitchen to see about his own dinner as he was most decidedly uninterested in pasta and soyballs.

Enjolras followed after him and leaned against the kitchen counter with his arms crossed over his chest. “Montparnasse is dangerous.”

“That’s why they’re waiting for him to leave.”

“I don’t like the idea of Combeferre, Eponine, and Jehan going there by themselves.”

“They’re waiting for him to leave, and it’s where Azelma’s most likely to be hiding.”

“Grantaire-”

“What do you want me to do, Enj? Pack the kids up and drive down there with them?” Grantaire snapped. He held out his hand. “I’ll need to borrow your car, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

Enjolras scowled at him. “Of course we can’t bring the kids, but this is a really shitty situation you’ve gotten us into.”

“Me?” Grantaire said, taken aback. “You can’t really think this is my fault. What would you have done if Gavroche turned up on your doorstep, tell him to get out to the beach because the March weather would warm up before he noticed?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think the answer is to temporarily adopt children you’re not equipped to care for. I don’t care what Eponine and Cosette say. We should be contacting social services, not playing babysitter.”

“Fine. Call social services. Can I make my peanut butter and jelly now, or are you going to jump down my throat some more?” Grantaire pointedly started gathering the supplies for his sandwich, and so almost missed the wounded expression on Enjolras’ face. He hurriedly set the jar of peanut butter on the table and rushed to his boyfriend’s side when he did notice it. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Enjolras let out a slow breath. “I’m the one who can’t stop picking fights. I’d better go get this confrontation over with before I completely destroy our relationship.”

“En-Enjolras?” Grantaire felt like he’d missed something. Enjolras kissed his cheek, then fished his phone out of his pocket and started walking towards his bedroom. Grantaire made them both sandwiches, left one on a plate on the kitchen table, and then went into the other room to join the boys.

Thing One and Thing Two were entranced by the preschooler show he’d put on, and Gavroche was sleeping with his head pillowed on the arm of the couch. His mouth was hanging open and he was drooling. Grantaire made a note to spritz that with some Lysol or something after he vacuumed Enjolras’ car.
God. The kids were right; he was whipped.

He ate his sandwich with them, then went to check on Enjolras. He found his boyfriend lying on his stomach on the bed with a pillow over his head. If Grantaire had to guess, he’d say Enjolras had chucked his phone across the room and into a wall to end whatever confrontation he’d been having.

He sat down on the bed, plucked the pillow off of Enjolras, and started rubbing his back. “You okay?”

“I got my rent money back, but that’s it so far. Dad says he’ll give me living expenses and school money if I change one of my majors to business.”

“What about your car?”

“I’ll fucking sell it. I don’t care about the damn car, or any of it.” Enjolras sat up and hugged his knees to his chest. “It doesn’t matter anyway. They’ll get tired of this before I will, and everything’ll be back to normal before I miss a single payment. For the record, they weren’t mad about me dating you.”

“Th-they weren’t?” Grantaire asked.

Enjolras smirked bitterly. “Mom forgot, actually, and Dad doesn’t care as long as I don’t make my love life into a scandal. They were mad because one of the petitions I started got some media exposure, and now one of their horrible friends has to give his employees sick days. Which he should have to begin with, as he owns a restaurant chain and firing his employees for calling out sick is tremendously irresponsible, but apparently that’s beside the point. Now their good friend David might have to sell one of his vacation houses, and they won’t be able to go skiing at Christmas with him and his lovely wife next year.”

“Oh. Well Enjolras, that is actually rather sad. You should have thought of poor David and his horrible wife instead of yourself,” Grantaire teased. “So your petition things actually work?”

“From time to time, yeah. The petitions in and of themselves don’t do much, but they garner attention.”

“Huh. Maybe I should start signing them then.”

Enjolras hit him with a pillow. “You said you were signing them!”

“And when I first met you, I said I cared about social politics and the environment and the plight of starving children in wherever too, remember? You figured out I was lying about all that.”

Enjolras rolled his eyes. “You’re so lucky your good qualities outweigh all this bullshit, Grantaire.”

Grantaire smiled stupidly. “Aw baby, I love it when you sweet talk me. But seriously, if there weren’t munchkins in the next room I’d be all over you.”

“Plus you have homework to do.”

“Enjolras.”

“We’re still going to health services and your professors’ office hours tomorrow to try to keep you from failing out of school, so you need to start acting like a student. I’ll look after the kids for the rest of the night, so do your damn homework. You have a response paper due tomorrow for your lit class and a project proposal for mixed media painting. I took some notes for you while you were playing
Sorry with the boys.”

Grantaire gaped at him, but before he could get a coherent response together Enjolras had gone off to fetch his backpack for him. He returned a moment later with Grantaire’s schoolwork and one of his own notebooks. “I made an outline for your response paper. It’s been a few years since I’ve read Go Tell It on the Mountain though, so you might want to flesh it out with your own observations. You did finish reading it, right?”


“You’re hopeless, you know that? Baldwin’s too late to be considered Harlem Renaissance. Whatever bullshit you cobble together for this paper, do not use that term. I’ll bring you a cup of tea for a study break in an hour.”

Grantaire let out a loud whine of protest and dramatically flopped backwards onto the mattress. Enjolras ran a hand through his hair. “If you’re good and you’ve made some real progress, maybe we can make out a little.”

Grantaire made an interested little noise and turned his eyes towards his boyfriend.

“But only if the kids are in bed,” Enjolras finished.

“You’ve convinced me. I’ll actually study.”

Enjolras smiled at him, then got up and left the room. “Ah positive reinforcement.”

Jesus Christ Superstar turned out to be fairly interesting, for a musical. Discussing the politics of the ancient Middle East helped, and then that led into discussing the politics of the modern Middle East and Feuilly started to actually enjoy himself. He spent a good forty minutes in the middle of the film ranting about Palestine, celebrating the fact that they’d finally achieved UN recognition, and slamming his own country for speaking out against it.

Just to get under his skin, Joly sarcastically reminded his roommate that the US was obligated to stand by their ally Israel, and then that really got him going. Enjolras-rant style. Feuilly lectured about the post-World War carving up of the Middle East and Africa into arbitrary spheres of influence, and the resulting negative impact from short sighted Western imperialism, and the much loathed denial of a people’s right to self-determination. Before he could get going on his thoughts on nationalism in general, Legle and Joly loudly started singing along with the movie and cut him off.

Feuilly gave a little sniff, but relaxed back into his seat and agreed to shut up for a while. He really felt that they should have known better when they picked out the movie though. He felt as passionately about the politics of the Middle East as Enjolras did about worker’s rights and representative governments, and Combeferre did about human rights.

Spouting social-political rants in the middle of a movie was pretty normal for them though. The three friends had an uncanny knack for turning anything into an excuse for political discourse. Feuilly was quietly relieved that so little had changed now that Joly and Legle were out.

In fact, the only change he noticed was that they cuddled in front of him now.

He drifted off at some point, and was gently woken by Joly when the credits started. “H-huh?”
“Work really did wear you out, huh?” Joly asked, and Legle frowned at him in sympathy.

“Yeah. Well, I told you it’s really been sucking lately. I’d better head to bed. I picked up the morning rush, so I’m off again at four.”

“Feuilly, that’s in five hours!” Joly exclaimed. “Do you know what havoc sleep deprivation can-”

“Believe me dude, I’m well acquainted with any and all adverse effects from sleep deprivation. Doesn’t change the fact that I’m impoverished and I need the money.”

“You’re always working so hard though.”

“Yeah, but it’s for a pittance. Tell Enjolras he needs to step it up on saving the world and turning it into a socialist paradise.” Feuilly mustered a smile for his friend before trudging off to bed. The last thing he wanted to do was go back to work, but such was life.

“I think I’ve got a tan line from my hat,” Legle complained. He was looking at his reflection in the mirror on the back of Joly’s door.

Joly was stretched out on his stomach on the bed behind him. He propped his chin up with his hands and giggled at his boyfriend’s pout. “So stop wearing your fedora so much.”

“It’s barely March. How do I have a fucking tan line?”

“You can burn year round. I must have reminded you about that during our last melanoma talk. I can give you some sunblock, if you’d like. I keep a supply year round.”

Legle grinned and shook his head. “Sorry Jol, but you’re only rubbing my bald head like that in the summer.”

“Well you know how much I love your bald head, so will you quit staring at it like it’s new to you and come to bed?”

“I suppose…” Legle was barely on the mattress before he had his boyfriend wrapped around him. He dropped a kiss on Joly’s brow and smiled fondly at him. “This was a pretty good night, huh?”

“Mm. I’m glad Feuilly and Combeferre forced us out of the closet. We’ve got the best friends ever, don’t we?” He entwined his fingers with Legle’s and let his eyes drift shut, and so missed Legle’s nod of agreement. He heard his pleased hum though. “I do wish Feuilly weren’t working himself to death.”

“I kinda have to wonder what he’s done to his finances. I mean, the kid works a billion hours.”

“Yes, but it’s spread between two part time jobs. The convenience store and the gas station. And the craft store kept him on pay roll so they can call him in to cover call outs and vacations and stuff. If just one place gave him full time status he’d be able to get benefits, and I bet that would help immensely. Plus the convenience store froze wages so he’ll never get a raise. He’s already been there for two years and they promoted him to shift supervisor without giving him a pay raise. It’s disgusting.”

“Hm. Couldn’t you just get him a job at your place? You said they’re always hiring.”

Joly shifted in Legle’s arms. “I can’t get Feuilly hired at the nursing home. He’s not certified-”
“To be a nurse’s aide, no, but the facility must need other kinds of employees. Ask around. See if you can use your good reputation to hook him up with something full time.”

“I suppose it’s worth a shot.” Joly grinned. “It’d be fun to work with Feuilly, wouldn’t it? And they’d force him to wash his hands properly! He’d have to do it for the full twenty seconds like I’m always telling him. Oh, I’ll get him an application tomorrow. You’re the best, Bossuet!”

Legle chuckled. “I hope Feuilly thinks so too. If you’re going to pester him about singing the ABCs while he washes his hands then you’re not allowed to tell him this was my idea.”

Grantaire was just putting the finishing touches on his project proposal when he realized something. It had been well over an hour and he was lacking both in a mug of tea and a frisky blond. He decided to venture out of the room and investigate. He’d been a good kid after all; he’d crapped out his response paper and actually done a pretty admirable job on his project proposal.

He figured Enjolras had probably fallen asleep on the couch or something. He was insulted and a little hurt even when he walked into the living room and saw all three Thenardier boys asleep while Enjolras watched the TV with rapt fascination.

He was still watching the preschooler show.

“Enjolras, what the fucking fuck?”

Enjolras jumped, then paused the show. “’Taire! Hi. What time is it?”

“Ten thirty. I finished my homework. And you’re watching…?”

“The Fresh Beat Band,” Enjolras murmured, face going a bit red. “I’m not really watching it. It’s just…mesmerizing. It’s a preschool show, Grantaire. They do that on purpose. It’s supposed to draw you in.”

“Yeah. Worked like a charm on the boys,” Grantaire said, gesturing to the unconscious children.

Enjolras looked a little defensive, but he turned off the TV. “Should we wake them up to move them?”

“They’re small children and they’re asleep. Leave them were they are.”

“Good enough. I texted Joly. He’s said he’s fine with us bringing them to his place on the way to school in the morning. He’s going to call around and see if they’re already enrolled in school and just haven’t been going, or if we’ll need to get them set up.”

“Sounds good.” Grantaire took Enjolras’ hand and tugged him up off the couch. “Have you heard from Combeferre about Azelma?”

Enjolras shook his head. “I was about to ask you.”

Grantaire took his phone out, hoping he’d somehow failed to notice a new text. He went into the kitchen and gave Eponine a call while Enjolras threw blankets over the sleeping children.

Eponine sounded tired when she finally answered. “Hey. Sorry I forgot to call. It’s been a long fucking day.”
“I hear that. Your brothers are exhausting.”

“Yeah. Thanks, by the way. I’ll do something to pay you back for all this. Y’know, as soon as I think of it,” Eponine murmured.

“Don’t worry about it.” Grantaire walked across the giant kitchen to get a glass and filled it with water. “Did you find your sister?”

“Yep. Found her with her head in the toilet,” Eponine answered. “She looks like hell, can’t remember the last time she’s eaten, and she’s sleeping something off. Can’t tell what. ‘Ferre’s letting her crash on his couch. I’m just going to stay here tonight too. Someone needs to keep an eye on her to make sure she doesn’t choke on her own vomit.”

“Lovely.”

“Mm. It’s a bit freaky, you know? Like looking in a really unflattering funhouse mirror.” Eponine let out a bitter laugh. “That doesn’t even make sense. God, I’m tired. I’m going to make another cup of coffee. I’ll talk to you tomorrow, okay?”

“Sure. G’night.” Grantaire hung up, finished off his water, then went and found Enjolras in the bedroom. He filled him in on what Eponine had told him.

“So they’re all okay?”

“As far as I can tell, no run-ins with Montparnasse,” Grantaire said.

Enjolras let out a relieved breath and sagged back against his pillows. “Well there’s one thing that’s gone right today.”

Grantaire snuggled against him while Enjolras threw the comforter over them. “Excepting a wee bit of drama, I for one, have had a fantastic day. We got to hang out and practice being domestic, and now I’m going to bed with my homework finished, for once. I feel all accomplished. Almost like a real adult.”

“You’re older than me, right?” Enjolras asked.

“…yeah. I’m turning twenty four next month.”

“So you are an adult.”

“I guess.”

“Then could you maybe do your homework without me bullying you into it tomorrow night?” Enjolras asked pointedly. He let out a loud gasp when Grantaire’s hands started wandering under the blanket. “’Taire!”

“Hey, you’re the one who promised me a make out session. I thought you were honorable enough to keep your word.”

Chapter End Notes
As this is a modern AU, I decided to make Feuilly's obsession be with Palestine instead of Poland. It seemed like an appropriate modernization to this history kid, anyway. My thought process is that in the Brick, Feuilly isn't obsessed with Poland because he's obsessed with Polish culture or anything like that. He's obsessed with the partitioning of Poland as a political travesty. If I can find a way to sneak it in, I'll also have him take a shot at the way the US acquired Hawaii...

Also...last chapter I got a comment saying that I should have a trigger warning on the fic, but the person didn't tell me what the trigger warning should be for. I don't know what this says about me, but I honestly can't tell what they were referring to. At first I was thinking maybe for cutting, because Grantaire was scratching at his wrist with his thumbnail, but if that was the case then I'd think they'd have brought it up during the snowstorm drama when he was found with razor cuts on his arms. And alcoholism and depression have BEEN a thing throughout the fic. Plus I've got it rated nice and high. Anyway, I'm confused, and generally not so great with tagging anyway, so I could use a little advice. I look to you, my lovely readers. Do you guys and gals think I need trigger warnings? If so, please let me know what for!
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

The Thenardiers settle into their unconventional new living arrangement. Azelma's worries about Montparnasse, and the Amis try to make her feel safe.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the input on the trigger stuff guys. After reading your suggestions I've decided to make some slight adjustments to my tags.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Eponine gave a start when she felt a large hand clasped on her shoulder, however gentle the shaking might have been. She pressed a hand to her chest and waited for her heart rate to settle back down.

“Sorry,” Combeferre murmured. “You’re going to strain your neck if you sleep in that chair though.”

“I’m not supposed to be asleep. I’m supposed to be keeping an eye on Azelma.” Eponine rubbed at her eyes and let out a loud yawn.

Combeferre looked at the petite girl curled up on his couch, then at the other girl all but nodding off again on the chair pulled up beside her. “I think she’ll be okay. Eponine, it’s five thirty in the morning. I’m actually up for the day. Take my bed and get some sleep.”

“You’re up for the day at five thirty?”

“My first class is at seven thirty, so yes.”

She got out of the chair and rubbed at her neck. “It’s probably not worth going to sleep then. What time do you leave? We’ll clear out before then.”
“You don’t have to-”

“Sweetie, you don’t want Azelma in your house unsupervised. There’s a reason old man Valjean doesn’t let us stay with him and Cosette unless we’re having an emergency. And glad as I am that you boys are helping me and my sibs out, I’m not planning on showing that gratitude by letting them exploit you all and rob you blind.”

Combeferre frowned. “So what do you want to do? Your brothers are going over to Joly and Feuilly’s soon. Do you want me to give you girls a ride there? Or are the two of you going to school?”

Eponine glanced down at her sleeping sister and frowned. “Honestly, I think if we tried to bring her to school she’d just skip and we’d lose track of her again. I’ll need to talk to her first if we’re going to do anything other than lose her. And my brothers are going to eat that sweet little nurse for breakfast, so it’d probably be best if you dropped me off with them. He’ll need my help.”

Combeferre glanced at the clock behind his couch, frowned thoughtfully, and turned back to Eponine. “I’ll blow off my first class then. We’re just reviewing for the exam on Wednesday, and I don’t really need it. You go to sleep, I’ll wake you in a few hours, and then I’ll bring you and Azelma to Joly’s before my bio class.”

Eponine leaned up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. “I don’t know what I did right to get friends like you guys. Thanks hon.” Combeferre showed her where his bedroom was and she was asleep almost before her head touched the pillow.

Combeferre made himself a bowl of oatmeal and treated himself to a free read in the kitchen while the girls slept. He got a few chapters into The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory before he heard a loud thump come from the living room. He set the book down on the table and rushed after the sound.

Azelma was on the floor in a heap, frizzy, deadened hair obscuring her face and skinny legs tangled in the blankets. “What the-who the-where the fuck am I?”

“Ssh.” Combeferre knelt next to her and carefully helped her out of the blankets. “Quiet down. Your sister’s asleep in the other room and she really needs the rest.”
Azelma’s eyes were almost as large as Cosette’s, though not nearly as pretty. That might just have been because she looked terrified. Also, they were staring at him out of a gaunt, bruised face. “Who are you?”

“My name’s Combeferre. We met last night.” Though she hadn’t been in any kind of state to remember the meeting. “I’m friends with Eponine. We took you away from Montparnasse’s because we want to help you. Do you remember any of that?”

“N-not really. Um…where’s you said Eponine’s here?”

Combeferre nodded reassuringly. He brushed some of the girl’s hair out of her face so she could see better. “Yes. Your sister is in the other room having a nap. When she wakes up we’re going to head over to one of our other friend’s houses where your brothers are waiting for you. And Eponine wants to have a talk with you.”

It hadn’t seemed physically possible, but the girl’s large, haunted eyes widened further. “What about Parnasse? Where’s he?”

“I don’t know,” Combeferre said. “Frankly, it’s not important. We’re trying to arrange it so that you won’t have to see him anymore. Okay?”

She shook her head, pale, chapped lips working for a few minutes before she could force any sound out of her abused throat. “No, no, no, that won’t work. Parnasse was angry at Ponine for leaving, and he’ll be even more angry at me, because I was only his second choice anyway, and then he’ll find both of us and if he’s that angry-”

“Azelma, don’t worry.” Combeferre grasped her bony shoulders and forced her to look at him. “He won’t find you. You don’t have to be afraid of him anymore. We’re going to take care of everything, I promise.”

“I don’t even know who you are. How can you say that?”

It was a fair observation. Combeferre tried to smile for her. “Just trust us. We’ll help you.”
“Parnasse makes people disappear, you know. People he doesn’t like.”

“We won’t let him hurt you,” Combeferre reiterated.

Azelma tilted her head to the side, eyes narrowing in contemplation. “Fine. I’ll try something new. It’s not like it’s me he’ll go for when he finds us anyway. He already said he wanted to cut Eponine’s throat. Do you have a bathroom? I’ve got to piss.”

“Uh, yeah. Down the hall.” Combeferre waved her in the general direction and she climbed unsteadily to her feet. “There’s a linen closet right next to it…if you want to grab a shower.”

Azelma sniffed her underarms, then nodded. “Yeah, sounds like a plan. Thanks cutie.”

She bounced down the hall, swaying her hips in imitation of her sister’s distinctive gait despite her lack of curves. Combeferre sat back on his heels and let out a shaky breath, hoping the feeling of foreboding settling in the pit of his stomach would disperse before he got to class.

Azelma was just a scared teenage girl. They were prone to exaggeration.

Feuilly had forgotten that Joly had taken Mondays for Thenardier-sittings. As Joly’s roommate, that meant that in essence he was also stuck damaged-munchkin sitting for the day.

He heaved his tired body through the living room and over to the coffeemaker in the kitchen as soon as this thought occurred to him. Eponine, beautiful creature that she was, had already brewed a large pot and was pouring out mugs for herself, Joly, and Legle. When she saw Feuilly stumble in in his convenience store work shirt, she wordlessly went over to the cabinet and grabbed another mug.

“Long day sweetie?”

Feuilly let out a long groan in answer. She’d had her hand on a normal sized mug, but she put it back in the cabinet and grabbed one that Joly sometimes used as a small cereal bowl instead and filled it for him. “Cream and sugar?”
“Yes,” Feuilly said. He leaned against the counter, because he was sure that if he sat down he was going to fall asleep. “How’re…how’re your brothers settling in?”

“Not too bad. Bossuet took them down to the park to work out some energy while Joly made some phone calls. Gavroche and Thing One are starting back at elementary school tomorrow, and Thing Two is now enrolled in preschool. They had to pick out proper names though, so now they’re Peter Parker and Grantaire. Since we’ve already got a Grantaire, we’re calling Thing Two Little R as a nickname.”

Feuilly grinned, feeling a little more alive for the warm mug of coffee in his hand and the gossip on the kids. “So our cynic made an impression on the boys, huh?”

“Yeah, they’ve really taken a liking to him. They’re still calling him Whippy though, but I think Gavroche is the only one who knows what it means.” Eponine went into the living room to distribute the rest of the coffees, and after fortifying himself with a few more sips, Feuilly went after to join the rest of them.

Joly was sitting on the couch with Little R in his lap, showing him a powerpoint on his laptop about the spread of the Norovirus and Influenza. Feuilly shut the laptop on him and they both pouted at him. “Joly, you are not raising a new generation of hypochondriacs.”

“But he’s going to a public preschool tomorrow! Small children are like little petri dishes! I swear, it’s even worse than the nursing home for spreading diseases.”

“I promised to sing the ABCs twice while I wash my hands,” Little R said proudly.

Feuilly shook his head.

Peter Parker was lying on the floor with a gigantic box of crayons and a pad of construction paper, and Gavroche appeared to be playing poker with Legle for skittles (and of course, Bossuet was losing spectacularly). Eponine joined Azelma on the couch, where the girls were watching Gossip Girl and doing nails. He considered the room, and then decided he wasn’t actually needed. “Do you guys mind if I go and nap?”

“Go right ahead,” Joly said, looking suspiciously happy about the suggestion. Feuilly rolled his eyes and started for his bedroom. He heard the laptop power back up, and before he’d even closed the door behind him he could already hear Joly lecturing Little R about the importance of annual flu
Combeferre was an uncharacteristic twenty minutes late for biology. His usual seat was still open for him though, in all likelihood owing to the strength of his best friend’s glare.

Enjolras shifted some books aside so that Combeferre had some room on the cool metal table. He dropped onto the bench next to Enjolras and started frantically getting his books and notebooks into order. Enjolras tapped his arm and motioned to the notes that he’d been taking in duplicate for his friend. Combeferre smiled gratefully at him and accepted his copy of the notes.

Other than answering questions, the two were silent for the next hour and ten minutes of the lecture. When it was time to pack their books up though, Combeferre couldn’t resist making an observation. “I’m surprised to see a new hickey. Weren’t you babysitting last night?”

Enjolras smirked, but self-consciously adjusted his shirt collar to hide the new marks on his neck. “Apparently you can use physical gratification to modify your boyfriend’s behavior. Grantaire did his homework last night.”

“You didn’t traumatize the children, did you?” Combeferre teased.

Enjolras rolled his eyes. “Please. They were already asleep, and they were on the other side of the apartment at that point. Besides, considering everything the Thenardiers have been exposed to, I’d think expressions of affection and devotion would be the least objectionable of the traumas.”

“True enough.” Combeferre gave a little shudder, thinking of Azelma’s words from the morning. “Do you want to grab lunch before philosophy?”

“I can’t. I’ve got two meetings beforehand, and I’ve got another one after class.”

“What for?” Combeferre asked, obviously intrigued.
Enjolras hesitated, taking longer than was strictly necessary to force a bulky five subject notebook into his bag. “Grantaire and I are meeting with all of his professors. We’re trying to keep him from failing out of school so he doesn’t lose his financial aid.”

“Ah. Well good luck then.” Combeferre’s voice was warm and reassuring, and Enjolras was visibly relieved. “Come on Enj, you know I wasn’t really jealous.”

“I know. But if you were, you wouldn’t have been wrong. I’ve been a bad friend.”

Combeferre shrugged. “Not really. Just keep being a good boyfriend. Eventually Grantaire won’t need as much of your support and I’ll be able to steal back some more of your free time again.”

“I’ve got to run or I’ll miss Grantaire’s lit professor for the day. I’ll see you in philosophy though.”

“Yeah, see you later.” Combeferre shrugged his bag on and started for the dining commons. If he was lucky he’d be able to catch Marius and Jehan before they left for Victorian lit.

Only one of them was in a good mood when Enjolras and Grantaire left campus together Monday evening.

Grantaire knew he was being whiny and ungrateful. Really, it was fantastic that Enjolras had saved him from flunking out of school. He was even back on track for graduating next spring, as Enjolras proved himself ten times more competent than Grantaire’s advisor.

However, with all the makeup work he’d been given he’d be lucky if he could set foot out of their apartments without a book pressed to his nose until the end of the semester. Really, Grantaire felt Enjolras could have waited for the professors to suggest makeup work without offering it first himself. He’d even thought up his own supplemental assignments, which was actually a little impressive as Enjolras was not an art major and should not have had the type of command of the subject matter to pitch research assignments. And he’d somehow talked Grantaire into signing up for summer classes…

“You are lucky you’re so damn pretty,” Grantaire grumbled as he flopped into the passenger side of
Enjolras shook his head. “Oh come on, ‘Taire. Smile. You’ve still got your financial aid and you’re going to graduate with me next spring. We’ll get to walk together.”

“Except I was counting on stretching my undergrad out for at least seven years. Do you know how many jobs there are for art majors? Fucking none, that’s how many.”

“Well sure, not with the meandering path you’ve taken for your undergrad. I’m going to talk to some friends I have at the art museum downtown. Combeferre and I were thinking of doing our internships there. I bet I can snag you a spot too, considering one of the new wings is named after my grandfather.” A touch of bitterness came out for that comment, but Enjolras didn’t linger on the subject. “Anyway, doing an internship now will help you when you’re applying for a job later.”

“But I don’t want to do an internship. I want to dick around and paint.”

“So what’s your plan? Considering the way you’ve been borrowing so far, you’re going to have a lot of debt when you graduate.”

Grantaire slouched down in the seat and pouted. “I know. I’ll deal with it when I get there. I suppose I could always be a trophy husband for a more driven sort of guy.”

Enjolras rolled his eyes. “If you want me to pay off your student loans you’re going to have to be a lot more than a trophy husband, which, by the way, you’d be terrible at given how lippy and insolent you are. I suppose I could use a butler though. They’ve always seemed really useful.”

Grantaire reached over and whapped him.

He mostly got over his pouting by the time they got to Enjolras’ apartment. Enjolras went for the kitchen to fix a post-school snack and Grantaire trailed after him. “Are you sleeping here again?”

Grantaire shrugged. “Eponine’s hanging with her siblings, so I don’t need to go back to the studio for her. Why, are you getting sick of me?”
“Of course not. Just trying to plan out the night. Let’s see…you’re not in that rough of shape for your multimedia class, so you should probably try to make headway on your comp II response papers tonight. Have you read Things Fall Apart yet?”

Grantaire shook his head. “Enjolras, I did homework last night. Can’t we do something else tonight? Something together?”

Enjolras glared at him, and it brought Grantaire back to the old days, from before they’d started dating. “You need to do your homework every night.”

“Every single night? Even weekends?”

“To keep from falling behind again like this, yes. Here.” Enjolras abandoned the peanut butter and Nutella wraps he was making to dig a planner out of his bag. “I got you this from the bookstore today.”

Grantaire flipped it open, not exactly surprised to see that so many of the pages were already covered with Enjolras’ writing. He must have stolen Grantaire’s syllabuses at some point, because he’d filled in when every single major assignment and test was for the rest of the semester. He’d also set target dates for first drafts, he’d apparently made a few appointments for Grantaire at the school’s Writing Center, and he’d set aside two Saturdays in April to head into Boston and visit museums for his makeup assignments.

“You are such a god damn control freak,” Grantaire muttered. “What’re those little circled Rs supposed to be?” Enjolras had drawn at least one in every week, with additional circled Rs after each major due date.

“Rewards,” Enjolras answered. “You only get them if you stay on task with your work though.”

“Oh.”

“Combeferre and I started that system when we were in high school. Of course, at that point our rewards were going into the city for special lectures or going to a concert or something. Rewards between the two of us will be a bit…different.”

That got Grantaire’s attention. “What did you have in mind?” Enjolras was blushing faintly, and
trying to hide it by turning away from Grantaire, who kept stepping back into his line of sight, trying to reclaim eye contact. “Enjolras, what’s reward number one?”

Enjolras chewed his lip, then stepped into the pantry and returned a moment later with possibly the last thing Grantaire expected to see him with; a bag from Amazing, the adult store a couple towns over. “If you quit your bitching and do your homework tonight I’ll let you see what’s in the bag. And if you meet all your study goals this week, we’ll use it.”

“You’re ruthless,” Grantaire said, voice only breaking a little as he spoke. His boyfriend grinned at him, then turned around and put the bag back in its hiding place. He walked over to his peanut butter and Nutella, perfectly innocently, as though he hadn’t just filled Grantaire’s sick mind with a whole host of perverted fantasies, and now they included licking Nutella off of Enjolras and damn would that be hot-

“Don’t you have homework to do?” Enjolras asked. He licked a glob of peanut butter off of his index finger, sucking much more of it into his mouth than he really needed to considering the peanut butter was only on the pad of his finger.

Grantaire whimpered. But he dutifully grabbed his bag and retreated into the bedroom to start reading Things Fall Apart.

Grantaire was a good chunk of the way through the book some hours later (enough to write the first draft of his paper, anyway), and feeling pretty morose because as it turns out, Things Fall Apart was a bit of a downer. Grantaire decided he’d earned a study break and ventured out into the apartment to see what his boyfriend was up to.

He figured Enjolras would be studying too, which made him kind of wonder why they weren’t studying together. Enjolras had even said he was a fan of cuddling while he read.

Then he got into the living room and found Enjolras once again engrossed in the preschooler show he’d been watching with the Thenardier children the day before. Grantaire quirked an eyebrow. He coughed loudly, as Enjolras was so entranced by the show that he didn’t notice Grantaire walk in.

“Oh! Uh, hi.” Enjolras turned the television off. “I was just…um…checking to see if this show was something we should put on for the boys when we have them again this weekend.”
“You watched over an hour of it yesterday, so y’know, if you haven’t made up your mind or not yet we might be better off with Blue’s Clues or something.” Grantaire sat down next to Enjolras on the couch. “You can just admit you like it. I won’t judge you.”

“Yes you will.”

“Alright, just a smidge, but it’s only fair that I get to tease. I mean, your normal taste in TV is really fucking pretentious. What the hell even is this thing?” Grantaire grabbed the remote and turned the show back on.

“It’s called the Fresh Beat Band. It’s about some quirky music school kids singing silly songs about friendship and the like. There’s lots of bright colors and upbeat music. I can’t even explain why it keeps sucking me in. It’s hypnotic.”

“Mm hm.” Grantaire couldn’t help but agree. “I’ll say this though. Even though it’s a preschool show, I don’t want to punch any of those kids in the face. I can’t normally say that about children’s television. In fact—”

“Ssh shush!” Enjolras grabbed the remote from Grantaire and turned the volume up. Grantaire looked at him in some surprise, then turned his attention back to the television, curious about just what had brought a rare dazed look to the typically intensely focused young activist.

Grantaire was confused. He’d been expecting a musical number, but as far as he could tell the only discernible change in the show was that the music students were now talking to a cheerful Brit in a bright green sweater. Grantaire kept waiting for something else to happen, but nothing did. The guy chatted with the Fresh Beats for a few minutes, gave them some instruments, and then they went on their way. Enjolras actually turned the volume back down and turned away from the television when the next music number started up.

Well that was…odd.

“Enjolras, are you okay?”

And that got the dazed smile off his face. “Yes. A bit embarrassed to be caught watching a show for four years olds, but other than that…why?”
“You do realize you just shut me up so you could check out that guy in the green sweater, right?”

“I was not checking Reed out!” Enjolras insisted.

Grantaire arched his brow again. “You know his name? Please tell me that was the character’s name.”

“Of course it was. The actor’s name is Hadley Fraser. I looked him up on IMDB last night. Er, that is…shit. Alright, I’ve got a bit of a crush. A thoroughly stupid and idiotic crush, and if you tease me about it you’re never seeing what’s in that bag.”

Grantaire let out an indignant squawking noise. “Hey! That’s completely unfair! You’ve got to give me at least a few minutes to give you shit for this before you start making threats!”

“Says who?” The poor guy’s face was already bright red. Grantaire did feel a bit bad, but only a bit. Enjolras was so dignified and Grantaire had so little dignity himself. It was nice to get an opportunity for a role reversal, and to have it snatched away so quickly was unjust. “It’s not like you’ve never had a silly celebrity crush before,” Enjolras continued.

“Well yes, but never on guys in children’s shows. Besides, he’s not even that cute. That dorky beatboxer in the yellow sweatshirt is cuter.”

“ Twist?” Enjolras scrunched his face up. Clearly he didn’t agree with Grantaire. “He’s not my type. He’s too…puppyish.”

“Oh good, you don’t like puppies either.”

“Besides, it’s not like the Fresh Beat Band is the only thing Hadley Fraser’s ever been in. He does musical theater. Jehan and I are going to watch the Phantom of the Opera anniversary special he’s in later in the week.”

Grantaire grinned. “So your crush doesn’t just provide instruments for annoyingly peppy kids in candy colored costumes, he’s also known for playing a physically deformed psychopath. Now that’s hawt.”
“He played Raoul, not the Phantom. Will you please stop teasing me? This really is embarrassing. I don’t even know why I like him so much. It’s just…there’s something kind of familiar about him that I can’t place.”

Grantaire turned back towards the TV and shrugged. “At least he’s British. As long as he stays on his own continent and refrains from being competition, you’re welcome to crush all you want.”

“Grantaire, I promise I’ll never leave you for Hadley Fraser,” Enjolras said solemnly. Then they both started laughing at the ludicrousness of the conversation.

Grantaire snuggled up to Enjolras and wrapped his arms around his waist. “If it doesn’t count as a betrayal to Jehan, I wouldn’t mind watching that Phantom of the Opera thing with you.”

Enjolras ran a hand through Grantaire’s hair, then went to the menu and searched for the Phantom of the Opera: Live at the Royal Albert Hall.

———

“Uh oh.”

“Uh oh what?” Eponine asked. She was just finishing counting out the register for the night and getting ready to divide up the tips. It was the best part of the night; Marius was just as pretty as she was and he flirted with customers almost as well, though he never realized he was doing it. Between the two of them they made an absolute killing.

However, her tip-magnet had just finished sweeping up and was now staring at his phone with a frown. “I just noticed a text from Courf. He said he can’t give me a ride.”

“Shit.” Eponine had been planning on getting a ride with them. “Did he say why?”

“He just said he’s got plans with Jehan. He sent the text at the start of my shift, I just didn’t notice it because I turned my phone off.”
“Well why would you do a stupid thing like that?” Eponine snapped.

“Because I was working?”

She scowled. “Dammit Pontmercy, this is just unacceptable. One of us is going to have to suck it up and get a car. I’ll finish with the tables. You start texting your friends and see if you can get one of them to give us a ride home.”

Marius looked a bit taken aback, but he didn’t comment on Eponine’s presumptions about mooching a ride home. He did start texting around though, and by the time Eponine had finished stacking all the chairs on top of the tables Enjolras was on his way to get them (apparently he needed a break from some joke Grantaire was running into the ground).

Marius hopped up onto the counter and started trading texts with Cosette, and Eponine leaned against the front window to keep an eye out for the Prius. “Hey Marius, you don’t think Courfeyrac is avoiding me, do you?”

Marius shrugged. “Why would he be avoiding you?”

She smirked. “Oh, I don’t know…maybe because shortly after finding out I had feelings for him he decided to go out with someone else instead?”

“Oh, right. Sorry Ponine. I wasn’t paying full attention.” Marius looked up from his phone. “Did you want to talk? I don’t think Courfeyrac’s upset with you or anything. He might be a little embarrassed though.”

“You certainly were,” Eponine teased. She’d knocked the awkward right out of their friendship before their first shift together post-confrontation had been half finished, and now their dynamic was settling into an easy friendship. Eponine found that she enjoyed Marius’ company more than ever, now that the pining and tension were gone.

She was still going to jump all over him if he and Cosette broke up, but that was beside the point.

“Yes, I was embarrassed,” Marius admitted. “But Courf hasn’t mentioned anything about wanting to avoid you. He probably is just hanging out with Jehan…oh, I just got a text from him.” Marius looked back at his phone and frowned. “Oh no. I must have sent him the group text when I asked for
a ride. He said he’s on his way to get us.”

“Well tell him he doesn’t need to because Enjolras is coming,” Eponine said, rolling her eyes. “It’s an easy enough fix.”

“He’s already on his way though. I feel bad. He must have ended his date early.”

“Boo frickin’ hoo. Prouvaire will deal. I’m going to take out the trash. Keep an eye on the window. We don’t want to miss the statue.”

“Uh huh.” Marius continued sitting on the counter typing out texts. Eponine pulled a face at him, knowing that he’d miss it, then put on her coat and grabbed the trash.

She was walking out back to the dumpsters when she thought she heard someone behind her. Eponine looked around a little, shrugged it off, and continued on her way. She was at the end of the alley hoisting the bags up into their dumpster when Montparnasse stepped out of the shadows, blocking her path back to the café.

“Hello Ponine.”

“Montparnasse,” Eponine said, feeling her heart hammering in her chest. “What are you doing here?”

He took a few steps forward and she took a few steps back. His expression was hard and passionless, but his eyes were blazing with anger. He reached into his pocket and Eponine started breathing heavily, sure that he was going for a knife.

She was no less terrified when he took out a bright pink post-it, balled it up, and threw it at her feet. It was the note she’d left him the night she’d run away to Courfeyrac’s. “You fucking whore. Couldn’t even tell me in person you were taking off. You mooched off of me for three years, and then without a word took off to start spreading your legs for a flock of uppity college twits.”

“I didn’t mooch, exactly,” Eponine said, wishing her hands would stop shaking. “I did help you with rent. And, and I bought you that vest for Christmas. You really liked it, and baby, you looked so hot in it-”
“Shut up you fucking skank!” Montparnasse growled. He stalked towards her, and she tried to edge away.

“Parnasse, please don’t hurt me,” Eponine pleaded.

“You’d do anything to save yourself, you selfish whore. How many of those dickless sons of bitches have you fucked?” he spat.

“Maybe this is just my inexperience with these matters showing, but I’d think that if we were dickless then she wouldn’t be able to fuck any of us,” a cold voice sneered from behind them. For the first time since he'd made his presence known, Eponine dared to look away from Montparnasse and saw Enjolras standing about ten feet away with his arms folded over his chest. “I advise you to leave the girl alone and be on your way.”

Montparnasse lunged, and Eponine let out a startled shriek when he grabbed her and held her against him. The next thing she knew she had a blade pressed against her neck. “Turn and walk away pretty boy, or I’ll slit the stupid bitch’s throat.”

Enjolras held his hands up. “I’ve already called the police. It would be prudent of you to let her go and run for it now.”

Montparnasse used one hand to keep the blade resting on Eponine’s neck, and extended the other towards Enjolras. “Pull up your call history and then give me your phone.”

Montparnasse let out a low, terrifying laugh when he saw the unmistakable ‘oh fuck’ look on Enjolras’ face at having his bluff called. “You didn’t call the cops at all. You just charged right in here like a knight in shining armor, didn’t you? Fucking twit.”

“No, I did call the cops,” Enjolras insisted. He took a step forward, and Montparnasse pressed the knife closer. Eponine shivered, but tried to keep as still as possible. She could feel warm tears sliding down her face. Enjolras took his phone out of his pocket and edged a little closer, slowly bringing it towards Montparnasse’s open hand.

Eponine was absolutely certain that Montparnasse was going to kill her. Her only hope at that point was that he wouldn’t kill Enjolras too. If only the stubborn idiot would run away. Montparnasse didn’t like distance weapons. He preferred the intimacy of close-range edged weapons, and Enjolras
was athletic and fast. He could get away. Why was he trying to play hero?

Montparnasse’s fingers closed around Enjolras’ phone, and then he was left with a dilemma. Enjolras was now close enough to touch them, so taking his eyes off of him for even the few seconds it would take to completely call his bluff was dangerous. Eponine could clearly imagine the uncertainty in his dangerously beautiful dark eyes. He must know that Enjolras had been lying, but he’d also want to confirm it.

Montparnasse darted his eyes to the phone, and in those precious few seconds Enjolras pried the arm clutching the knife away from Eponine. She ducked backwards and managed to run off to the side while Enjolras and Montparnasse fought with each other. Enjolras had both of his hands closed around the skinny wrist still clutching the knife. Montparnasse grabbed his hair with the other hand and pulled his neck back, baring his throat, then kneeed him in the stomach. Enjolras elbowed him in the face, still pushing the knife away.

“HELP!!” Eponine screamed. “Somebody help us!!”

“Eponine?!” She heard Marius’ voice faintly from inside the café. She kept screaming while Enjolras and Montparnasse wrestled with each other, but let out a terrified gasp when she saw a streak of red paint the snow.

Enjolras was still struggling against Montparnasse, but he was doing so from his knees. Montparnasse’s eyes lit up. “Fucking pretentious blowhard pretty boy. Always hated you and your fucking hair. I’ve got the best hair, you hear me you cocksucking bastard?!?” Enjolras fell to the ground in a bloodied heap, and Montparnasse kicked him in the ribs.

Eponine fell backwards, her vision entirely obscured by tears. Then she heard pounding footsteps and shouts. Backup.

Eponine wiped her eyes, then charged forward, grabbed Montparnasse’s hand, and bit him until he dropped the knife. Marius cracked him over the back of the head with the aluminum baseball bat Marguerite had left at the café after last week’s open night mic had coincided with her nephew’s first little league game. Marius hit him again, and Montparnasse dropped to the ground, unconscious.

Courfeyrac was holding Enjolras, and there was far too much red, and not enough color in skin that was usually so warm. Enjolras was starting to actually resemble a marble statue, albeit a sickly one.
“Enjolras! Keep your eyes open! Come on dude, don’t do this. Fuck! Marius, call an ambulance!”

“I-I-fuck.” The bat fell to the pavement with a clatter, and then Marius was struggling to get his phone out of his pocket with shaking fingers.

Eponine crawled across the ground and picked up Enjolras’ phone from where he’d dropped it during the scuffle. She dialed nine one one, handed the phone off to Marius, and then violently threw up next to the dumpster.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, sorry about the cliffy. I expect I'll be getting some flack for this. Look guys, I've got the next two days off and tomorrow has been set aside specifically as a writing day. I'll get the next chapter up as soon as I can, I promise! I won't leave you in anticipation for too long...even if that would be kind of fun ;)

Also, I couldn't help myself with the Fresh Beat thing. Thanks to my two year old nephew and my three year old cousin, I encountered Hadley Fraser as Reed before I came across him as Grantaire. I've been wanting to poke fun at that for ages now, and the Thenardier kids finally gave me an excuse to do so <3
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Grantaire falls apart, Combeferre does too, and Jehan is a bad ass.

Yes, you read that right.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for not answering your comments just yet. I like to try to do that before I post a new chapter, but considering I left you off on a cliffhanger (and damn what a response it got! Maybe I should do that more often…) I thought it best to get the new chapter up as quickly as possible.

So this chapter is definitely angrier than some of the previous ones. It deals with suicide and depression, so consider yourselves warned. Also, I'm generally pretty loyal to the write what you know school of thought (keeping in mind that you can learn quite a lot from dedicated research) but this chapter is a total departure for me. I've never been stabbed before, so please take my portrayal of the whole hospitalization experience with a grain of salt.

And once more, thanks for all the support. You guys continue to be a joy to write for <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Grantaire was getting bored enough waiting for Enjolras to get back that he came very near doing more homework voluntarily. He couldn’t imagine what was keeping his boyfriend, as driving to Brammer Street and back did not take two and a half hours, even with dropping Marius at Courf’s. Hell, even if they had to detour to Joly’s to bring Eponine home, he still should have been back already.

Grantaire grumbled under his breath. He figured the three of them had gone out for a late dinner or a snack or something. Considering how needy Grantaire had been lately, what with having Enjolras help him with school and supporting him while he babysat the Thenardier boys, he started worrying that his boyfriend had gotten sick of him. He must have needed a break from all that nagging, and even though cuddling and watching the musical together had seemed nice, it must have just been more smothering for Enjolras. And Grantaire hadn’t helped matters by teasing him about his crush, and Enjolras must have been more annoyed than he was letting on, so really a dinner out with Eponine and Marius must have seemed like an escape…

Grantaire dialed his nerves back a bit, reminding himself that Enjolras hated Eponine. He couldn’t see the three of them going out for dinner without him. And Enjolras wasn’t nice enough to pretend to enjoy an activity just to make Grantaire happy. If he hadn’t been having fun watching Phantom with Grantaire, Grantaire would have known.

He went back to wondering where the fuck his boyfriend was, but tried to be sane about it this time.
“If you really want to know, send him a text,” Grantaire muttered to himself. He patted his pockets for his phone, but it wasn’t there. Then he heard it start ringing from the bedroom. Grantaire jogged down the hall to get it. He’d been using it as a bookmark in Things Fall Apart.

To his annoyance, it was Combeferre, not Enjolras. “Hel-”

“Get your shoes on and get downstairs. I’m turning onto Enj’s street now.”

“What? What the hell’s going-”

“Downstairs now, ‘Taire. Five seconds.” Combeferre ended the call, and Grantaire let out a small scream of frustration.

Behavior like that was making it very difficult for Grantaire to behave rationally about his missing boyfriend. He did grab his shoes and his sweatshirt though, turned the TV and all the lights off, and locked up behind him. Combeferre was leaning on the horn by the time he got down to the driveway. Grantaire was tempted to yell at him about Enjolras’ live-in landlords, but then he saw the look on Combeferre’s face.

Grantaire dove into the passenger seat and Combeferre started driving before he’d even gotten the door shut, let alone his seat buckled. “What happened? Where are we going?”

Combeferre’s mouth was set in a hard line. “To the hospital. He’s-He…”

“What happened?!” Grantaire screamed. Combeferre jumped, but he thankfully kept his hands steady on the wheel somehow even though he looked like he wanted to break down as badly as Grantaire, who couldn’t seem to get enough air in his lungs. “What the fuck’s going on? He’s okay, isn’t he? He has to be okay. I can’t-just tell me he’s okay.”

“Quiet down and I’ll tell you what I know.”

“That’s not telling me he’s okay!”

“I know,” Combeferre snapped. He took a deep breath, and Grantaire tried to get control of himself. “He went to get Marius and Eponine from the café and he must have seen Eponine getting ambushed by Montparnasse. He tried to fight the guy off, but Montparnasse stabbed him. He asked to see us before he lost consciousness.”

Grantaire curled as near as he could into a fetal position while sitting in the passenger side of Combeferre’s car. He started violently sobbing, shaking his head in denial and repeating god knows what in a state of heightened despair. Combeferre’s eyes were wet too when he finally parked the car at the hospital. He had to physically support Grantaire to get him into the emergency room.

The next thing Grantaire knew he had arms around him, and he was leaning against Courfeyrac, whose t-shirt was stained with Enjolras’ blood. Courfeyrac and Combeferre were talking, but Grantaire couldn’t process what they were saying. The skinny arms around his neck disappeared, and then Eponine was standing in front of him, and she coaxed him over to a seat.

“En-Enjolras-”

“You can’t see him yet, sweetie. He’s in surgery,” Eponine said. She had a bandage on her neck and her makeup was all smudged. Grantaire was having a hard time looking directly at her. There was too much pity in her eyes.

Grantaire hid his head in his hands and started crying again. He felt a large, warm hand soothingly
running down his back. Marius whispered some kind of reassuring nonsense at him, and it helped a little. Grantaire had always liked the puppy’s voice. Then Courfeyrac was sitting next to him, and abandoning all semblance of dignity, he pulled Grantaire into his lap and held him like the child he felt like while he cried.

He knew a lot was going on around him while they waited. People kept coming over to talk to Combeferre, who managed to look like he was in charge. Courfeyrac tried to chime in occasionally, but the nurses and doctors didn’t seem to know what to make of the chipper college student with the sobbing wreck nestled in his arms, so they continued giving the updates to Combeferre, who relayed them around the small circle.

Marius was in charge of texting everything out to their other friends, while Eponine ran around to get coffees that no one was drinking and snacks that no one wanted. She pressed some tissues into Grantaire’s hand at one point, but he wasn’t willing to lift his face from Courfeyrac’s t-shirt long enough to use them.

If Enjolras died then he was going to die too. Grantaire couldn’t imagine his life without Enjolras in it, not anymore. He’d pledged himself too deeply to his lover. He could barely comprehend how he’d get by if Enjolras ever dumped him, which he’d always felt to be a strong possibility. But if he died…Grantaire would probably join him within the hour.

Well, maybe not within the hour. He’d have to find some way to kill Montparnasse first, but as soon as that was through then he’d kill himself. The only question was how. While Courfeyrac stroked his hair and whispered to him that it was all going to be okay, Grantaire thought about the X-Acto blades sitting in a box at the bottom of his closet. He could slit his wrists with those, and then he’d bleed out, and it’d almost be like dying with Enjolras because then they’d both die from edged weapons.

“I haven’t heard him say anything for almost an hour.” Grantaire was dimly aware of Courfeyrac talking to Combeferre about him. “Do you think we should flag down a nurse and ask them to give him something?”

“Just leave him be,” Eponine said. “He’ll be fine once he gets to see Enjolras.”

“However long that’s going to be,” Marius muttered.

Grantaire couldn’t remember if he’d sterilized his crafting knives the last time he’d used them to cut himself. It didn’t really matter though; if he was going to kill himself then the implements really didn’t need to be clean. They were sitting there at the bottom of the closet, waiting for him. As soon as he put Montparnasse in the ground, he was going to get the little box of knives from his apartment, then walk across town to Enjolras’ apartment. He’d lay down on their bed, bury his face in Enjolras’ pillow, probably have a good cry, and then he wouldn’t need to miss Enjolras anymore. He wouldn’t need to try to put together a shadow of a life after losing his only light...

“Guys? He’s mumbling some stuff and it’s freaking me out.”

“Take a break, Courf. ‘Taire?” Combeferre coaxed Grantaire away from Courfeyrac and into a seat by himself. Grantaire pulled his knees to his chest and dropped his forehead against them, back to sobbing loudly, while Combeferre wrapped an arm around him.

“Courfeyrac, get up. You-you look like you need to take a walk,” Marius whispered.

“I’m al-”
“You’re not. C’mon, let’s go over to the gift shop and see if we can get you a new shirt. At least let’s wash your face. I’ve never seen you cry before.”

Grantaire heard footsteps, and then it was just him, Combeferre, and Eponine.

“I thought that nurse said the two of you would be able to see him by now,” Eponine said.

“I thought we’d be able to see him by now too.”

“Ferre, I’m so sorry. This is all my fault.”

“Please Eponine, don’t start thinking that way.”

“Start? I haven’t been able to stop! I can’t even-if I hadn’t…and I was so useless, and he didn’t even hesitate. And he saved me even though he doesn’t like me.” Eponine broke off into near-hysterical sounding laughter. “He’s got to be okay. If he’s not…he’s got to get better at least long enough so I can kick his ass for putting us all through this. He should have just left me and run away. This is such a fucking waste.”

“Eponine, it’s not your fault.”

They were silent for some time after that. Grantaire went back to thinking about his knives, and he was starting to feel an odd sort of calm now that he’d formed a plan. He wasn’t crying anymore, at least.

Then Marius and Eponine forced him to his feet and walked him over to a bathroom. Eponine smiled and tried to crack jokes that he couldn’t force his mind to take in while she wiped at his face with a damp paper towel, and Marius tried to get him to take a sip of water but only managed to spill some down the front of his shirt.

Then something they said finally penetrated the fog that had settled in his mind. “Come on, ‘Taire. Come back to Earth at least a little. You don’t want Enjolras to see you like this, do you?”

“W-we’re going to see Enjolras?”

“You and Combeferre are, yeah. And you’ve got to let us know how he’s doing,” Eponine said. “So stay sharp and be a good reporter for us, yeah?”

“Tell us everything,” Marius added. “And tell him we’re all thinking of him.”

Grantaire distantly nodded, and then Marius and Eponine helped him out of the bathroom and over to where Combeferre was waiting for him. Combeferre took his arm and then they set off down the hall after a nurse in Snoopy scrubs. They were shown into a small, private room. Most of the space was taken up by the bed and an inordinate amount of machines and equipment that Grantaire couldn’t make sense of.

The figure lying prone on the bed took up the bulk of his attention anyway. Enjolras was barely recognizable. His usual radiance had been condensed, somehow, reduced. He looked like a shadow of himself. All the color was drained from his skin, his hair was lank and limp on the pillow, his eyes were barely open and unfocused, and he was struggling for each breath despite the clear mask over his face.

He was alive though. For the first time he could remember, Grantaire prayed to a deity he’d never really believed in, his heart full of gratitude.
He rushed for the chair at Enjolras’ side and took one of the weakened hands in his, showering it with kisses and rambling all sorts of gibberish. Combeferre rubed his back, tears gently leaking from his eyes in his own quiet show of emotion.

Enjolras turned a bit to look at him and tried to smile around the mask. His hand twitched a little in Grantaire’s, and Grantaire finally heard some of the words that were pouring from his own lips. “-love you so fucking much and I can’t picture going on without you at this point, I just can’t, and what in the hell were you thinking doing anything that could take you from me, don’t you know that I need you to breathe? I fucking…I couldn’t…”

“Calm down, ‘Taire. It’s going to be okay,” Combeferre whispered. Then he turned his attention to Enjolras. “But seriously man, way to scare the shit out of us.”

Enjolras tried to say something, but they both quickly shushed him. “You need to rest,” Combeferre said, attempting to sound stern. “The nurse already said we were going to get kicked out if we agitated you.”

“And I don’t have any intention of leaving your side until you’re ready to go, so, y’know…” Grantaire gripped his hand more firmly and scooched so close to the bed that he may as well have just climbed onto it at that point. Enjolras smiled at him, and he felt his tears start fresh at the sight of some comforting familiarity. “Love you,” Grantaire repeated. He watched Enjolras’ lips move to form the same words, though he did it without sound.

“What is going on in here?”

Grantaire and Combeferre turned to look at the doorway at the sound of an angry female voice. Enjolras’ mother was standing in the there, his father lurking just behind her. Combeferre started walking towards them.

“Marie, Paul! Hi. You finally made it. Did you speak with the doctors yet? Do you need me to update you-”

“What I need you to do,” Marie snapped, jabbing a finger at his chest. “-is to get the hell out of this sickroom and take that miserable piece of filth with you! It’s probably his fault Enjolras got himself knifed like a common street thug to begin with!”

Combeferre took a step back, surprised by the outburst from the looks of it. Grantaire defensively tightened his grip on Enjolras’ hand. “I’m not going anywhere.” It was the most conviction he’d been able to muster into his tone since hearing about the stabbing.

“Oh yes you most certainly are!” Marie sneered. “We’ll have him on family only in a snap, and then you’re both out.” She marched over to Grantaire and roughly shoved his shoulder. “Now get out of that chair, you ugly beast. It should be his mother at his bedside, not the filth that’s ruining his life.”

Enjolras tried to lean up in bed, but Grantaire and Combeferre darted forward to lower him back against the mattress. “Enj, stop it. I’ll take care of it, I promise,” Combeferre pleaded.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” Grantaire added brokenly. “Please, lie back.”

He didn’t look happy about it, but he did as instructed.

Paul walked over to Combeferre and tapped his shoulder. “I’ll talk to her. Just humor her for now. It’ll be easier that way.”

Combeferre looked conflicted. His glance shifted from the weakened but still clearly irate Enjolras, to
Grantaire, who looked ready to throw up, and then back to Paul. When he opened his mouth to speak, Enjolras darted his hand out, quicker than he should have been able to move by any stretch of the imagination, and seized Grantaire’s wrist in a vice-like grip.

Grantaire tried not to smirk when he turned towards Marie. He did his best to make his tone sound innocent. “I don’t think he wants me to leave.”

“I don’t care. You’ve no right to be here, and if you don’t watch it then I’ll get them to chuck you right out of the building,” Marie snapped.

“Combeferre, get him out of here and I’ll handle it.” Paul’s voice was low and menacing. It was hard not to listen to a voice like that.

Combeferre worked to pry Enjolras’ hand off of Grantaire, his hand shaking a little as he committed the betrayal. “I’m sorry Enj, but I don’t want them to get us all kicked out. We’ll be back to see you as soon as we can, I promise.”

“They can’t keep me away,” Grantaire added. He leaned over to place a kiss on the worryingly pale forehead. “Love you.”

Enjolras was mouthing something at them, but they couldn’t understand him around the mask, not without any breath support. Paul all but pushed them out of the room and, having no other choice, they went back to the waiting room.

Jehan was just walking into the emergency room struggling under the weight of two trays of coffees and a box of donuts, when he saw Grantaire and Combeferre trudging into the room from the other end. He gaped at them in some surprise. “What are you two doing out here? I thought you’d be in with Enjolras.”

“Paul and Marie kicked us out,” Combeferre said.

Jehan frowned. “I don’t think they can do that.”

Grantaire scowled. “Yeah? Go tell them that.”

“I think I will. Would somebody please take these from me?” He held out the trays and the box. Courfeyrac jumped up from his seat and helped his boyfriend deposit them on a nearby table. “Thanks, love,” Jehan kissed his cheek, then he shrugged out of his coat and scarf, neatly laid them over the back of a chair, and marched over to the desk.

“Excuse me, but I’m here to see my friend Enjolras. I believe his parents are in with him now, and I’d like to have a word with them.”

The woman at the desk gave him a stern look. “I’m sorry dear, but the boy’s mother specifically requested the family be left alone with him for now. If you kids want to come back tomorrow during regular visiting hours-”

“No, we’d rather not. You see, Enjolras is estranged from his family, so they shouldn’t be making these kinds of decisions for him. But that young man over there,” here Jehan motioned towards Combeferre, “is as good as a brother to him. And that other young man standing next to him is the love of his life. I’m absolutely certain that their proper place right now is at his bedside.”
“Be that as it may, his parents are his guardians—”

“No they’re not,” Jehan said, having to put some effort into keeping a polite smile on his face at this point. “Enjolras is twenty two years old. He’s a legal adult. His health insurance is under our university’s plan, not his father’s, and neither of his parents serve as his health care proxy. Now, considering that as of January two thousand eleven, all hospitals that receive federal funding, of which this is one, are required to allow their patients choice in visitation rights or risk repercussions, don’t you think you ought to run back there and ask Enjolras if he’d rather be with his boyfriend or the parents that he goes to great lengths to avoid? Because if you want to continue to indulge Marie’s bigotry regarding her gay son, I can nip outside and get on the phone with the ACLU-sorry, the American Civil Liberties Union, and we can sue the pants off of you. I mean, if you’d rather. It’s all up to you, I suppose.”

The woman almost tripped over her feet in her haste to run down the hall. Jehan made a satisfied little noise, turned around, and beckoned eagerly to Combeferre and Grantaire, who warily approached him.

“What did you do?” Grantaire asked.

“Got you your visitation rights. Combeferre, did you really forget that you’re Enjolras’ health care proxy?”

Combeferre frowned. “I didn’t forget. I was just giving Paul a chance to talk Marie down without causing a scene.”

“Really. Did you think that was likely to work?”

“Well, no…I suppose not. I don’t know. I’m running on the memory of coffee and some faded adrenaline. Will you give me a break?”

Jehan laughed. “Oh, hold on. Someone’s coming.” He turned on his heel and brightly greeted the doctor, nurse, and administrative-type of man in a neat suit who approached them. “Hello there.”

“Hi,” the guy in the suit greeted, looking incredibly smarmy and flashing a used car salesman type smile. “Let me just say, gentlemen, that we are so sorry for the confusion about our hospital’s visiting policies. I hope you won’t misconstrue this into anything other than the mix-up it was. If you’ll come with us, we’ll make sure you get to see your friend.”

“Certainly,” Jehan said brightly. He linked arms with Combeferre and Grantaire and followed the ass kissing hospital employees down a few hallways and over to Enjolras’ room.

They found Marie and Paul standing at the foot of Enjolras’ bed screaming at each other while Enjolras held a staring content with a ceiling tile. The unhappy couple stopped mid-word and turned to gape at the small crowd in the doorway. “What are they doing here?” Marie demanded.

“Exercising human rights. It feels rather invigorating,” Jehan answered. “I was just reminding the hospital that Enjolras is a legal adult with his own health insurance, that Combeferre is his health care proxy, and that as of two thousand eleven, they risk losing their federal funding if they try to discriminate against LGBTs regarding hospital visitation. Isn’t that fascinating?”

Marie’s mouth opened and closed a few times as she tried to work through all that. She turned an accusing look on her husband. “Enjolras isn’t under your insurance?”

“No. We opted for the university’s health care plan instead.” Paul chuckled under his breath. “Marie, you’d better ask Enjolras and his friends if they don’t mind you staying. They seem to have every
right to throw us out.”

“But-but they almost got him killed!”

“No we didn’t, you stupid fucking cu-”

Combeferre pinned Grantaire against him and threw an arm over his mouth. He and Jehan turned cheery fake smiles on the hospital staff.

The suit cleared his throat. “I’m afraid Enjolras is only allowed four visitors at a time, maximum, at the moment.”

Enjolras reached up an arm and pointed first at Grantaire, then a little higher to get Combeferre, and then over to Jehan. He pointed at his parents and made a slashing motion.

“That could mean anything!” Marie insisted.

Paul walked over to his son, gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze, and then took his wife’s arm. “Come on, Marie. You’ve caused enough disturbances for one night. Enjolras, we’ll be back to see you tomorrow night.”

Enjolras shot him an exasperated look, but Paul only chuckled again before dragging his wife from the room.

“Shall we send one of your friends in?” the suit asked. “There are another three of you in the waiting room still, aren’t there?”

“Yes there are, and that would be lovely,” Jehan answered.

“Also, you kids help yourselves to anything you want from the cafeteria. We’re so sorry for this mix-up. Enjoy your visit.” He bowed a few times, and then the staff were gone, and it was just the four of them.

Jehan walked over to the left side of Enjolras’ bed, as Grantaire had taken up a post on the right, and clasped his hand. “I’m glad I decided to bring everyone coffees. And here I thought I’d be crowding you guys.”

Enjolras mouthed a thank you.

“Oh, don’t think of it. You’d do the same for me, I’m sure.”

Grantaire snorted. “He’d have us organized into a full blown protest and turn it into a media spectacle. I like the Prouvaire method though. We got our asses kissed and we’re going to get free meals out of the deal.”


Courfeyrac joined them a moment later, munching on a donut and looking almost content. “I want a blow by blow of exactly what happened once you guys stepped back here. Enjolras’ mom looked like she was going to murder someone when she stormed out of the emergency room. She actually spit at our feet, and she called Eponine a brazen hussy.”

The friends gave Courfeyrac his requested recap, but by that point it was getting late enough that everyone’s adrenaline was starting to give way. When Jehan went out to the waiting room to give
Marius or Eponine a turn for a visit, he found them sleeping in the hard plastic chairs, leaning against each other. He woke them, and Marius ran back for a quick hello.

Eponine lowered her eyes and started fiddling with the work apron she was still wearing. “Hey, Jehan? What do you think the chances are of us getting Combeferre and Grantaire out of there for five seconds so I can talk to Enjolras in private?”

Jehan considered the girl for a moment. “I’ll see what I can do.”

When Marius and Courfeyrac came back, Jehan took Eponine’s hand and tugged her over to Enjolras’ room. “Boys, would you mind stepping into the hall with me for a minute? Eponine has something private to say to Enjolras.”

Grantaire’s first impulse was to tighten his grip on Enjolras’ hand, but this was quite a distinct scenario from what they’d just gone through with Enjolras’ parents. He slowly nodded, and he and Combeferre followed Jehan out of the room. Jehan smiled warmly at Eponine. “I’m going to head back to the waiting room. Good luck.”

Eponine returned the smile. “Thanks.”

Eponine sat down in Grantaire’s vacated chair, crossed her legs daintily at the ankle, and smoothed out the wrinkles in her work apron. That was as much time as she wanted to waste on her nerves though, as every second she spent at Enjolras’ bedside was a second stolen from the loved ones who deserved to be there.

He looked at her expectantly. Despite blood loss, a draining surgery, and what must have been an inordinate amount of pain, the main’s eyes were clear and almost as intense as ever. She couldn’t help but marvel a little at his willpower.

“Hey. I know I’m not your favorite person ever, so I’ll try to make this quick. Um…it feels a little trite to just say thank you, all things considered. It’s just…so Courf and I got into this fight, because I started trashing you for bullying Grantaire into quitting drinking. He said that you were saving Grantaire’s life, and I laughed at him. I just didn’t think…I mean, it just didn’t make sense to me. It sounds so presumptuous, that anyone’s capable of doing something like that for someone else. People don't actually go around saving the world and saving lives, you know? And I was like, well even if his drinking was hurting him, which I didn't think it was, Grantaire didn’t want to quit. He’s only doing it because of you. But Courfeyrac was definitely right, because he’s changed so much. I can see it, and I haven’t even been friends with him that long, but he has. He’s happier, but that’s not the only thing. He’s got hope now. It’s just, you’re like un-fucking-believable to someone like me. You see things and want to make them better even when they’re just beyond saving or even helping, and it was so much easier to laugh at it and dismiss you as some stuck up snob who wanted to tear Grantaire down for not being like you. But Courfeyrac was right because you are saving him, just like you saved me tonight, even though I didn’t deserve it. And thanks for infecting me with some of that ridiculous hope you have.”


She ran from the room, still breathing heavily when she got out to the hallway. Combeferre and Grantaire were leaning against the wall, but they both started for her when they saw how distressed
“Okay. Are you going to be okay?” Combeferre asked.

Eponine nodded. “Yeah, fine. Montparnasse is behind bars and I did not, in fact, get Enjolras killed and I… I’m good. I can breathe and everything. I’m going to go find the others. Courfeyrac was talking about taking off once we’d all gotten our chance to see Enjolras, and we still need to do some texting to catch the others up to speed. Good night guys.” She kissed each of their cheeks, and then turned and power walked back to the waiting room.

Courfeyrac was standing nearby with his sweatshirt zipped up to hide the tacky kitten t-shirt Marius had bought him from the hospital gift store. “Jehan and Marius are waiting in the parking lot. Ready to go home and pass out?”

Eponine forced a smile onto her face. “Where’s home tonight?”

“Your siblings are still with Joly, Feuilly, and Bossuet. But if it wouldn’t be weird, you’re perfectly welcome to come back to my place with us. The couch is still open.”

Eponine considered for barely a heartbeat. She felt a sudden surge of gratitude and appreciation for the fact that Courfeyrac was, indeed, not avoiding her. “Let’s just go back to your place and go to sleep.”

“Sure thing, princess.” He slung a friendly arm around her and escorted her outside.

Chapter End Notes

I didn't have it in me to further advance my other subplots this chapter, so Feuilly and Joly are probably going to receive a lot of attention in chapter nineteen. Thanks again for being awesome guys!
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Feuilly starts his new job. Enjolras drives everyone crazy, himself included.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Joly pitched a job at his nursing home, initially Feuilly thought he was joking. Then he dismissed it as an elaborate ruse to get him to start obsessively washing his hands (which, in part, it was). Finally, Legle’s comments about ten dollars an hour, full time, sick days, and health insurance all penetrated.

“And old people go to bed early,” Joly added. “When you get caught up with your bills, maybe you can start taking night classes again.”

That’s ultimately what sold him. He set up an interview with the head of the activities department, borrowed some clothes from Combeferre and Enjolras, the only friends of his capable of making a responsible visual impression, and did his best to hide his desperation from his potential employers. It’s not that he wanted to call Bingo and lead sing-a-longs, but the opportunity to get back into school and continue growing his mind, to potentially leave behind the dead end eight dollar an hour part time jobs, well, he wanted all that so much that he’d actually cried longingly into his pillow the night before his interview.

His potential boss introduced herself as Victumien and brought Feuilly to the second floor living room for the interview. A few surly looking old ladies were parked in front of a massive TV glaring at the Hallmark channel, and there was a lost looking old man walking circles around the room muttering to himself while he picked things up and put them back down.

“So let me just start by asking a simple, straightforward question, and please believe me when I say there is no bigotry or discrimination prompting this. Are you a homosexual?”

Feuilly stared at her incredulously, but she only regarded him patiently while waiting for an answer. “…no. Would it be a problem if I was?”

Victumien laughed and shook her head. “Not with me, honey. It’s just, the residents would probably take issue. This isn’t the most sensitive of generations we’re dealing with here. I hired a gay kid last month and, well, now I’m interviewing you. Your friend the CNA is pretty gay, so I just thought I’d check. If you are, I honestly couldn’t care less. I just want you to realize before this interview goes any further that if the residents think you are, you will be called by derogatory language on a daily basis and that there’s not much I can do about it.”

“Ah.” Feuilly wondered how Joly handled that. It probably helped that he only worked a few hours during the school year. But still… maybe his experiences at work contributed to how carefully closeted he was. “Well I’m straight.”

“Excellent.”
The interview was almost normal after that. Victurnien asked some odd questions now and then, delving a little more into Feuilly’s personal life than he would have liked, but generally his impression of her was favorable.

She called him the next morning to tell him that the only other interview had been a no-show, so he had the job. Feuilly excitedly put his notice in at the gas station and the convenience store the very same day. He made plans with a few of the guys to get drinks in celebration, but then Enjolras wound up in the hospital and that put a damper on the whole night.

Joly and Legle took the four younger Thenardiers to Combeferre’s house, as he’d gotten enough cots to comfortably sleep the kids for the days he was watching them. Bahorel joined Feuilly at his apartment, and they sat in a tense silence pretending to watch a basketball game but really waiting for Marius’ texted updates on Enjolras’ condition.

The silence was eventually shattered by his phone ringing, and Feuilly feared the worst. If someone had decided to take the time to call rather than text…His voice shook a little when he answered. “Hello?”

“I’m really sorry to bother you, it’s just, Jehan’s not answering and he’s the one that’s all emotional so he seemed like the natural go to guy for this, but as he’s not picking up I had to, um, that is…are you any good with kids?” It was Joly, and he sounded like he was on the verge of a panic attack.

“What’s going on?” Feuilly asked.

“I didn’t mean to say anything, I was just kind of freaked out, so Bossuet took me in the kitchen and we started talking about what’s going on…and Little R peeked into the room to listen and now he’s crying because he thinks that Statue Man is going to die and I can’t make him stop.”

Feuilly was at a loss. He wasn’t actually very good with kids, and definitely wasn’t looking forward to his Fridays with the damaged munchkins. “Uh…I suppose you’ve tried telling him that everything’s going to be okay?”

“Of course I tried that! That was the first thing I tried!”

Feuilly yanked his phone back from his ear. “Hey, Bahorel? Are you any good with kids?”

Bahorel let out a long sigh. “What’d those fucking idiots do? They didn’t try talking to the boys about the stabbing, did they?”

“No…but I guess Little R overheard them.” Feuilly heard some background noise coming from his phone, so he pressed it back to his ear. Then he pulled it away again, as there was quite a lot of screaming coming from the other end. “I think Peter Parker and Gavroche realized what happened too. Sounds like Azelma’s screaming something about Montparnasse killing them all. Shit.”

“Give me the phone.” Bahorel held out his hand, and Feuilly passed his phone off. “Hey, Joly? See if you can get Azelma and Gavroche to calm down and keep their cool for a little while. I’ll be over in fifteen minutes, and I’ll get the little ones under control for you. Bye.” He hung up and tossed the phone back to Feuilly.

“What are you up to?” Feuilly asked.

Bahorel winked at him before getting up and shrugging on his jacket. “I’ll have one of them text you a picture. This shouldn’t take long. See you in a bit.”

Feuilly nodded a goodbye.
Waiting for text updates silently by himself was definitely worse than waiting for them silently with Bahorel for company, but he did have the happy distraction of wondering just what the hell his friend was up to. After another ten minutes he got a message from Marius. Enjolras was out of surgery and stable. They expected someone to come and get Combeferre and Grantaire to go see him any minute. He texted back a happy face and then sank down into the couch cushions. His stomach finally started unknotting itself, and he wasn’t quite as aware of his short, uneven breaths.

Of course the boy could survive multiple stab wounds to the stomach and chest. He was fucking Enjolras.

Ten minutes after that, Feuilly got Bahorel’s promised picture text. This one showed Peter Parker and Little R waving excitedly while Batman crouched menacingly behind them. Feuilly stared at the picture in some wonder. Bahorel looked like he’d been plucked right out of a comic book. As far as Feuilly could tell (though he hadn’t actively read Batman comics since high school), every detail of the costume was spot on.

Bahorel got back to the apartment right about the time Feuilly got a vaguely worded text from Marius, saying there was some sort of drama going on between Grantaire and Enjolras’ parents. Feuilly couldn’t make heads or tails of it, so he turned his attention on the slacker lounging on the loveseat opposite him.

“So you have a Batman costume just sitting around?”

“I think it’s fairly obvious that I do, yes. I’ve also got Nightwing and the Red Hood, but I wasn’t as confident the kids would recognize those guys. And I didn’t want to do my Wonder Woman because boys their age listen to Batman more readily than the female heroes, which is their fucking loss because Diana is bad ass. And I do a mean Starfire, but the padding and the makeup takes forever.”

Feuilly considered that. “So you just ran in there as Batman and told the boys that everything was going to be okay?”

“I promised them that Montparnasse was on his way to Arkham Asylum and that he’d never bother them or their friends again. And I promised to lurk around our city and keep them safe. Then we took a few pictures and I promised Peter Parker I’d at least consider making him Robin. By the way, have you been reading since the reboot? Did you see what those fuckers just did?”

“Dude, I haven’t been reading since high school.”

“Fucking pricks killed my favorite Robin.”

“I don’t even know who Robin is anymore. Last time I read it was still that little stalker kid.” He cut a potential rant off by telling Bahorel about Marius’ confusing update. Within the next half hour they got some more intelligible updates from Courfeyrac and Eponine (who was bothered to a surprising extent by Enjolras’ mother calling her a hussy), and when their group left the hospital Feuilly finally decided it was safe to go to bed. He groaned when he saw the time. It was three in the morning and he had orientation for the new job at seven.

“I wish you had stuck Montparnasse in Arkham Asylum,” Feuilly grumbled under his breath. He tossed a pillow and blanket onto the couch for Bahorel, then stalked off to bed for a three hour nap.

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It felt a little weird to be wearing a borrowed outfit that came from Enjolras for his orientation. It made Feuilly hyperaware of the fact that his friend was lying in a hospital bed at that moment, most
likely in a lot of pain, and that he still hadn’t seen him yet, or even sent his well wishes.

At least the unsettling feeling helped keep him awake. The orientation essentially consisted of being crammed into a tiny room in a folding chair that was too small to accommodate his lanky frame with a dozen Jolys for six hours. He had his hand washing technique picked apart and corrected, he was shown how to sneeze properly, he was told when to wear gloves, when to wear masks, and warned that if he worked enough hours, he was probably going to be peed on at least once.

Not everything they covered was immediately relevant to him, as most of the new hires were CNAs, but he suffered through it patiently, reminding himself that this job was going to give him paid vacation time. He’d never had paid vacation time before.

Joly was waiting for him upstairs when he finished (orientation had been done in a cramped room in the basement level of the building). They’d decided to go visit Enjolras at the hospital after Feuilly’s orientation, but he was no longer sure he had the patience to deal with his friend while convalescing (Enjolras was not an easy patient, and Feuilly didn’t think that even being drastically weakened by stab wounds would change that). Luckily, Joly greeted him with a sympathetic smile and a large coffee. “Don’t worry. It all gets easier once you survive orientation.”

“Thanks, dude.” Feuilly reached to take his coffee, and jumped a foot when he felt a skeletal old hand clawing at his back. He whipped around and found a shriveled old lady tugging on his borrowed dress shirt. The hag’s claw-like fingernails had sticky, blackened goop collected under them, the remnants of at least a dozen meals and snacks. Feuilly thought he might be sick.

To his surprise Joly, who freaked the fuck out if he had to come into contact with even the possibility of dirt and germs, was laughing. “Hi Dot.”

At first it looked like Dot was grimacing, but when her thin lips peeled back over her yellowed and blackened teeth, Feuilly realized she was smiling. “Hello, dear.” At least her voice was sweet. She sounded like a typical grandma. “Is this one yours?”

Joly laughed again and shook his head. “This is Feuilly. He’s my friend, but not my boyfriend. Come on Dot, you’ve met Bossuet.”

Dot finally let go of Feuilly’s shirt while she processed that, and he took a step closer to Joly, putting himself out of clawing range. “The ugly boy, right?”

Joly’s face fell. “Bossuet’s not ugly.”

“He’s bald, isn’t he? Bald and not even thirty. You’ve got a full head of hair. Find someone else who does. Trust me, dear, you don’t want to be stuck looking at an ugly bald head before you have to. Eventually you lose your choice in the matter.” She pointed her withered claw at Feuilly. “He’s got hair.”

Feuilly smirked at Joly. “She’s right, you know. I’ve definitely got hair.”

“Sorry Feuilly, but it takes more than hair to build a relationship.”

“Don’t tell Grantaire.”

Joly glanced at his watch. “Speaking of our cynic and his golden haired better half, we’d better head out if we want to meet them.” He turned back to the old lady. “I’ll see you on Saturday, Dot.”

“Goodbye dear.”
Feuilly waited until they got to the parking lot before commenting on the odd encounter. “So…you came out to one of your residents?”

Joly’s face colored. He turned away from Feuilly, as suddenly unlocking his station wagon was taking a monumental amount of effort. “I didn’t do it on purpose. I was changing Dot’s bed once while she was watching Ellen, and she made a comment about Ellen that I thought was meant for me. And then I put my foot in my mouth and that was that. I only introduced her to Bossuet because she was trying to fix me up with her hairdresser. Come to think of it, she’s still trying to fix me up with her hairdresser. I don’t think Bossuet made a good impression on her.”

“I guess not.”

“He did spill tea on her favorite nightgown,” Joly said. They climbed into his car and he looked thoughtful while he started it up. “That might have done it.”

“Mm. Plus she seems rather stubbornly fixated on the hair issue.”

Feuilly had drained the coffee by the time they got to the hospital. He felt a bit more energized, but not quite sure if he was ready for a bitchy Enjolras. At least he wouldn’t be alone.

They were walking up the hall towards Enjolras’ room when they saw Grantaire leaving it, looking dazed and carrying a potted plant. Joly covered his mouth to hide a snort. “Hello Grantaire.”

“Huh? Oh, hey guys.” He started walking over to them. The poor kid looked burned out. He was smiling at them, but there was an off-quality to it. Feuilly thought there was a chance that serial killers smiled something like that. “Our diva’s pitching a bit of a fit. I’m going to spend the next half hour watering this plant. If Enjolras asks, all the bathrooms between here and the children’s wing are out of order.”

“Oh dear,” Joly murmured. Feuilly sympathetically rubbed Grantaire’s back as the guy shuffled past him. “He’s such a devoted boyfriend, isn’t he?”

“Mm hm. Poor bastard,” Feuilly said with a grimace.

Grantaire had stayed overnight at the hospital, sleeping in one of those awful reclining plastic chairs (if by sleeping you meant catering to the whims of an irritable young man who couldn’t stand being bed ridden and dependent on others). And from what Feuilly had heard, he had the prospect of an evening visit from Enjolras’ parents to look forward to. Much as Feuilly and Joly loved their friends, they’d opted to squeeze in their own visit right after Feuilly’s orientation in an effort to avoid that awkwardness.

When they walked in they found Enjolras sitting up in bed with his pajama top unbuttoned, in the process of unwrapping his own bandages. Joly dove forward and grabbed his hands. “Enjolras! What the hell are you doing?”

“The stupid aide was supposed to be here twenty minutes ago to change this. He keeps whining about the damn floor being short staffed, as though that excuses his incompetence. I’ve been watching him change these things. I’m sure I can do it myself.”

“Maybe, but you’ll probably open yourself up to all manner of potential infections and kill yourself trying. Sit back! Look at you; you’re all sweaty from the effort.” Joly went right into CNA mode, treating Enjolras like one of his more stubborn dementia patients (which, though Feuilly was never going to say it out loud, his attitude did put him in line with).

Joly turned towards Feuilly. “Will you pull the call light?”
“Huh? Oh, yeah.” Feuilly found it dangling next to Enjolras’ bed and gave it a tug. Joly reached into his bag and took out a box of non-latex surgical gloves that he did, in fact, keep on his person at all times, and he started fixing the bandages that Enjolras had been mutilating more than anything else.

A young man came in to answer the light after a few minutes, and after explaining that he was a CNA too, Joly helped him change Enjolras’ bandages. The aide fetched Enjolras a fresh cup of ice water and cautioned him (in an impatient tone that gave the visitors the impression that the poor guy was getting sick of repeating himself) against getting out of bed or moving around too much. “Your body’s trying to heal, sir. If you keep thrashing it around, you’re going to reopen one of those cuts and lengthen your stay here.”

Enjolras didn’t say anything, but he glared at the aide with unfiltered hatred. The aide left in an obvious huff. Joly looked like he might start lecturing Enjolras on being more pleasant to his caregivers, but Feuilly cut him off. “So thanks for loaning me the clothes, Enj. I think I made a good impression on my new coworkers.”

“I forgot about the new job.”

“Well you’ve been distracted. That’s reasonable, I guess. Considering I’m getting a bit of a pay bump by changing fields I was thinking of springing for get well flowers, but I figured Jehan would have you covered.”

“He’s opted for potted plants,” Enjolras said weakly, leaning back against his pillow in a resigned fashion. “Three so far. I think I’m just going to give them back to him when I leave, but it is nice to have something that reminds me of him while I’m imprisoned here.”


“I don’t need help. I’m mostly better already.”

“Enjolras, you got stabbed, deeply, four times! And that psychotic shithead broke two of your ribs. You are not fine! This isn’t me being paranoid, this is medical certainty!” Joly yelped.

“Hey Joly, why don’t you go and see if you can find Grantaire? He’s been gone for awhile. He probably needs some help watering that plant,” Feuilly suggested.

Joly seemed to know he was being handled, but that didn’t stop him from taking the out and leaving the room.

Feuilly sat down in Grantaire’s chair and Enjolras turned his head on the pillow to face him. “You do look weak as hell, by the way. But it’ll pass.”

“I know. And I do realize I’m being a dick, I just can’t stop myself. I’ve even chased Grantaire away, and I didn’t even think that was possible.”

Feuilly laughed. “Me neither. Remember when you used to tear him a new one every Friday night at the Musain? It just made him start sitting next to you so you wouldn’t have to strain your voice shouting at him from the other end of our table.”

“Mm. A lot’s changed since we first met.”

Feuilly grinned, indulging in a quiet moment of happiness for his friends, and trying to ignore the pang of jealousy that followed it. But with so many happy couples in his clique, it was getting harder and harder to forget how long it had been since he’d had a date.
They talked for a few minutes about the upcoming Supreme Court review of DOMA and prop 8, and then Enjolras let Feuilly rant a little bit about the violence in Syria and, of course, his beloved Palestine.

The conversation made him lose track of time, because all too soon there was an impatient sounding fake cough coming from the doorway. Feuilly looked up and found himself staring at a lot of cleavage. He blinked a few times and managed to shift his gaze a bit higher.

Then he rather wished he hadn’t, as that brought him eye to eye with what was essentially a female Enjolras, and he’d liked looking at the cleavage without feeling conflicted and dirty.

Before he could complain that Enjolras had never mentioned having a sister, the woman walked impatiently up to Enjolras’ bedside and started fussily pushing his hair out of his eyes. “Sweetheart, you look awful. These damn doctors aren’t doing shit for you, are they?”

“Did you really come and visit me in the hospital drunk? Of course you did. Mom, will you get your face away from me? Your breath smells like your wine. Where the hell is Dad?”

“Talking to some of your other friends, I think. And who are you calling drunk? M’not drunk. I mean, yes, I have been drinking. But I’m not drunk.”

“Uh huh. Dad’s the one driving, right?”

The woman rolled her eyes, and then did the unthinkable. She tousled the hair of the most imposing, least approachable human being Feuilly had ever met. Even keeping in mind that apparently this freakishly young looking woman (whose boobs Feuilly was totally not going to be thinking about later that night) was in fact Enjolras’ mother, Feuilly still kind of half-expected Enjolras to break her hand for daring to touch him.

His glare was pretty scary looking though. She had to be drunk to miss that.

“So who are you?” She smiled brightly at Feuilly and unsteadily offered her hand. “I’m Marie. Please call me that. I’m too young to be a missus anything.”

“I can see that,” Feuilly said, hoping he sounded polite. He took her hand and gave it a timid shake. “I’m Feuilly.”

“Oh, I think I’ve heard Enjy talk about you before!” Marie turned towards her son. “So how come you’re not sleeping with this one then?”

“Feuilly’s straight,” Enjolras near-growled. “Also, I’m in love with Grantaire.”

“Hmph. So you’re straight?” She turned back towards Feuilly with her hands on her hips. Wondering how many more times he was going to have to confirm that before the day was finished, he nodded. “You just became my new favorite. It used to be Combeferre, but he wasn’t very nice to me last night. Also, you’re handsome. And respectful. See Enjy? All your friends should be like this one.”

“Mom, go home and sober up. You’re embarrassing yourself.”

“I am not! Am I embarrassing myself, Feuilly?”

“Um…y’know what, speaking of heading home, I probably should. I’m pretty wiped from that orientation. I should go see where Joly got to. I’ll come by and see you later though, Enj. Have a good recovery.” Feuilly grimaced, as Enjolras shot him a withering look for leaving him alone with
his mother, but Feuilly couldn’t be too bothered by the minor betrayal. He hadn’t been the one to chase away all of Enjolras’ other well-wishers, after all.

Feuilly almost jumped out of his skin when he brushed past Marie to leave the room and she squeezed his ass. She giggled coquettishly while Enjolras let out a scandalized shout. “Mother! What the hell is wrong with you?”

“What? I’m still a young woman. I’m allowed to appreciate a handsome young man when I see him.”

“You are married to my father. Please refrain from sexually harassing my friends!”

“I honestly have no idea how I managed to raise such a stick in the mud. You’re so boring, Enjy. But if you do have any more cute and straight friends you want to introduce me to-”

Feuilly ran down the hall in his desperation to avoid hearing any more of that exchange.

Combeferre spent the next couple of days dutifully copying his notes from the classes he had in common with Enjolras, and running around to Enjolras’ other professors to get notes from those lectures, and then delivering them to the hospital, all the while telling his friend that he really would be better off resting than going over lecture notes. Grantaire was always lurking somewhere nearby, which had Combeferre feeling conflicted. On the one hand, it was great that Enjolras wasn’t going to be left alone while he recovered. Grantaire had stopped him from administering his own personal care more than once, defying all manner of stubborn attempts to “prove” independence.

On the other hand, Grantaire was exhausted, and looked almost as bad as he had when he’d been a drunken wreck. Plus it was fairly obvious he was skipping his own classes.

Combeferre was tempted to say something, but ultimately he thought it best to keep out of the couple’s business. The last time he’d tried to interfere it had all rebounded horribly on him, and he’d almost pushed Grantaire into a breakdown while coming within a hair of losing his friendship entirely.

On Thursday, he stopped by the hospital after lunch to hand off the notes he’d collected. He was expecting this to be the last time he’d have to make the trip, as Enjolras was recovering well, and the staff had expressed their expectation of him being discharged before the week was through. But then Combeferre encountered a pacing Grantaire in the hallway outside Enjolras’ room.

“What now?” Combeferre asked in a resigned tone.

Grantaire scowled. “That fucking bastard! I went up the street to get us lunch, since we’re both getting sick of the fucking hospital food, and that stubborn asshole decided that he was going to try to take his own shower. Seriously, I couldn’t leave him alone for ten fucking minutes!”

“What’d he do?”

“Banged his incision, slipped, fell, and tore open two of his wounds.”

Combeferre rubbed tiredly at his eyes. “So he’s not being discharged tomorrow?”

Grantaire laughed bitterly. “No, he’s not being discharged tomorrow. Also, I’m apparently insensitive and he feels badly enough already without me screaming swears at him.”
Combeferre gave Grantaire’s shoulder a sympathetic squeeze. “If you want, we can start taking
turns. I know how exhausting he is. You look like you need a night off.”

Grantaire shook his head. “As insane as he’s driving me, I’d make myself worse if I wasn’t here. But
thanks man, I appreciate the offer. While you’re here, do you mind if I run outside for a smoke? And
will you not tell Enjolras where I’m going?”

He was tempted to point out that Enjolras would be able to smell the smoke on Grantaire’s sweatshirt
when he got back, but when he saw the look of haggard desperation on his friend’s face he couldn’t
follow through with it. He nodded, and Grantaire slipped away.

Combeferre spent the next twenty minutes with Enjolras, talking about school and repeatedly
reassuring the obsessive overachiever that no really, none of his professors expected him to attend
class under the circumstances. Grantaire slunk back in after a little while and quietly sank into his
awful little reclining chair. He actually didn’t smell like cigarette smoke. The kid smelt like
Febreeze, which wasn’t exactly inconspicuous, but hopefully Enjolras wouldn’t give him grief for it.

He had to rush out after that though, as he was Thenardier sitting for the day. “I’ll be back with more
notes tomorrow, I promise.”

“Oh huh,” Enjolras murmured distantly.

“Do you want me to bring you anything else?” Combeferre asked.

Grantaire muttered something that sounded vaguely like restraints, while Enjolras ignored him.
Combeferre said goodbye a second time, and then left for the elementary school so he could pick up
Gavroche and Peter Parker.

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Sunday morning found Enjolras sitting up in bed with his laptop open in front of him on a table tray,
looking pissy while he scrolled through an article on one of his favorite blogs. Grantaire was
watching him from the awkward as fuck fold-out chair. His neck was stiff and sore and his joints all
ached from the convulsions he had to perform to drift off for the couple hours of sleep he managed to
snag here and there.

Frankly, he was almost too afraid to sleep at this point. He’d started out thinking that Enjolras was
going to be a difficult patient once he started to recover strength, but that had turned out to be such a
severe understatement as to be laughable. The stubborn asshole could have gotten discharged three
times over by then if he just stopped, relaxed a bit, and admitted that he needed help while recovering
from surgery, staggering blood loss, and fucking knife wounds. Instead, he’d reinjured himself
because (other than his will) he was still weak and he fucking needed the help.

Grantaire was watching the stupid, stubborn shit, trying to gauge what kind of a mood he was in. He
was hoping Enjolras wasn’t too restless, because he could really use another hour of sleep. He could
use a lot more than that, but he’d take the hour if he could.

Then a dietary aide knocked cheerfully on the door and brought in a covered tray. “Hello boys. I
snagged an extra portion for you.” He nodded at Grantaire, and he weakly smiled in return. “Do you
want to move your laptop so I can put this on the tray, or should I just put it aside for now?”

“I’m not really hungry yet,” Enjolras said absently, eyes glued to the screen.

“I’ll make sure he eats it,” Grantaire promised. He got up and took the heavy tray from the aide. The
guy thanked Grantaire and made a hasty exit, shutting the door behind him.

Grantaire took the cover off the tray and opened the containers, wondering what horrors the kitchen had cooked up for them this time. “Let’s see…we’ve got toast, sunny side eggs, and…urgh. It looks like someone’s eaten that already and regurgitated it for us. Wait, I think that’s supposed to be corned beef.”

Enjolras looked up from the computer. “For breakfast?”

“Yeah…fucking weird. Wait. Enjolras, what day is it?”

Enjolras glanced at the bottom corner of his computer screen. “March seventeenth. Oh, it’s St. Patrick’s Day. I guess the corned beef is supposed to be festive. You’re welcome to my share of it, if you want.”

“Yeah, that’s okay. I don’t even like Courf’s mom’s corned beef, and she actually knows what she’s doing when she makes it.” Grantaire snagged the toast and the eggs from the tray and set them on Enjolras’ table next to his computer.

“I’ve never met Courfeyrac’s parents,” Enjolras said. “Does his mother have a special fondness for Irish food?”

“Yeah, what with her being Irish and all. She’s a FOB,” Grantaire said. Enjolras shot Grantaire a confused look before putting his computer to sleep and setting it aside. “Fresh Off the Boat. You don’t use that one?”

Enjolras shook his head. “I figured Courfeyrac was Irish the way most people from the Boston area are Irish.”

“Three or four generations back and mixed with lots of other ethnicities? Nah, Courf’s like Irish Irish. Well, his dad’s side is French Canadian, but his mom’s through and through. When I went to his thirteenth birthday party I got lost in his house looking for the bathroom, and I accidentally found myself trapped in a room with a bunch of his relatives. They started yelling at each other in Irish-Gaelic, and I thought they were speaking in tongues. I had no clue what the fuck was going on.”

“That sounds a bit terrifying.”

“A smidge, yeah,” Grantaire said with a laugh. “I managed to find this demented old uncle of his and make friends though. Great Uncle Pat didn’t see any problems with giving an eighth grader whiskey, and he taught me how to cuss someone out in Irish.” Grantaire smiled at the memory, but Enjolras looked horrified.

“You really took alcohol from a strange old man when you were thirteen?”

“Well yeah. Uh…I guess when you say it like that, it does sound a little fucked up.”

“Yeah.” Enjolras picked up a piece of toast, but it looked like he only did it to have something to fidget with, as he started tearing off bits of the crust rather than eating any of it. “Grantaire, when did you start drinking?”

Grantaire set his own toast down and tried to think back. “Hard to say, really. There’s a lot of alcoholism in my family to begin with, so my folks didn’t exactly have a normal perspective on this stuff. They used to let me try sips of their beers and brandies and what have you when I was a kid, and I was always allowed to have drinks on special occasions, like New Years and stuff. I think I was probably in Middle School when I started drinking habitually though.”
Enjolras frowned. “I hadn’t realized you started so young. How…how have you been doing lately? We haven’t really talked about it much, have we?”

Grantaire shrugged, and then quickly shoved a piece of toast in his mouth. In truth he was tired, achy, worn down from wrestling with the temptation to get shitfaced day after day, and a small part of him was even almost happy that his boyfriend had been stabbed. The timing was convenient for him, because he’d been dreading St. Patrick’s Day, and now he had a perfectly legitimate excuse to stay out of bars. He’d be at the hospital all night with Enjolras, completely safe from temptation, and none of his friends would have to feel guilty and ruin their nights hanging back with the recovering alcoholic.

“‘Taire?” And as usual, Enjolras couldn’t just let an uncomfortable conversation topic go.

Grantaire swallowed his mouthful of toast, choked down a sip of tea, and then turned to face his boyfriend. “I’m fine. I’m doing fine. Haven’t touched a drop since we started dating, same as always.”

“Oh…”

“What? What the fuck is that look for?” Grantaire snapped.

Enjolras dropped the piece of toast he’d been mutilating. “I’m just trying to express my concern for you. Excuse me, I guess.”

“Sorry. Can we just talk about something else?”

“Sure.” Enjolras was silent for a moment, lost in thought trying to come up with anything to say that could break some of the tension in the air. Unfortunately, his mind settled on the obvious, and the obvious was dangerous territory. “Did you make any plans for St. Patrick’s Day?”

Grantaire dropped his eyes and shook his head. “I figured I’d stay here. Like…like I’ve been doing.”

“Just because I’m maimed and stuck in a damn bed doesn’t mean you have to spend every waking minute at my bedside. You should go out and have some fun. I’m sure our friends must be up to something tonight.”

“Yeah, bar hopping,” Grantaire muttered, trying and failing to keep the harshness from his tone. He’d gotten texts from Courfeyrac and Bahorel, both asking his leave to ditch their sympathy-sobriety for one night. He’d consented, but he’d rather not have been asked to begin with.

When Enjolras spoke next there was a tentative quality to his tone, a hesitance, that didn’t suit him. “I don’t mean to…I just thought this was one of your favorite holidays. You dyed your hair green last year.”

And then Grantaire realized that Enjolras wasn’t picking at him; he was trying to look out for him. He was just horrid at it.

Oh. That was kind of cute, actually.

“Enj, I always made a big deal out of St. Patty’s because it’s the one day of the year where rampant alcoholism is acceptable. Seriously, you can be falling-down drunk at ten am and people cheer for you as long as you’re wearing a few token shamrocks. I can’t remember the last St. Patrick’s Day I can actually remember and…well, that kinda freaks me out. Honestly, I’m not even sure of what to do with myself this year. I was hoping I could just hide out here with you.”
“Of course you can.” Enjolras reached his arm out and snagged Grantaire’s hand. “I’d just thought I’d become wearing company. I mean…I’m driving myself crazy at this point. I’m surprised you haven’t smacked me yet.”

“I’ve come close a few times.”

“Yeah. I figured.” Enjolras turned on the bed until he was facing Grantaire. A flood of curls that hadn’t quite lost their golden luster fell into his eyes, and Grantaire instinctively reached out a hand to brush them back.

“You’re going to need a haircut when you get out of here,” Grantaire said. “I mean, just a trim or something.”

“Yours is finally starting to get long again. Thank you, by the way. I appreciate it.”

“Are you done with this?” Grantaire asked, motioning to the barely touched toast. Enjolras nodded, so Grantaire pushed the table tray out of the way and climbed into bed with him. He held him carefully, mindful of the wads of bandages under his shirt and the fact that Enjolras was quite possibly willfully defying his doctor when the woman told him to keep strenuous movement to a minimum. Enjolras settled into Grantaire’s arms rather easily though, and rested his head on Grantaire’s shoulder with a placid smile on his face.

“Go to sleep, ‘Taire.”

“Promise me you won’t run off and reopen your incision-”

“Grantaire-”

“Again.”

Enjolras paused before answering. Grantaire could feel his breath coming out in angry little puffs against his skin. “I won’t reopen my incision,” he finally promised. “I had just been planning on cuddling with you. Jerk.”

Grantaire ran a hand through slightly greasy blond hair. There was a very good chance of Enjolras sneaking away to try to bathe himself in private if Grantaire let his guard down. The kid did not like feeling grungy, but such were the realities of being in a hospital. “Remember, Enj, you promised me you’d be good.”

“And if I keep being good they’re going to let me go home tomorrow.”

“Exactly. So now is definitely not the time for adventurous solo showers.”

“Mm hm. Now is the time for napping,” Enjolras agreed. He leaned up for a quick kiss, and watched as Grantaire’s eyes fell shut. Grantaire smiled, feeling the gentle trace of soft fingertips caressing down the side of his face.

Against his better judgment, he fell asleep.

He woke up twenty minutes later to a yelp, a pulled call light, and Enjolras on the floor, curled in on himself and clutching at his ribs.

“You asshole! You promised!”

“I had to pee…urgh, will you just find a nurse?! Ow…fucking hell.”
Feuilly dropped into a chair in the activities office, feeling tired and crabby after a long morning of trying to sing pop songs he didn't really know from the 1930s, running after demented patients trying to sneak onto the elevator as soon as his back was turned, and actually breaking up a fistfight over Bingo winnings. Surprisingly, the senior citizens were even more exhausting than the meth heads.

He took a quick look around, and once he determined that he was alone in the office, Feuilly snuck his phone out of his pocket to check if he had any new texts. The staff weren't allowed to have cell phones on them while they worked. It was some sort of right to privacy thing for the residents, as cell phones had cameras. Feuilly didn't really understand it, but he did appreciate the fact that he'd get fired if an administrator saw him using one. However, he didn't have a watch and he was using his cellphone to check the time until he could afford one.

He had a few new texts from Joly, asking him how his day was going, and asking him to say hi to a few of his favorite residents (which led Feuilly to the conclusion that the cheerful nurse's aide must not follow the cell phone rule himself, if he expected responses to the texts). Bahorel had invited him to go out and get a drink after work, as he'd apparently been reprieved from his sympathetic-sobriety. Feuilly declined in favor of going home for a nap.

He had one more text waiting for him, a picture message from a number he didn't recognize. That seemed a little strange, but Feuilly was curious, so he opened it.

When he saw the picture he threw the phone across the room so fast he was surprised he didn't break it. The message asked Feuilly if he was into cougars, and the picture was of Enjolras' mother posing naked.

"F-fucking hell. I need to bleach my eyes."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry guys, I meant to get this up yesterday (thus the stuff about St. Patrick's Day), but I was worn out from work and writing was not coming easily. I've got Feuilly's job at the nursing home, btw, so please let me know if his adventures are interesting, quirky writing, or if it descends into dragging rants about work.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Enjolras has a moment of crisis.
Feuilly has several.

Chapter Notes

Holy shit, chapter twenty! I can't believe how quickly this fic spiraled out of control.
Thanks for reading, and for all the lovely feedback. Let's see if I have another twenty chapters in me ;)
(Sadly, I think I might...)

On the happy day Enjolras finally managed to get himself discharged Grantaire was left with the strong impression that the doctors, nurses, and especially the aides, were happy to see their backs fade into the distance as they left the hospital. Combeferre and the Thenardier sisters picked them up.

Eponine was bright and cheerful. She gave each of them hugs, teased Enjolras about repeatedly reinjuring himself, and forced him to forgive her for the teasing immediately by giving him a vanilla latte from her work. Azelma stayed in the car with her headphones on, curled up on the seat with her arms clutched around her defensively. Grantaire glanced at the young girl and frowned. That particular pose coupled with the bitter look on her face was painfully familiar. He didn't say anything though, just climbed into the car beside her, and a moment later Eponine sat down on his other side.

“So what’s the first thing you’re going to do now that you’re free?” Combeferre asked, once Enjolras was settled into the passenger seat next to him.

“Nap,” Grantaire said.

Enjolras said “shower,” at the exact same time.

Grantaire frowned. “You’re going to wait for me to nap first.”

“They discharged me. From that we can infer that I can look after myself now.”

“They discharged you with the understanding that your whipped boyfriend and your hoard of friends were going to help you until your strength is fully recovered. For fuck’s sake Enjolras-”

“My scalp has been itchy for over a week and I smell like sickness and misery. The first thing we’re doing is taking a shower, not napping.”

Grantaire opened his mouth to argue some more, but closed it as he considered the significance of the ‘we’ in that sentence. It had been over a week since they’d fooled around too…

Shower, then nap. He could live with that.
“So where are your little brothers?” Enjolras asked.

“With Bahorel,” Eponine answered, as Azelma’s response to being addressed by anyone in the car was to turn the volume up on her music. “He said something about needing to oversee their superhero education. They’re having a Timm-verse marathon, whatever the hell that is.”

“Batman the Animated Series, Superman the Animated Series, Batman Beyond, Justice League, and Justice League Unlimited,” Grantaire listed off. “He had me watch them all with him over the course of a week during summer break once. He’s probably going to do the Marvel movies with them at some point too.”

Eponine sighed, but she was smiling. “I’m glad my brothers finally found some other little boys to play with.”

“Your sister on the other hand…” Grantaire mumbled, casting another glance at Azelma. He hadn’t meant for anyone to hear the comment, but based on Eponine’s frown she had.

Combeferre pulled into Enjolras’ driveway and the friends exchanged cheerful goodbyes, congratulating Enjolras once more on his recovery. Then Grantaire was left with the formidable task of helping Enjolras navigate the icy steps to his front door without being able to touch him because ‘he didn’t need help, dammit.’

Climbing the stairs usually took half a minute, but it was nearly five this time. But, y’know, Enjolras was totally fine. If Grantaire had had Combeferre’s build and upper body strength, he’d have picked Enjolras up and carried him. As it was, if Enjolras hadn’t been in an unusually weakened state he’d have been the one who could feasibly carry his boyfriend. Hell, with his deliciously defined arm muscles he could probably get Grantaire all the way to the bedroom from the driveway without breaking a sweat.

Hm. That was an odd new fantasy.

It was cute how triumphant Enjolras looked when he got to the living room, sickly pale and sweaty though he was. Then he noticed the sick nest that had been prepared for him on the couch and his face fell. “What the fuck is all that?”

Grantaire tried to take Enjolras’ arm to lead him over to the couch, but he struggled away. “It’s a sick nest,” Grantaire explained. “Joly, Jehan, and Feuilly helped me set it up. Everything you need’s going to be in easy reach so you can recover…in…peace?” Somehow he was left with the impression he’d done something wrong.

The nest took up the brunt of the couch and the space around it. Joly had carefully arranged an assortment of different pillows and blankets so that Enjolras would be comfortable in different positions-laying down to watch TV, sitting back for reading, sitting up for studying or eating. Feuilly had “borrowed” some table trays from work, and they were off to the side and already piled with necessities; one for meals, one with medical supplies for changing the bandages, and one for homework and social activist activities.

“I’m not an invalid. They released me from the hospital. It wasn’t so that you could turn my home into another one.”

“Look, you need to take it easy for at least a few more days.”

“Grantaire-”

“So let me pamper you-”
“I’m perfectly capable of—”

“Please!” Grantaire yelled, deciding to take Combeferre’s advice and play dirty. He turned his most vulnerable expression on Enjolras, allowing his eyes to mist a little for effect. “I almost lost you. For me, can you just please relax for a little while so I can reassure myself that you’re actually getting the rest you need and that you’re really getting better?”

Enjolras glared at him. “You’re a miserable bastard.”

Grantaire leaned forward and kissed his cheek. Enjolras continued to glare at him. “Um…so about that shower?”

The glare didn’t waver in the slightest, and for a horrible moment Grantaire thought he’d destroyed his chances at shower sex. Then Grantaire grabbed the front of his sweatshirt and yanked him towards the bathroom.

Really, Grantaire could have broken that grip very easily, but why the hell would he want to?

Later that night, Enjolras gratefully curled up in his own bed again, silently rejoicing once more in finally being out of the damn hospital. Grantaire was beside him, already fast asleep. Enjolras had expected that he would succumb to sleep immediately as well, but his traitorous body remained stubbornly awake while being thoroughly exhausted (and also a little achy—maybe the shower sex hadn’t been such a good idea, even if it had seemed a fantastic one at the time).

Grantaire’s hair was still damp from their activities. Enjolras brushed his boyfriend’s bangs aside and smiled fondly at the peaceful countenance he wore. He let his fingers trail down the side of Grantaire’s face, just brushing his cheekbone and breaking off at his jaw.

He looked so contented, so peaceful. It wasn’t often Grantaire fell asleep with a smile on his face. Enjolras thought about the sickly, slightly haunted look he’d worn for most of the hospital stay and shuddered. ‘It’s better now though,’ Enjolras thought silently, though he couldn’t get himself to believe it.

He spent another half hour or so curled on his side, watching Grantaire peacefully sleep and unable to drift off himself. Eventually he swung his legs over the side of the bed and quietly padded out to the kitchen. He sat down at the table with his cellphone and called Jehan.

Not too long after that he was hobbling over to the back door to let Jehan in. The poet greeted his friend with his characteristic bright smile, but it quickly fell away when he took in Enjolras’ haggard appearance. “Oh dear. Enjolras, are you okay?”

“Not in the least. Can you keep your voice down please? Grantaire’s sleeping in the other room, and I’d rather he not hear any of this.”

“Oh. Of course.”

Enjolras hobbled back to the kitchen table, Jehan following after him while shrugging out of his coat and unwrapping his ever-present hideous scarf. “I would have been here sooner,” Jehan said apologetically, “but I got us our scones.”

“That’s fine.”
“I would have gotten the traditional boy talk lattes too, but I couldn’t transport them on my bike.”

“The boy talk lattes are tradition now?” Enjolras asked. He sat down, pretending it was choice instead of necessity. Jehan put water on for tea, then started arranging their scones on napkins.

“I think so. This is the third time we’ve done this. Now Enjolras…is there a reason you’re not sleeping right now? I’m sorry for saying it so bluntly, but you look like you need a nap.”

Enjolras ran a hand through his hair. “I tried. I think my last good night of sleep was right before the stabbing. ‘Taire had stayed the night and…that was the last time I held him. With these damn injuries, it hurts too much to have his weight resting on my chest. And he’s not even heavy.”

Enjolras glanced down at his torso as though it had betrayed him by being mortal and subject to injury.

Jehan startled him with a soft, but still high pitched noise. “Sorry! I know it’s awful for you, but it’s still so cute.” The dreamy romantic shrank under the glare leveled on him, and stuttered out some apologies.

“I suppose I signed up for this when I called you instead of Combeferre. Urgh, anyway…I think what I’m missing is the security of holding him when I’m worried for him. It’s not quite the same when he holds me.”

“What do you mean?” Jehan asked, puzzled. He stopped fussing with the tea mugs and gave Enjolras his full attention. “The security of holding him? What is it you’re worried about?”

Enjolras returned Jehan’s concerned gaze with a steel-willed one of his own that was almost refreshing to see, as it was shining from a face tinged with a greyish pallor. He held Jehan’s gaze and spoke frankly. “I worry about him dying. By his own hand, by someone else’s as a result of some nihilistic fancy and accompanying poor choice, that he’ll start drinking again and finish himself off that way…really, there’s no shortage of options.”

“O-oh.” Jehan took a deep breath. The tea kettle whistled, and that gave him a few minutes to recover himself. He poured water over their tea bags, added some honey to his, and then sat down across from Enjolras. “He has gotten better though. Hon, he’s gotten so much better since you started dating him. I would think those worries would be less pressing now…right?”

“The night I was hospitalized, you didn’t see him at first.” Enjolras’ voice was low, still matter of fact but dipping towards the dangerously emotional. “Combeferre and Courfeyrac both talked to me about what he was like in the waiting room, because he scared them. Even Eponine came to me about it. Grantaire’s entire recovery hinges on me. He said…he said he couldn’t go on if anything happened to me. And with him it’s not just melodramatic sentiment. If I had died, he’d have killed himself. I’m sure of it.” Enjolras dropped his head to hide his welling eyes. “I’m not sure I can handle the responsibility anymore. I don’t want him to…something could happen to me, Jehan. And then where would he be?”

“Oh sweetheart…”

Jehan took Enjolras’ hand in his and gave it a squeeze. “He’s getting stronger though, even if he’s not quite on his own feet yet.”

Enjolras shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. He’s not changing at his core. It’s not self-directed; he’s just taking orders from me. He doesn’t really care if he lives or dies, he just cares that I care. If I’m not in the picture he’s going to collapse.” And he wanted so much more for Grantaire than that...
“Well…Enjolras, I rather thought the whole stabbing thing was a fluke,” Jehan said carefully, giving Enjolras a searching look. “You’re not planning on getting killed, are you?”

“Not exactly-”

Jehan hissed in a quick breath, but he managed to work his gentle smile back onto his face. “Would you care to explain that?”

Enjolras nodded. “Look…I’m not building a safe, quiet life for myself. I want to follow through on my social activism. I want to distribute vaccines, end human trafficking, help workers get a living wage and safe conditions. I want to travel where I’m most needed, and that could easily get me killed. If not from one of the myriad diseases Joly’s tried to terrify me with, then from being perceived as an outsider meddling in things that don’t concern me. Did you know that among its many targets, the Taliban is assassinating people for handing out polio vaccinations?”

“Okay, I think I get it. You’re not suicidal, you’re recklessly brave,” Jehan said, pale and visibly discomfited. “And you’re worried Grantaire couldn’t handle it if you died.”

“Exactly.”

“I guess that is a legitimate concern. You’re all he’s living for right now, which if you’ll remember our first conversation on this topic, I did take issue with. But I’m generally satisfied with the way Grantaire’s been treating you. He’s trying so hard to get better for you. Maybe you could return the favor and consider living more carefully for him?”

Enjolras shook his head. “I’m not going to quit seeking justice.”

“You don’t have to, Enjolras. But you don’t have to seek out the most dangerous paths out there either.” Jehan sighed, but he looked comforted by his latest flash of insight. “Huh. Grantaire’s weakness could temper your recklessness a little. I like the sound of this…”

“No,” Enjolras said flatly. “I may love him, but I won’t change my life for him. He’s got to find a way to keep going without me. I’ll find something else for him to live for.”

“What?” Jehan asked. “His art didn’t work. His friends didn’t work either. It’s you, dear. And I don’t think it’s a bad thing. You need this too. Or do you think you need to burn out young to make your point? I think you could accomplish a hell of a lot using your brilliance over the course of a lifetime, as opposed to martyring yourself in your youth.”

They sat in silence a few minutes, Jehan sipping his tea while Enjolras processed his words. The poor thing looked utterly miserable.

Enjolras spoke again after a bit more contemplation. “It’s not that I’m looking to die. That would be foolish and, you’re right, a waste. But I am not afraid to die. Or…I never have been before. I don’t want anything holding me back should I end up faced with a difficult decision. I don’t want Grantaire to share in any sacrifices I might make. I don’t want this.”

“But Enjolras, he loves you. In the same way that you don’t want him to hurt, he wants that for you. Can’t you play it a little safer for him? Relationships are about compromise, you know.”

Enjolras blinked rapidly, wearing an expression of stupefaction. “Are they?”

Jehan laughed. “Usually. I forgot how gone ‘Taire is over you though. He folds over everything, doesn’t he?”
Enjolras started picking at his scone. “Not…not everything.”

“Mm hm.” Jehan took a last sip of tea then got up to rinse out his mug. “I don’t have much else to say on the subject, and I do have to be on my way as I’ve got an early class in the morning, so let me close out on one last speech. You’ve acknowledged that Grantaire is getting stronger. Someday he might be able to handle grieving for you without joining you in the grave, but right now he doesn’t seem to be there. I don’t think it would be so terrible a thing to refrain from courting danger for a few more years and enjoying the company of a man who’s wild about you. He’s not exactly underserving of returned devotion, is he?”

“I’ll…I’ll keep thinking on it.”

Jehan nodded. “Good. Did I help at all?”

Enjolras sighed. “I’m not sure if it’s going to help me sleep, as you’ve given me an awful lot to think about. But I do feel a bit better. Thank you, Jehan.”

“Any time, dear.”

“Is there any way I can return the favor?” Enjolras asked. Jehan opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again, overcome with embarrassment. Enjolras arched a brow. “Jehan, what is it?”

“Um…not tonight, but maybe sometime soon…could we do the scones and latte thing and maybe talk about, um…you know what, never mind.”

Enjolras smirked. “You’re thinking of sleeping with Courfeyrac, aren’t you?”

Jehan scratched a likely nonexistent itch on his nose. “Is it that obvious?”

“You did just get awfully flustered. Have you two really not done it yet? You’ve been together for a few weeks now.” Frankly, Enjolras was impressed with Courfeyrac. He was even more respectful of Jehan than Enjolras had given him credit for.

“I told him I was a virgin, and since then he’s been afraid of pressuring me. But I’ve also been lusting after him since freshman year. I’m more than ready for him to make a move, but he won’t go any further than making out with me.”

“Grantaire did the same thing. I had to initiate everything.”

Jehan sighed. Clearly that hadn’t been what he wanted to hear. “Dammit. I feel like I’m going to make an idiot of myself if I try to give the signal.”

“Don’t try a fancy dinner. It’s painfully awkward. Well…it might be okay from you. Couldn’t you just write him a poem?”

Jehan shook his head. “Fun fact. When it’s not hypothetical or for the sake of metaphor, I suck at erotic poetry. Can’t come up with a single verse if I need it for practical use. I think I’m going to have to just come out and tell him to lose his pants. Ooo…or maybe I could giftwrap a box of condoms for him. That’s pretty obvious, right? And I could put a red rose on the box…”

Enjolras laughed. “Something tells me you’ll find a way to give him the green light. I’m glad he’s treating you well though. He didn’t mind the period of abstinence?”

“If he has he’s kept it to himself. Enjolras, he’s been perfect. So far it’s been everything I’d hoped. I’ve never been this happy before.” Jehan’s entire face lit up. Enjolras smiled for him, and Jehan
darted forward to hug him. “I know you’re facing some challenges hon, but there’s still so much to be happy about right now. We’re both young and ridiculously in love with our amazing boyfriends. If you focus on that you might have an easier time sleeping.”

“You’re probably right. Thanks, Jehan.”

“Anytime.” Jehan kissed his cheek, then put his sweatshirt and scarf back on and took his leave.

Enjolras tidied up the kitchen, poked his head into the living room to glance with disdain at the sick nest (but wound up touched at the thoughtfulness displayed in its construction instead—some of his favorite books were stacked on the reading tray, along with his J-Stor logo mug), and then went back to the bedroom. He crawled into bed next to Grantaire and wound up curled on his side once more, facing his slumbering lover.

Enjolras carefully trailed a hand down the side of Grantaire’s face again.

He was asleep before Jehan got his bike unlocked from the streetlamp he’d left it leaning against.

Feuilly was driving home from work when the texts started. He got ten texts from Marie over the course of five minutes, making him wonder if the bored housewife was doing anything with her life other than harassing much-younger men. He’d saved her number into his phone with the name Succubus, so that his cheap pay as you go phone would display that instead of her number when she called. He really didn’t want any of his friends to recognize that number and ask why Enjolras’ mother was texting him.

He really didn’t want Enjolras to find out about this.

After a few minutes, Marie switched from trying to text him to trying to call him. He still ignored it, but by the time he was parking on the curb in front of his building Feuilly snapped. He didn’t want to turn his phone off, and dammit, he shouldn’t have to. Marie should have the decency and self-control to leave him alone. He picked up the phone, determined to give her a piece of his mind.

“Will you fucking leave me alone you crazy bitch? I’m not interested.”

“Uh…everything okay dude?”

He probably should have looked at the screen first. Feuilly tiredly rubbed his eyes. “Sorry Bahorel. I thought you were someone else.”

“Clearly. Mind if I ask…?”

“I’m not talking about it.”

“Fair enough. Any chance you could give me a ride to a club tonight? I’ve got a DD for the trip home, but she can’t pick me up.”

Feuilly groaned. “Can’t you take the bus in?”

“Uh…I’m already painted and stuff. I’d rather not take the bus like this. It’s cool though. I’ll keep calling around.”

“Wait, you’re going to a drag show tonight? It’s Wednesday.”
Feuilly frowned. “It just seems like an odd day for it. You know dude, you’re supposed to be telling us when these things happen. The other guys want to go.”

“Yeah…everyone wants to go all at once, but honestly I’d rather trickle everybody in little by little instead of surrounding myself with a huge crowd of obnoxious noobs. So can you give me a ride?” Feuilly glanced at his apartment building, thinking longingly of the comfortable bed waiting for him, and sighed. “Yeah. I’m on my way.”

“Thanks man.”

Bahorel wasn’t exactly a short guy to begin with, so when you stuck a voluminous copper colored wig on his head and shoved him in five inch heels, he almost didn’t fit in Feuilly’s car. Feuilly immediately sympathized with him not wanting to take the bus.

He couldn’t help gaping at his friend when he ran out of the building and towards the car though. Bahorel had thrown a trench coat on over his outfit, but it was hanging open, giving Feuilly a look at a lot more Bahorel than he’d ever seen before. The wig and the heels were the most substantial parts of the outfit. Other than that he was basically wearing a few strategically placed teal spangles.

He was a muscle head. It should not have been possible. Somehow though, somehow he was a scantily clad knockout.

“Hey,” Bahorel said, and Feuilly was struck by how his usual deep and throaty man voice sounded ridiculous coming from such a sensually feminine looking creature. Feuilly knew he was staring again, much like when he’d first seen Tina at the Musain.

“That’s…quite the look. I thought you were supposed to be a guy in a dress when you did this.”

“I’m experimenting with a Carmen Carrera look tonight. Courfeyrac finally got me watching Drag Race, and I’ve been getting some great ideas from it. This dude did amazing stuff with almost full nudity, which is like the biggest challenge, you know? You can’t really pad this way, so you’ve got to use illusion, or in my case some carefully placed tape, to, like, soften all your angles and shit. How’d I do?” Bahorel shrugged out of his coat and struck a centerfold pose on Feuilly’s passenger seat.

He did indeed look like a beautiful mostly nude woman. Feuilly wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

“Looks good.”

Bahorel grinned. “Thanks. This is the first time I’ve tried something like this.”

“Well I’m sure you’ll be the prettiest girl in the club. By the way, where am I going?”

“Oh, right.” Bahorel pulled a flier out of the pocket of his trench coat, read the address off of it, and then plugged it into his phone’s GPS. He stuck his phone in Feuilly’s unused ashtray, and then they were off.
Feuilly had been mildly curious about Bahorel’s double life, so once he determined that parking was readily available he decided to head in and see what the drag show was like. Not being terribly extroverted or overly social himself, he wound up doing what he normally did when he was stuck alone at a bar waiting for his friends to get there. He found a seat in a corner and nursed a beer while he read the cheap paperback copy of Aristophanes plays he’d been keeping in his car.

Bahorel came over from time to time to chat with him, progressively more hammered as the night wore on. Sometimes he moved with fluidity and grace, addressing Feuilly in a throaty but definitely feminine voice that did things to him he’d rather not think about, and sometimes Bahorel ambled over and greeted him with a loud, “Dude, you’re still fucking reading?!”

After a couple of hours of this, Feuilly was thinking about calling it a night, but he wanted to wait until he saw Bahorel again to make sure his friend really did have a ride home. He stuck the little paperback in the back pocket of his jeans and looked around the room for a towering copper wig (unfortunately, a large and tacky wig wasn’t going to make Bahorel stand out in that crowd). After a few minutes, Feuilly located Bahorel at a table chatting with a Cher impersonator and a queen rocking a burlesque look.

Feuilly made his way through the crowded room and tapped Bahorel on the shoulder. Bahorel turned around and smiled tipsily at him. “I’m gonna head out. You still have a ride, right?”

Bahorel nodded so forcefully he seemed to be in danger of displacing his wig. “Yeah, I’m still good with the ride home.”

“She’s got a ride and then some,” the Cher impersonator said with a wink. “Half the fucking room has offered you a ride, girl, though I don’t think they care where they’re escorting you.”

The burlesque one leaned against Bahorel’s back and pulled him into a hug. “You’re such hot shit tonight! Seriously, how many numbers have you gotten?”

“Only one that I care about,” Bahorel answered. He traced digits that had been scrawled along his thigh in ballpoint pen and smiled goofily, pale cheeks flushing red. This got the other queens squealing excitedly and eagerly teasing Bahorel about the hot goth bitch he’d been flirting with all night. Sure he wasn’t going to get another word in edgewise after that, Feuilly made his retreat.

He didn’t realize how warm and stifling the club had been until he got out to the parking lot. Feuilly took a few deep breaths, letting the cool night air do its work calming him.

He climbed into his car and started driving aimlessly, or so he thought. His subconscious seemed to have a destination in mind. Before Feuilly was aware of it, he found himself across the street from Combeferre’s. It was where the Thenardier kids were spending the night, and he had one in particular he wanted to talk to. Feuilly sent Eponine a text, and a few minutes later she was climbing into his passenger seat.

“You could not have shown up at a better time,” Eponine informed him.

“What’s going on?” Feuilly asked.

“Fucking Azelma. She’s driving me insane. Okay, so you know how I told you about her crush on Combeferre?”

Feuilly nodded. Eponine had ranted about Azelma’s crush for a good twenty minutes the last time they’d spoken, and would likely have gone on for at least twenty more if Feuilly hadn’t reminded Eponine that she’d behaved similarly towards Marius, and even less discreetly towards Courfeyrac.
Eponine’s face had turned red, she’s sunk into a pout, and then they’d changed topics.

“Kay, so we were playing board games with the boys, and she was fucking ridiculous. She kept trying to cheat so that Combeferre would win, and then when we switched to a trivia game she insisted on being his partner even though we were trying to pair it up so that one of us would be with one of the little boys. And she was just disgusting all night, and when that didn’t get her anywhere because, you know, she’s a fucking child and he’s an adult, she went the other way and showed him her cutting scars and started crying about how depressed she was, and then she made a big production of being bulimic in the bathroom and I just want to smack the shit out of her for being stupid. And I kind of want to smack Combeferre too, because now he’s giving her all the attention she was obviously begging for.”

“Uh…so what’s the answer, Ponine? Ignore the cutting and bulimia?” Feuilly asked, more than a little unnerved about the way Eponine was talking about her sister’s issues.

“Well no, but certainly don’t reward her for it. I’ll bet you anything she cuts her wrists before the week is out in the hopes he’ll cuddle and comfort her. She used to try those tricks on Montparnasse.”

“Mayhaps someone helped her form the conclusion that she only has worth if she’s receiving attention from a man, regardless of the kind of attention or the circumstances?” Feuilly tried again.

Eponine scowled and crossed her arms over her chest. “Look, I continue to be incredibly concerned about you and your little sister, but I actually called you down here because I need to unload this time. Now do you want a McFlurry or a Frosty?”

Eponine considered. “We got McFlurries last time. Let’s get Frosties. And keep your wallet where it is. It’s my turn to pay.” Feuilly obediently started driving to the nearest Wendy’s.

For the past couple of weeks, he and Eponine had been doing the occasional nightly drive and session of bullshit venting. She’d gravitated towards Feuilly once she realized that they were both poverty stricken working class kids hoping to claw their way up to something better. Their socioeconomic background set them apart from their other friends (well, Grantaire’s family was below the poverty line, but they hadn’t always been that way, and they’d usually managed to keep his basic needs met while he was growing up. He wasn’t quite as desperate as Feuilly or the Thenardiers, and he was nowhere near as worn down from his poverty—it was his other demons doing that). The big difference between Eponine and Feuilly was that though she wanted to advance herself, she wasn’t sure how to do so. She was directionless, but seeking a path. Feuilly had dreams, and the barest beginning of a plan to achieve them.

“So what’s bugging you?” Eponine asked.

Feuilly sighed. “Awkward crush.”

“You definitely came to the right sympathetic ear then. I can’t seem to find crushes that aren’t awkward,” Eponine said with a bitter laugh. “Who on?”

Feuilly winced, then just blurted it out to get it over with. “Guillotina.”

“Pardon?”

“Don’t make me say it again.”

Eponine started howling with laughter. Feuilly scowled at her, but really, he hadn’t expected anything better. “Thanks for the sympathy.”

“Sorry, sorry. It’s just, aren’t you straight?”
“And that’s why I said Guillotina and not Bahorel. Look, when he’s dressed like a guy he does absolutely nothing for me. But he is really spectacularly hot in drag. I gave him a ride to a club tonight, and he was doing this new almost naked look, and he looked like a chick, Ponine, he looked like a chick. My poor dick is so confused right now.”

That had Eponine doubled over with her laughter. She had to calm herself when they got to the Wendy’s drive through, and even then she was biting down on her hand to keep from laughing some more while they got their Frosties and paid. Once they were on the road again her giggles returned.

“I am so sorry, sweetie. That is way worse than my crush on Marius or the awkward thing I had with Courfeyrac. Poor baby.” She reached over and patted his head.

“I’m hoping that if I ignore it, it’ll go away. Maybe I’ll get used to seeing Bahorel in drag and I’ll get desensitized.”

“That could work. You wouldn’t want to date Bahorel if he were a chick, would you?” Eponine asked.

Feuilly’s face scrunched up, and he vehemently shook his head. “Hell no. Bahorel would make a horrible girlfriend. I love the guy to death, but he’s a selfish sack of shit. Seriously. His poor parents are struggling to keep the bank from foreclosing on their house, and he still has the nerve to show up every week with his laundry to mooch money off of them and clean out their fridge. I love the guy, but he’s a spoiled fucking brat. I don’t do well with high maintenance types.”

“Yeah, well you’re definitely a lift yourself up by your bootstraps kind of guy.” Eponine set her Frosty in the cup holder and slouched down in the seat, putting her feet up on the dash. “If it’s just a looks thing then you’ll get over it. Maybe you have a secret thing for tall chicks, or hooker heels or something.”

“Maybe,” Feuilly said. “Thanks, Ponine. I feel better just having said it out loud. That doesn’t mean I want anyone else to find out about this though.”

“Consider my lips sealed. If your drama’s all set, then can we talk about my stupid fucking sister?” She smirked a little, looking surprised but pleased that Feuilly’s emotional distress was so easily handled.

“I’ve got one more thing first. This, even more than my unfortunate attraction to Guillotina, does not leave the car. You breathe a word of this to anyone and we are no longer friends, you got it?”

“Ooo…alright, what is it?”

Feuilly let out a deep sigh. He tried to speak a few times, but settled for just handing Eponine his phone. “Just…just look at my texts.”

“Kay.” Eponine started reading through the most recent ones, first giggling, then letting out shocked little gasps, and when she got to the picture messages she dropped the phone. “Holy shit! What the hell is wrong with Enjolras’ mom?”

“I know!”

“Honey, you should really change your phone number.”

Feuilly shook his head. “Then I’d have to explain to everyone why I was changing it.”

“Ah, yeah, that might be awkward. Well…maybe psycho-cougar chick has a short attention span.
Maybe they'll get a new gardener or something and she'll lose interest in you.”

Feuilly groaned. “Why is it that the only women who have shown interest in me in the last two years have been old enough to be my mother or my grandmother, respectively? Actually, you know what, the old lady who groped my ass the other day during Bingo was probably old enough to be my great grandmother. Am I doing something that actively repels twenty year olds? Because I really and truly would like to date someone my own age.”

“Who doesn’t look like Enjolras with a very nice boob job?” Eponine added. She’d picked up Feuilly’s phone and was scrolling through the pictures. “Seriously, that plastic surgeon is talented. A pluses for those double Ds. You know, if she ever needed to make a quick buck she could start selling these. The woman’s flexible.”

“With an impressive resistance to her gag reflex to boot. Things I didn’t need to know about my friend’s mother.”

Eponine snickered. “Really though, this explains so much about Enjy. He’s so super responsible because he’s rebelling against this crazy shit. So was Guillotina more or less naked than this picture?”

“Will you put the damn phone away?”

“Fine. Do you want me to delete your messages first?”

“Yes please.”

They drove around aimlessly for a little while before parking at the beach. Eponine let out a wistful sigh when she saw the snow banks crowding the low stone wall that separated the parking lot from uninhibited nature. “Every time the fucking snow melts down we get another storm.”

“Spring’ll get here. Honestly, it’s New England. You act like this is new to you.”

She shrugged. “Can I bitch about Azelma yet or do you have another hilarious dysfunctional sexually charged encounter to share?”

Feuilly chuckled and shook his head. “I’m good. It’s your turn.”

“Thank you. So…what do you think I should do about Azelma? Should I confront her about what an idiot she’s being?”

Feuilly picked his melted down Frosty up and idly started stirring it. “I think you need to examine why it’s bothering you so much. You have to know that Combeferre’s not going to reciprocate her feelings. She’s young and damaged. Even if he liked her at all, he’d see pursuing anything as taking advantage of a frightened child. So are you worried about your sister being hurt, or…”

“Or am I projecting onto the situation. Ding, we have a winner.” Eponine brought her knees up to her chest and hugged them. “Azelma’s like a little carbon clone of me. Last year, when I was her age, I acted exactly the same way she does now. I hate that she’s copying me.”

“We’ll help her out. That’s what ‘Ferre’s trying to do. We talked about it the other night while you were at work. He did notice the crush, you know.”

“Did he? He hasn’t acted like it yet.”

“He’s trying not to embarrass her.”
“Ah.” Eponine chewed on her lip and shifted her gaze out the window. “He’s a good guy. Maybe when Azelma’s a little older and a little more stable…”

Feuilly eyed her curiously. “So…you’re not jealous?”

Eponine snapped her head around to stare at him. “Wait, you thought that I…Combeferre? Really?”

“I don’t know! It just, I mean you got so angry, like how dare your sister try to go after him—”

“Yes, how dare my broken little sister try to manipulate a friend of mine into being as damaged as she is! I do like Combeferre, but not like that. Frankly, I’ve decided to give up on dating for now. Until I get my head straightened out, it’s not fair of me to pursue anything anyway. I’d make a shittier girlfriend than Bahorel.”

Feuilly was impressed. This was quite a different creature from the scared looking girl who’d climbed onto his lap and asked to be told she was pretty. “You’re growing up fast, Ponine.”

“My parents forced me to grow up faster than I should have. I’m smoothing out the rough edges from that now. Am I doing good so far?”

“I think so.” He smiled at her. “I like what I see, anyway. I don’t think you’ll have to be alone for too much longer.”

Eponine returned the smile, looking strikingly lovely with youth and the humor of good friendship. She held up her yellow paper cup, Feuilly held up his, and they toasted. “To us then. May we both be in healthy, functional relationships by this time next year,” Eponine said. “And may our partners neither be senior citizens or drag queens.”

“Cheers.”

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who haven't seen season three of RuPaul's Drag Race, consider googling Carmen Carrera. You'll be surprised this chick was born male (since the end of the show she's transitioned and is now identifying as female). She wasn't one of my favorite queens of the season (I supported Alexis and Shangela over the Heathers), but I am impressed by her look.

And on an only slightly related note, social activist rant!
For those of you who also happen to be US citizens, you're probably aware already that the Supreme Court is hearing arguments on DOMA and Prop 8 on March 26th. Same sex marriage is about so much more than marriage (I would say "just" marriage, but I find it to be a significant institution despite the slights it's taken). Marriage is an important symbolic achievement for the LGBT community, representing a very tangible recognition of equal rights, and as a civil institution marriage bestows over 1000 legal rights on couples. This is huge, and we need to treat it as such. I'm going to be taking the train into Boston on the 26th to join in on a rally for equality, wearing red to show solidarity for the cause (I'm sure Enjolras would be proud!) There are events going on across the country. For more info, follow the link: http://www.hrc.org/standformarriage
If you're reading this fic, you likely support fictional pretty boys in love. Please consider supporting their real life counterparts <3
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Feuilly and Bahorel help each other out.
Enjolras gets a visit from the munchkins.

Chapter Notes

So this chapter is very Feuilly and Bahorel heavy, and I'm not quite sure how I feel about the direction their stories are going, Bahorel especially. Feedback on that would be greatly appreciated.

To update everyone on the marriage equality business, something fantastic happened to me the other night. I was chatting with my mother about my plans for the week and I told her about the rally. Ten years ago, when I was first getting involved with social activism in high school, my mother would have freaked out on me. She was terrified I was going to be a victim of a hate crime, and even though she begrudgingly bought me my first gay pride t-shirt, she forbid me from wearing it in public. Ten years later, and she's going to wear red on Tuesday to show support for marriage equality, she asked if she could have one of my pride bracelets, and pretty much my whole family is going to wear red and tell people why they're doing it. My cousin in Florida is even trying to organize a rally for her community. I'm so proud of my supportive family <3

Also, Starbucks is getting actively attacked from the right wing again because their CEO came out in defense of marriage equality once more, and the conservatives are trying to spin it as him attacking traditional marriage. I'm going to continue depicting the Amis as Starbucks customers, in addition to frequenting Starbucks myself in RL. They're a wonderful company and I appreciate everything they do for worker's rights and LGBT rights.

It was four in the god damn morning. Feuilly had to be up for work in three hours. Why the fuck was somebody calling him at four in the god damn morning? Didn’t all his friends know better?

Hoping it wasn’t fucking Marie again, Feuilly grabbed his phone to see who it was. His phone served as his alarm clock, that being the only reason it was still on, and whoever had called him was going to get a big ‘fuck you’ for taking advantage of those unfortunate circumstances.

It was Bahorel. Feuilly decided on a big ‘fuck you’ followed up with a ‘go to hell’. When he answered the phone though, nothing intelligible came out of his mouth. Not even cussing.

“Dude, I am really sorry. I just, I need help. I don’t exactly know where I am, but it’s someplace seedy and I’m walking around in a fucking trench coat and this is a bad time of night for that shit. Can you pick me up?” The guy sounded unusually panicked. He was attempting to be quiet, but it was too forceful sounding to be considered properly whispering.
Feuilly groaned. “You couldn’t call anyone else?”

“Y-you already knew what I was up to. I don’t want anyone else to…please, dude? I’m asking you for help.”

Well fuck.

“How’m I supposed to get you if you don’t know where you are?”

There was an increase in street noise as Bahorel stumbled around outside. “Uh…I guess I’m on Washington Street. I’m reasonably sure I’m still in Lynn right now.”

“Lynn? Fuck. You owe me.” Feuilly hung up on him, then stumbled around his room for clothes. He got a pair of cargo pants on over his boxers and settled on wearing a hoodie without a shirt under it. He shoved a baseball cap over his sleep tousled hair, grabbed his keys, and ran down towards his car.

He ran back inside almost immediately, as contact with slush and snow had made him realize he’d forgotten shoes.

As driving half-awake was potentially perilous, Feuilly hit up a twenty four hour drive through to get enough coffee to allow him to at least pretend to be awake before setting off to rescue Bahorel. He was already planning on calling out of work, cheered up slightly at the remembrance of his paid sick days.

Once he got to the general area he texted Bahorel, and eventually found him lurking in a convenience store in what was admittedly a seedy neighborhood. Of course, Bahorel looked pretty sketchy himself. He’d de-dragged at some point in the night and was now sporting only the faintest traces of Guillotina; therefore, he came across as a tall, muscular, deranged looking dude in a trench coat. His wig was gone, his face had been scrubbed clean (though there were faint traces of makeup around his eyes), and he’d traded his heels for a pair of scuffed up boots. And he was hunched over, trying to look smaller and less conspicuous (and failing spectacularly at it), clutching his trench tightly to his chest. Feuilly concluded that he was probably still only wearing the teal spangles underneath it.

He looked like a mess.

Bahorel all but ran into Feuilly’s car, looking uncharacteristically rattled by something. Feuilly felt a bit guilty for stopping for his coffee. “Bahorel? What’s wrong dude?”

“I don’t…I don’t want to talk about it.”

“…did something happen to your DD?”

Bahorel scrubbed a hand through his short, spiky hair. “I didn’t leave with Trixie. I, uh…I should have though. The whole night was a mess. I don’t want to talk about it.”

Feuilly started driving, hoping that putting some distance between Bahorel and whatever had freaked him out so badly would help. He’d never seen his friend so shaken up before. Rather than go to either of their apartments, he started driving towards the beach. He was determined to get at least some of the story out of Bahorel. At least he’d already kissed his first sick day goodbye.

Feuilly parked in a space facing the ocean, took his seatbelt off, and turned in his seat so that he was facing his friend. Bahorel crossed his arms over his chest and stared out the passenger side window. “So what happened? You have to tell me at least a little bit; otherwise I’m going to worry about you.
And that’s a shit way to repay me for chauffeuring you around twice tonight.”

“Can I just leave it at Max was not someone I should have gone home with?”

“Is that the name of the guy who wrote his number on your leg?” Feuilly asked.

Bahorel briefly turned his head to look at him. “You saw that?”

“Yeah, just before I left. So who is this guy? He didn’t hurt you, did he? Should I be taking you to the police?”

Bahorel shook his head. “It’s not like that.”

“Well then what is it?”

Bahorel took a deep breath. “Look, if I tell you, you have to promise not to say anything to anyone. Especially not Enjolras or Eponine.”

Feuilly thought it odd for Bahorel to have gotten into anything that would require silence to those two particular friends, who didn’t seem to have much in common with each other, but he didn’t dwell on it. He nodded his agreement, trying to keep his expression at best supportive and at worst neutral.

“Kay…so there’s this other queen that I’ve been kind of sort of seeing,” Bahorel started. He had his head down, but something close to a smile formed when he thought back to how this thing had started. “I’ve had a thing for him for ages. He does goth-drag, and it’s just way hotter than it has any right to be. And we started hanging out and buying each other drinks and shit, and I dunno, we just clicked. I tried getting flirty with him, but he had a girlfriend so he did the flattered but spoken for thing, and we kept hanging out and I started hoping his girlfriend would get run over by a bus or something.”

“Because they couldn’t just break up…?”

Bahorel smirked. “I really like Max, so I was jealous. I wanted the bitch dead.”

“Ah.”

“So anyway, eventually he did start having trouble with his girl, and when they did finally break up he started getting flirty with me, and we made out a couple times in the men’s room, but he wouldn’t get serious with me because he said he wasn’t over her yet. I still don’t know his real name. Max is a drag name.”

“That doesn’t sound like much of a drag name,” Feuilly pointed out. He was rather fond of Guillotina. He thought it was clever.

“Well anyway, Max disappeared for like a week and a half, which happens sometimes but it’s still a little weird. He showed up tonight looking like hot shit, and the first thing he did was push me down into a barstool, lean over me and whisper in my ear that he was done with his chick. Then he wrote his number on me.” Bahorel rubbed at his eyes. “I was fucking psyched. I was gonna call him this weekend, but I bumped into him in the parking lot and he offered me a ride and I…”

“Should not have taken it?”

Bahorel chewed his lip and nodded. “Bad plan, yeah. We went to his buddy’s place to de-drag and hang out. I guess we couldn’t go to his place because he’s just escaped from prison and the cops
Feuilly waited for Bahorel to start laughing, but apparently he was serious. “What the fucking fuck? Are you kidding me? That does not happen in real life.”

“He didn’t give me the details or anything. Actually, he still hasn’t told me anything of substance about himself. But I think…I think I know who he is. Feuilly, you’ve got to swear to me that you won’t tell anyone else about this.”

“I promise,” Feuilly said automatically, without giving a single thought to what he was promising. He just wanted to hear whatever it was Bahorel was going to say next.

“I-I’m pretty sure Max is the guy that knifed Enjolras.”

“Montparnasse? How could he be—that makes no sense!”

Bahorel took his phone out of the pocket of his trench and pulled up an article from a local paper’s website. “Montparnasse broke out of the Middleton jail yesterday. They think he went out with a delivery. The timing all works out. Montparnasse was dating Eponine the entire time Max wouldn’t date me, and now that Montparnasse has tried to kill Ponine, Max is suddenly over his girlfriend. Max disappeared the night of the stabbing, and he showed up again the night after Montparnasse got out of jail. And Montparnasse’s drag name is Max Panache. Sounds like a play on Montparnasse, doesn’t it?”

Feuilly frowned. “Ponine said the guy used to do her makeup for her.”

“Mm hm.”

“Fuck. I am so sorry, Bahorel.”

“Yeah. Yeah, there’s no way around this. This sucks on every level. I have been interested in this guy for over a year, and now…” Bahorel rubbed at his eye with the heel of his hand. “I don’t know what to do.”

“I’d say that it’s pretty simple. Stay the fuck away from Max. And, y’know, give the police a tip about where to find their escaped prisoner.”

“But Feuilly, I really like him. You know me. I don’t attach to people very easily, but there’s something about this guy…”

Feuilly stared at him in shock. “He’s a criminal, dude. Even if he’s not actually the one who knifed our friend, he’s still admitted to having spent time in jail, hasn’t he? And escaping, which is still fucking ridiculous. He’s not good boyfriend material.” Feuilly couldn’t believe he even had to say that.

Bahorel pouted, and gazed out the window once more, giving off an air of melancholy that really wasn’t like him. “I’ll probably feel differently by tomorrow night, but right now…shit. There’s got to be some way to make this okay.”

“Are you sure you want to give this much consideration to dating a guy who tries to kill people for breaking up with him?”

“Ponine could have handled the break up better—”

“You did not just fucking say that.” Feuilly’s voice was almost a growl. He grabbed Bahorel’s arm
and shook him until the taller and much more imposing man turned to look at him. “Montparnasse was beating the shit out of her and her sister, and she drank herself into oblivion and popped pills so that she’d feel like their uncomfortable sex was consensual on her end. If she needed to sneak out in the middle of the night to feel safe about leaving, that’s her own business. You will not defend her abusive ex-boyfriend to me, or whine about his hurt feelings, or so help me god I will kick the shit out of you. You got that?”

“Oh. Dude, fucking okay, I get it. That was a stupid thing to say.”

Feuilly released him and Bahorel pulled away, hugging himself defensively. “You’re damn right it was.”

“Look, for the record, this is why I didn’t want to tell you about it. I have a right to say stupid shit the fucking night I found out the guy I’m falling in love with is—-is a fucking evil psychopath. There, I said it. Happy? This is a fresh fucking wound though, and I could use just a smidge of sympathy. I’d been waiting for him for almost a year now. I feel really stupid.”

Feuilly deflated a bit under the crushing weight of Bahorel’s self-directed anger. He reached out and grasped Bahorel’s arm in a friendlier manner. “I’m sorry. But…you are going to stay away from this guy, right?”

“I’ll try. The drag community out here’s not really big enough for me to avoid him completely though, and I’m not giving up drag.” Bahorel slumped down in the seat, rubbing at his eyes again. “I was looking forward to introducing him to everyone, y’know? Showing off my new boy the way Marius showed off Cosette. Bringing him around to the Musain and holding hands under the table like Courf and Jehan, or snarking at him like ‘Taire and Enjolras, even though he’d probably rather pretend we’re not a couple in public. Like Joly and Bossuet. I wanted to do the cheesy couple stuff.”

“I hear you on that. Kinda sucks seeing all our friends pairing off, doesn’t it?”

Bahorel nodded. “And all the gay boys are taken. I shoulda jumped on Grantaire when I had the chance.”

Feuilly looked at him in some surprise. “You have a thing for Grantaire?”

Bahorel shrugged. “I think we’d be compatible, yeah. I probably wouldn’t have been good for him though. Not like Enjolras, anyway. His drinking never bothered me. I didn’t even notice he was depressed until he wasn’t anymore and I had something to compare it to.”

“Enj definitely has had a big impact on Grantaire. Look, I wouldn’t worry too much about being lonely. You’re going out and meeting people all the time, and you’re good at it. If you hadn’t been fixated on the psychotic douchebag, you could have gotten a lot more numbers tonight, right?”

Bahorel reluctantly nodded. “Yeah, I rejected a fair few people tonight in favor of Max.”

“Oh huh. Here’s a little secret: people like tall, leggy redheads.”

Bahorel snorted out a surprised laugh. “I had noticed that, yeah. You’re right. I’ll meet someone else.”

Feuilly nodded, smiling encouragingly at him. “Definitely.”

Feuilly wasn’t nearly as confident about saying the same for himself though. Bahorel leached off of his parents financially and only put the bare minimum of work into school so that he wouldn’t be kicked out. He was loud, sociable, good looking, and had lots of free time. Of course he’d meet
someone. Feuilly, on the other hand, worked himself to exhaustion, used what little free time he had on a demanding group of completely platonic friendships, and was not nearly as extroverted as his friends. He was pretty sure he was going to be single right up until he died alone, drowning in debt and surrounded by his collection of books on Middle Eastern politics.

Overwhelmed by unhappy thoughts, Feuilly didn’t notice the way Bahorel kept tracing his fingers over the numbers scrawled on his leg during the ride home.

Someone was ringing the doorbell with the enthusiasm of a sugared up five year old. Groaning at the unexpected and awful awakening, Enjolras reached for his boyfriend, intending to bury his face against Grantaire in an attempt to block out the noise. The strategy wouldn’t have worked that well, as Grantaire wasn’t really even substantial enough to block daylight effectively, let alone noise, but the invalid was more asleep than awake at that point. At any rate, he didn’t actually find his boyfriend in bed with him, so he settled for pulling a pillow over his head.

Eventually the doorbell ringing let up, but it was followed up by the ominous sound of feet thundering over his hardwood floors. Enjolras sat up in bed and cocked his head to listen.

“Boys, ssh! Enjolras is still sleeping.”

“Can we see him?”

“I want to ask him what it’s like to be stabbed!”

“That’s a stupid question, Pete. Don’t ask him that.”

“What, do you know what it’s like? Could he feel if the knife got his guts? How are his guts? Did you get to see his guts coming out or anything like that?”

“Peter!”

“Will you stop being disgusting? You’re making your little brother cry.”

Enjolras fell back against the mattress and let out a loud groan. He concluded that it likely had been a sugared up five year old ringing his doorbell, and wondered which one of his idiot friends hated him enough to bring the Thenardier boys over for a visit the morning after he’d gotten out of the hospital.

Then his door quietly creaked open and a familiar, friendly face poked in. “Enjolras? Are you awake?”

“Against all inclination.”

Jehan opened the door a little wider, still smiling good naturedly despite the look Enjolras was giving him. He walked over to the bed and sat on the end. “Combeferre and I brought the boys by to see you.”

“I gathered. Shouldn’t they be in school?”

“The elementary school is having a day off for a teaching conference and Little R has afternoon preschool today. Come on Enj, they really worried about you when they overheard about what happened. Let them in to see you for five minutes.”

“Peter sounded very concerned just now.”
“He’s seven. Please Enjolras. Five minutes, and if we need to, we’ll get them out of here by promising to take them for ice cream or something. Just let Little R see that Batman didn’t lie and you really are alive.”

Enjolras must have been more tired than he’d thought. “What does Batman have to do with anything?”

“I choose to take that as a yes. Be right back!” Jehan bounced up off of the bed and threw Enjolras a blown kiss from the doorway, ignoring the fact that Enjolras flipped him the bird in response.

Enjolras was just able to struggle up to a sitting position before the thundering feet started afresh, and the next thing he knew, Peter Parker had bounded onto his bed. Gavroche stood at the end, trying to look nonchalant and even a little imposing despite being a ten year old, and Little R was in the doorway, standing just behind an apologetic looking Grantaire.

“See guys? Statue man is back from the hospital and doing fine.”

“Guts all on the inside where they belong,” Enjolras added in a low voice.

Grantaire rolled his eyes. “He’s a little crankier than usual, but otherwise doing great.”

“How can you tell the difference? He was pretty cranky to begin with,” Gavroche pointed out. Grantaire didn’t seem to have a way to answer that.

Peter Parker was bouncing up and down on his knees, looking around the room in wonder. “This is the fanciest bedroom I’ve ever seen. No wonder you’re sleeping so late.”

“Yeah, or because of the whole knife in the ribs thing,” Gavroche said, rolling his eyes. “Hey Statue, how come you didn’t stab Montparnasshole back?”

“Because he had the knife.” For whatever reason, that response earned him an irritated look from Grantaire.

“And also stabbing is wrong,” Grantaire said slowly.

“Oh, yes. That too. But in a defensive situation you are entitled to use force. Are you all done examining me and determining that I am not dead?”

“Can I see your scars?” Peter Parker asked. Gavroche whapped him upside the head and he ducked away.

“Don’t be rude, nipper. We have to wait longer to ask to see the scars. It’s still too fresh.”

“But they’d be more interesting fresh, wouldn’t they?”

Enjolras subconsciously brought the blanket up higher to cover his chest. He turned a pleading look on Grantaire. “Can you get them out of here please?”

“Peter Parker, Gavroche, go into the kitchen and see how Combeferre’s doing with the mac and cheese,” Grantaire instructed. The two older boys said almost-polite goodbyes to Enjolras and then ran through the doorway, almost knocking over their little brother.

Grantaire picked Little R up and carried him over to the bed. Enjolras eyed them curiously. The youngest Thenardier was clinging to Grantaire for dear life with his little face buried against his chest. “Come on kiddo, it’s okay. I chased your brothers out so we can talk in private. Everything’s
fine, I promise.” Grantaire sat down on the bed beside Enjolras and coaxed the little boy into looking up.

Now that he wasn’t clinging so forcefully to Grantaire, Enjolras finally noticed the red envelope in one of the boy’s tiny hands. It was covered almost completely with a dizzying variety of stickers—there were superheroes, stars, farm animals, fishes, and even Disney princesses and My Little Ponies. A small space in the middle had been left blank, and ‘Stachu Mann’ was spelled out messily in thick black crayon.

“Th-this is for you.” He held the envelope out with a shaking hand. As soon as Enjolras took it from him he went back to hugging Grantaire with his face hidden. Enjolras opened the envelope and extracted a hand drawn card made of thick yellow construction paper.

The front was a little horrifying. A blocky looking person with yellow circles for hair was dripping red all over the ground. The fledgling artist had done a remarkable job capturing an abstracted look of pain for the little cartoon Enjolras. Frowning, he opened the card, not sure he really wanted to see whatever else Little R had drawn, but sure that Grantaire would force him to look either way.

Thankfully, the inside was much better. The first half showed the cartoon Enjolras sitting down on a bed while a second blocky person with black spikes for hair gave him band-aids. The second half had a crowd of little figures. Based on their hair and heights, he assumed they were supposed to be him, Grantaire, and the Thenardier children. Above it the words ‘tanke yu fur safeing mie sistur’ were scrawled out. Smiling, Enjolras flipped to the back and found more stickers.

The little boy was still cowering, so Enjolras addressed his thank you to the back of Little R’s head. Grantaire stroked Little R’s hair and patted his back. “He’s smiling, buddy. He likes the card. Turn around and say ‘you’re welcome.’”

Hesitantly, Little R broke away from Grantaire again and watched Enjolras with wide brown eyes. Then, quite suddenly, he lunged forward and wrapped his skinny arms around Enjolras’ neck. “ThankyouverymuchforprotectingEponineandlettingusstayinyourhouseeventhoughyoudon’tlikeus’tsniceto! Then he pulled away, face bright red, and fled the room.

Grantaire laughed under his breath. “Don’t tell the others I said this, but that one’s totally my favorite.”

“Is that including Eponine?” Enjolras asked.

Grantaire considered. “…yeah. Again, don’t tell anyone I said that. ‘Ferre and Jehan are going to feed the munchkins while they’re here, and then they’ve got to bring Little R to afternoon preschool. They were thinking of taking the older boys to the movies or something after that. You interested in tagging along or are you gonna hang in and nap?’”

“Honestly, I feel like ass. I’m going back to sleep for at least another hour, and after that I should probably try to look through the latest batch of notes Combeferre brought me. Speaking of… shouldn’t you be in class right now?”

Grantaire looked at him blankly. “Uh…I suppose but, um, you must have noticed that I haven’t been going to class since the, uh, since you were hospitalized. Right?”

He had, and he’d avoided talking about it. Which was selfish and stupid, but it had been so much easier to have Grantaire with him the entire time. Enjolras knew what he was like when he was weakened. He hated admitting he needed help and he was an absolute pill. He alienated people by being a pain in the ass, but Grantaire was the one person who loved him so completely that he could
just be himself without worry of driving him away. Enjolras still wouldn’t admit, even to himself, that he’d *needed* Grantaire’s support, but he’d certainly liked it.

However, it had been selfish of him to lean on Grantaire when he knew his boyfriend had more pressing obligations that needed to be tended to.

“Did you talk to your professors?” Enjolras asked, afraid to hear the answer.

Thankfully, Grantaire nodded. “Yeah, of course. I emailed them the morning after, and Courfeyrac ran around offices for me and pleaded my case. I’ve been submitting assignments electronically and I’m back in class Monday, same as you.”

It sounded too good to be true. Enjolras scrutinized Grantaire’s face, looking for a trace of anything suspicious. Grantaire smirked. “What? You don’t believe me? I can show you the sent box from my student email if you need me to.”

“No, it’s just…sorry. I was afraid I’d gotten you in trouble, and considering we’d only just gotten everything sorted out—”

“Babe, you almost died. My professors felt a certain amount of compassion about that. When Dr. Simplice wrote back she mentioned the way you held my hand and kept me steady all during our office hours meeting with her, and she said you struck her as a fine young man and a good partner for me and she wishes you a speedy recovery.”

Enjolras fell back against the pillows and breathed a sigh of relief. “So you won’t get kicked out of school.”

“Not for this,” Grantaire said with a crooked smile. He bent over and placed a gentle kiss at Enjolras’ temple. “I suppose I should see how the guests are getting along. Is it cool if I hang in and study with you today?”

“Of course. Grantaire, you don’t have to ask to spend time with me. I take it as a given, at this point.”

Grantaire grinned and nodded. “Good catch. You’ve got a feel for how my broken mind works now, don’t you?”

“I suppose I do. Any chance of your broken mind accepting my feelings for you, or at least not taking what I say in the worst way possible whatever my intentions might happen to be?”

Grantaire made an iffy motion with his hand. “I’m working on it. I’ll be back in a little bit.” This time Grantaire kissed him properly, on the lips, and then he was off to shoo the children and their temporary caregivers out of the apartment (he hoped, anyway). Enjolras snuggled into his comforter and was just closing his eyes when his phone started ringing.

Annoyed, Enjolras pulled the comforter over his head, but it didn’t help. Exhausted though he may have been, he was far too awake to sleep through the blaring phone. He groped along his nightstand until he found it, and when he saw that it was his mother calling him he turned the phone off. He needed that hour of sleep before he could stand to even think of talking to that woman.

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In the interest of holding on to his sick days for when he would inevitably need them more, Feuilly
decided against calling out of work and made the mistake of showing up running on three hours of interrupted sleep. By the sixth hour of his eight hour shift he was close to falling asleep on his feet. They’d stuck him on the third floor for the afternoon—the advanced dementia and Hospice floor. The lowest functioning Alzheimer’s patients were probably the most difficult group in the building.

Feuilly spent what was supposed to be a snack social running around the room redirecting a confused old woman named Sadie, who was determined to hug and kiss all the other residents while muttering under her breath that they were crazy and trying to eat every scrap of paper she found on the floor. The other residents were distrustful of Sadie, and wouldn’t believe Feuilly when he insisted Sadie was harmless, just confused and sick, so if Sadie got too near them then they would freak out. There had been a few times when Eleanor, a feisty woman with the attention span of a fruit fly, tried to whack Sadie with her walker.

Feuilly was close to tears, pretty much begging Sadie to sit down and play with a foam puzzle instead of trying to hug Mary Higgins, when a CNA came up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder. “Hon, you need to go sit down for a few minutes.”

“I already had my break,” Feuilly muttered. He sat up, embarrassed at being caught at the end of his rope.

“It happens to all of us,” the girl said, offering him a smile. “Sadie’s daughter visited her yesterday. She always gets extra affectionate for a few days after that. Go and take five minutes and compose yourself. I’ll keep an eye on everyone in here for you.”

“Th-thanks. I…yeah, that’s probably a good idea.” Feuilly smiled at her, then bolted out of the room, ducked behind the nurse’s station, and locked himself in the employee bathroom. He took out his phone and texted Bahorel, demanding coffee. ‘Seriously dude. This is your fucking fault. I’m on the 3rd floor. If I don’t have a venti in my hands in ten minutes then we are no longer friends.’

When Feuilly got back into the main room, the CNA had miraculously gotten Sadie to sit contentedly with a stuffed rabbit from Feuilly’s sensory cart, and the other residents were watching a Lawrence Welk tape. Feuilly stared at the girl incredulously. “I tried giving her that stuffed animal. I tried giving her ten stuffed animals.”

“But you were agitated and she fed off of that,” the girl returned. “It’s all about your tone of voice and facial expression with Sadie. She doesn’t really hear most of your words, y’know?”

“Ah. Well, um thanks. You just saved my ass.”

She smiled. “Not a problem. It’s Feuilly, right?”

He nodded. “Yeah. New Activities guy. I didn’t catch your name.”

“It’s Jo. I’m a bit of a flake, so I keep losing my name tag. Every time the state shows up for an inspection I have to wear sharpied medical tape on my scrubs.”

Feuilly laughed. “Don’t tell anybody, but I used that break to text my buddy and have him bring me coffee. Do you want me to have him bring you one too?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I mean it’s nice of you to offer, but…”

“Are you sure? He’s hitting up a Starbucks for me, and he owes me the favor. It’s his money, not mine.”

Jo grinned. “I’ll take my caramel macchiato with extra caramel then.”
Feuilly snuck his phone back out and sent the instructions along to Bahorel as quickly as possible. He glanced at the roomful of content looking residents. “Technically I’m supposed to be doing ball toss with them until the entertainment on second floor starts, but considering how they’ve been today I don’t want to disrupt them.”

“I hear you. I don’t think Victurnien would mind.”

Jo and Feuilly chatted together until Bahorel showed up, looking irritable but carrying his tray of coffees. “Dude, I was asleep.”

“It’s two o’clock.”

“And?”

“You’re an asshole. You’re the reason I didn’t sleep last night, you jerk.”

Jo laughed. “Hey, I support this behavior if it’ll continue getting me lattes at work.”

“I don’t know what you’re complaining about,” Bahorel grumbled. “Looks to me like your job is just sitting here watching old people watch TV.”

Feuilly was sorely tempted to empty his very large, very full cup of very hot coffee over Bahorel’s head, but he held himself in check. He needed the caffeine too much, and besides that, he wasn’t sure he could even reach the top of Bahorel’s head.

Jo’s expression hardened. “You weren’t mincing words, were you Feuilly? He is an asshole. For your information red, this is one of the most physically demanding jobs a guy could have. But way to show compassion for your clearly exhausted buddy. Seriously, slow claps for you.” She probably would have kept going, but Wally wheeled into her and demanded to be toileted.

When one resident broke away from the TV, the spell of the Lawrence Welk show was broken, and the residents all erupted into various problematic behaviors. Feuilly was on his feet again and running around the room, shooing residents away from the trash, convincing others to stay in their wheelchairs because, no really, they couldn’t walk anymore without falling, and trying to get some of them interested in a game of ball toss.

When Meg, his coworker from the activities department, showed up to help him transport people for the afternoon entertainment, he was surprised to see that Bahorel was still there. “Excuse me for a sec, Meg.” He walked over to Bahorel. “I’ve still got another hour and a half of my shift.”

“Your loudmouthed friend made my conscience hurt.”

Feuilly quirked an eyebrow. “You’ve got one of those?”

“From time to time, yeah. Can we talk for a sec, or…?”

He shook his head. “Not just yet, anyway. I’ve got to get everyone downstairs and settled. If you want to wait in the second floor living room though, once the music starts I can get away with talking to you for a few minutes. That’s the only activity where I actually am a glorified babysitter.”

“Ohay dude. See you down there.” Bahorel nodded at him, then left for the elevator.

Twenty minutes later, Feuilly all but collapsed onto a couch next to Bahorel. The room was crowded with wheelchairs and walkers, and a smarmy old man with a CD player was singing 1940s pop standards in a booming voice that was almost in key.
“So, uh, I was just teasing. So we’re clear, I know you work your ass off.”

“So fine,” Feuilly mumbled.

“Yeah, but you looked like you were gonna kill me. We’re cool, right?”

“Mm hm. I’m just having a rough day. This job sucks. If it wasn’t giving me full time and benefits, I’d be back at the convenience store in a heartbeat.”

“Really?” Bahorel frowned. “But…you don’t have to deal with meth heads here.”

“Oh believe me, this place has plenty of its own substance issues. That guy in the reclining chair in the corner? He’s only in his fifties. He’s here because of a drug overdose.”

Bahorel peered across the room, and his eyes widened when he saw the state of the man Feuilly had indicated. “What’s that tube for?”

“It’s how he eats. He can’t talk, or really move that much, but you can see in his eyes that he’s totally with it. I’m actually not even sure if he likes these music entertainments. We just bring him anyway on the off chance he does.”

“H-huh. You know, if he’s with it he must hate them. This guy is terrible.”

Feuilly nodded his agreement. “They’re all terrible. Can you believe my boss pays these guys eighty bucks to come in and do this? Most of them use karaoke machines, at least.”

“Wait, you’re telling me that this friggin’ idiot is getting paid eighty bucks an hour to sing over a CD? But he’s not even good at it.”

Feuilly shrugged.

Bahorel seethed quietly, visibly enraged at a subpar performer making so much money. “He’s taking advantage of you guys. I could do better than this.”

“So do it. Victurnien hires one entertainer a week. She’ll be here tomorrow until two.”

“Kay. Should I mention you and Joly as references?”

“What?” Feuilly sat up straighter. “Bahorel, no! I was kidding. You cannot call my boss and ask to do a drag show for the residents.”

“Why not? I do a mean Judy Garland, and if I play it right, the old folks’ll have no idea I’m not actually a chick. And I won’t even charge the whole eighty. I’ll do it for sixty. Hell, I’d do it for forty if it meant giving these poor guys a decent show.”

Feuilly buried his face in his hands and groaned. “You’re going to get me fired, aren’t you?”

“Hey, you don’t even like this job.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Montparnasse is out of jail. People react.

Chapter Notes

But damn does my job interfere with my writing :( I wanted to have this chapter done LAST week, so sorry for my late posting. Part of the reason I'd wanted it up then was because of the marriage equality rally that's mentioned in this chapter (that I didn't actually get around to writing just yet). So if all goes well, the next update should follow this one rather quickly, as I am determined to share the awesomeness that was the Boston marriage equality rally with you guys.

Thursday morning found Eponine bustling around Jehan’s kitchen making peanut butter sandwiches for her little brothers for school. She was trying to be as little a burden as possible on her friends (some of whom were really just big-hearted acquaintances), and so was determined to take on as much of the childcare as possible.

Wednesday into Thursday, she decided, was her least favorite part of the week, as Jehan’s apartment was tiny. He had a one bedroom with a small living room and a pantry sized kitchen blocked off from it by a tacky yellow paisley counter. There was a bathroom located at the end of the hall that the entire floor shared, and she was sure some of Jehan’s neighbors were a bit suspicious about the two teenage girls and three little boys that had shown up quite suddenly to monopolize it for pre-bedtime showers the night before.

Not only was Jehan’s apartment small, it was also full of breakable things. The apartment seemed to have been built in the 70s (or at least, hadn’t been updated since then), so the wall paper, carpeting, and fixtures were incredibly dated and hideous. Jehan had thrown a lot of effort into his decorating to try to offset the apartment’s innate hideousness. He had statues of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and Hindu deities, he had fancy incense holders and crystals, and valuable, first editions of rare books, fancy looking crystal vases with carefully arranged dry and fresh flowers, and all sorts of things her brothers could easily destroy.

Eponine much preferred when they stayed with Combeferre (and hypothetically Enjolras, but that wouldn’t happen again until he’d made a full recovery). Combeferre had turned his study into a room for the boys, and on the nights the Thenardiers piled into his good-sized apartment, he slept on the couch and let Eponine and Azelma share his room. If he’d owned any breakable knick knacks to begin with, he’d had the sense to hide them away somewhere. The only thing Eponine really had to worry about when she stayed with him was the possibility of the boys tormenting the guy’s poor cats.

“Just get them all to school,” Eponine muttered under her breath. All she had to do was get the boys to school, then they’d all head over to Combeferre’s afterwards and things would be manageable.
They’d spend Friday with Joly, Legle, and Feuilly, which was crowded but came with its own consolations, and then, as Enjolras was still under the weather, it would be back to Combeferre’s for the weekend.

Eponine was putting the finishing touches on the last sandwich when she thought she heard a stirring in the living room. She peered over the counter into the main room and watched the row of sleeping bags lined up on the floor. She let out a quiet, relieved breath when she determined that her brothers were still miraculously asleep.

Then the bedroom door slowly creaked open. Jehan tip toed around the boys, wearing a fluffy blue bathrobe that looked something like a skinned Smurf. His hair was sticking up horrendously and his eyes were half-lidded, but he offered her a genuine smile. He mouthed ‘morning’ and then motioned at the stack of sandwiches.

Eponine smiled back and shook her head. She mouthed ‘I’ve got it’ and started putting the sandwiches in paper bags. Despite her words, Jehan still went to the fridge and took out the package of juice boxes she’d picked up the other day. He stuffed those into the bags while Eponine fetched a bag of apples.

Then her cell phone rang, blasting Little Lion Man loudly throughout the small space. Gavroche and Peter Parker jumped to their feet (and promptly fell over, as they were still in sleeping bags), and Little R started crying. Azelma even yelled at them to shut up from her nest of blankets on the floor in Jehan’s room.

Scowling, Eponine took her phone out and rejected the call. “You only had another ten minutes of sleep anyway. Gavroche, you’ve got bathroom duty first. Get dressed and brush your teeth. Peter Parker, start folding up the sleeping bags.”

“Oh, he doesn’t have to-” Jehan started, but Eponine threw a surly look his way.

“Yes he most certainly does. Little R, will you please stop whining? Come in here and help me make breakfast. We’re having toast. Come on, everyone’s going to pitch in so we won’t be a burden!”

“I’m sick of toast. We have toast every morning!” Peter Parker whined.

Eponine put her hands on her hips. “If you want something better then you can buy breakfast. Boys, get moving!”

They grumbled mutinously, but they did as instructed. Little R couldn’t reach much in the kitchen, but he was able to set the table when Eponine got the plates down for him. Jehan snuck past her and went into the living room to help Peter Parker with the sleeping bags.

She was so busy with her brothers and sister that Eponine didn’t even think of her missed call until she was walking Little R to preschool (another thing she hated about staying with Jehan—he was one of the only college boys who didn’t drive, and so they all had to take public transportation or walk to school Thursday mornings). She took her phone out of her pocket to check it out, but she didn’t recognize the number. They’d left a message though, so once she’d seen Little R to his cubby and then set off for the high school she checked her voicemail.

Eponine’s face paled when she heard the message. She darted into the nearest and most crowded building she saw (which happened to be a Dunkin Donuts), sat down, and called Feuilly. He didn’t answer, which she should have expected given his work schedule, but she was still frustrated. Luckily there were other college boys to choose from. She tried Combeferre next.
When he didn’t answer either she found herself in a bit of a jam. Eponine considered herself closest to
Grantaire, Feuilly, and Combeferre, but she didn’t want to go to Grantaire with this, and the other
two weren’t available. She wasn’t entirely comfortable going to Courfeyrac or Marius when she felt
vulnerable, she wasn’t sure how much help Jehan could possibly be in this situation, and, despite the
awkward living arrangement that had been thrust on her, she still didn’t know Joly, Legle, or Bahorel
well enough to run to them in a crisis.

Thankfully, her phone buzzed with a text before she had to make an awkward call. Apparently
Combeferre was in the library and he had a class in ten minutes. He asked her if it was important.
‘Yes it is,’ she typed feverishly. ‘Montparnasse is out of jail. Don’t want to be alone.’

Combeferre’s reply was immediate. ‘Where are you? Are you at school?’

‘Not yet,’ she answered. ‘I’m at the Dunks on Canal Street.’

‘Omw.’

Even keeping in mind that the campus wasn’t very far from the Dunkin’ Donuts on Canal Street,
Combeferre still made good time. He’d obviously left the library as soon as he’d gotten her text, as
he hadn’t bothered putting his books and notebooks back into his bag but was carrying them in an
awkward armful. He looked around the shop for her, spotted her table, and rushed over to her,
expression vaguely terrified.

“Hi,” Eponine squeaked.

Combeferre dropped the books onto the table and sat down across from her. “So what happened?”

She shook her head. “I-I don’t really know still. I got a voicemail from some detective, and he said
that there’d been…I mean, I guess it was a fuck up. They’re not really sure how it happened, but
somehow Montparnasse got out and now nobody can find him. The guy said to give them a call if
Parnasse tries to contact me.”

Combeferre looked like he was waiting for her to continue, but she had nothing else to say. “That’s
it? He didn’t, like, offer you protection or anything?” Eponine shook her head. “But Montparnasse
stalked you. He tried to kill you.”

Eponine’s eyes watered against her will. “Mm hm. Like I said, the detective was an asshole.”

“Where’s Azelma?” Combeferre asked.

Eponine gasped. “Oh God. School, I hope. I…I had to walk Little R to preschool, so I only saw her
off on the bus. It was Jehan’s day, so we didn’t get a ride in. Oh shit, you don’t think he’d go after
Azelma, do you?”

He’d already taken his phone out, and a moment later he relaxed into his chair as the girl had
obviously answered his call. Eponine listened as Combeferre checked in on her. She shook her head
when he started to tell Azelma about the breakout, and Combeferre responded accordingly. He told
Azelma he was looking forward to seeing her when she got out of school, hung up, and then
smacked a hand over his face. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

Eponine laughed, surprised she was able to force it out of a throat that had been constricted since
hearing her voicemail. “No, probably not. To a love addled sixteen year old, that right there was a
profession of love.”

“I suppose you’d be the expert on that,” Combeferre teased. “I had to say something. Actually, I
think I should have told her Montparnasse is on the loose. Don’t you think that’s information she needs?”

Eponine shook her head. “You’d only have panicked her. It’s not something to say over the phone, at any rate. As I just found out, actually. If she’s at school she should be safe enough. And I can keep an eye on her once I get there. Um…would you mind walking me in? I don’t want to make you miss your class, but…”

“It’s fine. I’ll give you a ride.” He started shoving his books into his backpack and once it was zipped up they set off for the student parking lot together.

Really, she didn’t expect Montparnasse to come after her in broad daylight. That wasn’t his style. And if he did come after her again, he wouldn’t come alone. He’d bring Claquesous, or Gue勒mer, or Brujon, or Babet…hell, maybe even her own father. Still though, walking next to a strong, brave, and above all good man who happened to be over six feet tall and broadly built was definitely more than a little comforting.

Enjolras’ voicemail was slightly more polite than the one detective Javert left for Eponine (unbeknownst to the students, his rudeness had been a kneejerk reaction to seeing the name ‘Thenardier’ in his paperwork), but it was still curt and far from helpful. And Enjolras was already in a pretty awful mood when he heard it, as he had to get through a drunken rant left on his voicemail from his mother first.

Grantaire walked into the room clutching his portfolio and an armful of books. He slowed his step when he saw Enjolras’ expression. “What’s up?”

Enjolras shook his head incredulously and weakly motioned towards his cellphone, which was sitting on his lap. “I…I can’t even. This is beyond ridiculous.”

“What happened?” Grantaire asked. He set the books down at the end of the bed and then crawled along it until he was sitting beside his boyfriend.

Enjolras looked at the concerned blue eyes he was so incredibly fond of, and thought with bitterness that he’d seen very little joy reflected in them recently. There had been a time when all he needed to do was throw a vague smile Grantaire’s way to get his face to light up (it would cloud over seconds later as his shit self-esteem dismantled the situation and reinterpreted it in the worst way possible, but still). As sick as Enjolras was of being weak and leaning on Grantaire, he was even more fed up with worrying him.

“Voicemail from my mom,” Enjolras muttered. “She’s drunk already, and pissed off about something. She made some vaguely worded threats. It’s not a great way to kick off a round of studying.”

Grantaire murmured sympathetic platitudes at him, and Enjolras curled against him, pretending to need comfort that Grantaire desperately wanted to give. Before long the expression of concern had softened to one of fondness. Enjolras sat against Grantaire, back to his boyfriend’s front, while they both worked on readings for their classes.

He’d tell him about Montparnasse later. There was a good chance Grantaire would find out on his own before long anyhow, as prison breaks were rare and noteworthy occasions. At that particular moment though, Enjolras didn’t consider it pressing information. The two of them were plenty safe in his apartment, and Enjolras thought they deserved a brief respite from fear and drama.
For the first time since Azelma had started exhibiting signs of her annoying as all fuck crush, Eponine was glad for her little sister’s infantile infatuation. She found Azelma immediately after school ended, patiently waiting for Combeferre to pick them up on the curb in front of the gym. If they had been waiting for any of the other college boys Eponine would have had to turn the school upside down looking for her sister. Instead, Azelma was ready, ignoring the other high school kids passing by in favor of checking her makeup over.

Eponine rolled her eyes, but she approached Azelma with a wary smile. “Hey sis. How’d school go?”

Azelma shrugged. “Glad it’s over. Why?”

“No reason.” Evasive and rude as ever. Eponine was comforted to see it. It didn’t seem like Montparnasse had tried to contact her, because if he had the little drama queen would have been pitching a fit.

Combeferre pulled up a few minutes later. Little R was securely buckled into the backseat with his backpack, lunchbox, and a few rolls of poster paper. Azelma basically shoved Eponine out of the way to grab shotgun, so she climbed into the back and buckled in next to her youngest brother. “Hey pipsqueak. How was preschool?”

“I made Bucket a picture! Jean said that cats are lucky, and Bucket has bad luck so I thought I should make him a cat.” Little R started unrolling one of the pieces of poster paper, and he proudly showed off a tempera paint Beckoning Cat that bore a passing resemblance to one of Jehan’s east Asian trinkets.

“Bucket? Do you mean Bossuet?” Eponine asked.

“I can’t say his name right, but Joly said Bucket was close enough when I tried. Do you think he’ll like my kitty?”

“I think so.”

“Me too,” Combeferre called from the front seat. He’d pulled out into traffic. “Hey, show your sister the other one you made.”

“Okay.” Little R unrolled the other picture, but it was larger than the first one, so he needed some help from Eponine to keep it flat. “We were a’posed to draw our families but I…I couldn’t really remember what to paint for Mom and Dad, so I just made us instead, and my teacher said it was okay for your family to be the people you live with instead of your mom and dad.”

Eponine looked at the blocky figures on the paper and smiled, though she felt a little pang of regret for her and her siblings’ circumstances. “Wow. Hon, this is quite the crowd. Which one’s you?”

“That one.” Little R pointed to a figure Eponine hadn’t initially noticed. A depiction of what she guessed to be Enjolras and Grantaire were in the center of the crowd of figures (the Enjolras had band-aids over its tummy). There was a little circle just above the Grantaire’s shoulder, and upon closer inspection it had brown circles for eyes and a fall of yellow hair. “’Taire carries me piggyback sometimes. That’s you. I gave you sparkles because you’re pretty.” He pointed to one of the two figures with eyelashes in the picture.

“Aw, that’s so sweet! Thank you, buddy.” She giggled a little when she noticed that cartoon Enjolras also had sparkles.

“Which one’s me?” Azelma asked, poking her head over the back of her seat.
Little R pointed to the lighter haired figure with eye lashes that was gazing at the tallest block person. The cartoon Azelma was shooting hearts out of her eyes while the cartoon Combeferre read a book.

Azelma frowned. “How come you didn’t give me sparkles?”

“Because I gave you hearts. But you’re pretty too, even if Combeferre hasn’t noticed.”

“Hey, it’s quiet in here,” Combeferre said suddenly, not quite overpowering Eponine’s snort of amusement. “Azelma, want to plug in my mp3 player and put something on?”

Azelma took the out and, red faced and slouching in her seat, she spent the next several minutes looking through Combeferre’s music selection while Eponine explored the rest of the picture.

Probably owing to some misunderstanding of the eastern statues Jehan had collected, Little R had drawn the poet to look like an airbender. She was confused by cartoon Joly’s hands for a few minutes, until she figured out that the white puffy stuff Little R had drawn was supposed to be soap bubbles. She snickered when she realized that cartoon Joly was perpetually washing his hands. Bossuet was standing next to him, wearing a cat-in-the-hat hat, and Gavroche and Peter Parker were striking poses just in front of them.

Eponine was loving everything about the picture and hoping someone would hang it up in a place of prominence, but then her eyes fell on the last figure. Cartoon Feuilly was in a heap in the corner, surrounded by empty coffee cups and frowning with Z’s coming out of his mouth. The budding artist had even drawn a storm cloud over his head.

“Azelma, why did you make Feuilly look so sad?”

Little R stared at her for a minute with his mouth hanging open and shrugged. “Because he’s sad. Did I do something wrong?”

Eponine let out a frustrated sigh. “No. I guess that’s the problem.” She rolled the painting up and handed it back to him. “Overall I like it. Good job, kiddo.”

“Thanks Ponine. Um…should I give Feuilly a hug the next time I see him? Teacher said people like hugs, but sometimes they don’t so you should ask first.”

“I think Feuilly would definitely appreciate a hug.”

“I think so too, Ponine. Especially if you gave him one,” Azelma said smugly. “I think the next time you see him, you should hug the crap out of him.”

Eponine kicked the back of Azelma’s seat and she giggled. Combeferre, as had become his habit, pretended not to hear anything. “Hey Eponine,” he said after a minute. “You didn’t get any, um, follow up phone calls today, did you?”

“Nope.”

“Huh. Well that’s frustrating. It’s not like that first one was helpful.”

“Tell me about it,” she snapped. “Did you talk to Enjolras?” As he’d been the one to actually almost die, she figured the police must have been talking to him as well.

“I stopped by his place earlier to give him some more notes. He got a message too, but it didn’t say much more than yours.”
“What are you guys talking about?” Azelma asked.

Combeferre gave his head a little shake. “We’ll talk about it later.”

They still had another twenty minutes before the elementary school let out, so Combeferre drove aimlessly in an attempt to kill time. Little R fell asleep with his cheek resting on the window, and once Eponine was sure he was out cold she reached into the front seat and poked Azelma.

“If we tell you what’s up you have to promise not to freak out. Especially not in front of the little boys.”

“Oh, I promise. What is it?”

Eponine took a deep breath, and then just forced it out. “Montparnasse escaped from jail.”

“What the fucking fuck?” Azelma hissed. Thankfully she kept her voice down, and Little R barely stirred. “How the fuck did that happen?”

“He snuck out during some confusion over a delivery,” Combeferre said. Eponine cocked her head to the side. “Enjolras got a little more information from the detective than you did. The detective also said he’s reasonably sure that Montparnasse is trying to get out of state. We’re probably all fine, but we should be careful. You know, considering what happened.”

“So buddy system for everyone,” Eponine said firmly. “Seriously sis. I don’t want you sneaking out anywhere until that creep is back behind bars.”

“Believe me, I have no intention of letting him find me alone anywhere,” Azelma said. “But I’m not too worried. It’s not like it’s me he’s going to want to kill. I was only his second choice.”

“Don’t tell me you’re bitter about that,” Eponine snapped. “For the record, it wasn’t some kind of party being his girlfriend.”

“I’m not saying it was. I guess that’s the sucky thing about being the pretty one.”

“Oh my God. Do you even hear what you sound like right now?”

“Girls,” Combeferre said in a warning tone. “Why don’t we finish this discussion tonight after the boys are in bed?”

“No we even have to?” Eponine asked with a pout. Combeferre ever so briefly turned in his seat and smirked at her. She stuck her tongue out at him, but when he turned back to the road she was smiling.

There were a lot of things about her life she wasn’t fond of. The negligent parents (who still hadn’t noticed that she’d moved out), the psychotic ex-boyfriend, the fact that everyone she fell for fell for someone else, and the fact that she’d become a replacement parent for her siblings all wore Eponine down. She’d been saddled with more responsibility than she’d ever wanted to deal with, and now that she’d been forced to spend more time with her baby brothers, she was starting to appreciate just how important that responsibility was. She didn’t want to fuck up. She wanted to give them more than she’d ever had, if she could, and that desire scared her.

However, she’d also been given a fabulous support system, and Eponine was thankful for that.

No one brought up Montparnasse after that. Once they got back to Combeferre’s place, he and Eponine helped all the boys with their homework, then she got ready and they all piled back into the
car so he could give her a ride to work.

She felt sick from her nerves when her eyes rested on the little alley behind the café. She couldn’t get the image of snow stained red out of her mind.

Combeferre turned the car off and walked her to the entrance. “Courfeyrac’s going to give you a ride when he picks up Marius tonight, so I don’t have to take all the kids out again. You’re going to be okay, right?”

She nodded, and tried to smile something close to her usual brazen one. “Course I am. I’m a tough kid, aren’t I?”

“I’ll try to have the brood all in bed before your shift is out. Even Gavroche.”

“Yeah, good luck with that.”

He gave her shoulder a little squeeze. “Have a good shift, Ponine.”

“Thanks. See you later.”

Then, just because Azelma was giving her a death glare from the front passenger seat she’d insistently stolen again, Eponine leaned up on tiptoe and kissed Combeferre’s cheek before she skipped into the café.

Enjolras still hadn’t figured out a way to tell Grantaire about Montparnasse’s escape by Saturday night. There just hadn’t been a good moment to slip it into conversation. He had made a few attempts, but then he thought back to what Grantaire had looked like in the hospital room, curled in on himself and clutching Enjolras’ wrist for dear life while he spewed out a tidal wave of fear and weakness. Enjolras didn’t want to bring him back to that moment, and he was starting to convince himself he wouldn’t have to. The police were, in theory, looking to recapture Montparnasse. Escaped prisoners couldn’t hope to evade capture for too long, could they?

“Grantaire, slow down!” Enjolras yelped.

“I’m only going thirty,” Grantaire said through gritted teeth.

“It’s raining, and there’s melted snow on the road, and you’re above the speed limit.”

“Will you relax? I’m fine.” Grantaire shot his boyfriend an amused, if not slightly exasperated, look.

“Keep your eyes on the road!” Enjolras yelled in response. “It’s not your car you’re driving.”

“Don’t I know it.” Grantaire gave the dash of the Prius an appreciative pat. He’d never driven a car younger than he was before. It was like commanding a cloud. The car handled perfectly, his absolute favorite part being that it braked without him stomping repeatedly on the pedal. If Enjolras hadn’t been so tense, it would have been the best drive he’d ever taken.

Despite Enjolras’ fears, Grantaire got them to the Musain safely. To Enjolras’ further annoyance, Grantaire passed by several open parking spaces close to the café. “Let me get this straight. You think that I’m in such unbearable agony that you insisted I take pain medication when I insisted to you that I was fine. Then you had to drive my car, and now that we’ve survived your recklessness, you’re going to park as far from our destination as possible? Wasn’t the point of this damn arrangement to keep me from exerting myself when I’m supposedly in need of rest?”
“Your eyes watered when you knocked your stomach against the kitchen counter. There’s nothing hypothetical about your pain. And I’m not trying to park far away.”

“That’s the fifth open spot we’ve—”

“I can’t parallel park,” Grantaire said. That, at least, shut Enjolras up. Grantaire finally found a space he could maneuver the Prius into, and he did so as quickly and carefully as possible.

Enjolras frowned at him. “How come you didn’t learn how to parallel park?”

“I haven’t driven regularly since I was seventeen. I’ve never had my own car or anything.” He’d borrowed the Volvo a few times over the years, but generally Grantaire walked or took the bus where he needed to go.

“If I had known that I wouldn’t have taken the Vicodin.”

“Which is why I didn’t tell you,” Grantaire said with a cheerful smile. “Now c’mon. Our friends are waiting for us.”

It was Enjolras’ first trip out for a café meeting since getting out of the hospital. Everyone was meeting up at the Musain to plan a trip into Boston on Tuesday for a marriage equality rally. Grantaire was hoping to talk Enjolras out of going himself, while Enjolras was equally determined to take just as large a part in it as he’d been planning before getting stabbed.

When they started walking Grantaire tried to take Enjolras’ hand, but he struggled away from him. Scowling, Grantaire shoved his hands in his pockets and trailed just behind the stubborn jerk instead.

They made their way to the back room of the Musain, and Enjolras gave a small start. All the tables had been pushed together and the room was decorated with red streamers and balloons. The tables had been covered with Human Rights Campaign symbol confetti, and several of their friends were wearing party hats. The Thenardier boys were sitting at a table blowing on red noise makers while Eponine was up on a chair tying a last set of balloons to a light fixture, but she jumped down and ran over to greet the couple when they walked in.

Grantaire watched in amusement as his cold and aloof boyfriend was swarmed by affectionate friends. Eponine hugged him and kissed his cheek, Courfeyrac did the same, and Bahorel said he would have hugged Enjolras, but he didn’t want to squish his healing midsection.

“I appreciate your restraint,” Enjolras snapped. “What is all this?”

“It’s the first time you’ve been out since the stabbing,” Courfeyrac said, as though that were news. “We decided to make it a ‘yay you’re not dead’ party.”

Gavorche and Peter Parker punctuated the statement with coordinated blows on their noisemakers while Little R lowered his head to color on a paper menu.

Enjolras looked a bit like he wanted to stab someone himself, but he let his friends bring him to a streamer covered chair of honor at the center of the pushed together tables. He did a poor job trying to hide a sigh when he finally got off his feet, and then he was beset on all sides by people trying to get him drinks or desserts or anything else they thought he might need.

Grantaire watched in some amusement. “This is what happens when you don’t let your loved ones dote on you. It builds up,” he called. Enjolras shot him a glare. Shrugging it off, Grantaire went to the counter and ordered himself a tea.
Enjolras loosened up a little after about twenty minutes, when Combeferre got them on task discussing the marriage equality rally. Enjolras gratefully jumped on the chance to discuss social politics instead of his supposed heroics and subsequent near-death experience. “I’m going to have to drive in,” Enjolras said. “I looked at the train times and they run pretty infrequently around the rally. I’d have to skip a class if I wanted to take the train, and-”

“Considering how much class you had to miss when you were stabbed last week, that really isn’t an option,” Grantaire said pointedly.

Combeferre tried to hide a laugh in a cough. “Something you’d like to say, Grantaire?”

“That attending a rally when you’ve been severely physically weakened is a total shit idea.”

“I’m fine,” Enjolras nearly growled. Combeferre shot his friend an assessing look, then turned his attention back to Grantaire.

“How’s he really been doing?”

“He had to pop a Vicodin just to come out here today.”

“That was only because I knocked my abdomen on the edge of the counter while I was making supper!” Enjolras insisted. “I’m fine!”

Combeferre tapped his fingers against his tea cup. “What if I drive?”

“I could live with that,” Grantaire said.

Enjolras made an odd high pitched noise in his throat. “Excuse me, both of you, but I am an adult. I can get myself to the rally.”

“So apparently we might need to hog tie him to get him to the rally safely, but I think it’s a plan. I’ll drive so he can pop as much Vicodin as he needs-”

“Get him in front of a news camera then!” Eponine squealed. “Oh man, I will pay money to see that! Drugged up Enjolras giving a speech for the five o’clock news! I like this plan.”

“If I consent to let you drive me in, will you all please move on to talking about the actual rally?” Enjolras asked. He rubbed at his eyes looking tired and exasperated. While his eyes were averted, Grantaire and Combeferre traded a quick high five. This was the first time they’d ever joined forces to badger Enjolras into taking care of himself. Apparently they’d have to do that more often.

From there the friends figured out carpooling and train schedules, and then signs, statements to the media, and how to handle counter-protesters.

“We helped to make signs!” Peter Parker said proudly, cutting off some suggestions for chants Courfeyrac was trying to pitch.

“Did you help too?” Grantaire asked in a soft voice, addressing the little boy that had cuddled up on his lap. Little R nodded, then hid his face in Grantaire’s t-shirt. Grantaire smiled giddily at Enjolras and mouthed ‘favorite.’

“So do we get to go too, since we helped by making the signs?” Gavroche asked. “I want to go and protest.”

Eponine shook her head. “You’re still going to be in school. And so are you,” she said pointedly,
looking at Azelma. “The rally starts at three.”

“We could skip for one day,” Azelma pouted. “I’ve never been to a rally before.”

“Mm hm. And you’ve never cared about going to one before either.”

“I’m skipping the rally too,” Grantaire said. “You guys can all hang out with me while we wait for everyone to get back from Boston.”

“Why are you skipping?” Gavroche asked.

Grantaire smirked. “Ah, to put it succinctly and rather mildly, I’m not really political. We don’t want me pleading the gay rights case to the news cameras. I won’t make a very good impression for the cause. This is the poster boy.” He reached over and patted Enjolras on the back.

“Unless we’ve got him hopped up on painkillers,” Courfeyrac said.

“Yes, unless we do that,” Grantaire returned.

“No one is hopping me up on painkillers!”

“So has anyone been watching the local news?” Feuilly suddenly interjected, looking exceptionally uncomfortable. Bahorel shot him a dark look and reached for his beer.

“Not really,” Combeferre answered, as the rest of the table remained silent. “I get most of my news from PBS, the BBC, and my blogs. You know that.”

“Yes, well, um…I thought it was worth mentioning that Montparnasse broke out of jail this week.”

“What?” Several of them gasped and started in surprise, but it was also equally obvious who at the table had already been aware of Montparnasse’s escape. Little R started trembling in Grantaire’s arms.

Grantaire shot Feuilly a nasty look. “So now seemed like the right time to just blurt something like that out, huh?”

“While we’re all gathered in one place?” Eponine returned pointedly, though she did look a little concerned about her brothers. She reached over and patted Peter Parker’s back. “So yeah, we need to be cautious until the police find him again. Buddy system for everyone.”

“Exactly,” Feuilly said. “We should be fine. I’d think he’d want to stay away from us in the interest of avoiding recapture, but just in case…”

“Right,” Combeferre said with a nod. “You’re right. We just need to be careful. If he’s smart, he’ll keep his head down and try to get as far away from here as he can.”

Feuilly’s announcement definitely put a damper on the party from that point forward. Bahorel sank into a pissy mood and took off after about twenty minutes. Grantaire spent that time holding Little R and reassuringly stroking his messy yellow hair. Gavroche and Peter Parker stole their brother’s crayons and started drawing a comic about Batman beating up Montparnasse, while Azelma sat in the corner hugging her arms and looking terrified. She came back to earth a little when Combeferre squeezed her shoulder.

Surprisingly, Eponine seemed fine. Grantaire wanted to ask her if she was okay, but Little R fell asleep on him, so he was stuck in his seat. Despite suspecting that Enjolras would want to talk about
anything else (with the possible exception of painkillers and news cameras) Grantaire leaned in as much as he was able around the limp little boy in his arms and spoke in a low voice. “Ponine looks pretty calm, considering. You don’t think Montparnasse is going to come after her, do you?”

Enjolras shrugged. “It would be stupid of him, but he doesn’t strike me as a terribly intelligent person.”

“I’d have thought she’d be freaking out.”

“I’m guessing the police contacted her Thursday when they called me. She’s had a few days to process the news.”

Grantaire wanted to jump up and shake Enjolras, but then he’d have had to deal with a crying child. “You’ve known since Thursday? Why am I just finding out now?”

Enjolras’ posture stiffened. He turned away from Grantaire. “Because you don’t follow the local news, I suppose.”

“Don’t put this on me. You should have told me as soon as you found out.”

“I didn’t want to upset you,” Enjolras muttered. “And I think I was right, as you seem pretty agitated to me right now. I don’t think Montparnasse has much reason to come after me, and the detective I spoke with was inclined to agree with me. Eponine and Azelma definitely need to be careful though.”

Grantaire dully nodded and glanced around the room, trying not to be hurt, and hating himself for the simmering anger he couldn’t quite get a lid on. He was tempted to strangle his boyfriend, and equally tempted to drown that urge in a bottle.

Fuck. It felt like those urges really should have been fewer and further between. He was three months in, but the temptation to drink still hit him with alarming suddenness, without any warning.

Little R stirred and let out a tiny sniffle. “’Taire? M’tired. Can someone take me to a sleeping bag soon?”

Grantaire stroked his hair. “Sure thing.” He smiled sadly. A normal kid would be asking to go home to bed. A normal kid would have parents that wanted to tuck them in.

He helped Little R off his lap and then got up to find Combeferre.

“You’re not actually using that thing, are you Parnasse?”

Montparnasse looked up at Babet and gave a little shrug. He’d been opening and closing the cheap, prepaid phone Thenardier had given him after they’d sprung him from jail. It was supposed to be for work, but he was waiting for a call that was most definitely unrelated to the favors he owed his (for lack of a better word) friends.

Babet kept stumbling towards the kitchen, and Montparnasse checked that the volume was turned up on the phone once more, though he knew it was. He couldn’t believe it. It had been days, fucking days, and he still hadn’t heard from Guillotina.

Things seemed to have been going so well with the leggy redhead. He couldn’t understand why the guy wasn’t call him. Maybe he shouldn’t have drunk so much the other night. He must have let something slip to scare the beautiful queen off.
Babet came back with a beer in one hand and dropped into an armchair opposite Montparnasse. “Have you spoken to Thenardier yet?”

Montparnasse shook his head.

“He saw that guy he was talking about. Got you some new IDs. Your name’s going to be Jondrette now. When the heat dies down, you should be good to start working again. Until then, the old man wants you to work in his Salem shop.”

“Kay.”

“Kid, what the fuck is wrong with you? You should be grateful. The old man’s only busting ass like this for you because he feels bad that it was his bitch that got you nabbed to begin with.”

Montparnasse only listlessly shrugged again and looked back at his phone. “I don’t fucking care about Eponine anymore.”

Babet rolled his eyes, and muttered darkly about fucking teenagers.

And meanwhile, Montparnasse wished he’d thought to get Guillotina’s number in return. He’d just been so sure that the guy was going to call him.

Apparently he was going to have to go looking for his new flame.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

The boys (plus Cosette and minus Grantaire) attend a marriage equality rally. Javert fails at his job.

Chapter Notes

Just to warn you guys going in, this one ends in a cliffie. And I'm working long shifts the next three days in a row, so I probably won't be able to get an update out before Saturday (I will try though!) Apologies in advance :(

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tuesday morning began deceptively peacefully. Enjolras woke well before his alarm went off, feeling rested and unusually content. Grantaire was still out cold, snoring even. They weren’t the loud, rattling snores he made when sick or overexerted, but the quieter, raspy ones that Enjolras was mostly used to after so many weeks of sharing a bed. In a way, he found the little sounds endearing.

He carefully turned onto his side and propped himself up on one arm so that he could see Grantaire’s face. Still more asleep than awake, Enjolras allowed himself a moment to marvel over his present state of commitment and contentment without the self-conscious pride of his waking mind to stop him. He’d never sought something like this. Even if he had, he probably wouldn’t have gone looking for someone like Grantaire. And yet…for all the upheavals they’d faced and all the imperfections still confronting them, he’d honestly never been happier.

The saccharine thoughts lasted barely two minutes. Then Enjolras tenderly brushed a strand of raven hair from his lover’s face, kissed his temple, and climbed out of bed with the utmost care so as not to wake him. He took his cellphone with him and turned off his alarm, lest he render the caution moot.

Enjolras noted, as he began his morning routine, that a lot of Grantaire’s possessions had accumulated throughout the apartment. When he took his shower he came close to using Grantaire’s generic, strongly scented body wash before he caught himself and reached for his own animal-friendly and unscented one. He’d accidentally grabbed a pair of Grantaire’s threadbare socks from the dresser. Enjolras almost put them on, but the heels (if you could call a gaping hole a heel) rendered them unusable. He threw them out and walked into the kitchen barefoot, deciding he’d get his own socks when he returned to the bedroom to wake Grantaire.

He made a sort of game of finding Grantaire’s possessions in his kitchen while he ate his oatmeal. The sweatshirt draped over the back of the chair (covered in holes-Enjolras made a note to buy Grantaire a new one), the muddy work boots against the back door, the stacks of comic books on the counter…he gave a small start when he found art supplies shoved in the bread box. “Hm. I’ll have to ask him about that one.”

He was rinsing out the dishes from his breakfast when he heard footsteps in the doorway. Enjolras turned to throw Grantaire a small smile. He returned it dazedly, rubbing at one of his eyes with the
back of his hand. His hair was sticking up, and Enjolras was hit with contradictory urges to smooth it down and muss it even more.

“Am I driving us to school today?” Grantaire asked.

Enjolras shook his head. “I’m completely Vicodin free. Actually, I think this is the best morning I’ve had in a long time. I feel great.”

“You look it,” Grantaire noted. “Careful though. Saying it like that’s going to tempt fate. Your day’s just going to go downhill if you start out all cheery.” He went into the fridge and started shifting things around, eventually emerging with a leftover slice of pizza and a mostly empty carton of orange juice for his breakfast.

“I suppose it’s an understatement to say that you’re not a morning person.”

“To be fair, I’m not all the crazy about afternoon, evening, and night either.” Grantaire said with a wink. He sat down at the table and took a bite out of the cold, three day old pizza slice.

Enjolras grimaced. “I’m not kissing you until you brush your teeth. That’s disgusting. We should have thrown that pizza out.”

“That’s why I hid it from you,” Grantaire returned. “You’d be surprised how much mileage you can get out of one large pizza if you ration it out appropriately.”

“’Taire, you don’t have to do that anymore,” Enjolras said, trying not to let his frustration show. He walked over to his boyfriend’s chair, stood behind him, and tenderly ran his hand through the soft black strands he loved so much. “I’ve been given more resources than I’ve any right to have, or even know what to do with. I want to share what I have with you, so please don’t feel you have to eat week old pizza or wear clothes full of holes.”

“Mm…this has been my life, y’know. I actually really enjoy the old pizza. But you can keep petting my hair if you want. I like that too.”

Enjolras rested his other hand on Grantaire’s shoulder, then leaned down and brushed his lips against his neck. “Whatever makes you happy.” Then he stood up and started for the doorway. “I’ve got to finish getting ready though. I’ve got to pack everything I need for the protest too. We’re leaving for it right from school.”

Grantaire had finished off his pizza slice at that point and gone on to drinking the last of the orange juice directly from the carton. He set it on the table and followed Enjolras back to the bedroom. “Can we talk about that again?”

“We talked about it last night,” Enjolras said quietly, tone full of warning. He started digging around in his dresser drawer for a pair of socks that were actually his and thus lacked holes. It took him longer than he would have liked. “Have you been stealing my socks?”

“Uh…we need to do laundry,” Grantaire said, evading the question. “And I want to talk about the protest one last time.”

“I’ve said everything I’m going to say. This is important to me. And, might I add, it should be important to you too. You fit into the LGBT rainbow. These are your rights we’re talking about as well.”

Grantaire rolled his eyes. “It’s just marriage.”
“You really don’t listen to me when I speak, do you?”

“Sometimes I get distracted by watching your mouth.” Grantaire sat down on the end of the mattress and leaned back on his elbows. “Even more so than usual now, actually, since I know what those lovely lips are capable of.”

Enjolras threw a pair of heel-less socks at Grantaire’s head. “Federally recognized civil marriage comes with over one thousand benefits and protections that are currently being denied same-sex couples. We’re arguing for equal recognition under the law, and considering we don’t, in fact, live under a theocracy, this should be a given. In addition, the term marriage has a lot of symbolic significance that resonates on an emotional level with most people. It would be a tremendous victory for the gay rights struggle if were we to attain equal footing with heterosexuals on this front.”

Grantaire shrugged. “Look, sorry, but I can’t be bothered to care about fucking marriage. Maybe it’d be different if I’d ever seen a happy couple enter into the institution, but I haven’t. My experiences with it have only soured me. Honestly, the whole thing has nothing to do with me anyway. It’s never going to touch my life.”

“I see,” Enjolras said, icing over. He finally found a pair of his own socks and slammed the drawer shut with more force than was really necessary.

Grantaire sat up straight and regarded him with confusion. “Enj? Don’t shut down on me yet. I still haven’t gotten to my point in fighting about this again. Y’know, the ‘you should still be taking it easy’ part, and getting all pissy about politics tenses you up and puts strain on recovering injuries, and the guy who knifed you to begin with is out prowling around somewhere…okay, what the fuck did I say?”

Enjolras sat down on the other side of the bed and started fiddling with the socks. “Nothing, just…I suppose it’s better to know now that you only want the relationship to progress so far.”

“Huh?”

“You just said the struggle for marriage equality isn’t ever going to touch your life. So the logical implication of that is that you wouldn’t want to marry me.”

Grantaire gaped at him. “That’s…well, I mean I…marriage is an empty gesture that people don’t really mean and…but…if it were you…” The devout cynic had lost all his eloquence, reduced to vague stutters of points he’d argued with vehemence on countless other occasions.

Occasions when he’d been single and thought he always would be, as he’d been pining over an unrequited love at the time.

Enjolras grinned when he realized his very affection had become an argument Grantaire could never counter. He leaned over and kissed his cynic, mindful to keep it closed mouthed because of the pizza breath. “Idealistic though I may be I think I’ve got a concrete stake in this one. My feelings for you have only gotten stronger the longer we’ve been together, ‘Taire. I’d marry you in a heartbeat, and I want that option available to me.”

“I…I don’t think we need any kind of legal documentation or religious sanction to prove anything,” Grantaire said slowly. He grasped Enjolras’ hand in his. “But you’ve got to know that you’re stuck with me for life. Even if you cast me off again, I’ll just follow you like a really loud and obnoxious shadow, just like before.”

“I’m never breaking up with you,” Enjolras insisted.
“Oh. Well then I suppose we might as well get a tax-break out of the deal,” Grantaire quipped.

Enjolras laughed. “They’re expecting the Supreme Court to have a decision by June. I won’t enter into what Ginsburg called a skim milk marriage. But if DOMA does get taken out of the equation… it’s something to talk about. Maybe sometime after graduation?” He couldn’t believe he was pitching this. They were barely three months in, and Enjolras was legitimately thinking of marrying his boyfriend.

What in the hell had Grantaire done to him?

Grantaire, meanwhile, let out a giddy little squeak that was much more characteristic of someone like Jehan (to the point where Enjolras almost started looking around for the adorably romantic poet). He pulled Enjolras onto his lap and kissed him deeply, and Enjolras went with it despite the pizza breath. He groaned appreciatively, tangling his fingers in Grantaire’s hair and sighing against his mouth.

He could do this every day for the rest of his life.

When they came up for air, Grantaire reverently stroked the side of Enjolras’ face. “You are destroying me, so you know. I’m going to have to stop making fun of marriage. That’s been one of my biggest rant targets since middle school.”

“I noticed,” Enjolras said. “You can still make fun of it.”

“No I can’t, because then I’d be a hypocrite. Because I want to marry you so fucking bad. I’d never even thought of it before, but…damn. That would be nice.”

“You should come to the state house with me then,” Enjolras murmured. “Stand with me and tell the world about it and help us get that right.”

Grantaire shook his head. “I meant what I said the other night. You’re the poster boy for the cause, not me. I’m damaged goods and I’d only fuck up if I tried to advocate for this. Besides, I’m going to babysit the Thenardiers so everyone else can go, remember?”

“I suppose that is important too.” Enjolras kissed a spot on Grantaire’s neck that sent a shiver up his spine. “I promise to be careful. I won’t overexert myself, nor do I expect the others to let me.”

“I guess I’ll stop bitching then.”

“I’d appreciate it. Now get ready for school. We’re supposed to leave in five minutes.”

“Fuck.”

Enjolras slid off of Grantaire’s lap and watched in amusement as he darted around the room trying to get an armful of clothes together. “Did you take the last pair of good socks?”

“I think I may have. I suppose you’ll just have to wear your own clothes then.”

“Urgh…I’ll do laundry while you’re at the fucking rally.”

“Grantaire…?”

He’d disappeared into Enjolras’ walk-in closet, but he poked his head back out again. “Yeah?”

“Are we…living together?”

Enjolras honestly couldn’t tell. Grantaire had started spending more time at Enjolras’ place than his
own once they’d been dating for a couple of weeks, but that had been a matter of practicality. Grantaire’s apartment was a fetid hole and neither of them liked being there. It seemed stupid to even try, considering there was a viable alternative. But Enjolras’ injury and recovery had kicked that all into high gear. Enjolras couldn’t remember the last day he’d spent without his doting boyfriend as a constant companion.

“I…I dunno. I suppose.” Grantaire exited the closet with one of Enjolras’ red t-shirts. They were supposed to wear red to show support for marriage equality, and Enjolras’ wardrobe was redder than Grantaire’s. “Is that okay?”

“We just talked about marriage,” Enjolras said flatly. “I’d say it’s a good idea to try living together before we make that commitment.”

Grantaire grinned. “Cool. Then can I start moving some of my junk here?”

“You really already have. But yes, keep moving it in.”

“Cool.” Grantaire pulled his thin, hole filled t-shirt over his head in favor of the red one he’d borrowed from Enjolras’ closet. Enjolras raked his eyes over Grantaire’s torso for the thirty seconds it was bared to him, reflecting with a small smile of the changes in his boyfriend’s physique over the past few months. He was starting to put on some weight and even a little muscle tone.

He gave a little jump when Grantaire let out a loud bark of a laugh. “Get your mind out of the gutter, Enj. We’ve got class, remember?”

Enjolras scowled. “I wasn’t thinking about…okay, fine, I was. But we’re in a committed, monogamous relationship. Thinking of you when you’re half naked in front of me doesn’t count as having my mind in the gutter.”

“Oh huh.” Grantaire was about to do that thing where he flipped his underwear inside out so he could use them for a second day, but Enjolras stopped that ridiculousness by throwing one of his own pairs of boxer-briefs at him.

“You’re not doing that again. It’s disgusting.”

Grantaire obediently pulled the borrowed underpants on, then hesitated with his jeans. “Are you sure we need to get to class on time?”

“I’ll be in the car.”

“C’mon, I’ll definitely be more of a morning person if we start our mornings off with sex!” But he reluctantly put his jeans on.

“Then I suppose you shouldn’t sleep until nine when you have to be at school at nine thirty.”

Grantaire jogged after him, trying to pull on a sweatshirt as he went, a ball of socks sticking out of the back pocket of his jeans. “What about after the rally’s over?”

Enjolras stopped by the front door to pull on his coat and boots. “I suppose that depends on whether the Thenardier kids are still here. Grantaire, don’t forget to put on deodorant or I’m not touching you at all.”

“That’s not how that ends and you know it. It just ends with shower sex.”

Enjolras smirked. “Finish getting ready. I really don’t want to be late.”
“Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Grantaire smiled, then turned and ran back towards the bedroom. Enjolras struggled down the stairs by himself and carefully climbed into the front seat of his car.

The morning really did start off so well…

Detective Javert stared incredulously at the papers spread out in front of him. He was in his cruiser, parked up the street from the local high school, where he’d just seen the former mayor drop his adoptive daughter off. He’d almost missed them, as he’d been slowed down by picking through Valjean’s trash before tailing him to the high school.

He was looking through the papers he’d taken from the recycling bin now, and contemplating the contents with worry. It looked to him like Valjean was preparing to skip town, and Javert couldn’t have that. He hadn’t managed to get any convictions to stick to the suspicious old fox. But if Valjean moved out of his district…

Javert agonized over the receipts, invoices, bills, and other papers in his hands, but he couldn’t think of another way to read them. Valjean had acquired a condo in Western Massachusetts, with furnishings scheduled to start arriving there in August. He’d also purchased a small sedan.

Javert took a deep breath. “He’s not leaving until August, then. There’s still time.” He’d just have to catch the criminal in the act (whatever that act may be) before summer’s end.

The cranky detective was interrupted in his musings by his personal phone. He had a text from one of his coworkers, asking him if he’d made any progress on the Montparnasse case.

Javert curled his lip and texted the man back, informing him that he should mind his own caseload. Montparnasse was a talented thief, and he could be dangerous alone in a dark alley, but the youth wasn’t what Javert considered a cerebral individual. He made mistakes, lots of them, and he inevitably facilitated his own recapture through them.

This business with the mayor though, this was different. Clearly it required Javert’s full attention. He turned back to the pile of papers to look for clues.

Combeferre paused in shifting around the junk that had accumulated in his backseat to push his bangs out of his eyes. His car was usually impeccably clean, but with some paper due dates creeping up on him the backseat had become cluttered with research materials.

Well, that and the surprises the Thenardier boys had left for him; food wrappers, chewed up lollipops, crumpled drawings, and marked up homework shoved in the cracks between the seats. Combeferre looked at Gavroche’s history test and frowned. Whereas it was kind of exciting to see the boy developing into a fellow radical activist, he could sympathize with the kid’s poor teacher. She’d taken issue with Gavroche referring to Martin Luther King as an accommodationist coward and Combeferre couldn’t blame her.

He made a mental note to have a chat with Enjolras about how they phrased their political rants
when they were around the kids.

His friends started showing up shortly after he’d cleared the backseat of Thenardier-related detritus. Enjolras took shotgun, leaving Marius, Cosette, and Feuilly in the backseat. They stuck their signs and backpacks in the trunk, and then they were ready to set off.

Combeferre beeped when he saw Courfeyrac’s Volvo by the front of the student parking lot. The slacker cheerfully waved from where he was sprawled on the hood. They could see Jehan shifting around junk in the backseat while Bahorel tried to cram their signs in an already overburdened trunk.

“Maybe they should have taken the train,” Feuilly said. “They’re never going to fit Joly and Bossuet in there too.”

“I’m glad we picked this car,” Cosette murmured, giving Marius’ hand a gentle squeeze. “No offense to your roommate, but I do appreciate having leg room.”

“No worries. I think we stand a better chance of making it on time this way too,” Marius said. “Plus we won’t have to contend with Bossuet’s luck.”

Combeferre glanced in the rearview mirror and did a headcount as something occurred to him. “Guys! We split up by sexual orientation.”

“No we didn’t,” Enjolras snapped.

Feuilly let out a loud snort. “Yes we did. Oh, that’s too funny. The only straight guys in our group are all in this car. Enjolras, you’re the only gay kid!”

“Excuse me,” Cosette said in a soft but challenging tone. “I believe I came out to you boys as bisexual. Just because I’m dating a man right now doesn’t make me any less a member of the LGBT community.”

“Sorry Cosette. Didn’t mean to offend.”

“It’s okay, just don’t do it again. Having my sexuality trivialized is a pet peeve of mine.”

Feuilly was still smirking. “Considering our big gay group though, what are the odds of this happening?”

“Until we get to the marriage equality rally, Enj and Cosette are the minority,” Combeferre added.

“Oh dear. I don’t know how we’ll ever manage, being a minority,” Cosette said, feigning horror. “I’ve so little experience feeling like a member of a minority group.”

“Mm, it’s an incredibly foreign feeling,” Enjolras joined in.

Combeferre handed Enjolras his mp3 player. “Try not to put anything gay on. Y’know, since this is the straight car.”

“The straight car on its way to fight for gay rights,” Feuilly called from the backseat. “Either we’re incredibly bad at being straight or super fucking awesome at it.”

“I’d go with awesome,” Cosette said with a laugh. “So what does Combeferre have for straight music?”

“Not much, actually,” Enjolras muttered.
“Courfeyrac got ahold of my mp3 player a few days ago and messed with it. I haven’t gotten a chance to switch it back yet,” Combeferre said.

“That explains the preponderance of show tunes. Is Frank Turner okay with everyone?” Enjolras asked. He didn’t get any objections, so on Frank Turner went.

As Marius and Cosette had never been to gay rights protests before, Enjolras, Combeferre, and Feuilly spent a little while filling them in on what the events were usually like. “They’re pretty fun, actually,” Feuilly said.

“Yeah, the gay side is always the side to be on,” Combeferre added.

Marius looked a bit confused. “Gay side?”

“They’ll have the pro-marriage people stand apart from the counter protestors,” Enjolras said. “We’re not allowed to engage our opponents in direct discourse.”

“Unless the cops are foolish enough to take their eyes off of Enjolras for five seconds,” Combeferre said, provoking amused sniggers from everyone but Enjolras.

“So there are going to be cops there?” Marius asked.

“Yeah. To keep order and whatnot,” Feuilly explained. “Don’t sweat it though, these things are always pretty chill. I mean, this is Massachusetts. We’re kind of a lost cause for the homophobes, and I think they’re aware of that.”

“We’re not really trying to sway the violently homophobic anyway,” Combeferre said. “That’s one reason we’re not supposed to engage the counter-protestors.” Here he shot his best friend a significant look before turning his attention back to the road. “They make themselves look like intolerant, hateful pricks. By being sympathetic, mature, and loving demonstrators, we stand a better chance of swaying people who are on the fence to our side.”

“Mm. We can swing the rational over to us. The psychotic douches to the far right are never going to come around, and frankly, they help us make our case by being assholes,” Feuilly said.

Despite their friends’ best efforts, Marius and Cosette didn’t seem to know what to expect when they got to the state house. The more seasoned activists did a double take when they got there.

“Where are the counter-protestors?” Marius asked. “I don’t see any. Everyone here is wearing red and rainbows.”

Feuilly grinned. “The people have come around, haven’t they?”

“In Massachusetts, anyway,” Enjolras muttered. “Come on. Let’s stake out a good spot.”

They jogged down the steps, pushing through hesitant looking clusters of activists and demonstrators, passed by a line of news media, and joined a bolder group of activists by the flagpole and podium. The ACLU was handing out signs supporting Edie Windsor, the plaintiff in the DOMA case, and GLAD and the HRC were also well represented.

Cosette unrolled her sign, a piece of white poster board with the slogan ‘Liberty and Justice 4 All’ scrawled across it in elegant purple cursive, I’s dotted with pink hearts. Courfeyrac had made Marius’, and it read “As Jesus Said About Gay Marriage: “

Marius looked around, noting that despite their intention to secure a good spot, his friends had taken
“Where’d everyone go?”

“I think Enjolras is networking,” Cosette said. She pointed towards the podium, where some of the more professional looking demonstrators were speaking and trading notes. “Feuilly’s getting interviewed,” she said, motioning towards the line of news media. Feuilly was indeed speaking to someone from channel seven. “And… I can’t find Combeferre. You’d think he’d be the easiest one to find.”

“Oh, there he is!” Marius said. “He’s handing out extra signs.”

Their other friends showed up after about twenty minutes, which was much better time than anyone had expected. Bahorel ditched them almost immediately to try to pick up guys (“You guys are taking me to a gathering of openly gay guys and you expect me not to hit on anyone?” “It’s a marriage equality rally. This gathering of gay guys is also more likely to be in a committed relationship they’re trying to get federally recognized.” “Will you quit it with the fucking logic, Enj? Be a good friend and help me get laid.” “…you’re a terrible activist.”), Legle and Joly joined Marius and Cosette with their own signs (‘Dump DOMA’ in rainbow letters, and ‘6 Years Together, Society Still In Tact’, respectively), and Courfeyrac and Jehan immediately joined Feuilly by the news cameras.

“Excuse me, hi.” A girl approached Cosette with a microphone and a camera. “I’m doing a piece on the Supreme Court cases for my school’s newspaper. Can I ask you a few questions?”

“Oh, sure. Are you sure you want to talk to me?” Cosette asked. She motioned towards her friends. “These guys are seasoned activists. I’m a noob.”

“It’s fine,” the girl said with a smile. “We’re trying to get a variety of perspectives.” She aimed the microphone at Cosette and adjusted her tripod. “So what made you decide to come out here today?”

“Well, um, I’ve been a strong supporter of gay rights for years, and when my friends told me they were coming to the rally I thought I should tag along and show my support.” She gave her sign a little wiggle.

“Are you gay?”

“Bisexual,” Marius interjected quickly, even though the microphone wasn’t aimed at him. “I’m her boyfriend. So she’s not, you know, looking for a girlfriend or anything.”

Cosette let out an awkward laugh. “Isn’t my boyfriend pretty?”

“Don’t worry, the microphone didn’t pick him up. So you’re bisexual?”

“Mm hm. I plan to marry for love, and I’d like the option available for me no matter what gender my true love happens to be.”

“That’s lovely. Thank you very much for your time. Do you mind if I get your name?”

“Oh, sure. It’s Cosette Fauchelevent.”

The woman faltered with her phone. “You’re going to have to spell that out for me.”

Cosette helped the woman with her name, then rejoined her friends. She gave Marius a look. “Really? Was that really necessary?”

Marius’ face was red. “Bahorel’s trying to pick up guys. I just… I’m sorry. I panicked. You’re so beautiful, and, and-”
“And if a lesbian hits on me, I’ll tell her I’m very flattered but unfortunately spoken for. I expect you to do the same if a charming young man should approach you.” She was tempted to throw in a dig about his behavior with Courfeyrac, but she resisted. They’d already had that fight. There was no reason to bring that back up.

Feuilly walked over to them, his sign dragging a little at his side. “The reporter thought Combeferre was my boyfriend.” He glanced around the rally and let out a small sigh. “This is why we’re single.”

“Because you surround yourself with gay guys and then advocate for our rights?” Legle asked with a grin. “I suppose we do make it hard to meet straight girls, don’t we?”

“If it helps,” Combeferre said, walking up behind Feuilly, “the reporter didn’t seem surprised when you told her we were straight.”

“Go allies,” some random kid said, reaching around their signs to give Combeferre a high five. He returned it and the guy flashed a thumbs up before rejoining his own clique.

The rally started in earnest after that, so the friends took their spots, facing the cameras and the crowd with their signs. “I still can’t believe there aren’t any counter-protestors,” Combeferre muttered.

“I know! Talk about progress,” Joly said. “Ten years ago, this would’ve been completely different.”

“I think Enjolras is actually disappointed,” Combeferre said. “Look at him.”

They had to lean forward a little to catch a look at their friend, as Enjolras had splintered away from the group to join the organizers of the rally. According to Combeferre, he’d been communicating with them through email, and they’d asked him to be one of the speakers.

Some of the organizers tried to get some chants going, but the crowd of demonstrators proved to be on the shy side, and terribly uncoordinated to boot. Courfeyrac made some disparaging comments about their lackluster chanting.

They got a fair few “Hey hey, ho ho, DOMA’s got to go”s before the crowd lost the rhythm.

“This is disgraceful,” Courfeyrac muttered. “Seriously, we’re failing at activism right now.”

“We’re here, aren’t we? We don’t necessarily have to be a loud spectacle to show our support,” Feuilly said.

“Excuse me, can I borrow this?” Courfeyrac asked a group behind them. They nodded, and then Courfeyrac started skipping in front of the podium, just in front of the news cameras, trailing a giant rainbow flag behind him.

The crowd started clapping and cheering for him, and he led them in a much more coordinated chant, dancing with the flag as he went. Then he and Jehan took a pass by the cameras together. Jehan was up on Courfeyrac’s back, twirling the flag gracefully. He jumped down and then did a backflip and went into a split.

“Maybe we don’t need the spectacle,” Cosette said with a laugh, “but it certainly doesn’t hurt.”

Shortly after that the speeches began. They heard from mayor Menino, who earned a lot of cheers with his unabashed support for gay rights, and his call for other politicians to follow his example. “There are a lot of tough decisions I make every day as mayor,” Menino said. “But supporting marriage equality has always been an easy call for me. It should be an easy call for the Supreme Court today, and tomorrow.”
Jehan wiped a few tears from his eyes when Julie Goodridge spoke. Some of the speakers were a bit lackluster, some were good, and then there was another college aged kid who made Enjolras look timid and socially conservative.

 Appropriately, Enjolras followed his fellow radical socialist, making some of the same points, but bringing his own unique gracefulness and eloquence to the stand. Where the first kid was loud and challenging, Enjolras was controlled and authoritative. They complemented each other, and their placement among the other speakers helped to reinforce all their points.

No one was surprised to see them chatting after the rally, or to learn that they’d traded contact information.

Everyone was in pretty high spirits when they left the rally a couple hours later. Enjolras was buzzing about all the contacts he’d made, books he needed to check out, and new groups he was going to be following on facebook. Joly was still marveling loudly about the lack of anti-gay demonstrators.

“During the Goodridge case, they did have to bus them in from out of state,”Feuilly pointed out. “We got some Westboro Baptist crazy in here for those ones.”

“I didn’t get into Boston for any of the Goodridge stuff,” Courfeyrac said with a sigh. “Mom said I was too little to participate in protests. And I didn’t fight her very hard on it, because I hadn’t told anyone I was bi yet. She found my interest in same sex marriage pretty baffling as it was.”

“We went to a couple of events,” Combeferre said, motioning to Enjolras. “We had to sneak out to do it though. I thought Paul was going to kill us.”

“He would have if we’d gotten on TV,” Enjolras muttered darkly.

The friends parted ways after that, piling into Combeferre and Courfeyrac’s respective cars for the trip back to town. The collective good mood, brought on by a feeling of accomplishment and hope for June’s rulings, lingered over the young people for another twenty minutes or so.

Then the text messages began.

Eponine was feeling a little antsy when she got out of school. She wasn’t exactly surprised that Azelma wasn’t waiting out at the curb for their ride home (after all, it was Grantaire getting them, not Combeferre), but she was still annoyed. The girl knew how important it was for them not to wander off on their own. She had to. She’d been more scared of Montparnasse’s temper than Eponine was.

The Prius came to a sudden, jerky stop in front of her, and then Grantaire was smiling at her from the driver seat. “Hey. Do me a favor and don’t mention my short stops to Enjolras? I swear I’ll get the hang of driving a car with responsive brakes eventually.”

“Have you heard from Azelma?” Eponine asked.

Grantaire shook his head. “She’s supposed to be meeting us here, isn’t she?”

“Of course she is.” Eponine climbed into the front passenger seat and took her phone out. Little R was in the back, surrounded by rolls of poster paper once more and napping with his head resting against the door.
Grantaire took his phone out and started sending Azelma texts as well. He got a response before Eponine did. “Don’t wait up for me. I’ve got plans,” Grantaire read back. “That little bitch.”

“I’m calling her,” Eponine snapped.

“She’s not going to pick up.”

“I don’t care. She’s going to get an earful the next time she checks her voicemail then!”

“Well get back out of the car while you yell. Little R’s napping.”

Eponine did as instructed, and after leaving several strongly worded messages, she got back into the car and crossed her arms over her chest. “Just drive. We still need to get Gavroche and Peter Parker.”

Grantaire dutifully left for the elementary school, and once the car was loaded up with little boys he turned an expectant look to Eponine. “What do you want to do about your sister?”

She honestly had no idea what to do, but she didn’t want to admit that. Eponine glanced at the backseat and let out a frustrated sigh. “Let’s just get them home. I’ll figure out what to do about Azelma then.”

“Kay.”

They went to Enjolras’, just like they’d planned, and fell into some semblance of the routine Eponine was trying to establish for her brothers. She fed them snacks and then helped them with their homework. After that was finished, it was pretty much time to start cooking supper, and once supper was done she had to fight everyone into their pajamas.

It wasn’t until the boys were winding down, watching cartoons with Grantaire in the living room, that Eponine realized she still had no idea where Azelma was. She tried texting her sister again, but of course got no response. She started pacing back and forth across the kitchen, trying not to think of the worst case scenarios, even though those were the ones begging for attention.

Grantaire joined her after a few minutes of this. “Hey. Did ‘Ferre text you too?”

Eponine shook her head. “What’d he say?”

“Azelma’s…she’s in Boston.”

“What the fucking fuck is she doing in Boston? Oh that bitch! She went to the rally, didn’t she?”

Grantaire smirked. “She tried to go…but she missed it by like two hours. Combeferre and Enjolras are heading out to get her now. They’d just dropped Cosette off when ‘Ferre started getting some antsy text messages.”

“Great. And now he’s white knighting off to her rescue.” Eponine pulled out a kitchen chair and sat down. Grantaire remained standing by the doorway, arms crossed over his chest. “Grantaire, tell me the truth. Was I this stupid and needy when I was crushing on Marius and Courf?”

Grantaire shrugged. “You’d have to ask one of them. I wasn’t bothered by it. Then again, I don’t think anyone’s made a worse spectacle of themselves pining over their crush than me, so I don’t know how helpful my opinion is.”

“Urgh.”

“Ponine…how’s your own homework coming along?” Grantaire asked.
“Finished it already. I mean, I did it during classes and lunch today, so it’s probably horrible, but I’ll have something to turn in. Sorry. I’m just so fucking tired.”

Grantaire frowned sympathetically. “Come with me.”

“No. I’ve still got to get the boys ready for bed.”

“They’re in pajamas already. I’ll be able to get the sleeping bags set up and I’m confident I can even trick them into brushing their teeth. I’ve got it. Now follow me.”

Eponine hauled her tired body out of the kitchen chair and followed after Grantaire, mostly because she couldn’t muster the energy to argue with him. He showed her to the largest, most luxurious looking bathroom she’d ever seen. And then he pulled back the shower curtain.

Eponine let out an honest to god whimper when she saw the whirlpool tub. And that showerhead! It had more settings than most car radios had presets.

“Take a shower or a bath or whatever and go to bed. I’ve got munchkin duty for the night.”

Eponine threw her arms around Grantaire’s neck and kissed his cheek. “You’re my absolute favorite!”

He laughed. “You deserve it kid. Have a good bath.”

Grantaire was confident enough in his Thenardier-sitting capabilities that he hadn’t even hesitated in making his offer to Eponine. The poor girl looked like hell. He recognized the look of someone getting to the end of their rope, and Eponine deserved some help. Besides that, she’d already done most of the hard work by getting the boys' homework done, cramming food in them, and wrestling them into jammies.

Grantaire poked his head into the living room to check they were still watching the Avengers movie, then he went into the kitchen to do the dishes from supper. When he looked into the living room again barely fifteen minutes later he was short one blond head.

“Where the hell is Gavroche?” he demanded.

Peter Parker looked up at Grantaire and shrugged. “He said he was going out.”

“Did he saw why?”

Peter Parker shrugged again.

“Did he say where he was going? How long he was going to be?”

The kid didn’t even bother shrugging that time, attention returned to the television.

“Well why didn’t one of you try to stop him? Why didn’t one of you come and get me? You know how dangerous it is for you guys to be running around by yourselves right now, right??”

Little R burst into tears and hid his face in his hands, and Grantaire felt like an asshole. He sat down next to the kid on the couch and pulled him into his arms. “Oh, hey, I didn’t mean to…I just lost my temper for a second. It’s okay, I’m not really mad at you.”
“I don’t-I don’t like when p-people yell…then th-they hit and…and choke and…” Little R buried his face in Grantaire’s t-shirt, his tiny shoulders shaking with sobs. Even Peter Parker looked rattled from the shouting. Grantaire was sharply reminded of his own childhood, and he felt disgusted with himself for scaring the kids the way he’d been scared.

“I’m sorry kiddo. I promise, no one’s going to hit you.” Grantaire stroked his hair, then reached over and gave Peter Parker’s arm a gentle squeeze. “Everything’s fine.”

“No it’s not. Zelma and Gavroche are gone,” Peter Parker said. He hung his head. “And it’s our fault because we didn’t say anything. I knew Zelma was going to go to the rally.”

Grantaire managed to keep his temper in check, but it was a close thing. “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to go tell Eponine she has to cut her bubble bath short and get out here and watch you guys, and then I’m going to head out and look for Gavroche. Now do you have any idea where he might have gone?”

Little R tightened his hold on Grantaire, digging his little fingers into his skin. “Don’t go! Don’t go away, m’scared!”

“Oh for the love of…” He managed to cut himself off before he raised his voice again. “Fine, you can come with me. But Peter Parker, you’re staying here with Eponine.”

“Kay. Can I keep watching Avengers?”

“Urgh…” Grantaire managed to pry Little R off of him long enough to go give Eponine the bad news. She didn’t seem surprised that her brother had taken off, muttering something about how she should have known a full night’s rest was too good to be true. She did give Grantaire a list of likely places to find Gavroche before she went into the living room to join Peter Parker though.

Grantaire sent a few texts out letting everybody know that Gavroche was missing and that he was going to check some of the kid’s favorite hangouts. He asked Enjolras for permission to use his car again, and it was granted, so he buckled Little R into the backseat, draped his sweatshirt over him like a blanket, and set off for the beach.

The Prius was found there some hours later, with the front door open and sporting a conspicuous red stain. Grantaire’s phone had been smashed against the pavement just beside the car, and the sweatshirt turned blanket, also stained red, was lying in a nearby puddle.

Chapter End Notes

So as is probably obvious, the marriage equality rally I presented here is the one I attended on March 26th. Here are some links about it:

Here’s a nice, generic write up: http://www.baywindows.com/500-turn-out-for-marriage-equality-rally-on-Boston-City-Hall-Plaza I’m actually in the picture they used. I’m the girl wearing rainbow tights holding the sign I had Cosette carry in the fic
http://bostonherald.com/news_opinion/local_coverage/2013/03/supreme_showdown_for_same_sex_marriage
This one focuses on the Supreme Court rulings a bit more than the rally.

This is the speaker I referred to as being more radical than Enjolras, Keegan O'Brien. I've become a fan, and have developed a bit of a brain-crush on him. He's active on facebook, is quick to rec interesting articles and books, and has really expanded my thinking on a lot of subjects in a short space of time. Definitely an inspiration for this activist (even if he does make me feel lazy!) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NnRjtAouPc4&feature=youtu.be

This one shows off our horrible chanting: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXw-fmmnWho

And this one features the dancing flag guys I based Courf and Jehan's little spectacle off of (they were seriously the best thing ever). Also, I'm interviewed at the end.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYDS5uFiuOs
Jean Valjean was not in a good mood. He'd started his day like any other, with his cup of tea and the local paper. The local paper, however, had run a story on the marriage equality rally in Boston, and he saw a picture of his adoptive daughter on the front page, holding signs with that group of college boys she'd fallen in with. He felt wary about those boys, though he couldn't tell if that was his overprotective nature (all males need to stay away from my little girl!) or a legitimate concern about the boys' characters. What gave him pause, though, was the fact that Cosette identified herself to a reporter as bisexual.

She'd never mentioned that to him before. He wasn't sure how he felt about it.

Valjean was still working through what, if anything, he was going to say to the girl later that afternoon when he started cleaning out the garage. That was when Javert intruded on his day. "For someone who's supposed to keep their distance, you sure do find an awful lot of opportunities to speak with me, Mr. Detective."

Javert was walking up the driveway towards him, wearing what, for him, constituted casual clothes. "I am off duty."

"I believe you can still be reprimanded for this," Valjean returned.

"Only if my behavior constitutes what my superiors consider harassment," Javert returned coldly. It was clear from his contumacious sneer what he thought of his superiors' decision. "I come here with the aim of having a cordial discussion."

"I'd have thought you'd consider that below you." Valjean continued with his work, in no mood to talk to the persistent thorn in his side. Javert, used to being brushed off by the old criminal, followed after him as he shifted boxes around.
"Just what are you doing?"

"Spring cleaning, not that it's any of your business."

"Clearing space. Why are you clearing space? Are you preparing to move your belongings?"

Valjean turned on him, tempted to drop a very heavy box on the man's feet. "Come back with a search warrant and I'll thrill you with the stunning tale of my adventures clearing cobwebs from the rafters."

Meanwhile, Cosette was upstairs, having just returned from a halfday at school. She'd just taken a call from Courfeyrac, who was filling everyone in the group in on what had happened the previous night (well, those who hadn't already been pulled in through early morning text messages and the subsequent search parties). Her hands were shaking when she hung up. She took a few deep breaths, which was usually enough to calm her, and they did help. But she couldn't stop the mild trembling while she put her phone in her purse and gathered up her coat and shoes.

“Papa!” she called as soon as she got downstairs. There was no answer, so she went to peer out the front room window and was just able to make out her father’s imposing frame as he stood in the driveway. That’s right. He’d said he was going to clean out the garage. She ran outside to join him. “Papa, there’s been an emergency. I know I said I needed to stay in and work on my senior project, and it's a school night and I already went out this week, but my friends…” Her voice died in her throat when she saw him standing opposite her father. Cosette’s face twisted in hatred. “What the hell is he doing here?”

“Cosette, please mind your language,” Valjean said sternly.

Ignoring her father, Cosette pointed an accusing finger at the snide detective who’d made a habit of stalking her and her father. “I most certainly will not! Not when I know for a fact that he’s got better places to be! What are you doing here harassing my father when two innocent people have gone missing?! It’s your fault Montparnasse took them! Eponine and Enjolras told us! You were supposed to be finding him and now he’s taken Grantaire and the poor baby Thenardier! He could have killed Grantaire by now!"

Cosette dissolved into hysterical sobs. Valjean rushed forward and pulled her into a fiercely protective embrace, absolutely horrified to see his beloved daughter in such agony.

Neither of them noticed the look of stunned disbelief on the detective’s face. He didn’t hang around long enough to give them the chance, but ran for his cruiser to go confirm the girl’s story.

Combeferre couldn’t tell which of his friends was in a worse state when they left the police station together, Eponine or Enjolras. Eponine was showing her emotions pretty plainly, with pained tears interspersed with noisy hiccups. Combeferre kept an arm braced around her back as they headed for his car.

But just because Enjolras appeared outwardly calm (to a stranger, at any rate; to someone who knew how to read him he was clearly distressed) didn’t mean his emotional state was any less worrying. A storm was brewing behind those fierce blue eyes.

Enjolras got into the backseat and promptly curled in on himself, dropping his head to his chest. Combeferre helped Eponine into the front passenger and did her seat belt for her.
She was holding her damn phone again by the time he got into the driver side. Combeferre quickly snatched it away. “Don’t make me hide your phone. Looking at that picture again isn’t going to help.”

“I-it’s all my f-fault,” Eponine sniffled weakly.

She’d been looking at the picture Montparnasse had sent her just after four in the morning, the picture that had tipped them off about just how badly everything had turned. It showed a bloodied, unconscious Grantaire, bound and gagged and shoved into the trunk of a car.

At Eponine’s words, Enjolras gave a small shudder and his jaw tightened. Combeferre recognized the worrying signs for what they were: Enjolras trying not to speak. He was trying to hold his temper in check.

He must have thought it actually was Eponine’s fault. Damn. And the two of them had just started getting along…

In order to keep that tenuous peace from completely self-destructing, Combeferre decided he needed to split them up as soon as possible. But he didn’t want to abandon either of them while they were in such obvious need of emotional support.

He glanced down at Eponine’s phone and shuddered himself when his eyes rested on the picture. “You should have let the police officers take this.”

“What if he texts again? W-we can’t trust them to tell us.”

Combeferre sighed. What he really wanted to do was take Eponine in his arms, wipe the tears from her eyes, and patiently explain to her that nothing about this was her fault, that Montparnasse’s evil character and horrible choices weren’t her responsibility, and that she should never regret getting herself away from all that anger and abuse. But with Enjolras sitting in the backseat, ready to vent his anger and fear on the first available target, that simply wasn’t an option.

Eponine buried her face in her hands, shoulders shaking with her sobs. Combeferre stroked her back with one hand and started texting with the other.

Twenty minutes later, Enjolras was standing on the sidewalk in front of the nursing home Feuilly and Joly worked at, feeling shell shocked. He watched his best friend drive away with the girl he considered to be the source of all his recent problems sitting in the front seat.

Feuilly jogged out to meet him a few minutes later. “My boss let me leave work early. She wasn’t going to at first, but then this girl Jo tag teamed her with her sister Meg, and…Enjolras? Are you…? Let’s go somewhere and talk.”

Enjolras gave a sudden jerk, then shook his head. He was still gazing off in the direction the car had gone. “Combeferre just…he just left me here.”

“He didn’t,” Feuilly said, gently gripping Enjolras’ shoulders so that he was forced to look at him. “He made sure I was going to be able to come down and get you first. He wanted to separate you and Eponine, and given the circumstances, I think that was a good call.”

Enjolras still looked dazed, but his voice was hard and cold. “He left with her. He just picked…you know what, no. I don’t want to go somewhere and talk. Can you take me home please? I’d drive
myself, but my car is being analyzed at the moment. Y’know, because my lover disappeared under mysterious and violent circumstances, and my lifelong best friend is off comforting the girl who got him in trouble to begin with.”

Feuilly jumped back a bit. He attempted to smile reassuringly, but it came off as more of a pained grimace. “This is why you guys needed to split up. You’re probably right about part of it though. Combeferre should be with you. I should be the one talking to Eponine. Enj…I’ll bring you home if that’s what you really want, but I can’t in good conscience leave you alone like this.”

He started leading Enjolras over to the employee parking spaces. Though he was trembling, Enjolras’ hands were balled into fists at his sides. “There’s got to be something we can do other than sit and wait for bad news.”

“We could try e-stalking Montparnasse. The guy’s younger than us, seasoned criminal or no. He’s probably active on social media. Maybe he’s got a facebook. I bet he’s even stupid enough to be active on it.” Feuilly unlocked the passenger side for Enjolras, then got into the driver seat.

“That’s…that’s probably worth looking into.” Enjolras sat stiffly, facing out the window as Feuilly began driving despite not having a clear destination. “Feuilly, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to trivialize our friendship.”

“Dude, don’t worry about it. You don’t need to apologize. Everyone knows you and ‘Ferre go back forever. Frankly, I’m surprised about this too.” Well, surprised wasn’t quite the word Feuilly wanted, but it was as close to the truth as he was going to get in front of Enjolras.

He had other things to focus on besides Combeferre, anyway. Like finding a destination. “Um… want me to bring you to Courf’s? Jehan’s heading over when he gets out of class, and obviously Marius will be over there too. Or is that too many people for right now? Joly’s taking the kids to my place this afternoon, otherwise I’d just…just…yeah.”

“Courfeyrac’s will be fine. It’d be good to talk to Jehan.”

“Kay. Destination. Cool, progress.” And if he was lucky, he’d be able to ditch Enjolras to the care of other friends. Because when Feuilly had heard about what happened, his first instinct had been to track down Bahorel. He needed to have words with that boy...

Grantaire’s head felt like it was splitting in two. At first he thought he was suffering from the mother of all hangovers, which gave him a sharp stab of panic, because he wasn’t supposed to be doing that anymore. Then he noticed that the quality of head pain was different from a hangover, and the panic worsened as his most recent memories filtered back in.

Going to the beach to check park benches for Gavroche, finding Montparnasse instead and failing at pretending he hadn’t recognized him, running for the Prius and being tackled to the pavement. Having his head pounded into the pavement and then into the car door.

Little R’s eyes, frozen wide in horror, a trickle of blood sliding down his soft, chubby cheek.

Grantaire felt sick to his stomach. He tried to sit up, and only managed to slam his head against something. He tried to swear, but there was tape over his mouth. He gave his wrists a tentative tug and found them bound with more tape. Wherever he was, it was too dark to see, and that hit had him reeling, so he needed to move carefully.
Grantaire moved cautiously, feeling out his surroundings as best he was able. There wasn’t a lot of space, but there was light streaming in by cracks at his feet…

He was in the trunk of a car. Grantaire actually did throw up that time, and he had to swallow it as his mouth was taped up. He couldn’t breathe right; it was too claustrophobic and his nose couldn’t possibly provide air enough in such a restricted space…

Everything went black.

At least Gavroche was back. The little shit had wandered in around two in the morning, about a half hour after Grantaire stopped responding to texts. He said he’d gone out to stretch his legs. He had the decency to look ashamed when Eponine started crying.

Azelma, on the other hand…Eponine still wasn’t willing to talk to that one. She’d spent the night at Joly and Feuilly’s. In theory, Eponine was supposed to see her in the afternoon, but she couldn’t bear the thought of it. She wanted to grab Azelma by the hair and shake her until what little brains she had started rattling around in that thick skull of hers.

If Enjolras hadn’t been off with Combeferre chasing after Azelma, he’d have gone out with Grantaire too, and maybe this wouldn’t have happened.

Or maybe Enjolras would have just gone missing too.

“Ponine?” Combeferre’s voice was hesitant.

Eponine looked down at her folded hands. She’d gotten some measure of control over herself, but frankly it was only because her eyes started hurting from all the tears. “You’re not going to convince me it’s not my fault, Combeferre. It’s kind of a fact that your lives all started going to hell once Grantaire made friends with me. Remember how I dragged him along with me during that blizzard and Montparnasse beat the shit out of him for the first time? And then Enjolras got stabbed protecting me from my psychopath, and now this.”

“Eponine, I promise you, our lives have been plenty dramatic with or without you. Maybe not to this exact level, but the element tipping things to the realm of a true crime show isn’t you. It’s Montparnasse and him alone.”

Eponine snorted and rolled her eyes. “You’d all be better off without me. You should be focusing on schoolwork, having fun, or trying to save the world. Hell, with some of you, all three of those count as the same thing. You shouldn’t be looking after my baby siblings, and you certainly shouldn’t be trying to convince me I’m worth a damn. I’m not. As soon as we find Grantaire and my baby brother, I’ll stop inflicting myself on you.”

Combeferre pulled the car into a nearby parking lot. Once he’d found a space he turned it off and unbuckled so that he could sit facing her. “You’re not inflicting yourself on anyone. We choose to spend time with you. Remember how we decided the babysitting schedule? We volunteered.”

“Because you felt guilty,” Eponine pointed out with a sneer.

“No, because we wanted to help. I suppose I can’t really speak for Grantaire, Jehan, Feuilly, and Joly, but that’s how I feel. I haven’t enjoyed seeing you struggle, Eponine. And whatever happens to Grantaire and your baby brother, I could never blame you.”
Eponine bit her hand. She was going to start crying again, and she just couldn’t stand to anymore. She felt like she shouldn’t have had any tears left. “I’ll never stop blaming myself.”

Then suddenly she was in Combeferre’s arms, and it felt so good to be held that she gave in to it. She tucked her head under his chin, closed her eyes, and after a few minutes her breathing lost that shallow quality that had been making her hiccup.

“You’re a good person, Eponine,” Combeferre murmured. “Considering everything you’ve been through, it’s a damn miracle, but it’s true. You’ve got a good heart, and you’re brave, and you’re stronger than this. I know you are.”

Eponine cautiously pulled away from him. Something about that tone of voice, mixed with the comforting embrace, had crossed the line from friendly reassurance to something she definitely wasn’t in an emotional state to process.

Maybe flirting with Combeferre to tick off Azelma hadn’t been such a good idea.

Eponine wiped at her eyes and tried like hell to regain some sense of equilibrium. “Um…th-thanks. Helps to hear that.”

“I’ll repeat it as much as I need to.”

“So um, listen, I did actually have an idea of something that might help,” Eponine said, her desperation to change the course of their conversation making her bold enough to finally pitch what had been on her mind all morning.

Combeferre shot her a searching look. “Why didn’t you mention it at the police station? Whatever it is, the cops probably ought to know.”

Eponine shook her head. “I…I know they’re horrible people and all, but I can’t. I just can’t sic the cops on them. But anyway, the thing is…my parents work with Montparnasse all the time. He’s one of my dad’s drinking buddies. That’s how I met him. I think if I paid my parents a visit, and just asked if they’d seen Little R—”

“Eponine, that’s risky as hell. If your parents do know anything, then they probably know Montparnasse goaded you by texting you the picture. If you know where your parents are for the sake of questioning, you should definitely tell the police, not go in yourself.”

“But…they’re still my parents. I can’t just…okay, never mind.”

They sat in an uncomfortable silence for a few minutes. Combeferre was the one to finally break it. “Will you reconsider telling the cops where to find your parents?”

“Absolutely not. I can’t rat on them.”

Combeferre sighed and started up the car. “I already feel like I’m going to regret this. Fine, I’ll take you to see your parents. But I’m not leaving your side the entire time.”

Eponine looked him over and nodded. She wasn’t sure how useful Combeferre would be in a fight, but he was solidly built and tall. If the rest of the gang wasn’t around, her father might even find him intimidating. It’s not like her dad would know by looking that Combeferre was a scholar, considering the company Eponine had kept before meeting the college boys.

“Where am I going?” Combeferre asked, sounding irritable.
Montparnasse woke up in a foul mood that afternoon. His mind was reluctant to come to full awareness, and it took him a moment to realize exactly why. Then he heard the faint whimpering coming from the closet, and pieces of the previous night came back to him (only pieces though—some were lost to whatever he’d chased his vodka with).

He staggered over to the closet door and pulled it open. The youngest Thenardier brat was cowering in a corner. The front of his pajama shirt was ripped and he had a nasty looking cut on his face, but otherwise he was fine. Clearly terrified, but fine.

Then Montparnasse almost doubled over as he caught an unpleasant odor. “You little fuck! Did you fucking piss in there?!”

“I-wh-couldn’t…s-sorry. Pleasedon’thurtme.”

“For fuck’s sake!” Montparnasse slammed the closet door shut, then stumbled out into the main room. He passed into the kitchen, where Babet kept his cleaning supplies, grabbed a bottle of bleach, and then went back into the bedroom. He uncapped the bottle, slammed the closet door back open, and started dumping bleach haphazardly into the small space, not caring if he rained it on the child or Babet’s possessions.

The brat scampered out of the way with his skinny arms over his head.

Montparnasse dropped the bleach, then turned on the kid and gave him a sharp kick. “Just what in the hell are you doing here anyway? Why didn’t you go home?”

“You said you’d kill me f’I did. An’ Ponine and Gav and Peter Parker and Zelma too. Y’said you’d kill s’all so I stayed. I didn’t move, just like you said. Please don’t hurt anyone, please. Please let me an ’Taire go.”

“’Taire?” And then Montparnasse remembered the college boy. Fucking Eponine’s stupid fucking boy…shit. He’d seen him, and he’d been filled with such a sudden, driving rage, thinking of that jackoff stealing his girl for his stupid fucking snotty buddies, and then he’d done something unforgivably stupid.

And that unforgivably stupid decision was currently shoved into the trunk of Claquesous’ car. Not the best choice he’d ever made.

“Come here.” Montparnasse grabbed the little boy by the collar of his shirt and dragged him through the apartment to the bathroom. He started the tub and tossed the boy into it, not caring that the water was cold. “Scrub the piss off of you. I’m not taking you back into the car smelling like piss.”

The kid’s teeth were chattering so hard they sounded like they might break. Montparnasse chucked a bar of soap at him.

He went into the other room, took out his phone, and called Thenardier.

“Fancy finally hearing from you,” the old thug said by way of greeting. “Are you going to get your ass down here and get to work or what?”

“Not today, old man,” Montparnasse said. He rubbed at the back of his neck. “I, uh, I seem to have
acquired one of your children.”

“Okay.”

“Would you like him back?”

“Not particularly. Which one’ve you got?”

Montparnasse tried to think if he’d ever heard the boy’s name before. “The littlest one.”

“Just throw him back wherever you found him. I’ve got better things to…shit. I’ve got to let you go, kid. Detectives’re at the door.” Thenardier hung up, and Montparnasse growled a few curses under his breath.

That could have gone better. He still had no idea what to do with the kid (why had he thought the Thenardiers would be glad to have one of their children returned to them?!), and on top of that, the cops were probably onto him if they were shaking down his friends again. Granted, Thenardier certainly got into enough of his own trouble with the police, so there was an outside chance they were there to talk to him about something other than Montparnasse’s recent kidnapping, but he also wasn’t going to count on it.

Montparnasse lit a cigarette and leaned against the wall to smoke it, and gave the situation some thought.

He was already living under an assumed name, Max Jondrette. One last big crime tacked to Montparnasse wasn’t anything to agonize over, though of course it would have been ideal to keep a low profile while he was scraping his new identity’s life together. But at least he didn’t have anything of his own to implicate himself with. He was living in Babet’s spare room. He’d been using Claquesous’ car while the man was working a job in Maine.

He still wasn’t sure what to do with the Thenardier brat, but after a few more minutes of thought, Montparnasse started developing a plan to deal with the college kid. It was simple, really. He’d leave the asshole in the trunk and get rid of the car.

Mind made up, Montparnasse went into the kitchen and started packing some supplies into a duffle bag. He took some more bleach, some lime, pliers, and anything else he saw that he thought might be useful in making a body harder to identify. Claquesous was going to be pissy about losing his car, but it’s not like he’d really want it if it was tied to a murder anyway. Once Max Jondrette was situated, he’d have to get the guy a new car though. It was the only decent thing to do.

Once he was packed up, Montparnasse returned to the bathroom, where he found the little brat curled up in a corner of the tub, shivering and crying. He threw his cigarette into the freezing bathwater, pulled the drain, and tossed a towel on the boy’s head.

“Dry off. We’re taking a ride.”

Chapter End Notes

So what do you guys think? Anyone else in the mood for something lighthearted and fluffy after I finish this story arc off?
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Combeferre gets a tarot reading. Bahorel goes for a swim.

Chapter Notes

At the moment I'm not thrilled with this chapter. I think it came out a little messy and unresolved, but considering you guys have been goodly enough to put up with two consecutive cliffies from me, I figured I'd best post it now. I can always clear up the messy threads with chapter twenty six.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Where’s your parents’ shop?” Combeferre asked. They were getting pretty close to the wharf, so he figured it had to be nearby.

“Park over by the cinema,” Eponine said. “We’ll walk over. It’s better for us if they don’t see your car.”

“Okay…” he said slowly. Combeferre did as instructed though, and parked in the lot by the mall the Salem Cinema was in. He took out his wallet and started looking for quarters for the meters.

“You’d better leave that in the car,” Eponine said. “And don’t take your bag in. Leave your phone here too. Just stick everything in your glove box.”

Combeferre quirked an eyebrow. “I don’t want to leave my phone behind. Someone could call.”

“Sweetheart, if you bring a smartphone within ten feet of my father, you’ll never see it again to take a call. I promise. You’ve seen how good my brothers are at picking pockets, haven’t you? My parents are vultures. They could strip the clothes off your back without you noticing.”

He decided to cede her that point and left his valuables in the glove box.

It had been awhile since Combeferre had spent any lengthy amount of time in Salem. He followed after Eponine with his hands shoved in his empty pockets, looking around the picturesque little city and taking in changes.

Salem had been an important port until the mid-nineteenth century, when the city’s shallow harbor rendered it useless for newer forms of merchant vessels. Its once prosperous maritime economy gave way, and the city had been trying to scrape a new reputation for itself ever since. They tried transferring to a mill economy just in time for all those factories to move south in search of cheap labor, and after that Salem had tried its hand at being a shopping district, just before the opening of massive shopping complexes in two of its neighboring towns. By the end of the twentieth century, the city had become a sprawling tourist trap, and it was almost as successful at that as old Salem had been as a port.
Of course, to be a successful tourist trap, Salem had to tart up its history a bit. Combeferre rolled his eyes when he saw a group of college girls in colonial garb leaning against the wall of a parking garage while they took a smoke break. He wasn’t even that good with seventeenth century history, and he could casually identify at least a dozen anachronisms in their outfits (besides their glaringly red lipstick).

Eponine tugged his arm and pulled him down a maze of cobblestoned back streets. They wound up in a dingy street off the beaten path, but within view of the ocean. “This is it.”

Combeferre squinted to read an artificially aged sign. “Madame Thenardiers? I’d never even heard of this one.”

“You wouldn’t have. Mom and Dad can’t go through the chamber of commerce so there’s no official advertising. Their psychics are all unlicensed too. Of the shady stores in town, this is one of the shadier.”

“The psychics in Salem have to be licensed?” Combeferre asked.

Eponine nodded. “Everything in this town is regulated, even the New Age shops. Psychic readings in Salem are big business. You ready?”

“Yeah. Let’s get this over with.”

Eponine threw open a rusty screen door and charged her way into a crowded little shop front. Combeferre fell into a sneezing fit as soon as the door was shut behind him. Not only was the place dusty, but there was also some kind of incense burning thickly. The shelves were arranged in such a way as to make maneuvering the store difficult, and they were all piled with seemingly-mystical junk; tarot decks, Ouija boards, crystals, glass bottles of herbs and glass vials of potions, what looked like a severed hand marked with palmistry lines, and a variety of other knick knacks.

Jehan would probably have an aneurism if he saw the place. They had statues of the mother goddess and the Virgin Mary thrown in with figures from Eastern religions with no thought given to distinction. He spotted a statue of Quan-Yin labeled ‘Female Budha-compassion & fertility.’

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Combeferre muttered.

Then he noticed a sallow little man with extraordinary sideburns seated behind an equally cluttered counter. The man was wearing a crushed velvet vest over what looked like a store bought gypsy Halloween costume. A tall thug of a creature making a passing attempt at dressing goth stood just to the side of him, idly shuffling a deck of tarot cards.

“ Heads up Gueulemer. Hussy an’ date, methinks. First new meat all day. Let’s get ‘em to the jewelry counter.” The man was remarkably soft spoken. Had Combeferre really been there to browse with his companion, he wouldn’t have heard a word of it. As it was, his nerves were on end and he was attuned to every small sound in the tiny shop.

“Theyardier, that’s your kid. She’s not going to be much of a mark. The boy looks like a sucker though. Maybe she brought him for us?” the thug, Gueulemer apparently, answered.

“Hey Dad,” Eponine said, cutting off their whispered discourse.

“Shouldn’t you be in school?” Thenardier asked gruffly, clearly disappointed. It was still off-season for the tourist shops, so business was probably scarce at best. Combeferre drifted by a display of tarot cards but remained within a few feet of Eponine.
"I go when I feel like it," Eponine answered. She stood by the counter with one hand resting on a jutted out hip, looking at her father disdainfully from under the fall of her bangs. "So where’s Mom?"

"Where do you think? What’s it to you, anyway?"

Eponine held up her hands, though she kept her expression disdainful. "Hey, I come in peace. Look, I’ve got some new friends and I told them that you guys had a shop down here. ‘Ferre wanted to check it out. I was going to buy him a reading, but if you’d rather I not…"

"I never said that. Gueulemer, did I say that? Of course I didn’t say that," Thenardier said quickly. "Course your mom’s here to do a reading. What’s it going to be, Zelma? Fifteen or thirty?"

"Thenardier, that’s Eponine."

"I know who it is, Gueulemer! She’s my brat, not yours. Eponine, how much?"

"Fifteen ought to do it." Eponine reached into her bra and extracted a twenty. "‘Ferre, c’mere."

He shot her a questioning look, but she ignored it. "Go and sit in that curtained room back there. My mom’ll be by in a minute to read your cards."

"You’re coming with me, right?" Combeferre asked, feeling the stirrings of unease.

"All readings are private," Thenardier barked.

"It’s okay sweetie. I need a few minutes to chat with my daddy. Enjoy the reading though. Make sure you ask Mom about getting a job after graduation." Eponine leaned up to kiss his cheek, then gave him a good hard jab to get him walking towards the closet sized little reading room she’d indicated. Highly reluctantly, Combeferre shuffled over to the room, pulled the curtain aside, and went in.

If he thought the shop was cramped, the reading room was downright claustrophobic. The only light came from a lonely bulb hanging from the ceiling. Most of the space was taken up by an ancient velvet armchair that might have been handsome some generations ago. The brunt of what was left was hogged by a card table with a black lace shawl thrown over it, and a stool took what it could from what remained.

Combeferre contorted as best he could to balance on the little stool, feeling ridiculously out of place and physically uncomfortable. He hoped he wouldn’t have another sneezing fit, though that was rather a lot to hope for as there was an incense censer in the reading room.

After a seeming eternity, the curtain was pulled back and Madame Thenardier maneuvered into the velvet armchair. Combeferre regretted the fact that his eyes were watering and squinted all but shut (he began to fear he was having an allergic reaction to the incense) because he would have liked to see how she managed it. She was at least as tall as he was, and even broader. The woman was an absolute giant; ruddy and strong, with mean little eyes.

Now that he’d met Eponine’s parents, he had to kind of wonder where her looks came from. Maybe she’d just lucked out when it came to recessive genes.

"Hand," Madame Thenardier barked.

"Um…what?" Combeferre asked, and then was seized with the expected sneezing fit. While he was distracted the woman reached across the table and snatched his right hand. She had the grip of a bear trap. Combeferre instinctually tried to pull away, but that only got him red marks in the shape of
sausage-like fingers.

“Oh, sir, this is a remarkable palm you have here. Good, long lifeline, and lots of luck besides. You will do well in life. You are an ambitious boy, aren’t you?”

“I…I suppose.” God but her fake accent was terrible. It kept slipping between a caricature of a Cockney and something almost French.

“I see from your palm that you will be rich and well loved.”

“I thought you were a tarot reader.”

“I do that too. Do not be impatient with me, boy, or the guides may not have pleasant things to say.” She tossed his hand aside and he resisted the urge to cradle it against his chest. The red marks were definitely going to bruise.

Madame Thenardier took out a weathered looking set of tarot cards and laid them out on the lace shawl. “I see brilliant things from you, young sir. You are a one who is going places, with all that ambition. Yes, this is a very promising card.”

“That’s the three of swords. I thought it meant heartbreak.” Combeferre was by no means an expert on tarot symbolism, but he and Jehan had bought decks a couple years ago and started messing with them at the Musain on slow nights, mostly to annoy Enjolras, who thought of them as a superstitious waste of time. He still remembered a few things from his brief flirtation with fortune telling.

Madame Thenardier scooped the card back into the deck, picked through it, and pulled out the ten of pentacles, which was a prosperity card, but the way she angrily slammed it onto the table didn’t strike Combeferre as particularly propitious. “There, smartass. Are you happy?”

“Um…Eponine told me to ask you about my employment prospects. For after college.”

“Oh, you’re one of the college boys. Well no wonder you’re so…alright. Let me see what the guides tell me.” She placed her fingertips on her temple and pressed her lips together. After a minute or so of off key humming she sat stiffly upright and threw her head back. “The guides tell me that you will easily find a job where you will advance quickly. You will then marry Eponine and give her a good home. That’ll be twenty dollars, young sir.”

“We already paid your husband.”

“Ah. Well you can’t begrudge an old woman for making sure.”

“So I’m done?” Combeferre asked.

“You’re done. Please leave.”

“Right…uh…thanks.” He carefully stood up and made his way out of the reading room, still managing to knock over a bowl of crystals and a spare deck of cards despite his caution.

Eponine was waiting for him with her arms crossed over her chest. She barely looked like herself, radiating insolence the way she was. “How’d you like Mama’s reading?”

“Uh…it was nice enough, I guess. I’m going to be successful.”

“That’s nice.” She leaned against him and wrapped her arm around his waist. “Ready to go? Remember hon, you promised me dinner this time.”
Combeferre felt his face flush. “Sure. We can definitely grab an early dinner.”

“Thanks, love.” She kept close to him while they made their way to the front of the store, which made it more difficult to navigate and slowed their progress substantially. Once they got to the front she turned around and waved at the counter. “Bye Dad. Gueulemer!”

“So long Ponine,” Gueulemer called after them.

Eponine remained pretty much attached to Combeferre’s hip until they were nearly back to his car, then she broke away and righted her posture. “Good, they didn’t follow us.”

“Eponine…what the hell was all that? Please tell me you at least learned something?”

Her face went red. “I did. Look, Dad wasn’t going to say anything in front of a stranger, so I had to get you out back. He was a lot more chatty once he’d thought I’d brought him a rube. Course now Mom’s probably telling him that you didn’t have any cash on you, and I bet they’re furious. Uh, yeah. So those were my parents…”

“Uh huh. Pleasant people. Do you know where Montparnasse is?” Combeferre pressed.

Eponine slid into the passenger seat of the car without answering. Combeferre got into the driver side, but he didn’t start the car yet. “Eponine?” he asked again. “What did you learn?”

“I…honestly, I couldn’t get much out of him. It was a tricky dance. I didn’t want to say too much, and I could only warm him up so much…”

“Ponine?” Combeferre wasn’t sure he wanted to hear what she had to say, not if she was this reluctant to say it.

“When I asked him if he’d seen my baby brother he said that he hadn’t, but that he knew where he was. H-he said if I came back to the shop tonight around closing that I could pick my brother up and keep looking after him. H-he said…Little R’s alone.”

Combeferre’s stomach turned. “Does that mean…Grantaire is…?”

Eponine shuddered. Her voice broke when she spoke. “It’s a miracle if he isn’t.”

Courfeyrac went into his kitchen under the pretense of getting glasses of water for the friends gathered in his living room. He kept the cheery smile of encouragement and optimism plastered on his face until he was out of sight. As soon as his bare feet hit linoleum tile, he banked a sharp right and walked into the pantry.

When Jehan came looking for him about ten minutes later, he found Courfeyrac curled in on himself, leaning against a cabinet and scrolling through a facebook photo album on his phone. Without a word, Jehan sat down beside him and rested his head on his boyfriend’s shoulder. Courfeyrac wrapped an arm around Jehan and tilted his phone a little so he could see the screen too.

“That’s from tenth grade,” Courfeyrac said. “I was supposed to go to the semiformal with this girl from my geometry class, but Grantaire talked me out of it at the last minute. We went to the beach instead, split a couple boxes of his mom’s wine, and played Uno all night in our dress clothes.”

Jehan smiled softly. “It’s a nice picture. You guys were cute teenagers.”
Courfeyrac closed his eyes and two slow tears took the opportunity to escape, despite the valiant effort he’d been making to keep them back. “I just can’t believe it’s happening now, like this. I’d… I’d thought I’d prepared to lose him, y’know, because he was—he was doing so bad for so long, but he’s finally happy. He’s finally…he was getting so much better. This is just so fucking unfair.”

Jehan pulled him close and kissed his forehead. “We’re not at the point past hoping just yet. I admit, it does look bleak, but we might yet find our friend. And if this does end as tragically as it seems it might, I will do everything in my power to help you through it, my love.”

Courfeyrac dropped his phone to better hug his boyfriend, making full use of the comfort Jehan was trying to give him. He let out a choked little whimper as his tears started falling in earnest.

Jehan wiped them away and kissed his forehead again. “Courfeyrac, dear…I want to bring you back into the main room, and I want you to do something for me.”

“W-what is it?”

“Stop trying to be so strong for everyone. Yes, Enjolras is Grantaire’s lover, and yes, we’re all scared for him. But you have a special place in his heart and we’re all aware of it. You have a right to your feelings, and beyond that, you’re among friends. We should all be helping each other.”

Courfeyrac managed a weak smile at Jehan’s insight. He had been trying to mask his emotions from the others. It didn’t seem right to break down in front of Enjolras, who by virtue of his passionate relationship with Grantaire just seemed to have more right to be upset. Jehan was right though. This wasn’t some kind of contest.

“I don’t know what I’d do without you, Jehan,” Courfeyrac murmured. “Well, aside from crying like a little girl in my pantry.”

“My poor darling,” Jehan murmured. He gave Courfeyrac another tight squeeze, then helped him to his feet. “Go back into the living room with the others. I’ll get the waters.”

“Thanks, love.”

No one commented on his red eyes when he went in and took a seat on the couch. Enjolras was sitting tensely on the other end, holding his phone in readiness for bad news. Feuilly and Marius were on the futon. They both stared at Courfeyrac a bit longer than was normal when he walked back in, but if they were discomfited by the cracks in his friendly exterior, they kept it to themselves.

The room was thick with tense silence when Jehan emerged with the promised glasses of water. Once he’d handed them out he sat down between Courfeyrac and Enjolras on the couch. He leaned against Courfeyrac once more and together they silently went through the ‘Old Stuff’ photo album on facebook with Courfeyrac’s phone. Jehan gave his boyfriend’s hand a little squeeze whenever he rested on a picture of his lost friend for just a beat too long, but even he didn’t dare shatter the silence.

There was no way around it. It seemed that Javert had made a mistake.

(According to his commanding officers, he’d made a series of mistakes and misjudgments over the course of an otherwise distinguished career, but Javert’s commanding officers had never seen eye to eye with him over the continued insidious threat posed by the former mayor).
He wasn’t used to making mistakes. He expected absolute perfection of those around him, therefore, he had to behave impeccably himself at all times. He held himself to the highest accountability and reflected on his own actions with intense scrutiny. He honestly had no idea how to process a misjudgment of this magnitude.

He’d gotten into trouble at work before, it was true, but he’d never felt himself to actually be in the wrong in those situations. Javert had always been able to give himself the moral high ground. This time though, with a young man and a child in danger, with Javert’s misplaced priorities partly to blame…If he’d focused on tracking down Montparnasse like he should have, those boys would be safe in their own homes.

Guilt was an unfamiliar sensation to the scrupulous detective. How could he have misapprehended the situation so severely? He’d been dealing with Montparnasse since the thug was a mere boy, taking on petty scores while being egged on by other misguided youths. He should have noticed how far the budding criminal’s violent tendencies had evolved. He should have realized what a threat he was and put all his resources to use in the young criminal’s apprehension.

Javert looked down at the papers in his hands, printouts of photos of the missing persons. The first picture had been provided by the college boy’s friends. It showed the twenty four year old holding the child on his lap, beaming for the camera while the little boy looked up at him with a vulnerable trust etched into his innocent features. The second picture the one that haunted Javert’s thoughts and seemed burned to his eyelids, had been texted to Montparnasse’s ex-girlfriend and showed the young man in the trunk of a car. There was still no sign of the child.

He remembered meeting the missing student when he’d been interviewing the lad’s boyfriend at the hospital after the young peoples’ earlier run-in with Montparnasse. Javert had dismissed the boy, who’d looked like an addict, as little better than the thug that had stabbed his lover. If it hadn’t been for the fact that the boyfriend came from a good family, he’d have dismissed the entire incident as gutter trash attempting to do society a favor by wiping itself out with infighting. After all, the girl at the heart of the dispute was a Thenardier.

Time and proper interviews were the boy’s friends had shown Javert how wrong all his assumptions had been.

He folded the pictures up and placed them on the seat beside him. Javert looked out the windshield at the quiet suburban street in front of him, then he turned his attention to unholstering his gun and laying it on his lap. For the first time in his entire life he felt lost, unable to cling to the sense of purpose that had driven him for as long as he could remember.

He wasn’t sure what to do, or how to face going on with this…this tremendous guilt.

Bahorel jumped when his phone vibrated with a new text, but it was just Feuilly. Scowling, he deleted the text without looking at it.

He really wished Feuilly would stop bothering him. Considering what was going on, he had better things to do than repeat himself. He had no intention of telling Feuilly where to find Montparnasse, because he was going to be damned if another one of his friends got close enough to that bastard to get hurt.

He stood in front of the floor length mirror he’d duct taped to the back of his closet and took a look at himself. After giving it some thought, Bahorel had settled on partial-drag; he’d given himself smoky
eyes with cheap red lips and gelled his hair into messy spikes. He’d put sterling silver hoops in his ears and opted to wear the tongue ring he was pretty sure even his friends didn’t know about. For clothing he went with a wispy, barely there white t-shirt and black jeans that hugged his ass like a second skin. Heeled boots and chipped black nail polish completed the look.

Bahorel appraised his reflection, trying to think of how Montparnasse would react to it. He ripped the collar of his t-shirt wide, exposing his collarbone and giving him a roughed up look he knew the other young man would respond well to. For added assurance, he further smudged his eye makeup.

His phone buzzed with another text as he left his apartment. He ignored that one too, then typed out a quick text for “Max.”

‘Sorry I never called. Been busy. Got a minute?’

Bahorel paused in the stairwell, struck a pose, and took a quick selfie. He sent it to Montparnasse with the message ‘I’m all dolled up 4 U.’

His phone was ringing by the time he got down to his car. Bahorel climbed into the driver seat and answered. “Hey doll.”

“Tina. Where the fuck have you been? Why the fuck did you have to call me now?”

“Better late than never, right?” Bahorel asked, keeping his voice low and husky. “M’sorry I flaked out. But you know, it’s only fair. You kept me waiting for a fucking year while you were screwing around with your little skank. I thought you could stand to wait a week.”

“You were wrong.”

“So punish me.” Bahorel slid down a little and threw his head back against the seat, trying to get in character. He made his voice breathy. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? I get off on it too. I’ve got my cuffs with me, babe. You could tie me down, do anything you want to me. Make me beg…make me scream. Make me yours…” He heard Montparnasse’s breath hitch. “It doesn’t even have to be anything that fancy. Just…just let me see you, just for a few minutes. Just long enough for you to mark me up a little. I am yours, Max, and I want to feel it.”

“Fuck. You’re so fucking hot, Tina.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah…fuck. Now’s really not a good…”

“Baby, please. Don’t make me go looking for someone else. I waited for you for so long…want you.”

“No one else is laying a hand on you, you got that you whore?”

Bahorel bit back a smile. He let out a throaty purr. “Babe, what the fuck are you doing by the lake? Y’know what, never mind. I bet it’s quiet…private. Yeah, that works fine for me. I’ll meet you there.”
“Wait, Tina, meet me by the picnic ta-”

He ended the call before Montparnasse could give him instructions and tossed his phone on the passenger seat. Bahorel started his car and sped off for the wildlife reserve, hoping he wasn’t already too late.

Bahorel found Montparnasse leaning against a tree smoking a cigarette. He looked good. He was wearing all black; tight fitting pants, polished shoes that looked terribly out of place on a hiking trail, and a button down shirt with the sleeves rolled up at the elbows. His gorgeous hair hadn’t been brushed and so wasn’t as sleek as usual, but the volume and body looked good, maybe even better for the variety it lent his appearance.

He was so god damn gorgeous. Of course he was a psychopath. That’s just how Bahorel’s luck worked.

Bahorel sauntered up to him and threw him a flirty smile. “Hey. Thanks for making time for me.”

“Fuck damn, princess. You’re going to make it worth it, aren’t you? You’re fucking beautiful, Tina.”

“So’re you.”

Montparnasse grinned. “I know. But you can keep saying it if you want.”

Bahorel stroked Montparnasse’s jaw and angled his face up so that their lips were a breath apart. “I think there are better things we could be doing.”

He suffered through a fierce, possessive kiss, doing his best to play assertive-submissive (Montparnasse liked to break things-submissive from the get-go wouldn’t get him excited the same way as dominating someone with a spark of fight). It was awkward, to say the least. Not only did he now have zero feelings for the crazy asshole, but it was awkward on a physical level too. Bahorel was half a foot taller than the crazy little bastard, and much more muscular. When neither of them was wearing a dress, their dynamic just felt ridiculous.

But still, Bahorel had gotten a pretty good read on Montparnasse over the last year. He knew what the guy liked, and he knew how to deliver. He played Montparnasse’s body, kissing and licking and sucking exactly where he liked, and letting him scratch and paw at him in return.

When he was sure he had the guy insensible with lust, Bahorel grabbed him by the crotch and squeezed, hard.

There was nothing erotic about the squeal of pain Montparnasse let out, though it was satisfying. Bahorel knocked him to the ground with a punch to the jaw followed by a knee in the gut, and then whipped out a pair of handcuffs and cuffed him to a nearby sign marking out a hiking trail.

He’d bought those cuffs with such wonderful expectations...at least they were still useful.

Bahorel kicked Montparnasse in the ribs a few more times, glad he’d opted for a pair of steel toed boots, and then calmly sat down beside him and lit a cigarette.

“So Max, it occurred to me that we never introduced ourselves properly. My real name’s Bahorel.”

Montparnasse’s eyes widened a bit. Good. He recognized the name. “Y-you’re friends with
“Yeah. I am. I’m also friends with Grantaire.” Bahorel smiled, showing his teeth. “Good friends, really. Wanted to date him for a while, but you must know why that didn’t come into being. Considering you landed the reason in the hospital.” He took another drag on his cigarette, then pressed it into Montparnasse’s arm.

He didn’t cry out, but he came close. Bahorel turned it a few times, then returned it to his lips.

“So, Parnasse. You must have figured out why I really called you by now.”

Montparnasse tried to kick him, but he easily dodged. “Cute. Very cute, kid, but I’ve got the upper hand here. So are you going to tell me where my friend is now, or after I’ve broken your pretty fucking face?” Bahorel turned his hand over so that his scarred up knuckles were in easy view. “I’ve got some experience with mangling faces.”

Montparnasse tried to kick him again, so Bahorel punched him in the face. “Fuck! You fucking son of a bitch! You broke my fucking nose!”

“Oh shit. Hope it heals okay. Y’know, sometimes it can go off center, or get bumpy.” He dug his thumb into the bridge of Montparnasse’s nose and twisted until he started screaming. “Yeah, that’s not gonna heal right. Shame too. Your nose was really pretty. Y’know, was being the key word there.”

“You are going to be so fucking dead college boy!”

“Where’s my friend, Parnasse? The longer you hold out on me the uglier you’re going to be.”

“You’re too late you stupid fuck! I kicked the car into the lake after you called me.”

“What?” Bahorel’s stomach twisted into knots. He grabbed Montparnasse’s nose between his thumb and index finger and yanked it until the bastard was crying out in agony. “Tell me the fucking truth you son of a bitch!”

“I am! It’s in the lake and your fucking faggot is in the trunk!”

Bahorel was on his feet in an instant running for the lake. He searched the ground for tire tracks, thankful for the last rays of the setting sun that allowed him to see them, then he followed after them and dove into the water without another thought.

The car wasn’t very far out. Bahorel had a time seeing it through the murky lake water, but he kept it in sight and swam for it as fast as he was able. It was an old car, in crappy condition. Bahorel pounded the trunk until the catch popped and it banged open. He grabbed Grantaire by the arm and then pushed upwards.

Bahorel’s lungs were burning by the time he broke the surface, but still he pushed himself. He dragged Grantaire to a large boulder at the edge of the lake, threw him up onto it, and crouched over him. The tape had fallen off of his mouth, but his wrists were still bound.

His eyes were closed and his skin was deathly pale, with a faint blue tinge.

“No. No, I’m not too late. Wake up, ‘Taire, you son of a bitch. Wake up!” Bahorel slapped his face, but he got no response.

He desperately felt along Grantaire’s neck for a pulse. “Please, please don’t die on me, kid. You
can’t.”

What would Joly do? CPR. He could do CPR. Trying not to let panic and hopelessness overwhelm him, Bahorel began chest compressions.

The friends were still gathered in Courfeyrac’s living room in that unbearably tense silence when Enjolras’ phone rang. He almost dropped it getting it out of his pocket, and again when he saw the number on the screen. “It’s the police. Guys, it’s the police!”


“What is it?” Enjolras snapped into his phone. He shrugged away from Jehan and curled in on himself, attention focused solely on the voice at the other end.


“My boyfriend, yes. Have you found Grantaire?” Enjolras asked desperately.

“Not exactly, I’m afraid. Look, we received a tip that we just looked into, and, well, I’m afraid the news isn’t encouraging.”

Enjolras felt suddenly dizzy. He fell back against the couch, and he must have looked as light headed as he felt because his friends crowded around him, varied expressions of concern on their faces. Courfeyrac tried to take the phone from him, but he elbowed him away. “What happened? Sir, please just tell me. He’s not-what is it?”

The detective gave a heavy sigh. “We found the suspect’s vehicle…submerged. We also found implements of torture.”

“Oh god. And…and Grantaire?”

“Still missing. We’ve got divers in the lake. I’m sorry, son, but it doesn’t look good for your friend.”

The phone finally slipped from his fingers. Courfeyrac snatched it up and began questioning the detective, but he had the sense to move into the kitchen while he did so. Jehan looked torn for a moment, eyes trailing after his boyfriend, but he scooched over on the couch and pulled Enjolras into his arms.

Enjolras clutched at his friend’s arm tight enough to bruise, but he didn’t care. He let out a small gasp and dropped his head, tears falling freely. “Please…please no…there’s got to be some way, something I can…I can’t…”

“Enjolras, ssh. Calm down, dear. There’s nothing more we can do j-just yet. Ssh…” Jehan murmured, rocking Enjolras despite the physical pain he was in from the distraught young man’s tight grip.

And then Enjolras let out a sound none of them, himself included, had ever expected the self-assured idealist to even be capable of. It was a raw, guttural cry of loss and pain. Enjolras had been willing to make sacrifices and would gladly have laid down his own life to help others, but to lose Grantaire so senselessly…that was a sacrifice he’d never intended to make, and he wasn’t prepared for it.

Jehan curled forward and hid his face in the crook of Enjolras’ neck. The angle was slightly
awkward, given that he was holding Enjolras, but he was crying pretty hard by that point too, and letting out his own small whimpers of loss and sorrow. Enjolras loosened the death grip on his arm, and the friends shifted so that they were holding each other.

Feuilly dropped his head in his hands, silent and still, so it was hard to read him. Marius looked around the room nervously, as though he were intruding on his friends’ grief. His eyes were shining with as yet unshed tears.

Courfeyrac returned after a few minutes and silently slid onto the couch behind Jehan. He rested his head on his boyfriend’s back. “I can’t believe it. This is so fucking unfair. Just when he was finally…” He choked up, voice dissolving into whimpers.

They all jumped at the sound of a loud banging on the front door. No one moved to answer it, though Marius and Courfeyrac eyed the door as though they’d never seen one before.

“Courf, darling…I can’t get it,” Jehan said, tilting his head towards the distraught blond in his arms. “Will you…it might be good news.”

“My best friend is dead.” Courfeyrac said in a hollow, disbelieving tone. “I sincerely doubt anything anyone could tell me counts as good news right now.” He still disentangled himself from the grief huddle, wiped at a face that was red and splotchy from tears, and climbed to his feet.

Feuilly followed him to the door, bracing Courfeyrac with a strong hand on his back.

“Darling, I’m so sorry,” Jehan whispered, though no one could tell if he was talking to the trembling wreck in his arms or his boyfriend. There was a strong possibility it was meant for both of them.

Courfeyrac flung the door open, and let out a shout of disbelief at what he saw. He would have fallen over if Feuilly wasn’t there to catch him.

Grantaire was on the doorstep, looking horribly weak and mangled, but very much alive and leaning against a disheveled Bahorel.

Courfeyrac let out a faint scream, then lunged forward and pulled Grantaire into a tight hug that had him groaning in pain. “You’re alive! You stupid son of a whore! Thank everything holy, oh fuck, you’re fucking alive!” He clung to Grantaire, sobbing tears of joy. It took Feuilly and Bahorel both to pry Courfeyrac away and give the boy some air, a futile gesture as once Courfeyrac was off of him, Enjolras took his place.

Grantaire collapsed into his lover’s arms, and Enjolras let out another completely uncharacteristic noise, this one a tiny inelegant squeak of pure joy and relief. He dropped kisses over the side of Grantaire’s face that wasn’t red, raw broken skin, murmuring senseless words of gratitude between each one.

Grantaire woozily brought his hands up to clutch at Enjolras’ arm, which was wrapped across his chest. His eyes drifted shut.

“He looks ready to keel over. Enjolras, bring him over to the couch,” Jehan instructed.

The friends helped him stagger over to the couch, and after a minute or so Grantaire was lying down with his back to Enjolras’ front, hands still weakly clutching at a protective arm flung across him. Jehan ran into the other room and came back with a damp cloth and a bowl of soapy water. He crouched down next to the couch and started dabbing at the dried blood on Grantaire’s face. Courfeyrac sat at Grantaire and Enjolras’ feet, so Feuilly, Marius, and Bahorel took the futon.
“So what the hell happened?” Courfeyrac asked, tearing his eyes away from Grantaire to give Bahorel an expectant look.

The guy was in a pretty odd state. His clothes were stained red, worryingly damp, and smelled like a pond. He’d been wearing makeup, as a lot of it was smeared over his face, and a few cuts on his knuckles were still freely bleeding.

“I got him back,” Bahorel said simply. “Can we leave it at that?”

“Guys, he pulled me out of the trunk of a sinking car,” Grantaire said, voice low and raspy. “We can leave him alone for now.”

“If you insist,” Enjolras said quietly. He dropped his head into Grantaire’s damp curls and breathed deeply, even though the odor couldn’t have been pleasant. Just a few short minutes before, he’d been convinced he’d never see his lover alive again, and now he had him safe in his arms. He determined to savor Grantaire the way he deserved from that moment on.

Courfeyrac reached over and rubbed Grantaire’s knee. “So ‘Taire, the next time you’re having a really shit day and you get all crazy and down on yourself, just remember how deliriously happy you made us all by not being dead.”

Grantaire closed his eyes and let out a contented noise as he snuggled into Enjolras’ arms. “Sorry for scaring you guys.”

“Where’s Little R?” Jehan asked suddenly, sitting up straight with a start.

Bahorel frowned. “He wasn’t there. I looked for him, but…Grantaire, you don’t know where…?”

“I-I don’t. I was in the trunk the whole time. I…shit, you didn’t find him?” Grantaire tried to sit up, but Enjolras wouldn’t let him.

“Love, stay still. We’ll figure out what happened to him, don’t worry.”

“If that sack of shit hurt that little boy…” Grantaire started, but his voice gave out into pained, wheezing coughs.

Bahorel frowned. “We should get him to a hospital. I had to give him CPR. He was unconscious when I got him out of the lake.”

Grantaire let out a long groan and followed it up with a whine. “Ten more minutes?”

Enjolras involuntarily tightened his hold, but ultimately his sense of responsibility got the best of him. “No, he’s right. You…you need to be looked at. But I promise, I won’t leave your side.”

“Neither will I,” Courfeyrac added, reaching up to squeeze his knee again.

Grantaire squinted down the couch at his friend as though he’d never seen him before. “Courf… were you crying over me?”

“I thought you were dead you stupid asshole!” Courfeyrac yelled. “Of course I was crying! God, what do you think?”

Jehan patted Courfeyrac’s shoulder. “Grantaire, we all cried.”

“The detectives, they said they were looking for your body,” Enjolras said hollowly. “We thought we’d never see you again.”
Grantaire didn’t seem to know what to make of that. He did look close to passing out again though, so the friends took Bahorel’s suggestion and set off for the hospital.

Enjolras and Courfeyrac went back with Grantaire once he was admitted, which left Feuilly, Bahorel, Marius, and Jehan in the waiting room. Bahorel cleaned himself up a little in the bathroom and put on some clean clothes Marius had thought to grab for him before they ran out the door. They didn’t fit quite right, but it was better than wearing his ruined clothes.

Marius stepped outside to give Cosette a call, as he’d promised to keep her updated (she had an earful for him in return, something about that detective that stalked her father showing up on their doorstep asking for penance—it didn’t make a lot of sense, but Marius didn’t really have the energy to give his love the attention she deserved; he determined to get the story in full from her again later). When he walked back in, he found that his friends had been joined by Combeferre, Eponine, and Little R.

The little boy was sitting on his sister’s lap, surrounded on all sides by his older friends. He didn’t seem to mind the attention, though he did shyly turn his face in towards Eponine from time to time.

“Combeferre, Ponine! When did you get here? And thank God Little R’s okay.”

“Marius!” Eponine’s face lit up. “Montparnasse left Little R with my parents. We just came back from getting him, and he had a few cuts that we thought might need stitches so we took him here to get him checked out. Everyone was just telling us that Grantaire’s okay.”

“And Zelma and Peter Parker and Gavroche are okay too, right?” Little R squeaked out.

“Everyone’s fine, sweetie,” Eponine said fondly. She leaned in and planted a big wet kiss on his forehead. “I’m so glad we have you back. I promise, I’ll never let anything like that happen to you again.”

“C’n I see ‘Taire?”

“Not yet, sweetheart. He’s with the doctors right now,” Eponine explained. Marius took a seat beside her and reached over to squeeze her free hand.

Eventually some detectives came in to ask them questions, and Bahorel reluctantly expounded his tale. The friends all looked on in some surprise when he described his actions (the police were less than thrilled to hear about the initiative he’d taken in tracking down a known criminal by himself), but no one could say they were displeased with the results. More than one of the gathered college students privately determined to never give the brawler a reason to be angry with them though.

After a few hours that seemed longer than they were, everyone was sent home. Enjolras even had his car back.

They left for the parking lot together, and once they reached the cars a lot of time was given over to hugging, reminding Grantaire and Little R that they were loved and that everyone was relieved to have them back, Courfeyrac surprised Grantaire by crying once more, and then everyone was finally on their way home.

Enjolras brought Feuilly, Little R, and Eponine back to Feuilly and Joly’s apartment, and then he took Grantaire back to their place. He helped him up the stairs, Grantaire commenting that if they were going to make a habit of getting injured like this then they should look into getting an apartment
on the first floor, and then they went to bed.

Both young men fell asleep quickly under the strength of their relief and contentment at being reunited. They knew this was a calm moment before an inevitable storm of consequences from the recent adventures, but that didn’t make the peaceful night any less enjoyable. Even Grantaire, with all his pessimism, believed that they’d earned a rest.

The night terrors of waking in a small, dark space flooding with water would come another night, and the phone calls from social services enquiring after the Thenardier children’s living arrangements would wait until morning.

Chapter End Notes

I definitely poked a little fun at the tourist shops in Salem, Massachusetts in the chapter, but I did so with love. I worked at one of them while I was an undergrad. There are a few sketchy ones, but they’re nowhere near the Thenardier level of sketch, and some of them (like the one I worked at) are wonderful little establishments. I just wanted to mention that not all professional psychics are con artists and frauds.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Courfeyrac and Grantaire head to Courfeyrac’s childhood home for a family dinner so his mother can meet their boyfriends. Enjolras is a little confused about the necessity of his presence, but he goes along anyway.

Chapter Notes

So it's not straight fluff, but you've got to admit, this is a pretty light chapter for me.

Grantaire had fallen asleep easily enough; after all he was physically and emotionally exhausted. Staying that way was tricky though. He woke up more than once panicking in the dark bedroom, but each time he quickly reassured himself that everything was okay by clutching onto Enjolras and listening to his even breathing until he was soothed back to sleep.

He discovered that Enjolras was having a similar night of broken rest when, maybe the fourth time he started awake, he found his boyfriend propped up in bed watching him with a pensive expression.

“I’m sorry,” Enjolras whispered immediately. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You didn’t,” Grantaire reassured him. “I’ve been doing it on my own all night.”

“Me too. I keep waking thinking I dreamt that you’d been found and…and that you’re really still missing. Or worse.” He gave a shudder.

Grantaire’s breath caught in his throat. He’d never seen Enjolras so vulnerable before. “You really worried for me that much?”

“Of course I did. How can you have such a difficult time believing that? I’ve made every effort I can to show you what you mean to me. At this point I couldn’t bear to lose you.”

Grantaire had the feeling Enjolras would survive just fine, after all, there were plenty of other unremarkable human stains just like Grantaire in the world, but men like Enjolras were few and far between. Who was he even kidding? There was never going to be another man like Enjolras.

He figured he’d only annoy his boyfriend if he said any of that though.

Grantaire took one of Enjolras’ hands in his and twined their fingers together. “I’m sorry I freaked you out.”

“Jesus Grantaire. It’s not your fault you were abducted by a psychotic killer.”

“…I’m still sorry you were worried.”
Enjolras gathered Grantaire in his arms and dropped a kiss on top of his head. “My subconscious has been pretty panicky too, but let’s try one last time.”

Grantaire nuzzled against Enjolras and shut his eyes. “I love you,” he murmured.

“You do not have three thousand six hundred fifty friends,” Grantaire said incredulously. He’d been cuddled up to Enjolras on Courfeyrac’s couch, but he leaned forward to better see his friend’s laptop screen when he’d caught the ridiculous number on Courfeyrac’s facebook page.

Courfeyrac, who was sitting in Grantaire’s usual non-convalescing spot on the floor, tilted his laptop up for easy viewing. “On the contrary. Facebook says that I do indeed have three thousand six hundred and fifty friends.”

“How do you even know that many people?” Joly asked incredulously. “There weren’t even that many people in my entire hometown.”

“Jol, we grew up in Western Mass. There are definitely three thousand cows between our hometowns, even if there aren’t that many people,” Legle joked with a grin.

Enjolras looked suspicious as well. “Three thousand does seem a bit excessive, Courfeyrac. You don’t actually interact with all of them, do you?”

“Of course not. I just friend whoever and I never get around to pruning my friends list.”

“Ah. I suppose if I didn’t regularly prune my list I’d probably have about two thousand at this point,” Enjolras murmured. Grantaire gaped at him. “What? You realize the sole purpose of going to all the academic events I do is for the sake of networking, right? That’s partly how I intend to get into a good graduate program.”

“Oh.”

“How many friends do you have, Grantaire?” Joly asked.

Grantaire scrunched up his face as he thought it over. “I dunno. Maybe fifty?”

As Courfeyrac was already on facebook, he pulled up Grantaire’s page. “Seventy two. Damn, that’s kind of depressing. It’s not like you’re not active on this thing.”

“Well I don’t really know that many people. I friended you guys, a few kids from high school, a few kids from college, and that’s about it.”

“I suppose if I pruned out all my old hookups and potential future hookups that would take a sizable chunk out of my list,” Courfeyrac muttered. “Hm. Maybe I ought to do that anyway.”

“As you’re in a committed relationship with one of our friends, I highly suggest it,” Enjolras said in
what was clearly to be interpreted as a threat.

“I’ll put that on the to-do list. Hm. Y’know ‘Taire, when you put it like that I am actually surprised you managed seventy two. You never really talked to that many kids in high school.”

“Yeah, I think I only added a few kids. Oh, your family definitely added to my numbers. That might be five of my list.”

Courfeyrac looked alarmingly close to dropping his laptop. “You friended my family?”

“…yeah. They sent me requests.”

“Did you friend my parents? Grantaire, answer me, are you facebook friends with my mother?!”

Grantaire looked at him blankly. “Of course I am. What, you expected me to ignore a friend request from Bridget?”

Courfeyrac shoved his computer at Grantaire. “Sign on and unfriend her this instant! Grantaire, you stupid sack of shit, she’s been trying to friend me for five years! If she’s friended you then it’s so she can creep me through your page, you jerk!”

Grantaire shoved the computer right back. “If you don’t want your mom to see your page then I’ll unfriend you! I see you every day, practically. I don’t get to see Bridget that much anymore.”

Courfeyrac looked torn. “I, but…urgh. This sucks. I don’t want Mom seeing what I do on facebook.”

“Then I suppose you ought to be more careful about the pictures you post,” Enjolras said with a smirk.

“Or how blatant you are about your hook up friends,” Joly added.

“Except he’s not doing that anymore because he’s dating Jehan,” Enjolras nearly-growled.

Courfeyrac rolled his eyes. “Of course I’m not using facebook to facilitate casual sex anymore. God, guys, let it go. But this still sucks. You don’t see me friending any of your relatives.”

“Yes, well, that would be difficult in my case, now wouldn’t it?” Grantaire snapped.

Courfeyrac realized he’d hit a nerve, and he resolutely changed the subject. After another hour or so of hanging around Courfeyrac’s living room waiting for their other friends to finish their respective jobs, classes, and whatever else was keeping them from heading to the Musain, the conversation cycled back somewhere near facebook. Grantaire, less defensive, felt it only decent to assure Courfeyrac that whereas he did talk to his mom on facebook a lot, she almost never pried about what her son was up to.

“There’s a good chance she doesn’t creep you, dude. She’s always been pretty respectful of your privacy.”

“Mm. To an irresponsible degree, even,” Courfeyrac agreed, thinking back on what he and Grantaire had gotten up to as teenagers behind his locked bedroom door. “You said almost though. What does she say when she does bother you about me?”

Grantaire shrugged. “Normal stuff, I guess. She noticed that you’ve got a boyfriend now. She wants to meet Jehan.”
That shut the rest of the room up as they all turned to look at Courfeyrac. “You haven’t told your mom about your boyfriend?” Legle asked.

“Uh…not exactly. Look, I’m not the only one in the group that doesn’t talk to their family about their love lives.”

“The only reason I don’t is because my family disowned me over my love life,” Joly reminded him.

“I have a horrible relationship with my parents, and I still sucked it up and took Grantaire over for dinner. From what I’ve gathered, you actually like your parents,” Enjolras said.

“I do,” Courfeyrac said with a reluctant sigh. “I just…I dunno. They’re good people but they’re not very sensitive. Dad still thinks I’m faking being bi for attention. I dunno how well they’d respond to Jehan. I think they might traumatize him a little.”

“The guy’s tougher than you’re giving him credit for. He can handle your dad, even if the man does say something stupid,” Grantaire said, rolling his eyes. “But yeah, Bridget asked me a few questions about Jehan and I didn’t go into much detail or anything, since I figured you might kill me-”

“Good insight.”

“But she does want to meet him.” He turned towards Enjolras. “Actually, she wants to meet you too.”


“Because you’re dating Grantaire,” Courfeyrac said, as though it were obvious. The explanation didn’t seem to help Enjolras, who still looked baffled, but he let it go. “I guess we should go back for a family dinner. We need to plan out the summer trip anyway.”

“Since school’s taking you to Disney in the fall, I suppose Florida’s out,” Grantaire said. “I still think we should go to New York. Plays for you, art museums for me.”

“And I still think we should go to an amusement park,” Courfeyrac said. He took out his phone. “I guess I’ll give Mom a call before we meet everyone at the Musain. Enj, you down with having dinner with my family?”

“I…I guess?”

“Cool. Be back in a sec.” Courfeyrac went into his bedroom and shut the door.

Grantaire grinned. “That wasn’t too hard. Oh, you are actually a vegetarian, right? I just kind of assumed.” Enjolras started to explain about the environmental impact of large scale cattle farming, the potential to ease human suffering through grain redistribution, and all his other talking points on the benefits of vegetarianism, but Grantaire cut him off. “Cool. Bridget was gonna do her pot roast, but when I told her I thought you were a veggie she decided to make a lasagna. She makes a killer lasagna.”

“How long have you and Courfeyrac’s mother been planning this?” Enjolras asked.

Grantaire shrugged. “I was supposed to pitch it over a month ago. But you know me. I’m a lazy accomplice. I suck at planning things.”

“True enough.”
Enjolras and Grantaire ended up leaving the Musain early. They were both feeling tired and achy, and it soon became clear that Grantaire was emotionally wrung out and would rather hide from his friends than be in a crowd. He’d been quieter than usual since his abduction, though he made a valiant effort to pretend everything was normal when he was with his friends. Enjolras didn’t want to push him about it. He figured there was a psychological benefit to feigning the normalcy-taking a break from the trauma, in a way, but he was determined to help him confront it and move past it when they were alone together.

He gave Grantaire some time to himself when they got back to the apartment. Enjolras sat in the study and worked on some makeup assignments (ignoring several calls from his mother while he did so) while Grantaire took a bath to work out some of his aches. When Enjolras was ready for a study break he made them both mugs of tea and went into the bedroom to check on Grantaire.

He found him in the living room instead, painting. Enjolras set the mugs of tea down on the coffee table, then sat down behind Grantaire, wrapped his arms around his waist, and propped his chin on Grantaire’s shoulder so he could peer at his work. “I’d think you’d take the bath after you’d finished staining yourself.”

“I wasn’t planning this. It just kind of came to me.”

The work was an abstraction, so Enjolras couldn’t make heads or tails of it. He didn’t have the training to see the meaning behind it, but there was a sort of cruel beauty to the violent streaks of color. “So this is a personal piece?”

“Yeah. I, uh, I called health services today. I just don’t think I can finish out the semester. Too much has…anyway. I’ve gotten an official leave and I’m not going to do the summer courses. I, uh, I know you wanted me to walk with you at graduation. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Grantaire, you don’t have to apologize for that.” He punctuated his point with a quick kiss to Grantaire’s neck. “So you’ll be back to school in the fall?”

“Mm hm. When I feel a bit stronger I’m going to get a job. I can start pitching in on the bills and maybe pay down my loans a little.”

“Just focus on the loans. My parents have us covered, and believe me, there’s no reason to feel guilty about using their money. They owe me.”

Grantaire laughed. “You’re such a brat. C’mon Enj, I really don’t want to be a kept man.”

“You felt differently when you heard that I had three grand in my personal finances account.”

“You got that back?”

Enjolras murmured an affirmative and placed another kiss on Grantaire’s neck, enjoying the little shiver he gave in response.

“Hm…I’m not sure three grand’s exactly the right figure for my dignity, but it’s certainly the right ballpark.”

“Mm. Your lease is up soon, right?”

“Not till June. I suppose I could break it, but I’ve got the cash saved to pay rent until then.”
“Might as well keep it then. I don’t think either of us are really up to moving your things-”

“And with the luck we’ve been having one of us will get seriously injured again next week so things can stay that way,” Grantaire said, rolling his eyes. He carefully added a few more streaks of color to his canvas as he spoke, and Enjolras watched, transfixed by the slow construction of discernible objects.

“The police have promised to keep Montparnasse in jail this time, and besides that, I’m going to be keeping a better eye on you.”

“Oh? Because you totally weren’t knifed in the gut or anything. Y’know. Clearly I’m the only victim here.”

“…we’ll keep each other safe?” Enjolras tried again.

Grantaire turned in his arms just enough to give him a quick peck. “Sounds like a plan.”

Enjolras watched him paint for a little longer, then reluctantly accepted the fact that he ought to get a little more schoolwork done before bed. He forced himself to let go of Grantaire and rose to his feet.

“I’m going to be in the other room working on a translation for French class. Come and interrupt me if you need me though.”

“C’mon Enj, I don’t want to get between you and your near perfect GPA.”

“Grantaire, you come before my schoolwork.”

Grantaire tore his eyes from his canvas to stare at Enjolras, apparently surprised by the grave reply to his teasing. “Really? I think that’s the most romantic thing you’ve ever said to me. Where do I rank against social activism?”

Enjolras smirked. “Don’t push it.”

Grantaire laughed, and turned his attention back to the canvas.

After a moment’s thought, Enjolras crouched over and whispered against Grantaire’s ear. “You’re above the social activism too. No point in saving a world without you in it.”

Grantaire was done painting for the night, he decided. He still wanted to let Enjolras study though, so while his lover worked on his translation Grantaire sat at the foot of the bed and attempted to read Persepolis. In reality, he spent most of the next two hours dazedly staring at his lover and feeling unusually content.

Some hours later, Enjolras was sitting up in bed with his laptop open, creeping his lover’s facebook page while the man slept beside him. Grantaire was curled in on himself, a troubled look occasionally furrowing his brow. Whenever Enjolras noticed the change, he reached his hand over and stroked Grantaire’s face until his expression soothed.

The conversation about Courfeyrac’s family had made Enjolras realize that there was still quite a lot he didn’t know about his boyfriend. He tried not to be resentful of the fact that Courfeyrac knew him so much better. It wasn’t anything to do with Grantaire caring more for his friend than his lover; Courfeyrac had simply come into Grantaire’s life when he’d been more open and less guarded.
It was odd for him, looking at pictures of Grantaire as a teenager. He felt like he was seeing Grantaire in a mirrored state. Presently, he was in a state of transition, gaining strength and confidence along with emotional well-being and even some happiness. Grantaire the teenager seemed to have been losing that, slowly becoming the bitter, depressed drunkard that Enjolras had first met as a freshman in college.

Enjolras paused on a picture of Courfeyrac and Grantaire at their junior prom. They were posing with a third boy Enjolras didn’t know in someone’s backyard, probably Courfeyrac’s. Courfeyrac and the third friend were smiling brightly at the camera, looking ridiculous the way teenagers always do in formal wear, but also looking genuinely excited and happy about their big night. Teenage Grantaire was standing just a little apart from them, looking self-conscious and probably aware of how poorly they were pulling off their dress clothes.

Actually, Enjolras corrected, Grantaire didn’t look too bad in his. Of course, he wasn’t wearing a tux like the other boys. He was wearing cheap black slacks with a dress shirt and red tie. His hair was spiked, he was sporting black eye liner, and his fingernails were painted a dark metallic blue. If Enjolras had to guess, he’d say there was a chance his boyfriend had been a Green Day fan. Of course, American Idiot would suit a less mature Grantaire.

Enjolras clicked to the next picture in the album, which was also from prom. It showed Courfeyrac and Grantaire standing on either side of a laughing housewife with a round, friendly face that resembled her son’s. Courfeyrac was leaning over to kiss his mother's cheek while Grantaire hugged her, smiling unabashedly not for the camera, but for the woman.

At least ten minutes passed while Enjolras studied the picture, searching it for meaning. He didn’t notice when Grantaire stirred, but he jumped when the man sat up and leaned against him to squint at the screen.

“Prom pictures?” he asked fuzzily. “You’re staying up late creeping my page to look at fucking prom pictures?”

“I was curious,” Enjolras explained. “Obviously I didn’t know you when we were in high school. I wondered what you’d looked like.”

“Urgh…like a loud mouthed little dweeb. Look at that fucking picture. I tried to be all anti-establishment and I showed up at prom looking like every other kid who wanted to be ‘different’ or ‘edgy.’”

“Lot of Green Day fans are your school?”

“No. American Idiot fans, and there’s a difference. Some of those fuckers didn’t even know Dookie, let alone like Kerplunk and stuff.”

Enjolras went over to Combeferre’s page and pulled up his Nostalgia album. “This is one of my prom pictures.” He shifted a little so Grantaire could better see the screen.

The picture showed Enjolras and Combeferre standing with their dates in one of the gardens behind one of Marie and Paul’s mansions. Grantaire snorted when he saw seventeen year old Combeferre: he’d just shot up to six two when that picture was taken, but the weight hadn’t come anywhere near to catching up with the sudden height increase. He looked gangly and awkward, traits that were amplified in a rented tux. He looked happy though. He’d liked his date, Christine. The two of them had been going out for just shy of a year before prom.

It was a shame that relationship hadn’t worked out.
Enjolras, on the other hand, had felt incredibly put-upon by the unpleasant social ritual, and it showed in his teenage self’s haughty expression. He hadn’t allowed his mother to snap even one good picture of him, nor had he given Combeferre the opportunity to do so under her orders when they’d gotten to the actual dance in Boston. His date, the younger sister of the boy he’d actually wanted to take, had eventually gotten sick of being ignored and started dancing with one of the chaperones.

Once Grantaire was finished laughing at Combeferre, he nuzzled against Enjolras with a small smile on his face. “Other than that ‘I fucking hate life’ expression, you looked really hot. You never had an awkward phase, did you?”

“Awkward phase?”

“Most people have at least one during puberty. In my case I think it was all of puberty, actually.”

Enjolras rolled his eyes. “You looked hot in your prom picture.”

“I looked like a dweeb, we established that.”

“You think you looked like a dweeb.” Enjolras pointed at the insolent shit captured on the computer screen. “He would have jumped at the chance to take you to prom.”

“Not least of all because it would have given your dad a coronary.”

Enjolras smirked. “Mm. It would have been a magical night.” Enjolras shut the computer down and set it aside. He turned onto his side, thinking that he might as well broach the subject of meeting Courfeyrac’s mother. Then he noticed the way Grantaire’s eyelids were drooping.

It was pretty late.

He pressed a kiss to Grantaire’s forehead, then pulled him into his arms. “Go to sleep, love.”

“Nhm…yeah, sounds like a plan. Night.”

Marius got up ridiculously early Saturday morning, as was his habit, so he could take one of the more infrequently running buses out to the quiet suburban neighborhood his beloved girlfriend lived in. As Jean Valjean was an eccentric (paranoid) old man, they lived in a pretty isolated spot, so Marius still had a good half hour walk from the bus stop to their house. Courfeyrac usually gave him rides, but he was getting ready to visit his parents so Marius was on his own for the day.

He didn’t mind though. The walk was pleasant, and it gave him the time to get some of his daydreaming out of the way before he devoted the next several hours to conversation.

As was his habit, Marius got so lost in his head that he stopped paying attention to what was going on around him. He came back to reality with a start when he got to Cosette and Valjean’s house. He kind of had to. That detective that hated them so much was on his hands and knees weeding the front garden. It was clear he’d never done anything of the sort in his life. Marius wasn’t very good with gardening himself, that was definitely more of Jehan’s thing, but he was pretty sure you weren’t supposed to wear a suit and dress shoes when you did it.

Also, it looked like a few of the weeds Javert had pulled might have been flowers that just weren’t
blooming at the moment.

Marius crept up to the front door, hoping the detective wouldn’t see him, and rang the bell. Cosette opened the door a crack after a moment. “Is he still there?” she whispered. Marius nodded. Sighing, she opened the door just wide enough for him to slip in, then shut it and did all the bolts and the chain.

“What’s going on?” Marius asked.

“It’s…a bit of a story. Here, come into the kitchen and help me finish making brunch. I’ll tell you while we do that so I don’t have to bring it up in front of Papa again. He finds the whole thing very upsetting.”

“Kay.”

Marius dutifully started chopping up a cantaloupe while Cosette went back to scrambling eggs. “Alright, so you remember how detective Javert was assigned to Montparnasse’s case after he escaped, and he kept stalking me and Papa like always instead of tracking him down like he was supposed to?”

“Yes. My friends had rather a lot to say about that after Montparnasse abducted Grantaire and Little R.”

“Oh believe me, so did I. And I said it directly to that abysmal detective. I even…I even swore at him. In front of Papa.” Cosette gave her head a little shake, as though she was still having a hard time believing her own audacity.

Marius smiled stupidly at her. “I would have liked to see that. But darling, how does that end with an unbalanced detective mutilating your perennials?”

Cosette scowled. “I guess I made an impression on him when I freaked out. He felt bad about Grantaire’s disappearance, and he finally feels like harassing Papa for all these years was a mistake. So he wants to make it up to us, but of course Papa wants nothing to do with him. He told Javert that if he wants to show how sorry he is he should leave and never come back.”

“I take it the detective didn’t accept that?”

“No he didn’t. He said that would be too easy, and considering the gravity of his mistakes, he owes us a deep debt. So Papa asked him to donate to one of our charities in his name, and then Javert broke down even more, saying he’d made an even more grievous miscalculation of Papa’s character than he’d thought, and he’d wronged him so deeply all these years, blah blah blah. The end result seems to be that we’re stuck with him.”

“Can’t you just, like, call his bosses and tell them he’s harassing you?”

“We’ve done that, Marius. Actually, we can’t even get him in trouble at work anymore.”

“Why not?” Marius asked.

“Because he got fired.”

“Fired?” Marius frowned. He’d have figured that if the miserable old man was going to be fired for stalking Cosette’s father it would have happened some time ago. “Why now?”

“Because digging through our trash when he was supposed to be investigating a dangerous escaped
criminal was the last straw,” Cosette answered. “Think about it. The police didn’t actually catch Montparnasse, Bahorel did. And we only got Grantaire back because of Bahorel too. And Eponine and Combeferre are the ones that found Little R. All of that could have ended differently. Javert messed up at pretty much every level of his investigation.”

“I, um, I’d heard social services called Eponine the other day. Did you hear anything else about that?”

Cosette shook her head. “It should be fine though. I can’t imagine the Thenardiers want their children back.”

“But Eponine doesn’t have a permanent address,” Marius said. "I don't think she can become a guardian for her siblings while she's technically homeless.” He’d heard Eponine talking to Courfeyrac about it the other day, but he’d made himself scarce when she’d broken down in tears, figuring that she’d want some privacy.

“It’ll work out somehow, I’m sure. We need something to change. The boys can’t keep living between all your friends, and besides that, Azelma needs more direction than they can give her. They need a real home.”

She was right, but unfortunately, it seemed the only way to get them that was to split the Thenardiers up, throw them into the system, and hope for the best. Based on the slump of her shoulders and the troubled expression she wore, Cosette was aware of that too.

Marius determined to change the subject. “So just what was the detective hoping to find in your trash anyway?”

“Oh, that.” Cosette giggled. “He found a bunch of old receipts and things and convinced himself that Papa was orchestrating some kind of master criminal operation and that after he was done he was going to skip town.”

Marius laughed too. “That’s quite the imagination he’s got.”

“Oh, he had some help coming to that conclusion. Based on the trash he found, it did look like we were preparing to move. He found documents about the apartment Papa’s renting out in Western Mass, and the new car he’s buying, and the rental truck we’re getting for August to move all my things.”

“M-move all your things?” Marius asked, face paling.

“Yes, of course,” Cosette said, completely oblivious to her boyfriend’s distress as she scooped the finished eggs into a dish. “I’m starting Mount Holyoke in the fall. Papa’s all ready to move me out there at the end of August.”

Marius didn’t notice that he’d missed the cantaloupe with his knife until Cosette screamed and ran over to him with a dishtowel to press to his freely bleeding hand.

Enjolras insisted on driving to Courfeyrac’s childhood home even though they really all could have comfortably fit in the Volvo. He wanted to be able to leave without dragging everyone else out with him if he needed to.

He didn’t want to admit it to Courfeyrac and Grantaire, but he was actually really nervous about the
whole thing. Which was just ridiculous. Enjolras was a trained public speaker and orator. He was engaging, charismatic, intelligent, morally upright, and responsible. He knew he was more than capable of making a good impression on pretty much anyone he cared to impress.

But the possibility of failing this one time, when the impression was not on some stuffy admissions director or faceless reporter or professor, but a person who mattered to his boyfriend…

Well that was just unacceptable. Was this shaky, nervous and irrational sense of inadequacy how Grantaire always lived? Enjolras suddenly felt a lot more sympathy for his boyfriend.

Saturday morning passed pretty normally for the couple. Enjolras slept until nine, which was his version of sleeping in. He spent a few hours working on his homework before getting back to bed at noon, when Grantaire usually woke up on Saturdays. They fooled around a little, Enjolras had lunch while Grantaire had breakfast, and then they started getting ready to leave.

Since he was meeting his friend’s family for the first time, Enjolras put a little more care into his appearance than he usually did on a weekend. He was a pretty careful dresser under normal circumstances though, so this was only apparent in that he was wearing slacks instead of jeans on a Saturday.

The difference was much more pronounced in Grantaire. He spent over an hour in the bathroom and eventually emerged with his hair neatly brushed, dead ends trimmed off. He’d cleaned under his fingernails and clipped them, shaved even more carefully than he had before his and Enjolras’ first date, and he was wearing a collared shirt and a pair of dress pants Enjolras wasn’t even aware of him owning.

Enjolras quirked an eyebrow. “Did you clean behind your ears too?”

“Yes, actually,” Grantaire said. He stuck his tongue out.

Enjolras wasn’t used to seeing the scruffy artist look, well…so much like him. Grantaire looked so neat and presentable he could have passed for one of Paul’s old money acquaintances. Much as Enjolras loved (and preferred) seeing Grantaire wild haired and wearing paint stained clothes, this look suited him incredibly well too.

“You look nice,” Enjolras said. “Just…very different.”

Grantaire shrugged. “Bridget’s special.”

“I’d gotten that impression.”

“Before we head out, is it okay if we stop at the grocery store? I usually bring flowers and a dessert when I visit her.”

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

They went down to the car, and Grantaire started nervously checking his appearance in the mirror. “I suppose I look better than I did at Christmas, but I still don’t want to worry her. Courf didn’t tell her about the thing with the, uh, yeah. You can’t tell from looking that I got beat up and shoved into a trunk earlier in the week, right?”

“You’ll need an excuse for the cuts on your face. They’re mostly healed but they’re still visible. Otherwise you look…you look really good, ‘Taire.” He wanted to say amazing, but Enjolras knew from experience that Grantaire wouldn’t accept a compliment quite that blatant. As it was, he didn’t seem entirely comfortable with ‘really good.’
He licked his thumb and started rubbing at the scabs on his face, as though that could get rid of them.

Enjolras had been driving, so he didn’t initially notice, but when he did he smacked at Grantaire’s hand. “Hey, relax. It’s just dinner with friends.”

“You don’t understand, Enj.”

Enjolras sighed. “So tell me. Why is Courfeyrac’s mother so important to you?”

Grantaire finally gave up on the unrealistic task of getting rid of his cuts and sat back against his seat, vaguely watching the scenery pass by his window as Enjolras drove. “Kay, so y’know how I’ve said I didn’t have much of a childhood and that my family sucked?”

“You’ve hinted, yes.” It’s something they had in common, though clearly they’d responded to it differently.

“Well, when I was in high school, Bridget…noticed me. She saw what I was going through and she started inviting me over for family dinners and taking me out with her and Courf and stuff like that. There were weeks where the only food I got was at her dinner table. And the first time I had a really big fight with my dad she let me sleep in her car all week. She would have taken me in the house in a heartbeat, but Courf’s dad had walked in on me making out with him that week and he banned me from being an overnight guest. I…I didn’t really get to have my own mom, so Bridget jumped in and took on a lot of those duties for me. I still don’t get why, but I appreciate it. Since I was fourteen, she’s always been there for me when I really needed it.”

“Oh.” Enjolras felt like he should have had more to say than that, but he honestly couldn’t think of anything.

The whole speech brought up many more questions than it had answered. Like what the hell had happened between Grantaire and his father, why hadn’t his own mother been a presence in his life, why had he gone hungry so often, why didn’t he lean on this supposed miracle mother for support when he’d been drinking himself to death…really, the list just went on and on. But Enjolras couldn’t think of a way to broach any of those subjects, and really, Grantaire had clearly already shared more than he was comfortable sharing.

Enjolras was left with a renewed and strong desire to make a good impression on this woman.

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Enjolras couldn’t tell if Courfeyrac’s house was actually small, or if this was part of how being a spoiled rich kid had skewed his perception of what a normal house looked like. The house definitely appeared small to him either way; it only had one floor, and you’d be lucky to fit even one good sized car in that garage.

There were certainly a lot of cars in the driveway and on the curb in front of the house though. Considering how closely spaced together the houses were in the neighborhood, that wasn’t necessarily an indication that they all belonged to people living in or heading for the house that may not actually have been as small as it looked.

The Volvo was already on the curb. Enjolras parked behind it.

He expected Grantaire to be nervous, considering his morning’s anxiety and all his prep. Instead, Grantaire basically ignored Enjolras in his haste to get to the front…
Side door. Apparently you were expected to enter Courfeyrac’s house through the kitchen. Enjolras set off after his boyfriend, and found himself in a situation he’d heard about but never thought he’d ever see.

This was the kitchen as the centerpiece of a loving home. There were family snapshots stuck to a full refrigerator with magnets, a cookie jar filled with home baked oatmeal raisin cookies sitting on the counter, a real spice rack (clearly not just for decorative purposes like the ones Marie always insisted on having in their kitchens), real cookbooks (similarly for practicality’s sake-these ones were stained and had dog eared pages), and most importantly, a plump little woman forcing food and drink into everyone’s hands. It was something right out of a feel-good holiday movie, not the kind of thing that existed in real life. Or so Enjolras had always thought, anyway.

Jehan was sitting at the counter by the cookie jar, with a mug of tea and an open cookbook in front of him. He looked like he was in heaven as he chattered with Bridget. From the sounds of it, they were going over a recipe for rose hip pudding. Courfeyrac was also sitting at the counter, and though he looked a bit bored by their conversation, he still looked happy as he watched his boyfriend and his mother getting along like old friends.

Bridget abruptly turned her attention to the door when she heard it open. “Oh! Sweetheart, come here! Come here this instant!”

Grantaire bounded over faster than Enjolras had ever seen him move before. The flowers he’d bought were very nearly crushed in the tight hug Bridget gave him, but Jehan snatched them away to safety.

Enjolras had thought he was the only one to ever make Grantaire smile like that. It actually stung a little. When he provoked the unguarded looks of radiant happiness from Grantaire they lasted maybe thirty seconds, tops, before Grantaire’s cynical nature crushed them with doubt. This first smile had yet to depart Grantaire’s lips, and he’d been hugging Bridget for two plus minutes.

She finally nudged him backwards and clapped her hands on his shoulders. “Now let me have a look at you. Oh honey, it’s so good to see you. And you look so much better than you did at Christmas. Poor dear, you always get the flu at holidays, it seems.”

“Funny how that happens,” Courfeyrac said dryly. “He certainly doesn’t look sickly now though.”

Enjolras thought Grantaire still looked a little weakened from his encounter with Montparnasse, but Bridget couldn’t seem to detect a hint of that. She chattered on happily about the weight Grantaire had gained, and how nice and healthy his hair looked, though she did feel he needed a cut (Enjolras bit back a defensive growl, as he thought it needed to grow out at least another couple of inches), and she marveled at how much better his complexion was. Once these maternal musings were satisfied she turned her attention to Enjolras.

“So you’re the boy dating my little Picasso?”

“I-I guess,” Enjolras answered, a bit thrown by her wording.

Bridget studied him for a moment, traded some private, inscrutable look with Grantaire, then broke out in a wide grin. “It’s so nice to finally meet you, dear. I’ve heard an awful lot about you, between my two boys.”

Enjolras tried to offer his hand for a shake, but she slapped it away and pulled him into a tight hug. His body involuntarily tensed—the only human being Enjolras could remember hugging was Grantaire, and that type of affection seemed…inappropriate to the situation to say the least.
His friends weren’t sympathetic about his distress. On the contrary, they were all trying to stifle giggles.

“I’m sorry dear, but there are no handshakes in this house. We hug in this house.” Bridget gave him one more squeeze before letting go. “There. Now that that’s out of the way, here, have a seat. Tell me something about yourself.”

“Okay…”

“Relax, Enjolras. I just went through all this before you got here,” Jehan said. “It’s nothing to be frightened of.”

“Of course it isn’t,” Bridget said. She took Enjolras and Grantaire’s coats and then herded them towards seats. Before Enjolras had even settled into his chair he had a cookie and a glass of milk in front of him.

God, apparently that was a real thing people did too.

“I already know the most important things about you anyway,” Bridget said. Enjolras expected her to prattle on about the usual things people found impressive about him; his grades, his commitment to social justice, and if they were shallow, his physical appearance and wealth. He was pleasantly surprised by Bridget’s comments. “I know that my boy’s deeply in love with you and that you’re making him happy. Anything else is just a bonus.”

Grantaire looked embarrassed, but Enjolras finally started relaxing. “I love him too. He makes me fantastically happy in return.”

Bridget let out a loud squeal. “I’m sorry dear, I know you didn’t like that first hug, but you’ve got to let me hug you again! Oh, I’m so happy for all four of you. And to think, just this Christmas I sent the two of you out the door looking lonely and gloomy, and now you’re both dating lovely young men. I’ve got chills, I tell you. This is so exciting. Please Enjolras, give this old woman another hug.”

“O-okay.” He suffered through another one, then resumed his seat and, in hopes of keeping off any awkward questions, he took a bite of his cookie.

“Wow. I think this is the best thing I’ve ever tasted in my life.”

Bridget laughed. “You don’t have to flatter me, sweetheart. But thank you.”

Grantaire grinned. “Wait until you try her lasagna.”

Chapter End Notes

Bridget is the latest OC to capture my imagination. For those of you who haven’t already noticed it, you can find more of her in the prequel I just started writing for this fic series, High School Boys.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

The boys head home from their dinner with Courfeyrac's parents. Eponine and Feuilly spend the day together.

There are some heavy conversations to be had.

Chapter Notes

So it's not a cliffhanger, but I still get the feeling you guys aren't going to be pleased with me. The drama and the angst are just so delicious though! I'm only human...

They were still sitting around the kitchen picking at their cookies and chatting over an hour later when the kitchen door banged open again. A middle aged man Enjolras assumed to be Courfeyrac’s father ambled into the room (he had the curly brown hair, though his was peppered with grey, as was the matching mustache). He didn’t acknowledge anyone present, but went straight for the fridge and grabbed a beer. Once he’d cracked the can open he finally nodded a greeting to his wife. “Bridge.”

“Hello darling. How was work?”

He shrugged. “Saturday. It’s overtime. So what’s with all the extra mouths? You taking in strays again?” His lips quirked in a grin, and Enjolras realized that the comment was an attempt at humor. “It’s good to see you boys.”

“Hi Dad,” Courfeyrac said.

“Hey Charles,” Grantaire said with a nod.

Charles looked first at Jehan, then at Enjolras. “Alright, which one’s my son’s and which one’s Grantaire’s?”

“This one’s mine,” Grantaire said, wrapping an arm around Enjolras, who looked between Grantaire and Courfeyrac’s father, unsure of what, if anything, he was expected to say. Grantaire was smiling widely, as though showing off some kind of accomplishment.

Charles rolled with it well enough. “Nice to meet you, son. Didn’t catch your name.”

“It’s Enjolras.” And thankfully, Charles differed from his wife by being a handshaker, not a hugger.

“Ah. Oh, wait, I’ve heard about you before.” He squinted at Enjolras. “You’re really dating…Grantaire?”

“Charles!” Bridget whapped her husband’s arm. “What the heck is that supposed to mean? He’s lucky to have Grantaire.”
“Oh come on, Bridge, I can’t be the only one in the room who can tell this kid is out of your lost waif’s league—”

“So, Dad, this is my boyfriend!” Courfeyrac practically yelled, nudging Jehan forward. “Uh, yeah. Jehan, this is my dad. Please don’t take anything he says to heart. He doesn’t have a filter.”

“It’s fine, I promise,” Jehan said, then turned a sweet smile to Courfeyrac’s father. “It’s very nice to finally meet you sir.”

Charles looked him over, sizing him up. He nodded at Jehan, then turned his attention to his son. “So you’ve really got a boyfriend?”

Jehan and Enjolras traded puzzled looks, wondering why that inquiry was coming directly after Courfeyrac’s father had been introduced to his boyfriend.

Courfeyrac let out a long suffering sigh. “Yes, Dad. I’ve really got a boyfriend. Y’know, because I’m really bi.”

“Uh huh.” Charles took a sip of his beer and glanced at Jehan again. “I dunno, son. Your fella’s awfully girly looking. Are you sure you’re not straight? Seems like if you liked guys you’d date one that looked like a guy. Y’know, like what Grantaire’s doing. I’ve never had a problem believing that kid was gay.”

Jehan’s face fell. “I don’t look like a girl.”

Bad as he felt for Jehan, Enjolras was privately a little bit pleased at being labeled masculine looking. There was nothing feminine about his body, but his face was often considered more pretty than handsome.

Charles shrugged. “Just calling it like I see it. Y’look kinda…y’know…” He waved one of his hands. “Delicate, like. Small. Like a girl.”

Bridget put her hands on her hips. “Really, Charles, that is uncalled for. Jehan’s a lovely looking young man.”

“Hey, I’m not wrong here! That’s a girly looking fella. I still think this bisexuality thing’s a crock. If you were really gay, you’d be attracted to guys that look like guys.”

“Oh come on Dad!” Courfeyrac yelled. “I’ve been dating guys since I was fifteen! I’m not straight! Will you please accept it?!”

Jehan’s face had crumpled. He looked genuinely distressed by Charles’ comments. “Really, I don’t look like a girl.”

“It’s not a bad thing,” Charles said defensively. “I mean, fellas who are actually gay must think you’re…y’know, pretty. But my son’s not actually like that. Courf, you should stop leading this boy on. That’s just not a decent thing to do, y’know.”

Courfeyrac was about to yell at his father some more, but then Jehan stunned the room into silence by stripping off the baggy cable knit sweater he’d been wearing.

His friends couldn’t recall ever seeing him shirtless before. Jehan was a little more modest than the rest of the group, sticking to baggy, comfortable (and unfashionable) clothing. From what everyone had been able to discern, he was slender and probably a little underweight.
The guy was definitely thin, but he was also jacked. There didn’t seem to be any fat on him. His body was all lean, hard muscle, none of it bulky but every inch defined.

“I don’t have the body of a woman, okay. I’m sorry if you find this distressing, but your son is attracted to me. He’s not straight.”

Grantaire’s mouth was hanging open as he blatantly ogled Jehan. Enjolras would have been upset, but he didn’t seem to be aware he was doing it (plus Enjolras was staring a little too). “Nice,” Grantaire breathed.

Jehan’s cheeks colored a little, and he put his sweater back on. “S-sorry. That was probably weird. And rude.”

“Sweetie, my husband was being rude,” Bridget said, sounding a bit dazed. “Er…it’s okay. But have another cookie. You’re too skinny.” She seemed to regain her composure and a sense of normalcy by forcing food onto her guest. With that in mind, Enjolras also accepted another cookie and tried not to think about the recently bared, very nicely defined torso he’d just seen.

“Damn, Jehan. How did that even happen?” Grantaire asked.

Jehan chewed on his lower lip before answering. “Well y’know how I’m an environmentalist? Riding my bike everywhere instead of learning how to drive made my legs all muscular and creepy, so I started lifting weights to try to balance that out. And then my tummy looked all weird and soft when my arms and my legs were muscular, so I started doing crunches. And I’ve always been pretty skinny.” He shrugged.

“How come you never take your shirt off?” Grantaire pressed. “I mean, we go to the beach all the time in the summer and you’re always covered up.”

“I burn easily,” Jehan explained.

“Ah.”

When the group of friends staked out a spot on the beach for a change of pace from the Musain (and an illegal bonfire), most of the guys wound up shirtless by the end of the day, but Jehan usually wore a triple X lime green t-shirt, floral print swim trunks, flip flops, a giant straw sun hat, and sunglasses that covered half his face.

Come to think of it, the only way for that ensemble to look even more ridiculous was to remove the triple X t-shirt.

“Fine, you kids have made your point,” Charles said. He shrugged his shoulders. “So my son is gay.”

“Bisexual,” Courfeyrac snapped.

“Whatsoever. Does this mean I have to start going to those Pipfag meetings?”

Enjolras slapped a hand over his mouth to stifle a sudden snort, Grantaire openly laughed, and Jehan just looked confused.

“PFLAG?” Courfeyrac asked cautiously, as though afraid of the answer.
“Yeah, that must be it. Well?”

Courfeyrac shook his head. “That would’ve been good like six years ago. I’m an adult now though, so you’re off the hook. No meetings. In fact, I think it’d be good if we never talked about this again.”

“Thank God. I’ll be in the living room watching Pawn Stars. Let me know when dinner’s done, yeah?”

“Of course,” Bridget promised.

Charles skulked out of the room, and everyone erupted in nervous laughter as soon as the door shut behind him.

Eponine was in the mother of all God awful moods. A few short months ago she would have flung herself headfirst into some regrettable situations and probably woken up the next day achy, covered in bruises, and lying on the floor of Montparnasse’s bedroom with little memory of what they’d resorted to as a stress reliever.

It was nice to have alternatives.

As soon as her shift ended, Eponine hopped a bus and went to the nursing home Joly and Feuilly worked at. From what she’d been told, weekends were more relaxed, as the brunt of the administrators worked regular nine to five weekday schedules. As long as they still got their work done, Joly and Feuilly could have visitors without getting in trouble.

She went in through the main entrance, took a quick look around the floor, found neither of her friends, and then took the elevator up to the advanced dementia wing on the third floor.

Joly was sitting at the nurse’s station doing books. His face lit up when he saw her. “Hi Eponine!”

“Hey. Cute scrubs.” The kid was wearing a Chococat top with brown pants. His face colored. “Bossuet?”

“Actually, Jehan. Everything else is in the laundry, and scrubs aren’t the kind of thing you reuse without washing. Not that you should do that with regular clothes, but I absolutely refuse to compromise on this one. If you see my darling boyfriend before I get out of work, will you remind him that he promised to do laundry four days ago? By rights, I get to start flicking his ears. If he waits another day I get to draw on his bald spot with sharpie.”

Eponine laughed. “I’ll nudge him. I brought you a present.” She had a tray of reusable mugs with her, and she handed one off to Joly. “We made an earl grey latte. I thought you might want to try it.”

“Ooo…indeed. Thanks Ponine. I assume the other one’s for Feuilly?”

“Yeah. Chai with espresso for him. Where is he?”

“In the dining room.” Joly inclined his head towards a doorway to the right.

“Cool beans. Thanks Joly.”

“I’ll join you guys in there in a few,” Joly promised.

Eponine walked into the dining room and burst into loud, ringing laughter at the sight that greeted
Feuilly was sitting at a table with a little old woman in a pastel pink Red Sox cap giving her a manicure. At the moment, he was filing her nails, but there were clippers, nail polish remover, cotton balls, hand lotion, and about a dozen bottles of nail polish sitting in a little basket across from him all waiting to be used. Actually, the set up was rather nice (other than the protective gloves Feuilly was wearing—the necessity of those was off putting). He had a neat towel laid down in front of him, and the woman had her withered little hands resting on it while he filed her index fingernail.

Feuilly had been in the middle of some kind of chit chat with her, but his face turned bright red when he noticed Eponine laughing at his expense. “Hey.”

“Y-you-they’ve got you-manicures?”

Feuilly ducked his head closer to the woman’s hand, as though filing her nails took much more concentration than someone might expect. “It’s on the activities calendar so it’s part of my job.”

“Who’s that?” the woman asked. “Who’s that in the doorway? Do I know her? Why is she laughing?”

“No, Helen, you don’t know her. That’s my friend Eponine.”

“If she’s your friend then why is she laughing?”

“You know, that’s a pretty good question.”

Eponine sauntered over to the table and ruffled Feuilly’s hair. “I’m just teasing a little. Hey there Helen. Y’know, Feuilly never gives me manicures.”

“What? That’s awful! He’s so good at them too. Feuilly, why don’t you give this nice young lady manicures? I’d give her manicures. I’ll give you one now, if you want.”

“Don’t worry about it, Helen. Eponine’ll live without a manicure,” Feuilly said.

It was the wrong thing to say. Suddenly, he was being pressed on by all the old women in the room who thought he ought to give the pretty young girl a manicure. One persistent woman even tried to give Feuilly money for Eponine’s nails.

To appease them, he agreed to paint Eponine’s nails for her. Laughing, she sat down behind Helen and started filing her nails in readiness. “What color are you painting your nails, Helen?”

“Red. I always paint them red.”

“Ah. The last time I got a manicure I painted mine lime green.”

“What? That’s a ridiculous color for nails! Is that what the kids are doing these days? I must be an old fart if that’s what the kids are doing these days. You should paint your nails red. It’s a good color for nails.”

“It’s also pretty much the only one we have,” Feuilly said, motioning towards the little bottles in his basket. More than half of them were some shade of red, and the remainder were pink.

Eponine picked out a glittery red one she liked, and Helen quickly asked Feuilly to use that one on her too. Eponine refrained from teasing, but she couldn’t help grinning widely while Feuilly self-consciously painted the woman’s nails, and at her insistence, did a second coat, a top coat, and
massaged her hands with scented lotion. “There. Now do all that for the pretty girl too. She’s awfully nice. You should spoil her a little too.”

“Paint her nails red!” another lady shouted.

As soon as his back was turned from the residents, Feuilly shot her a withering glare. “You couldn’t talk your way out of this?” he whispered.

“Why would I turn down a free manicure?” She scooched her chair closer to the table and set her fingers down on the towel. “I want the same shade as Helen so that we’ll match. We’ll be twins, Helen.”

“Oh that’s not even a little true. No one would ever think you and I were twins.”

“That’s true. I’m not nearly as pretty as you are. Maybe it would help if I got a pink Red Sox hat though.”

“Do you like it? You can have mine.”

“It’s okay, Helen, put your hat back on,” Feuilly said. “If Eponine wants a hat, I’ll get her a hat.”

“That’s right, of course you should get her a hat. You’re a good young man. You’ll take care of this girl, won’t you? That’s right. You’re a good boy.”

Feuilly rolled his eyes, then began the task of painting Eponine’s nails (thankfully, he removed the gloves before he started). She leaned towards him with a flirty smile, intending to harass him a little more about his emasculating work task, but the residents didn’t let her get much of a word in edgewise. They kept complimenting Eponine and trying to give her things, and a few of them asked when she and Feuilly were going to get married.

And then there was the distracting matter of Feuilly flexing her fingers with his strong, calloused ones. She chewed on her lower lip a little, doing her best to steer her imagination away from how it might feel to have those fingers somewhere else on her body. Sitting close enough to him to see his stubble and count his eyelashes really wasn’t helping either.

‘Calm it the fuck down, Ponine,’ she inwardly snapped at herself. By this point she’d fallen in love or lust with just about every guy in her new group of friends, and none of the infatuations had ended well. Seeing her pathetic behavior reflected in Azelma’s actions had only confirmed her in her resolution to never attempt seducing one of her new friends again.

Besides, this was just sad. She could survive a free manicure without jumping the poor guy afterwards.

“There. Red.”

“You forgot the topcoat,” Eponine teased.

“And the hand lotion!” Helen reminded them.

Eponine’s smile faltered a little.

Feuilly carelessly threw on the topcoat, then shoved a jar of lotion at Eponine. “I think you can handle that part yourself. I should get back to work. Joyce, you wanted a manicure too, right?”

“I want red!”
Eponine sat to the side and blew on her nails while she waited for them to dry. It was surprisingly interesting, watching Feuilly work. Even though he complained bitterly about his job, and clearly wanted to be doing something more intellectual, he was still incredibly compassionate and gentle with the feeble old women as he painted their nails. He quietly coaxed them into conversation (or not so quietly, in the cases of the ones going deaf), and kept up a pleasant stream of chatter with the ones that were too far gone to participate in conversations actively.

She liked seeing the boys one on one, if she could manage. Feuilly behaved differently by himself than he did in the company of his raucous friends. All of them did, really. Enjolras was a little less haughty and a lot more human when he didn’t have to play at being leader, Combeferre was chattier when he didn’t have his best friend doing most of the talking for him, Grantaire was less sarcastic when he didn’t have anyone to impress, Courfeyrac was less bawdy, Bahorel less rowdy, Jehan less reserved, Marius slightly more focused, Joly less fussy, and Legle much less of a clumsy doofus. Wonderful as the group was for them, it also stuck them pretty firmly into set roles, and it was nice to see them break out of the roles from time to time.

When her nails were dry, Eponine joined Feuilly at the table he’d moved to and handed him his chai. She took a sip of the cocoa she’d made for herself, then asked if she could help him with the manicures.

“I don’t think that’d be okay, actually. You need a CORI check to volunteer here, so…yeah. But I’ve only got another five minutes of this. Marilyn’s going to be my last manicure for the afternoon. Then I’ve got to do a few room visits and then I’m out. Do you mind waiting for me?”

“I’ve certainly got nothing better to do,” Eponine muttered, some bitterness creeping into her tone.

“Good. I wanted to show you something.”

Intrigued, Eponine found it difficult to patiently wait for him to finish his last manicure. Once he was done he packed up his supplies, then they set off for the activities office to drop them back off. They passed a frantic looking Joly on the way. He was struggling to get a pair of gloves on while barreling down the hall.

“I thought you were going to join us in the dining room,” Eponine pouted.

“Can’t talk, gotta run, woman with a ruptured pee bag on the floor, bye!” He ran past them and darted around the corner.

Feuilly clapped a hand over his mouth. “Y’know, every time I start to get really bitter about my job something like that happens, and then I’m just grateful that I’m not a CNA. I never have to touch the pee bags.”

“Thank God for that,” Eponine murmured.

The set the manicure basket on a shelf in the office, then Feuilly showed Eponine down a side stairwell and they came out on the second floor. “So there’s this resident I want you to meet.”


“I already got Joly’s opinion on this too, but we wanted another pair of eyes. He’s got some family pictures in his room, and I want you to take a look at them and tell me if anyone in them looks familiar.”

“Kay. What am I looking for, exactly?” Eponine asked.
“I don’t want to tell you yet, because I don’t want to color your perception. Seriously, if no one in them looks familiar to you at all, that’s fine.”

“Alright.”

They stopped and turned down a side corridor before he took her to the actual room in question. “I should warn you before we head in there…this guy’s kind of a perv.”

“A lot of old men are,” Eponine said, completely unphased.

“Yeah, even for old guys, this one’s a creeper. Seriously, female CNAs aren’t allowed to administer care to him, and Meg’s not allowed to do room visits with him. And, um…even though he’s ninety…his equipment’s still active.”

Ick. “Okay. Thanks for the head’s up. Let’s do this.”

“Y’wanna zip up your sweatshirt first?”

Giggling, Eponine did as instructed. “Thanks for protecting my modesty, darling.”

Feuilly rolled his eyes, then they continued on their way. Even though the door was open, he still knocked on it before sticking his head in. “Mr. Gillenormand? Hey, it’s Feuilly from activities. Is it okay if I sit with you for a few minutes?”

“Where’s that pretty young thing? Why don’t they send her in here?” the old man barked.

For a ninety year old, he looked pretty good. His hairline had receded a little bit, but he still had rather a lot of hair for his age. Unlike most of the population of the nursing home, he wasn’t using a wheelchair but a walker. At the moment though, the formidable looking old gent was sitting in a high backed armchair that most definitely had not been standard issue for patient furniture.

It looked like quite a few amenities had been added to his room by his family. He also had a handsome antique wall mirror, a flat screen TV, a full bookcase, a mini fridge, and a laptop.

“Meg’s not working today,” Feuilly said. “I did bring a friend with me though. This is Eponine.”

“Eh? Oh, why hello dear.” Gillenormand’s entire demeanor changed once he realized he was in the presence of a woman. He smiled, showing off neat off-white teeth that were all the more impressive for not being dentures. If his skin hadn’t been papery thin and wrinkled, he really wouldn’t have looked that old. He also would have been pretty handsome, too.

Despite Feuilly’s warning about perviness, Eponine couldn’t help but feel a spark of fondness for this elderly Casanova. “Hello sir. How’re you doing today?”

“Better for having caught a glimpse of such a marvelous specimen of feminine loveliness. My dear, just gazing on your beautiful young face makes me ache for bygone days.”

“Aw, thank you. You’re not so bad yourself.”

“Eponine,” Feuilly hissed. “Don’t encourage him. Seriously, we’re having a problem with this behavior.”

“Oh don’t be such a stick in the mud.” She crossed the room and sat down on a chair that was facing his. “So what are you up to? Playing any wild games of Bingo?”

“No, I don’t leave my room much. The staff keeps me separated from any of the enticements for
doing so. I sit and look forward to the day when I’ll be released from this hellhole.”

“Mr. Gillenormand’s only here for physical therapy,” Feuilly explained.

“Ah. Well it’s too bad you don’t leave your room. There are some feisty old ladies upstairs that would probably love to be charmed by you. And Feuilly just gave at least half a dozen of them manicures, so they’re all dolled up.”

Gillenormand sniffed. “It would take more than glitzily painted claws to make those hags enticing. No, my dear, I think I’d much prefer to look on your loveliness.”

Eponine stole a few looks at the framed pictures on Mr. Gillenormand’s dresser while he flirted with her, but she didn’t see anything particularly noteworthy. As far as she could tell, the old man had been quite the looker when he was younger, he had two daughters, one of them was quite pretty, and they took really boring formal portraits.

“Hey, Mr. Gillenormand, is it okay if I show Eponine your photo album? She likes looking at old pictures.”

“Go right ahead. You have my full blessing to indulge this delightful creature to her heart’s content.”

“Thanks Mr. G,” Eponine said. “That’s very sweet.”

Feuilly rolled his eyes as soon as his back was turned away from Mr. Gillenormand. He took a photo album down from the top of the wardrobe and passed it to Eponine. She cracked it open and saw some less formal, but still boring pictures of the man and his two daughters.

A few pages in she found a snapshot that gave her pause. Half of the picture was relatively normal. It showed the pretty daughter in a sundress looking radiantly happy. Her face wasn’t turned towards the camera though, but towards another figure. This figure had been rendered indiscernible, unfortunately. His face had been scratched out and the words ‘communist hippie bastard’ were scrawled over him in pen.

Apparently Mr. Gillenormand was not fond of his daughter’s choice in partner.

She flipped to the next page and just managed to suppress a startled gasp. This was what Feuilly had been talking about, then.

Because unless she was very much mistaken, the next picture looked to be of a four year old Marius Pontmercy.

Grantaire hadn’t been exaggerating in the least about Bridget’s lasagna. Everyone stuffed themselves with it, and then Bridget pulled a carrot cake out of nowhere and passed around slices of that for dessert. Even though the boys were relatively sure they couldn’t eat anymore, staring at a plate of moist cake while a smiling Irish woman asks you to just try it so she can know if you like it or not isn’t conducive to keeping your limits in mind.

The four of them were in food comas before long. Courfeyrac and Jehan slumped together onto the couch in the living room, Grantaire took up a post on the floor, and Courfeyrac’s father was still in his armchair with a TV tray of crumbs in front of him. Apparently Charles habitually dined in the living room in front of the television, even when they had company. Enjolras tried not to find it off-putting. So far of every set of parents he’d met, his own and his friends, Courfeyrac’s were his
favorites. Bridget’s general demeanor and cooking made up for Charles’ awkward aloofness.

Enjolras was about to join his friends in passing out when Bridget waved him over. He took the seat she indicated by the kitchen counter. “Yes?”

“I was hoping we might have a bit of a chat,” Bridget said. She sat down across from him with a mug of coffee.

Shit. So there was a test. Obviously Enjolras wasn’t going to be meeting Grantaire’s parents any time soon, if ever, but that didn’t matter because Bridget was clearly his actual beloved authority figure. Enjolras couldn’t tell if he’d gotten approval or not. Shit-shit-shit. He hadn’t been prepared for a test.

Bridget offered a smile that was almost natural, then dropped her head and looked into her mug while she stirred it. “For the record dear, I know that Grantaire’s never once actually had the flu when he visits me. I let the boys keep up their charade and think I’m that naïve because I didn’t think it would help any if Grantaire knew I’d realized he was an addict. He doesn’t like to disappoint me. Of course, he really can’t, but he’s never known unconditional love so he doesn’t understand how it works.”

“A-ah,” Enjolras choked out, already uncomfortable with the discussion. “He wasn’t, that is…look, when you say addict-”

“Oh, sweetheart, I know he’s not a drug user. But with the way he drinks, he may as well be.”

“He quit drinking, actually.”

Bridget nodded. “Courfeyrac told me. I usually have a glass of wine with dinner, but I abstained tonight because of that. It looks like he’s really taking to sobriety. I’ve noticed some changes in him, and overall I’m pleased with what I see. I only really have one thing I wanted to say to you about this, sweetheart, and I’m sorry because it might sound a bit cruel.”

“I have a thick skin. I’d value any input you have for this situation,” Enjolras said. “I’ve known Grantaire since freshman year, and whereas we’ve been close almost the entire time, everything that came before that is a bit of a mystery to me.”

Bridget nodded, not surprised in the least that her honorary son had kept such a strict silence about his past. “There isn’t much he’d want to dwell on. Alright, sweetheart, this is it. Courfeyrac told me that you started dating Grantaire on the condition that he quit drinking and start taking better care of himself. Is that true?”

Enjolras was a bit taken aback. “Yes, of course. He was a raging alcoholic and he actively hated himself. Still does, actually, but I’m working on that with him. I can’t…” He wasn’t sure he wanted to open up about this to a near stranger, but Bridget had a way of looking at her conversation partners with such sympathy that they couldn’t help but share anything and everything that was on their mind. Enjolras proved no more immune to her charms than anyone else. “I can’t get him to believe me when I tell him I love him. He always has some kind of quip for it, or this look comes over him and he turns away from me. His self-esteem is so low…he’s so fragile.”

“He is,” Bridget agreed. “It sounds like you know as well as I do that any positive steps he’s made recently haven’t been the result of some inner transformation. The poor thing probably hates himself as much as he ever has.”

Enjolras averted his eyes and nodded. “I’m trying to get him to see himself as I see him but…it’s not working.”
“Sweetheart, Courfeyrac and I have been trying to convince that boy he has worth for almost ten years now. We’re competing with a tender heart, a life’s worth of disappointments and sadness, and probably some biological disorders as well. Don’t let it frustrate you too much, dear. I’m sure you’re doing the best you can.”

“Normally my best efforts achieve better results. He should at least be able to accept a compliment by now,” Enjolras muttered bitterly.

Bridget took a sip of her coffee in a manner that suggested she was fortifying herself for what came next. “Darling…is Grantaire’s sobriety a condition for your relationship?”

Enjolras hesitated before answering. Initially it very much had been. Despite the feelings he had slowly developed for Grantaire over the course of their friendship, he’d never been willing to commit himself to the man while he’d been a self-destructive, messy drunk. After everything they’d been through the last few months though, he wasn’t sure there was anything Grantaire could do to make him end the relationship.

“I…I’m not sure. His continued effort to do better, to stay sober, is necessary. I couldn’t bear to see him the way he was once more. But…I understand that there’s a good chance of him relapsing at some point.” Especially given all his recent stressors. Frankly, Enjolras was thankful Grantaire wasn’t resorting to his favored coping mechanism. Considering the terror he’d gone through earlier in the week, and the fact that he still wasn’t sleeping right as a result of it, Enjolras only would have been saddened to find his lover in a drunken stupor, not surprised.

“Because you do realize that if he does start drinking again, judgment would only make it worse, right?” Bridget pressed.

“I…If it does happen, I’ll handle myself with as much compassion as possible. But it would be difficult.”

“Of course it would.” Bridget gave his hand a comforting squeeze. “It would be heart wrenching. Still though, you seem to have a good grasp of this situation. I’m so glad my boy has you to look out for him and help him through this. I mean it, Enjolras. He’s needed someone to light a fire under him for so many years now. I’m filling my role, but I can only do so much. The mothering keeps some of his cynicism at bay, but not enough of it, I’m afraid. He’s been worn down, jaded. I don’t blame the dear, but I would like to lift him up a bit more. Would you be a coconspirator in that with me, Enjolras?”

“Yes, I think our goals are one and the same. I promise not to cast Grantaire off if he succumbs to his alcoholism again. I want to help him.”

Bridget beamed at him. “You’re already doing marvelously well, dear. Now can I bother you for one other quick thought?”

“Absolutely.”

“Alright. This, might sound a bit odd considering where we started this conversation, but…how do you think my actual son is doing in his relationship?”

“Courfeyrac and Jehan?” Enjolras asked, startled that she even needed to ask. “They’ve been on a cloud since they started dating. They’re sickeningly in love. At least, that’s how it’s appeared to…do you think something’s wrong?”

Bridget sighed a little and went back to stirring her mug. “Not wrong, exactly, but they’re missing a
certain spark that I expected to see. Jehan seems like a lovely boy, and I know Courfeyrac thinks highly of him. I’m just not sure they’re meant to be.”

“I am,” Enjolras said, tone a little more short than was polite. He made a conscious effort to calm down, reminding himself that this was his friend’s mother he was talking to. She was soliciting his opinion because she was concerned, not because she wanted to undercut Courfeyrac and Jehan’s relationship. “I’m sorry. Honestly, I haven’t seen anything to suggest they’ve been anything but blissful. However…I’m not sure I’ve really been looking, either.”

“Mm. I’d heard you’d had your hands full recently. It’s alright dear. I just figured I’d ask. It’s hard not seeing my boys every day anymore. And Courfeyrac never talks to me enough until things get to be too much for him.”

“They are still early into their relationship,” Enjolras pointed out.

“That is true. Well, thank you for your thoughts. I won’t keep you from your friends any longer.” She smiled again and he politely returned it before setting off for the other room.

Jehan was fast asleep, head pillowed on his boyfriend and in danger of drooling from the looks of it. Courfeyrac didn’t seem bothered by an impending wet spot on his t-shirt though. He was fondly stroking back Jehan’s hair, a dazed looking smile on his lips.

Enjolras decided to take Bridget’s insights with a grain of salt. As well as she’d seemed to know Grantaire and his demons, she was clearly out of her mind when it came to her own son and his boyfriend. Jehan and Courfeyrac were most definitely meant to be. Anyone who looked at them could see it.

“Where’s Grantaire?” Enjolras asked, noting a distinct lack of his boyfriend.

Courfeyrac shrugged. “He left to use the bathroom sometime before the last commercial break. Maybe he dropped into another food coma on the toilet or something.”

“Where’s your bathroom? I’ll go check on him,” Enjolras said, uncomfortable with Grantaire being unaccounted for for so long a stretch, considering how he’d been since Bahorel had pulled him from the sinking car.

Charles directed Enjolras down the hall and to the second door on the right.

As he’d expected, the bathroom was empty. It smelled faintly of cigarette smoke. After a moment’s search through the trash barrel, he found the damp stub of a cigarette that had been extinguished from the sink wrapped in a piece of toilet paper. Sighing, Enjolras took out his phone and sent Grantaire a text. After a moment he got a response directing him out to the garage.

Enjolras excused himself from the little family and went to find his boyfriend.

He was forced to reassess his conclusions regarding the garage. It might have been able to fit a decent sized car in it if it hadn’t been cluttered with boxes, tools, a spare refrigerator (which made lots of practical sense after meeting Bridget) and a ping pong table. Grantaire was sitting between the ping pong table and a lawnmower, opening and closing his lighter.

“Is everything alright?” Enjolras asked. He sat down next to him and lightly touched his shoulder.

“Yeah. Just…y’know, every time I come back here I get flooded with memories. Most of them are pretty good, because Courf’s family has always been good to me. But…y’know, this was my safe haven. It also makes me think of what I was running away from.”
“Do you want to talk?”

Grantaire shook his head. “I’d rather just go home, if that’s okay.”

“Of course that’s okay. That’s why I insisted on driving.”

“Can we…I don’t want to hurt Bridget’s feelings, because it’s really not her. Do you think we can pin it on you? Like, say you have a big project due that you need to work on.”

“Grantaire, I have three presentations, two papers, and a quiz I need to be studying for.”

“Yeah, say that.”

“…that wasn’t an excuse; that was the truth.”

Twenty minutes later Enjolras and Grantaire were settled in the front of the Prius, Jehan camped out in the back with containers of leftover lasagna, cookies, and carrot cake. Courfeyrac was behaving like a good son and spending the night with his parents, so Enjolras had offered to bring Jehan home, mindful of his impending papers for literary criticism and Victorian lit.

Jehan’s food coma started wearing off a little less than halfway through the trip. He sat up in his seat and started participating in conversation with a bit more animation. “Goodness, but isn’t Bridget an amazing cook? We must have traded at least a dozen recipes between us this afternoon. I can’t wait to make some of her dishes for Marius. I only hope Courfeyrac won’t mind if I mess up a little when I try the apple pork chops. I mean, these are his mother’s recipes, so he’ll notice if they’re not perfect.”

Grantaire snorted. “If you make a home cooked meal for him, he’s not allowed to complain. Just so you know, dude, Courfeyrac knows how to cook. Bridget taught him everything she knows. He’s just a lazy asshole and only does it about twice a year.”

“Huh.” Jehan frowned. “I didn’t know that. He certainly didn’t let on that he could cook when I made him breakfast for the first time.”

“Yes, well, you might have asked him if he’d cook for you, and he wouldn’t want that,” Grantaire pointed out with a smirk.

Jehan looked pensive. Enjolras didn’t notice right away, as his eyes were on the road, but the lull in conversation clued him in. “Jehan? Is something wrong?”

“Hm? Oh, not wrong, exactly, it’s just…well, you guys are in a similar situation to me. Okay, so we’ve all been friends with each other for a few years, and now we’re dating a good friend. Does it seem like…I keep feeling like I should just know things about Courfeyrac that I don’t. Do you guys feel that way too?”

Grantaire shrugged. “Not really. I mean, I’m sure Enjolras could whip out a shit ton of stuff from his past that would startle the crap out of me, but I know the important stuff.”

“Yeah, but you think so?” Enjolras asked with a hint of challenge.

Grantaire crossed his arms over his chest. “In my three years of pathetic devotion and unrequited love, I spent an awful lot of time watching you. Even Combeferre, who has known you since the second grade, has said I can read your mood and your facial expressions better than he can. I know your interests, your passions, I know what you hate, what you fear, the noises you make when you’re asleep, the way you take your coffee, your favorite song, your birthday, and if I keep going
I’ll sound like a stalker.”

Honestly, he already sounded like a stalker, but Enjolras had never been bothered by that. “What’s my—”

“Favorite song is the Sound of Silence by Simon and Garfunkel. Your birthday is October twenty first, your favorite color’s red, and at the moment your favorite television show appears to be the Fresh Beat Band.” He stuck his tongue out for that last one.

Enjolras briefly took his eyes from the road to throw a smug glance Grantaire’s way. “Your favorite song is Gloomy Sunday by Billie Holiday. Your birthday is March eighth. You don’t have a favorite color, so as to maintain impartiality in your artistic endeavors, which I find adorable, by the way. And your favorite show is South Park.”

Grantaire looked stunned. “How did you…”

“Believe it or not, I have made a study of you as well.”

“But you even knew about Billie Holiday.”

“I thought his favorite song was that Pearl Jam one,” Jehan piped up from the backseat.

“Black. I do like that one,” Grantaire said. “But there’s something about Gloomy Sunday.”

“It’s…pretty,” Enjolras said diplomatically, because really he thought his lover’s attachment to a song about suicide was a bit terrifying. It was a pretty song though.

A few minutes passed. Like any relatively well-functioning couple, Enjolras and Grantaire had forgotten that the conversation wasn’t initially about them until Jehan spoke up again.

“Is Courfeyrac’s favorite band still Rage Against the Machine?”

Grantaire laughed and shook his head. “No, not for ages. He’s on a folk revival kick now. It’s Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeroes.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that,” Jehan murmured distantly.

Enjolras frowned. “Jehan…in the grand scheme of things, I don’t know that it matters that you didn’t know about Courfeyrac changing his favorite band to Edward Ship and the Whatsits—”


“Whatever. Anyway, what matters is that the two of you are happy.”

“Way to sound like a Hallmark card,” Grantaire said.

“Don’t make me pull this car over,” Enjolras joked.

Grantaire rolled his eyes. “Or turn this car around?”

“Or that.”

“Guys, I’m not sure he is.”

Enjolras and Grantaire both turned towards the backseat at the unexpected comment, though Enjolras faced frontwards after a quick few seconds. “What was that?” Grantaire asked.
“I…I’m not sure Courfeyrac’s happy with me.”

“Of course he’s happy with you,” Grantaire said reflexively. Enjolras was a little relieved that he wasn’t the only one thrown by the possibility that their friends weren’t the perfect couple they represented themselves to be. “Courf’s nuts about you. You must’ve noticed by now.”

“Well wait…what makes you think he isn’t happy?” Enjolras asked.

“It’s…I mean, he hasn’t said anything. I can just kind of tell…I mean, I think I bore him. He’s so much more energetic than me. He likes to go out, talk to people, dance, be crazy. And I like to sit around drinking tea from my antique china sets, cuddle under a quilt, and read dusty old books of poetry. We’re not very compatible. I didn’t give it much thought before but I should have. I think he’s sick of me.”

“He’s not,” Grantaire insisted. “The guy’s nuts for you, I promise. Seriously, Jehan. I’m not saying this as your friend telling you what you want to hear. I’m telling you as your boyfriend’s best friend who’s debated with him over whose boyfriend is better. I mean, it’s still me, but he made some pretty compelling arguments on your behalf.”

Jehan gave a stiff nod, but his expression was troubled. He drew his knees up to his chest and dropped his head. “He says all the right things but…I don’t know. Something just doesn’t feel right.”

“Have you talked to him about it?” Enjolras asked.

“I’ve tried a few times, but he usually deflects me. He’s worried it’s going to go into the ‘why aren’t we having sex’ fight, and he wants to stay away from that, so-”


“Still?” Enjolras added. “I’d thought you were planning a seduction.”

“With or without Reservoir Dogs?”

“That’s not funny, Grantaire.”

Jehan sank low against the seat, face almost entirely obscured by his knees. He was basically in an upright fetal position, and it was muffling his speech a little. “I tried, but it came across as a romantic night in, so we made out and cuddled and I just couldn’t take things further. I felt…ridiculous, really. And then I tried to talk to him about it and he shut down on me and I just don’t fucking get it!”

Grantaire and Enjolras both flinched at the sudden increase in the usually quiet and dreamy young man’s voice.

“Courfeyrac likes sex. I know he likes sex. Why won’t he have it with me?”

An awkward silence descended upon the car. Grantaire and Enjolras traded a few terrified looks, because they both had absolutely nothing to say to that. Had one of them been in the backseat, at least they could have pulled Jehan into a hug, or at least offered him a ‘there-there.’ As it was, one of them had to come up with something.

“He might, well I mean…seeing as you’re a virgin-” Enjolras tried.

“Grantaire, has Courfeyrac ever dated a virgin before?” Jehan asked dryly.

“Yes,” Grantaire answered without pausing to think. “When we were juniors in high school, he got a
reputation as being the deflowerer. Uh…sh*t. Don’t tell him I said that.”

Enjolras glared at him. “Really? Why would you mention that? Why would you mention that now?”

“I used to think it was funny. I just got used to telling that story. Okay, well, look…he’s probably just scared. He’s allowed that, isn’t he?” Grantaire asked pointedly. “I mean, he really does care about you, Jehan, and you’re the friggin’ dreamy romantic of our group. He’s probably figuring you’ve got all these big expectations for your first time, that you’ll want it to be perfect and all that. I was nervous about being Enjolras’ first.”

“But if he’s nervous he should tell me. Right now I just feel rejected.”

“Jehan, he took you to meet his mom. You haven’t been rejected, I promise,” Grantaire assured him. “Courfeyrac’s really careful about who gets to meet Bridget. And, y’know, he keeps people away from Charles until he knows he’s at the point with them where his dad won’t scare them off. Anyway, with him meeting his folks is a sign of devotion. Trust me on this, the sex thing is some other weird hang up, not a sign that he doesn’t care about you. I know he does.”

Jehan reached into the front seat and gave Grantaire’s wrist a quick, grateful squeeze. “Thank you, Grantaire. I know this must have been an uncomfortable conversation for you.”

Grantaire held up his thumb and index finger and made a pinching motion. “Just a smidge. I don’t think I betrayed Courf too badly though.”

“No, not at all. I think you’ve helped. Well, I hope so anyway.”

Jehan still looked a little emotionally frail when they dropped him off, but there was a cautious smile on his face and he did have two plastic containers full of comfort food with him. Overall, Enjolras didn’t feel too badly driving away from him. He sent Jehan a few texts reminding him that he could call at any time and Enjolras would be over in a heartbeat, just in case.

When they got home, Enjolras put the food in the fridge and spent a few minutes in the kitchen tidying up the breakfast things they’d left out. When he did get to the bedroom he found Grantaire lying on his side on the bed, curled in on himself and facing the wall. Enjolras sat down beside him and ran his hand through Grantaire’s hair.

“What do you need from me right now?” he asked.

Grantaire twitched in a way that was almost a shrug. “Not sure. Just don’t feel right right now. I… I’m having a weird day.”

“Yeah, I noticed. I’d think you’d be in a better mood. The dinner was really nice,” Enjolras said, hoping it wasn’t somehow insensitive to point that out.

“It was,” Grantaire agreed. Then he deflected. “What do you think will happen if Courf and Jehan break up?”

Enjolras sighed. “I hope they don’t.”

“But if they do?”

“It’s going to suck,” Enjolras said simply, because there wasn’t a kinder alternative unless he was going to lie. “They care about each other deeply, so if they do break up they’ll be emotionally devastated, and they’ll need lots of time apart. And as our group of friends is unhealthily codependent with each other, their need for space will create a split in the group that will be
uncomfortable for everyone.”

“Way to just put it out there all matter of factly.”

“If it helps, I think they’re both mature enough that they wouldn’t ask us to choose sides. But I don’t think it’ll come to that, ‘Taire. Jehan waited so long for Courfeyrac. He’ll find a way to work past whatever it is that’s troubling him, I’m sure of it.”

“Good. We should tell them they’re not allowed to break up.”

Enjolras smirked. “I’m sure they’ll just tell us the same thing if we try to bring it up. You know the exact same thing would happen to the group if we broke up too.”

Grantaire sat up suddenly, and Enjolras’ hand slipped out of his hair as a result. His eyes were wide, panicked. “You’re not thinking about breaking up with me, are you?”

“Grantaire, calm down and think,” Enjolras said in a stern yet placating tone that usually had a good effect on his boyfriend. “We’re moving in together and I’ve brought up the possibility of getting married after graduation. Do those sound even remotely like the actions of someone who’s interested in ending his relationship? ‘Taire?”

“No,” Grantaire mumbled. He dropped his head and rubbed at the back of his neck. The poor guy was actually shaking.

Enjolras moved to hug him, but Grantaire pulled away. “Sorry, I just…weird night. M’gonna go draw or something. I’ve got…” His fingers twitched a little. “Gotta work through some things.”

“Okay. Grantaire, I love you.” Enjolras’ throat tightened as he watched his lover climb off the bed and walk away from him with his back turned, but he still managed to choke it out. He figured it was important.

Grantaire flinched, but he turned around at the doorway and tried to smile for Enjolras’ benefit. “Love you too.”

Some hours later, when Enjolras finally fell into an actual deep sleep, Grantaire set down the drawing he’d been working on, crept through the house, and took the bottle of wine he’d stolen from Bridget’s house out of its hiding spot.

When Feuilly’s shift ended they went back to the nurse’s station to see if they could find Joly. As soon as they turned the corner and the normally-cheerful and upbeat young CNA came into view, Eponine grabbed Feuilly’s arm and pulled him the other way.

Joly was neither cheerful nor upbeat at the moment.

He was wearing an old Metallica t-shirt with his protective gloves and screaming at Legle, who was cowering opposite him while holding a plastic bag of soiled scrubs. Cries of “You don’t have a job, you don’t pay rent, you don’t even do your own dishes-how can it take you two weeks to do laundry?!” and “I’m drawing a bullseye on your head and flicking paper footballs at it for the rest of the week!” followed them as they left the floor.

Eponine clapped a hand over her mouth and snorted. Feuilly let out a groan. “Sorry sweetie,” Eponine said. “I forgot you have to go home to the psycho couple tonight.”
“Oh, Joly won’t still be angry by the time he gets home,” Feuilly said. “He resets pretty easily. The only reason he’s this mad now is because Bosquet’s laziness is ratcheting his germ phobia up to anxiety producing levels. Seriously, soiled scrubs freak *me* out, so Joly…anyway, what I’m dreading is the makeup sex. Now that they know that I know, they don’t even try to be quiet.”

“Oh. That’s actually worse. I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

Eponine frowned thoughtfully. “Why don’t you just crash with one of the other guys?”

“Because I have a perfectly decent apartment that I bust my ass to pay for. I should get to sleep in my own bed without being jarred awake by Joly’s big fucking mouth. I was thinking of using part of my next paycheck to invest in noise cancelling headphones though.”

Eponine was still giggling from the necessity of that when she got into the passenger side of the car. Feuilly buckled himself in and then set off in the direction of the beach. “You didn’t want to get snacks first, did you? I figured the café drinks you brought were the equivalent of our usual McFlurries.”

“Yeah, I’m good,” Eponine said. “So…do you think Mr. G is Marius’ grandpa?”

“It would fit,” Feuilly said with a nod. “Kay, so the guy has about a billion pictures of his grandson in his room, but most of them are from when the kid was ten or under, thus me and Joly not being a hundred per cent sure it was really Marius-”

“No, it looks just like him. And…well, sadly I’d know. I spent enough time sighing over the way his hair falls into his eyes and all that other stupid stuff.”

“Ah. Expert opinion then,” Feuilly laughed. “Anyway, Gillenormand keeps most of the pictures out of sight. He has easy access, but none of the ones of Marius are hanging up on the wall. If you ask him about his grandson he flips out on you, and says that the kid deserves whatever happens to him now that he’s turned from his family to embrace a communist lifestyle-”

“Marius isn’t a communist.”

“I’m not sure Mr. Gillenormand’s aware the Cold War ended. Plus he lumps communists, socialists, Nazis, and Islamic fundamentalists all into one group of ‘non-Americans.’ For him, calling anyone a commie is probably just saying they’re bad.”

“Ah.” Eponine smirked. “I wonder what he’d think if he knew Marius had fallen in with a group of radical socialist activists.”

“I think my job would be a living hell if he found that out,” Feuilly said with a shudder. “Seriously, I keep the residents in the dark about most of the things that are important to me. None of them know I live with a gay couple, none of them know I’m a socialist, none of them know I demonstrate for worker’s rights and LGBT rights, and they damn well don’t know about my support for Palestine. A CNA saw me reading through one of my beginner Arabic books the other day and that was awkward enough. God, I fucking hate this job.” He shook his head sadly.

“Don’t worry sweetie. You’re just doing this to pay the bills for now, and someday you’ll get to work somewhere where your big old brain will be appreciated.” Eponine reached over and gave his arm a reassuring pat.
“Thanks Ponine, but at the rate I’m going that’s probably going to be twenty years down the line. If it ever happens at all. Urgh…anyway, let’s not go over the lack of intellectual fulfillment and challenge in my job once more. My point was, Marius said he ran out after getting into a big fight with his grandfather, who he was living with along with an aunt. That’s why he’s living with Courfeyrac. Mr. Gillenormand had been raising his grandson, who took off on him in a display of ingratitude, according to him.”

“Yeah, Mr. G’s gotta be Marius’ grandpa. Hm. I’d never have picked Marius to have a pervy old grandpa. The kid’s so naïve. You’d think he’d have picked up on some sex stuff with a creeper like that raising him.”

Feuilly snorted. “I swear, the guy’s willfully dense. Eponine…do you think I should tell Marius his grandfather’s in the nursing home?”

“…why are you thinking of keeping it to yourself?” Eponine asked. She figured it went without saying that they should give Marius the head’s up.

“They’re not on speaking terms. But…even though Mr. Gillenormand’s a real pill about his grandson, to the point where we’ve all been encouraged not only not to mention his grandson but not to mention grandchildren in general when we’re around him…the poor old guy’s lonely and he obviously misses Marius.”

Eponine nodded. “The hidden pictures were kind of a giveaway. I don’t know. Why don’t we bring Courf into this little conspiracy? Marius is his bro. He can feel him out and see if the kid’s amenable to a reconciliation plot.”

Feuilly visibly brightened up at the prospect. They’d gotten to the beach, so he parked in their usual space, and as the weather was appreciably milder since the last time they’d done this, they left the car in favor of walking along the low brick wall separating the street and the sand.

“How are your brothers doing?” Feuilly asked, finally broaching the subject Eponine most wanted to talk about while simultaneously dreading to even think of it.

She let out a long, labored breath before answering. “Gavroche is fine. You know him, he can roll with anything. And their foster parents of the moment have a dog, so Peter Parker’s happy. But Little R’s not doing well at all. He cries all the time and he keeps asking for me and Grantaire. Also, they’ve made the boys go by their birth names, and they’re not too happy about that. Peter Parker thinks Michel sounds like a girl’s name, and Little R acts like he doesn’t know who people are talking to when they call him Jean.”

“Poor kids. What about Azelma?” Feuilly asked.

“Zelma? She’s happier than a pig in shit,” Eponine snapped. When social services had intervened, they’d decided that only the young boys needed to be placed in homes. The girls were old enough for legal emancipation and thus had been left to their own devices. Eponine and Azelma had been offered a spot in a group home, but they’d both turned it down in favor of continuing to crash with their friends. As they didn’t have criminal histories, they hadn’t been forcibly compelled to go to the group home. As such, Eponine was staying in Grantaire’s all but abandoned studio while Azelma had staked a claim on Combeferre’s study.

Eponine had actually put a fair bit of work into the studio apartment now that she didn’t have to spend so much time taking care of her baby brothers. It was even starting to look a little homey. She’d gotten a table cloth for the TV tray Grantaire sometimes used when he bothered to cook his meals, she’d scrubbed everything clean, and she and Jehan had invested in some flowers and trinkets
to brighten the place up. Grantaire didn’t care, as he was living with Enjolras. He gave Eponine his full blessing to make the place as girly as she wanted.

“Your sister’s happy your brothers got taken away from you?” Feuilly asked incredulously. “That seems a bit much, even for her.”

“She’s not happy about that,” Eponine said with a sigh. “It’s that she’s got so much time alone with Combeferre now. He’s having a harder and harder time pretending he doesn’t notice her crush. I actually wish I was around a little more to see it. It must be hilariously awkward.”

“I bet.”

“Speaking of which…” Eponine frowned. She shoved her hands in her pockets, careful to keep her eyes on the beach ahead of her and not on her conversation partner as she spoke. “I think ‘Ferre wants to ask me out.”

Feuilly took a moment to respond. Eponine waited in some anticipation, but the final comment was only a dull. “Oh.”

Eponine quickly shot her eyes to the side, but it was hard to get much of a read on his expression in the barely ten seconds she allowed herself to scrutinize him. “I… I kind of feel like I should. I mean, I think I’ve got a better head on my shoulders than I did a few months ago so I probably could handle dating, and Combeferre’s definitely the kind of guy I should want to date.”

“But you don’t? Want to date him, I mean?”

Eponine shook her head. “I don’t know why. On paper it all sounds good. Smart, caring, cute, driven, stable…there’s just… I can’t explain it, but I think what it is is that I’d rather have him as my friend. Y’know?”

“I can…I can see that. So you don’t date friends?” Feuilly asked.

Eponine’s breath caught in her throat. She was suddenly overtaken by a surge of emotion she couldn’t quite define. It was strong, and it was more genuine than anything she could remember feeling. “I… I’m not sure it’s a good idea. I want to keep my friends now that I’ve got some that are worth keeping. Y-y’know?”

“Yeah, that’s more than fair. So… are you still going to try to get custody of your brothers?”

“My hopes aren’t high, but I have to try. I’ve got some time. After graduation I’ll try to get a better job and maybe I can get an apartment. Probably nothing that the state will think suitable for raising three boys, but I’ve got to try. I’ve got to…”

Eponine broke off and wiped at her face. She’d started crying without realizing it. The good, strong façade she’d been building up for herself over the past week was finally giving way.

Feuilly gave her a hug. “It’s okay. We’re still here to help you. We’ll help, I promise.”

“I lied before. Feuilly, I wanted to go to college. How can I go to college if I’ve got to be a mother to my brothers? It’s so fucking unfair. Why couldn’t my parents just take care of us like they’re supposed to? How can you look at Peter Parker and Little R and not want to cuddle and nurture them? I know Gavroche is a little brat, but he’s a cool brat and…”

“You wanted to go to college?”
Eponine nodded. “The way you talk about it…I’m not dumb, y’know. I think I could do well in school if I tried. But obviously that’s off the table now. I’ll be a barista forever at this rate. Or I suppose I could trick Combeferre into marrying me and then he could pay for everything and we’d get full custody of the boys in no time. But I’d basically be a prostitute because I don’t love him.”

Feuilly let go of her, but he held onto one of her hands. “There is another option, you know.”

Eponine let out a bitter laugh. “What, become a stripper?”

He shook his head. “You need a decent place to live to get custody of the kids, and to afford a decent place to live you need a roommate.”

“Yeah, so?” There wasn’t exactly an abundance of available, stable potential roommates in her life at the moment.

“So let’s move in together.”

Chapter End Notes

Guys, I’ve been covering shifts like crazy for the past week because one of my coworkers is out recovering from a surgery (recovering well, even. She should be back to work on time a week from today!) Anywho, I know I’ve fallen behind in answering the comments you’re all so thoughtfully leaving me. It’s not that I don’t care, it’s that I have so little free time that I’ve had to pick between keeping up with my online correspondence or working on the fic. I’ll get around to answering them like I usually do eventually, I promise. Basically, please don’t think that I stopped caring about reading your comments. This is not the case. I love them and would love to keep seeing what you think of the story :}
Chapter Summary

Boston, April 15, 2013.

Chapter Notes

I wasn't initially planning on having an update ready so quickly. Actually, I was going to work on a new chapter for the prequel fic next, but then inspiration struck. Horrible, relevant, inspiration.

I hope no one sees this chapter as offensive or in any way exploitative of a horrific real world tragedy. As you all must have noticed by now, I live very near Boston, so the bombing happened pretty much in my backyard. It's really screwing with my head, and my writing helps me process things. As I've set this story in my home turf and have been updating it in near real-time, it seemed reasonable to write a chapter where the boys were affected by the tragedy. But if it isn't your cup of tea, I understand. Please just be kind in the comments. I'm really shaky over this topic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Enjolras woke from an unsettling dream that slipped from his memory before he could fully grasp why it had bothered him so much. He flung out an arm, seeking the reassuring warmth of his boyfriend, but found himself alone in bed. It wasn’t a very good start to the day.

The bedroom was still dark, as his body had beat his alarm by about an hour (or, it would have if it had been set. As it was a Sunday, he was off the hook). After a moment he crawled out of bed in search of Grantaire.

Enjolras checked the living room first, figuring Grantaire had fallen asleep working on his art or distracting himself with television. The room was empty, but Grantaire’s sketchbook was lying open on the coffee table. Intrigued, Enjolras sat down on the couch and took a look at it.

This particular sketchbook had been a gift from Jehan and thus contained personal pieces only—nothing for school or commissions. It was journal style, with a handsome leather binding. The pages it was opened to were likely the ones Grantaire had been working on the night before. One side showed bits and pieces of sketches—ideas being worked out. A hand clutching at nothing, half an eye, an eye with its lid being peeled off, a nest of matted hair, something that was either a tree branch or a skeletally thin arm, maybe both.

Every image made Enjolras shudder. There was a certain amount of naturalism at work in the subjects, but only enough to make the exaggerations disquieting. Everything was twisted just slightly, just this side of grotesque.

The mirrored page showed the assembled composition. The main subject was the portrait of a woman, skeletally thin, with wide eyes. Most of the drawing was sketchy pencil work, but the eyes
had been colored with a pale blue chalk pastel. They were haunting, melancholy, and resonated deeply with Enjolras because they belonged to Grantaire, but here they were in a wraith-like woman’s face. It looked wrong, to see features he loved so dearly transferred to some sad, sick, trembling thing. The woman’s hair spread out from her face in silvery tangles that formed fantastic, ghastly shapes in the background, including the tree branch from the concept sketches. When Enjolras found the eye being pierced by a needle he set the sketchbook down.

He’d broken out in goose bumps and the hairs on the back of his neck were standing up. He’d never been affected so strongly by artwork before.

Enjolras gave himself a moment to calm himself, blaming the early morning and the unsettled sleep on his powerful reaction to the sketch, then resumed his search for his boyfriend. He didn’t want to place more meaning on the drawing than it merited, but between that and the way Grantaire had behaved the previous night, Enjolras was starting to worry about having left his boyfriend to solitude for so many hours.

He’d really thought Grantaire would join him in bed once he’d sketched for a little while though. Enjolras hadn’t wanted to smother him, but maybe he should have pressed a little harder and gotten him to talk.

He searched the study, the second tinier living room they never used, and the kitchen before finally finding Grantaire in the bathroom. He was sitting on the floor with his head down, slumped over, his side resting on the toilet. “’Taire?”

Grantaire didn’t respond, and Enjolras realized he was asleep. He crouched down in front of him to give his shoulder a shake, and that’s when he noticed the wine bottle next to him. It had been hidden by one of Grantaire’s legs.

Enjolras fell back a few steps, his breathing speeding up. He tried to take deep breaths, tried to calm down, but he could feel his heart hammering. He ran into their bedroom, grabbed a pillow off the bed, and screamed into it.

When he was sure he wouldn’t say entirely the wrong thing, he went back into the bathroom, crouched down beside Grantaire, and shook his shoulder as gently as he could. “’Taire? Wake up. Grantaire, c’mon.”

“H-huh? Wzzhah?” Grantaire’s mouth opened before his eyes did. He opened and closed it a few times before anything close to intelligible came out. “M’head hurts.”

Enjolras smoothed back his sweaty bangs and kissed his forehead. “Let me help you up and get you into the kitchen, okay? I’ll give you some water. That should help.”

Grantaire blinked a few times and squinted at Enjolras. “You’re pissed at me, aren’t you?”

“No, of course not. Just very saddened. Come on, ‘Taire. Let me take care of you. Let’s go.” He curled one arm behind Grantaire’s back, placed his other on his forearm, and slowly helped him to his feet. Grantaire almost fell right back to the tiled floor, but Enjolras was able to keep him upright.

He helped Grantaire into a kitchen chair then fetched him a glass of water and some aspirin. Enjolras sat down next to him and held his hand while he slowly drained the glass. When he wasn’t taking sips, Grantaire kept his head down and his eyes averted.

His eyes looked terrible. They were swollen and red, with dried tear tracks down his face. Enjolras got up and returned with a damp cloth. “’Taire, look at me for a minute.”
“I…I’d rather…”

“Just let me clean your face a little. Your eyes are all puffy. The cold cloth might feel good.”

With a reluctant sigh, Grantaire lifted his head and Enjolras wiped around his eyes.

“M’sorry,” Grantaire mumbled.

“I know. I am too. I’m sorry I misjudged how badly you were feeling last night and that I went to bed when you so clearly needed me. I wish you had woken me up instead. I’d have helped you through whatever was bothering you.”

Grantaire dully nodded.

Enjolras’ voice shook a little when he spoke again. “Grantaire, why didn’t you wake me? Why didn’t you come to me? Why did you…"

“Please, please, please don’t cry. Don’t cry, Enjolras, I’m not worth that. You’re not even supposed to be able to cry. You’re supposed to be the strong bad ass beacon of righteousness and justice and change, and there’s no room for tears with all your light and strength. I don’t want to break you.”

Grantaire wiped Enjolras’ tears away with his thumbs, looking genuinely frightened at the display of vulnerability.

“I want you to be strong, Grantaire. I don’t want you to go back to what you were. You were so unhappy…” Enjolras grabbed Grantaire’s hands and squeezed them tightly. “Please, please don’t give up. This was one incident, one setback. You can still quit. I know you can.”

Grantaire shivered. “I don’t feel very strong right now.”

“You’re…you’re going to try again, right? You’re not giving up?”

Grantaire shook his head. “Of course not. I don’t want to lose you. I just, last night, I couldn’t-”

“Grantaire, listen to me. I love you. I’m not going anywhere.” Enjolras grabbed his chin and tilted his face until they were making eye contact. “I mean it. And I will help you through this. I want you to be able to stand on your own two feet, but until that time approaches, you will lean on me, not your bottles. Okay?”

“Al-alright. I’m so sorry.”

“You have a disease, ‘Taire. You’re an alcoholic. You’re sick. That’s all it is. It’s going to take time to get better. Last night was a setback. We can keep it from happening again, but do not feel ashamed. You don’t need to. You will never lose my love and support.” He hoped to god that was the right thing to say. It had sounded good in his head, when he rehearsed it between frustrated screams into the pillow.

He wiped Grantaire’s tears away, and followed up the action with a tender kiss to the swollen skin just below each eyelid. Grantaire surged forward into his arms, and Enjolras held him until the sobs stopped wracking his body.

“I’m so fucking disappointed in myself. I tried so hard, Enj, I swear I did.”

“I know. This is just a setback. We go on from here just like before.”

“Uh-uh huh.” Grantaire let out a few shaky breaths, face pressed against Enjolras’ neck. “M’still so
“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I failed you too.”

“You didn’t-”

“Stop blaming yourself and I’ll follow your lead,” Enjolras said sternly.

Grantaire looked up. “Snarky bastard.”

“I’m not wrong. We’re supposed to be working together on this. I told you to lean on me and I meant it. So, from hereon out I promise to keep a better eye on your mood, and when I have a foreboding feeling when you’ve gotten all withdrawn and twitchy, I promise to follow up on it.”

“Th-thanks.” Grantaire dropped his head again. He wasn’t crying anymore, but he was incredibly sullen.

Enjolras had him drink another glass of water, then he dragged Grantaire off to the bedroom, forced him into comfortable clothing, and set him up in bed. He disposed of the wine bottle (which was about three fourths empty), and then crawled into bed with his lover.

Grantaire nuzzled against him. “You’re still going to meet up with Jehan and Combeferre for your study party thing, right? I’m not ruining your day, am I?”

“Frankly, I’m not terribly interested in leaving your side at the moment. I was thinking of seeing if they’d meet me after lunch instead of after breakfast,” Enjolras answered.

Grantaire sat up on his elbows, and Enjolras resettled against him with his head in his lap. Grantaire looked down at him in some wonder—they did sit that way sometimes, but so far only with the positions reversed. He reverently stroked his hand through golden curls and Enjolras’ eyes slid shut in response to the gentle petting. “Don’t break your plans with your friends.”

“I’m not breaking them, I’m postponing them. And it’s for my sanity too. I honestly don’t want to be away from you right now.”

Grantaire snorted disdainfully. “I do. Too bad that’s fucking impossible.”

Enjolras’ eyes snapped open. “’Taire, we need to talk.”

“I knew this was coming.”

Enjolras sat up again and tried for one of his more serious stares. As Grantaire flinched in response, he figured he must have managed it. “Do you have any more bottles hidden in the apartment?”

“No. I swiped that one from Bridget’s house yesterday before we left. I haven’t touched any other alcohol since we started dating, I promise.”

Enjolras chewed on his lip a moment, then slowly nodded. He was itching to search the apartment on his own, but he figured it was more important to trust Grantaire on this. Again, he hoped he was doing the right thing, and cursed the uncomfortable feeling of uncertainty. “I want you to promise me something. If the temptation to drink ever gets that bad again, you will come to me. I don’t care what I’m doing. If I’m in class, asleep, sick with my head in the toilet, in the shower, whatever it is. Come to me anyway. I’ll never be angry with you for it. Will you do that for me?”

“Enjolras, I’m going to be such a pain in your ass-”
“I don’t care. Grantaire, do you not realize what your pain does to me? Let me help you. Please, just promise me.”

Grantaire wiped at his face, then slowly nodded. “Yeah, okay. I…I promise.”

“Good. Now…can you tell me a little bit about yesterday? What went wrong? Why was it so difficult for you?”

Grantaire shifted away a little and hugged his knees to his chest. “I just, I dunno. I’m not sleeping, and I feel like I’m fucking everything up. I mean, I had to take the semester off, and I was only just clawing my way back up to having a hope of passing any of my classes. I’m such a burden on you, and I’m not contributing anything to anyone and I just wanted to make everything a little dull and fuzzy again. Just, just not so sharp. Y’know?”

The words felt like a physical blow. Enjolras wanted to hold Grantaire close and kiss everywhere he could reach, but the man was visibly trembling and would likely just flinch away from his touch. “You’re not a burden on me. You’re not. And do you really think I’d have let you this close if I wasn’t getting anything out of this relationship? You pride yourself on knowing me better than anyone else. Does that really sound like something I’d do?”

“N-no. But why me? Don’t get me wr-wrong,” Grantaire mumbled, voice trembling with the weight of tears. “This is what I’ve always w-wanted. But I don’t deserve it, so why fucking me? I’m not special. I’m a wreck, and a buffoon, and fucking useless and damaged. And you’re everything, so what on earth do you see in me?”

Enjolras framed Grantaire’s face in his hands and leaned in for a slow, tender kiss. Grantaire’s lips were chapped, dried out, and scratchy against his, but reassuringly warm, and the vulnerable little noise he made at the soft caress went straight to Enjolras’ heart. And most importantly, Grantaire didn’t flinch away from him. He was getting somewhere, then.

“You remind me that I’m only human, you perfect fool. You know me, Grantaire, who I actually am. You’re a bit dazzled by some of the more superficial details about me, but you’ve still gotten so close to me, and I don’t let people get close to me like this. Yours is the only touch I’ve welcomed. You’ve been so good for me, and you really don’t have any idea, do you? I was becoming too cold, too fanatical about my causes. You push and challenge me, challenge my ideals, make me grow, assess myself. Sometimes you’re a pain about it, but that’s what I need. And besides that, you’re the best friend I’ve ever had.”

Grantaire laughed weakly, visibly discomfited by the praise. “Don’t let Combeferre catch you saying that.”

Enjolras pressed his lips together, and tried not to think of the sight of the back of Combeferre’s car from the vantage point of a sidewalk.

Hesitantly, Enjolras pressed a hand to Grantaire’s back, and when he didn’t flinch he gathered the trembling young man into his arms. “I love you so much, and you deserve it. Will you please believe me? You deserve to be loved and to be happy.”

“If you say so.”

“I do. And you usually have some regard for my words.” Enjolras rocked Grantaire in his arms a bit, soothing himself as much as his lover with the physical contact. “Do you mind if I ask you about the drawing you left in the living room?”
“What do you want to know?” Grantaire asked, sounding vaguely terrified.

“The woman in the portrait…is she a real person?” Enjolras asked. “And why does she have your eyes?” He’d seen enough of Grantaire’s schoolwork to have bumped into some obligatory self-portraits. He knew Grantaire could render his own face faithfully, and he knew the boy had a good enough eye to spot when he’d used himself as a model for his work, so if he’d worked out the piece with practice sketches first, there was no way the eyes had been an accident.

Grantaire’s voice was quiet when he answered. “The woman in the portrait is my mother. We looked a little alike, that’s why she has my eyes.”

“Looked?”

“Enjolras, you know it’s not in my power to deny you anything you really want, but I’m begging you, not now. Later. Okay?”

Enjolras kissed his forehead. “Alright. Later. You must be achy from spending the night in the bathroom. Do you want me to draw you a bath?”

“No. I could use a nap though. Stay until I fall asleep again?”

Enjolras settled them against the pillows, pulled the blankets around them, and held Grantaire against his chest.

Enjolras didn’t tell Combeferre and Jehan about Grantaire’s relapse. It weighed heavily on his mind all throughout their studying, but Jehan and Combeferre were lost enough in their own thoughts and refrained from pressing the issue. Jehan gave deeper conversation a cursory try, but retreated into his own gloomy silence when Enjolras and Combeferre both proved reticent.

At least he got a lot of work done. The distracting familiarity of revising essay drafts and making notes for presentations was surprisingly soothing.

When he got home he found Grantaire reading in the living room. Out of habit Enjolras checked the title of the book and gave a start of surprise. “You’re reading Lovingkindness?”

Grantaire shrugged. “Jehan loaned it to me. He told me he thought it was exactly what I needed, if I could get past the title. Up until today I couldn’t so it was collecting dust. Considering last night though…I can’t be that proud anymore. It’s actually not a bad read.”

“I read a few chapters for a paper when I was in Philosophy and Religions of the East,” Enjolras said. “At his insistence, of course, but still. I have respect for Sharon Salzberg as an author. Do you want to try some metta meditations with me then? It’s not really my cup of tea, but I can give it another shot.”

“I’m okay for now. I’m, um, I’m feeling a lot better. And I thought about what you said…I didn’t mean to, like, invalidate your feelings about me or anything.”

Enjolras flopped down next to him on the couch and leaned over his shoulder to peer at the book. “How many chapters have you read?”

Grantaire laughed. “I’m almost done. I think I need to blitz through this thing daily. It seems like everything that’s wrong with me was wrong with this chick too. Seriously, it feels like she’s talking
Enjolras kissed the side of his face. “I’m glad it’s helping. If you like this, you might try the Dhammapada next. That’s Jehan’s favorite Buddhist text.”

“I’m not converting to Buddhism,” Grantaire whined. “I just like it a little…”

“My but you’re a defensive atheist.”

Grantaire playfully swatted at his arm and, laughing, Enjolras kissed him again before getting up to start on supper.

That night they sat together in bed, Grantaire reading his favorite passages aloud from the Lovingkindness book while Enjolras looked up some reading materials for his own use on amazon. He made a full cart of books on loving a recovering alcoholic, figuring it was high time he did some research.

Enjolras’ alarm went off at six thirty, and Grantaire promptly whacked him with a pillow. “It’s a fucking Monday holiday! What th’fuck di’ju set th’alarm for?”

“Habit,” Enjolras said apologetically, groping on the nightstand for his phone. “I always forget about Patriot’s Day.”

“I never forget about anything that gets classes cancelled. S’one of the only benefits of going to a broke ass state school.”

Enjolras sat up and yawned. “Well I’m awake now. I’m going to make breakfast.”

“You do that.” Grantaire pulled a pillow over his head and curled in on his side.

A good sized group ended up gathering at the Musain by lunch, so Enjolras and Grantaire headed out to join them. Grantaire had made plans to meet up with Eponine and Feuilly there anyway. Feuilly was giving them a ride out to visit the Thenardier boys at their foster home. Grantaire had a big box of crayons for Little R and some action figures for Peter Parker and Gavroche.

Eponine and Feuilly were already at the Musain nursing teas and picking at a muffin. The two of them were sitting angled towards each other, and Eponine, whether she knew it or not, was sending Feuilly flirty eyes. Grantaire shot Enjolras a significant look, but he didn’t seem to pick up on anything.

“Hey guys,” Enjolras greeted, pulling a chair up across from them. Grantaire rolled his eyes, then went off to get his and Enjolras’ lattes.

The rest of their group slowly trickled in: Combeferre with a mountain of textbooks, Azelma trailing behind him worshipfully clutching his backpack, Bahorel without any homework at all despite looming finals deadlines, a dejected looking Marius with a wad of bandages over his thumb, and Courfeyrac without Jehan.

Marius’ injury commanded the most immediate attention. “Holy fuck. What the hell did you do to me.”
“Your hand?” Grantaire demanded.

“I was cutting a cantaloupe,” Marius said lamely.

“And you mistook your thumb for the fucking melon?” Grantaire asked incredulously.

Marius slumped down in his chair. “My hand slipped when I found out…but it’s too terrible.”

“Marius, what happened?” Combeferre asked. Eponine finally looked away from Feuilly and leaned across the table to give his uninjured hand a squeeze.

Marius’ eyes watered. “Cosette’s moving.”

“Now?” Eponine asked, startled. “Why’s she moving now? She’s just going to have to move again in August when she leaves for Mount Holyoke.”

“No, that’s when she’s moving! She’s moving out to western Massachusetts!” Marius wailed.

The whole table looked at him in confusion and a little bit of concern. “Marius, that’s not that far away,” Combeferre pointed out. “I drove out to get Bossuet once when his car broke down on the side of the road.”

“Did Cosette really tell all of us she was going to Mount Holyoke before she told you?” Enjolras asked. “That wasn’t very sensitive of her.”

“Enjolras, when do we see Cosette without Marius?” Courfeyrac asked pointedly. “He must have ditzed out. C’mon kid, you knew she was going to school. This isn’t a big deal.”

“Of course it’s a big deal! I don’t drive. I don’t have a car. I’m never going to see her while she’s at school because I can’t get there.”

Feuilly coughed something that sounded suspiciously like bus.

“My life is over,” Marius moaned pathetically.

The friends decided the best course of action was to ignore the puppy’s melodrama. Grantaire privately hoped this was some kind of reaction to whatever pain meds he’d been put on after his thumb was sliced open and that it would wear off.

Unfortunately, Marius’ pathetic mooning and whimpering haunted the conversations they tried to have. He sniffled sadly all while Courfeyrac told them about Jehan going into Boston to cheer for some of his high school buddies who were running in the marathon, and he let out dejected little noises when Feuilly added that Joly and Legle were there cheering on friends too.

“Who do they know running?” Enjolras asked. Jehan had grown up in Cambridge, so his presence was pretty much expected, but neither Joly nor Legle were runners, they’d grown up on the other side of the state, and in the absence of family their social circle was relatively small and mostly known to their good friends.

“Some of me and Joly’s coworkers are running for charity,” Feuilly explained. “I was thinking of heading in with them, but I ended up sleeping in instead.”

“Oh. What charity are they…” Enjolras cut himself off, as Marius had let out a somewhat louder sob than his other noises. He cleared his throat and tried again. “What charity are they-” He was cut off again, this time by a whimper. “Really Marius, do you have something else you want to say?”
“N-no. I’ll just s-sit here and keep my agony over Cosette to myself, since you all don’t think it’s a big deal that I’m being separated from the love of my life.”

“It’s not that we don’t care,” Courfeyrac said. “You’re just blowing this out of proportion and it’s kind of ridiculous.”

“Plus she’s not even leaving for months,” Feuilly added.

“But my soul will ache without her. I swear, I’m already feeling the loss. I’m so lonely-”

“For the love of everything decent, Marius, no one cares about your lonely soul!” Enjolras yelled. “Now will you kindly shut up about Cosette?”

Courfeyrac and Grantaire snorted, while Bahorel burst into loud guffaws. Marius’ face colored, but he obliged and stopped his whining.

Combeferre glanced at Enjolras and shook his head incredulously.

“Oh don’t even start, ‘Ferre. You were sick of it too,” Enjolras said with a smirk.

“Guys…” Bahorel was looking down at his phone with a horrified expression on his suddenly pale face.

“Bahorel, what’s wrong?” Eponine asked.

“Th-there was an explosion at the marathon. Wait, fuck, two explosions at the finish line.”

Everyone at the pushed-together tables went silent, then as one, everyone with a smartphone took it out and got on facebook.

“Holy shit,” Courfeyrac murmured.

Grantaire leaned over Enjolras’ shoulder to look at the screen. He could see status updates, links to video feeds, and updates from news stations about the explosions.

“Someone call Joly and Jehan and Bossuet,” Grantaire choked out. Courfeyrac and Eponine were already using their phones as phones, but they didn’t get answers.

“I’m on Joly’s page. He hasn’t posted anything since announcing that he was heading into Boston for the marathon,” Combeferre said grimly.

“M-maybe it’s not as bad as people are making it sound,” Azelma said.

“Maybe,” Combeferre said weakly, but he didn’t look like he believed it.

“Someone let me sign in on their phone,” Feuilly said. “Or borrow a laptop or something. I’ve got friends from work who are there too. They might be posting updates.”

“Guys, right now everyone’s probably running for their lives,” Eponine pointed out. “We’re probably going to have to wait for updates.”

The friends sat in a tense silence for another few minutes, then as one they rose to their feet. “My place?” Courfeyrac asked, voice incredibly small. Combeferre nodded, and they set off for his apartment.

Fifteen or so minutes later, the group of them were settled in Courfeyrac’s living room with the TV
on the local news. By that point the race had been shut down and first responders were taking
victims from the scene. The news kept replaying the explosions and showing pictures of the blood
stained pavement.

Courfeyrac was dialing Jehan on repeat, but he wasn’t getting through. Finally, the news announced
that cell phone service had been shut down in the city, but that text messaging was still working.
Everyone sent Jehan, Joly, and Legle texts asking them if they were okay.

Combeferre had Courfeyrac’s laptop open and was scrolling through his facebook feed, looking for
updates from his friends while Feuilly did the same with Marius’. “Jo just put up a status,” Feuilly
announced. “She’s fine, but she didn’t say anything about Bossuet and Joly.”

“She was a runner though,” Combeferre said. “The bombs went off in the crowds.”

“Guys, there’s a fire in the JFK library. Holy fuck. Holy fuck,” Grantaire said, pointing at the TV.
Enjolras turned the volume up and they all watched, entranced.

“They said fire. It’s not necessarily connected,” Combeferre murmured.

Eponine dropped her head onto her knees. “Who the fuck is doing this? Why are they targeting us?”

“Two dead,” Combeferre reported. “Boston police just confirmed two dead, twenty two injured so
far.”

“For fuck’s sake!” Courfeyrac yelled. He jumped to his feet and charged into the kitchen. Grantaire
took off after him.

“Dude, calm down.”

“Why the hell isn’t he texting us? He can fucking text us!” Courfeyrac stormed across the room and
kicked over one of his kitchen chairs.

“Do you know what the odds are of him being one of the dead? In a crowd that size? H-he’s
probably fine,” Grantaire said. “This is the notorious pessimist speaking, okay? Even I think you
should stay hopeful and positive. He just hasn’t gotten a chance to get in touch with us. Maybe his
phone was in his bag and he dropped it in the crowd or something. Anything might have happened.”

Courfeyrac nodded. He curled his hand into a fist and bit it, rocking back and forth where he stood.
Grantaire crossed the room and hesitantly patted his arm.

“Guys, Bossuet just checked in,” Feuilly said, poking his head into the kitchen. “He’s texting with
Combeferre right now.”

“What’s going on?” Grantaire asked. “He and Joly are alright, aren’t they?”

“Yeah. Joly’s been making impromptu tourniquets and now he’s off with the first responders. They
haven’t seen Jehan though.”

Courfeyrac started pacing again, letting out little panicked whimpers as he circled the room. Feuilly
left for the livingroom to give him some privacy for his freak out, and Grantaire helplessly watched,
not sure how to comfort his friend. “Please calm down. Courf, you’re starting to scare me.”

“I’m sorry my distress is distressing you,” Courfeyrac snapped. Then his phone buzzed. He almost
dropped it opening his text.
“Is it him?” Grantaire asked.

Courfeyrac nodded, tried to speak, and then handed the phone to Grantaire. “Safe. Stranded for the mo. Very busy. Will send longer message when I can. Love you.” He let out a breath he hadn’t been aware of holding. “Oh man…”

Courfeyrac sank to his knees and started muttering repeated thankful gibberish.

Reassured that their friends weren’t in immediate danger, everyone reassembled in the living room to follow the news together. Remembering other acquaintances and some distant relatives who had plans to be in Boston for the marathon, the next few hours were spent tracking people down on facebook and sending out texts to make sure everyone was alright. Eventually Legle posted a picture of an exhausted looking Joly with a bloodied t-shirt slumped over in front of a medical tent. More than a little proud of their friend’s selflessness in volunteering his services to the point of exhaustion, Combeferre and Feuilly both shared the picture.

Jehan put up a status informing everyone that he was staying at his parents’ house, and that they’d taken in a group of stranded college students and were in need of spare blankets, if anyone happened to have any. Before ten minutes were out, he posted again to state that the need for blankets had already been satisfied.

Enjolras had become sullen and withdrawn. It took Grantaire longer to notice than it should have, but only because he’d been reacting so strongly to Courfeyrac’s panic for Jehan’s safety. “You okay?” Grantaire murmured.

Enjolras gave a stiff shake of his head.

“What is it?”

“Nothing that can be addressed,” Enjolras whispered harshly, clearly trying to avoid notice. It didn’t work. Combeferre turned towards him with an expression of dawning understanding and sympathy, “Enj, do you want me to call for you?” he asked.

Enjolras lowered his head, squeezed his eyes shut, and nodded.

“What?” Grantaire asked. “What is it?”

Combeferre rose to his feet and headed for the kitchen. He paused at the doorway, looking like he wanted to tell Grantaire, but he left without saying anything.

“Enjolras?” Grantaire gently touched his shoulder, and Enjolras looked up.

“My father usually runs the marathon.”

“O-oh.” Grantaire didn’t say anything else. He simply took Enjolras’ hand while they waited for Combeferre to return to the room. The others fell silent, not sure what to do or say under the circumstances.

Combeferre came back after five minutes that felt much longer than they were. “I just got off the phone with Marie. He wasn’t near the finish line when it happened, but he is stuck in the city. He’s staying with a friend. Also, Marie wants you to return her calls.”

Enjolras shook his head. “I’m glad my father isn’t hurt, but I still have no desire to speak with my parents.”
Combeferre smirked. “I figured. By the way, Feuilly. She mentioned you too for some reason. Why has Marie been calling you?”

Feuilly suddenly looked incredibly uncomfortable. “Oh, um, I’m not really sure. I’ve mostly missed her calls though. Y’know, not supposed to have my phone on when I’m at work, so…yeah.”

Enjolras regarded him in confusion. “How did she even get your number? Did you give it to her?”

“No. I was actually wondering that myself,” Feuilly muttered.

Eponine looked like she was going to die trying to suppress her giggles.

The atmosphere lightened considerably once everyone confirmed that their loved ones were safe and accounted for. After that people started dispersing. Bahorel was the first to leave, followed by Combeferre and Azelma.

Feuilly stood up and shrugged into his coat. “Did you guys still want to visit the kids?”

Eponine frowned. “I wouldn’t mind giving the boys hugs, but it’s a bit of a hike. I’d understand if you didn’t want to go.”

“No, it’s cool. Grantaire, are you coming with us still?” Feuilly asked.

Grantaire glanced over at Courfeyrac, who still looked a little rattled despite Jehan’s texts, and shook his head. “I’m gonna hang here. Can you give the kids my presents though?”

“Sure. Take care guys.” Feuilly grabbed the bag with the toys, and then he and Eponine took their leave.

“Dude, you gonna be okay?” Grantaire asked.

Courfeyrac nodded. “Yeah. Honestly, I think part of why I’m so shaken up is that we…we had a fight last night. I just kept thinking that he could have died, and the last thing I said to him was all whining and bitching.” He scrubbed a hand through his hair and let out a humorless laugh. “From now on I’m ending every fucking conversation with ‘by the way, just so you know, you’re the love of my life.’”

“That might get old quick,” Grantaire joked. “And it’s unwieldy. You should just stick with ‘I love you.’ Works well enough for me.”

Enjolras looked a bit thrown. “You and Jehan had a fight?”

“Yeah, it was stupid stuff. He said he was worried that I was bored with him, and I was feeling crabby so I put my foot in my mouth. I said that if he was really that worried, he’d be less boring and let me take him out places. And…and I threw the marathon in his face. I bitched at him about being willing to go out to Boston for the day for his high school friends, but he wouldn’t even go to a bar two blocks from his house to hear a band with me.” Courfeyrac shook his head. “It was such a stupid fight. I can’t wait until he gets back. I need to talk to him. I wish the phone service was back in Boston. I want to hear his voice.”

“He’s going to be gone all night,” Grantaire said. “Do you want me to crash with you and keep you company?”

Enjolras stiffened. “I’m not sure that’s such a good idea. Um…” He glanced between Courfeyrac and Marius, who looked confused, and Grantaire, who felt his stomach turn a little in guilt.
Courfeyrac was drinking again. Enjolras didn’t want him to spend the night in a house with alcohol in it. Which was fair. Grantaire wasn’t sure he could trust himself with easy access to wine and beer either.

“I can keep Courfeyrac company if you can’t,” Marius said, though he looked terribly confused about Enjolras’ objection, while Courfeyrac just looked suspicious.

“What’s up?” Courfeyrac asked. He turned a significant look on Grantaire. “What happened?”

“I…I had a…um, I got hammered last night.”

“Oh ‘Taire…” The disappointment in his eyes cut.

Grantaire winced and started rubbing at his arm. “I-it was a setback, not, not the start of…like, the end of sobriety. I’m not going to do it again. Okay? But Enjolras is right. If you’ve got booze I probably shouldn’t crash here.”

Courfeyrac nodded. “Yeah, that’s fair. Um…would it be cool if I spent the night with you guys then? I just…I dunno. No offense, Marius, but I kinda feel like sinking back into high school mode. Video games and South Park and comfort food and my bestie.”

Marius said he was fine, but the puppy was visibly saddened, and sporting a fresh injury and a troubled heart.

Private though he may have been, Enjolras wasn’t heartless.

That night Marius and Courfeyrac slept on couches in each of Enjolras’ living rooms. Courfeyrac fell asleep with his phone in hand, just in case Jehan texted again.

Chapter End Notes

I just wanted to let everyone know that all my friends and family are safe. No one I know was injured in the bombings. One of my friends pulled a Jehan and sheltered some stranded college kids in her apartment until they could get home, and one of my sister's friends, an EMT, spent a hellish night helping the injured. I was pretty much recording my experience on the sidelines, watching the news for updates and stalking my facebook feed for info, so the conversations in the story give the first bits of info we were hearing, not the most accurate.

As of this writing, three people have died, including an eight year old boy named Martin Richard, whose sister and mother were injured in the bombings. There are over a hundred injuries. I've heard conflicting reports on the JFK fire, but from what I've gathered, it was a mechanical fire that the police are treating as suspicious until they can positively rule it out. Some reports have said it was an explosion though.
Please keep my beloved city in your thoughts, and to those following this story who are also from the area, I hope you and your loved ones are also okay <3
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Courfeyrac and Jehan struggle a little. Enjolras pays Bridget another visit.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Grantaire padded quietly through the house, carrying two mugs of coffee and balancing a plate of toast over his crooked arm. He made his way to the seldom used second living room, set everything on the coffee table, and leaned over to poke Courfeyrac’s head.

Courfeyrac curled in on himself and threw the blanket over his head, letting out a low growl. Grantaire, feeling unusually persistent, sat down on Courfeyrac’s legs and yanked back the blanket.

“Good morning, sunshine. We need to talk before you and Marius leave for school.” Enjolras had already left an hour ago, which was when Grantaire had first woken up.

“Asshole. Give me the fucking coffee then,” Courfeyrac groaned.

Grantaire obliged, and even got off of Courfeyrac’s legs so he could sit up and drink it. After a few sips Courfeyrac looked more like his usual self. “So what’s up?”

“Are you and Jehan having problems?” Grantaire asked, in that way that meant he knew full well they were having problems and he thought it was time for Courfeyrac to spill about it.

Courfeyrac took another gulp of coffee before answering. “Really getting right to it, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know how long we have until the puppy wakes up. Dude, if you are…you coulda come and talked to me a little earlier.”

“When?” Courfeyrac asked pointedly. “When you were all twitchy from getting kidnapped and almost killed, or when you were freaking out over school, or when Enjolras was in the hospital and you were a wreck? Really, ‘Taire, when was the right time to bring up my own drama? I’m not trying to slam you, dude. I know you can’t help having all this shit going on all the time. But there hasn’t been a comfortable point to derail you and bring up my issues.”

“You and Jehan have been fighting for that long?” Grantaire asked, taken aback. Plus it was easier to fix on that then contemplate just how ridiculously dramatic his life had been as of late, and what an awful friend it had made him.

“We’re not fighting all the time, not really…but things don’t feel right.” Courfeyrac sighed and pushed some messy strands of hair out of his eyes. “Things haven’t really felt right at all since we started dating, actually. We never got to that comfortable point where you’re just hanging out and you’re friends as well as boyfriends. I always feel like I have to put my best face forward when we’re together. It’s so formal and rehearsed, and it kind of sucks. And I know he feels it too, and he doesn’t like it either, but I don’t know how to make it stop.”

Grantaire frowned, visibly puzzled. “If I can relax around Enjolras and be myself, you should be fine
around Jehan. You’re not nearly as fucked up as I am, and Jehan is so nice.”

“I know. He’s nice, and caring, and compassionate, and sensitive, and sees beauty everywhere. He’s the most beautiful creature I’ve ever met. He shouldn’t even be real. And I’m a lazy, dirty minded, foul mouthed jerk. I’ve never minded before, but he’s so good that I can’t help but be more conscious of it all. It’s like…I want to be comfortable with him, and I want him to know who I really am…but when I’m around him I don’t like who I really am.”

“I certainly know what that feels like,” Grantaire said with a slow nod. He set his mug on the coffee table and grabbed a piece of toast. “I mean, c’mon, everyone knows I’m dating up with Enjolras. At first that scared the shit out of me, but…he knows what he signed himself up for. Jehan does too. They care about us in spite of our shortcomings, Courf. Jehan has feelings for you.”

“I know he does, but it’s not like you and Enjolras,” Courfeyrac said. “You bared your soul to Enjolras. I try to keep Jehan from noticing all my flaws. I think he’d be disgusted with me if he realized what a perv I am. And if he knew how much I sleep around when I’m not in a relationship…”

“Courf, Jehan isn’t looking for a reason to judge you. Seriously, just talk to him-”

“I tried, and we got into a fight, and then he went off to the marathon and could have died. There’s not some magic solution to our issues, ‘Taire.”

Grantaire pressed his lips together and shifted backwards a little on the couch. “Sorry. Just trying to help.”

“Well you kind of suck at it. Can you just leave me alone about this for now?” Courfeyrac snapped. He stood up and started walking for the door. Grantaire felt wounded. It had been longer than he cared to think about since Courfeyrac had lashed out at him in any kind of sincerity, and he wasn’t used to it anymore. Smarting from the unexpected blow, he said something he probably shouldn’t have.

“You know, you really should just fuck your boyfriend. Bet you’d be less of an asshole if you got laid again.”

Courfeyrac’s posture stiffened. “Jehan…told you about that?”

“Oh…would it help if I said it was in confidence? Also, I think he was talking more to Enjolras than me.” Shit. Based on Courfeyrac’s gaping fish facial expression, that hadn’t been the right thing to say either.

“Enjolras knows too?” he squeaked. “Shit. Why would…why is Jehan talking to you guys about it when he won’t talk to me?”

“Wait, what?” Grantaire shook his head in disbelief. “Jehan was saying he tried to bring it up, but you didn’t want to talk about it.”

“No, that’s not true. I’ve tried to talk about getting more intimate with him and he always changes the subject.”

“Courf…why aren’t you guys sleeping together?” Grantaire asked.

Courfeyrac paced for a few seconds before answering. “Honestly…I’m not entirely sure. I definitely want to. You saw him the other day; his body’s flawless.”
“Mm hm.” His verbal diarrhea must have been subsiding, because Grantaire managed to keep from mentioning that he’d totally hit that if he’d been single and given half a chance. “So you’re in love with a really pretty poet. I’d think a few stanzas of naughty poetry and some candles to set the mood would be enough.”

“I do love him, ‘Taire. I’ve…never actually slept with someone when I was in love with them before. I think that might be the issue.”

Grantaire eyed him in some confusion. “Yeah you have. Didn’t you…no?”

Courfeyrac shook his head. “I’ve slept with crushes and infatuations, but never someone I cared about this way. And I don’t want…the last thing I want is to do something that feels casual with Jehan. He’s so much more thoughtful and deep than I am, and…it’ll be his first time. He deserves the perfect romance he must be expecting. Not some cheerful slut who’s collected casual fucks on his facebook page the way I have.”

“Dude, it’ll be different. Just by virtue of who you are and who he is, it’ll be totally different. Courf, he thinks this is his fault. You don’t want to lose him over this.”

“No, I definitely…shit.” Courfeyrac scrubbed a nervous hand through his hair. “I’ll talk to him.”

“Make sure you listen to him. I’m starting to think that that’s what the real problem is. You guys are both talking, but you have no fucking clue what the other guy is saying.”

Courfeyrac nodded. “Yeah, I guess. Um…do you think it’s okay for me to grab a shower?”

“Huh? Oh yeah, go nuts.” Grantaire got up and started folding up the blanket Courfeyrac had used. Courfeyrac threw him a smirk.

“You’ve got the privilege of speaking on behalf of Enjolras regarding who can use his shower now?”

“Well yeah. Seeing as it’s my shower too. We’re living together now.”

Grantaire couldn’t tell if Courfeyrac’s almost comical level of surprise was insulting or not. The squawk of surprise he let out made Grantaire jump though. “Dude! When the fuck did that happen and why the fuck didn’t you say anything?!”

Grantaire let out a nervous laugh and shrugged his shoulders. It really had been a long time since he and Courfeyrac had had a good talk then. “Um…he asked me about it right after he asked me if I’d be interested in marrying him sometime after graduation. Y’know, only if the Supreme Court strikes down DOMA though.”

The squeal Courfeyrac let out over that one had a concerned Marius running into the room to make sure they were both okay.

When he found Courfeyrac all-but-strangling Grantaire with an enthusiastic hug he still looked concerned, but less so. Grantaire rolled his eyes, and Courfeyrac waved Marius over to make it a group hug.

Marius still had no idea what was going on, of course, but he wasn’t the sort of guy to be bothered by trivial details like that.
Despite the reassurances of Jehan’s texts. He hadn’t noticed it; such was the relief of being in communication with his boyfriend after so much uncertainty, until it too finally eased away. This happened when he watched Jehan step off the commuter rail train and onto the platform Tuesday afternoon.

Courfeyrac rushed forward and pulled Jehan into a tight hug. Jehan returned it, kissed him warmly, and then pulled away. “Darling, you didn’t need to pick me up.”

“Oh yes I fucking did. Trust me, for my sanity I needed to see you as soon as I possibly could, and you said you didn’t want me driving to Boston to get you.”

“I take it you blew off classes for the day?” Jehan asked.

Courfeyrac nodded. He’d dropped Marius off at campus, thought about going to his first class, and then decided that it would be a waste of time as there was no way he was going to be able to focus. “I think my professors are goodly enough to roll with it. A lot of people are still really rattled by everything.”

“Mm. Understandably so, I’d say.”

Courfeyrac took Jehan’s hand while they walked to the parking lot. Jehan kept his head down, an air of melancholy surrounding him that Courfeyrac did not like seeing. He rubbed his thumb against the palm of his boyfriend’s hand, and that made him smile a little, though it wasn’t comparable to his usual warm little smiles.

“I imagine after being stuck with your parents for so long you just want to head home now?” Courfeyrac asked after they settled into his car.

Jehan shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. I don’t actually mind being at my parents’ house, but the circumstances weren’t ideal.”

“Not in the least, no. Okay…so is my place okay then?”

“Whatever you want to do is fine.”

Courfeyrac shifted in his seat. “Jehan…are you okay? I mean, sorry, that probably sounds dumb, but…you’re…I mean, you’re not injured, but…help me out here. You’re the wordsmith; you know what I’m trying to get at. I’m not used to you being so quiet.”

Jehan curled in on himself, hugging his arms. “Look, I had a really horrible day yesterday. It was long, and hard, and I want to stop thinking about it for just a little while, but I can’t because it’s everywhere. Every TV, every passerby, every Facebook post, every radio station. Just everything is shrapnel and blood and maiming and crying and hurting and I need a break.”

“Okay. Okay, I can do that for you.” Courfeyrac plugged his mp3 player in and put on music. “There. No radio. And we’ll go to my place and keep the TV off, and I won’t pressure you to talk.”

“Courf…are you okay?” Jehan asked, throwing him a concerned look.

Courfeyrac tried to answer, but he couldn’t think of what he wanted to say. He’d expected getting the chance to date someone he’d quietly admired and esteemed for as long as he’d known the boy would bring them closer together, not put such a wedge between them that he couldn’t even offer comfort to the poor guy when he clearly needed it. It was frustrating, to put it mildly, and Courfeyrac was disappointed in himself.
Then Jehan tentatively stroked the side of Courfeyrac’s face until they were making eye contact. The shy smile he offered this time was more genuine, more *him*, and Courfeyrac was able to return it. He leaned forward and captured Jehan’s lips in a much needed and incredibly reassuring kiss. Thank god doing that still felt right.

“I’m okay,” Courfeyrac breathed out, lips still brushing against Jehan’s as he spoke.

Jehan stroked Courfeyrac’s cheek with his thumb, kissed him again, and then curled up on his seat. This time his posture wasn’t defensive. He kept himself angled towards Courfeyrac as he drove, and when they walked into Courfeyrac’s apartment they were holding hands again.

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When Enjolras was six years old he decided he wanted to surprise his mother with breakfast in bed for Mother’s Day. To make it a good surprise he’d planned everything in secret, without telling even his father or the housekeeper. It meant there weren’t any adults to help him out, but he’d been confident he could pull everything off by himself.

He’d set his alarm to go off two hours before the housekeeper showed up, which was well before his parents ever stirred on a Sunday morning. Enjolras dressed himself, combed his hair, then went down to the kitchen, climbed up on the counter, and took down one of the big cookbooks his mother kept in the window to make the room look homey. He’d snuck it up to his room earlier in the week when his mother had been having one of her “juice naps” (what he would later learn was more widely referred to as sleeping it off) and found a recipe he thought looked easy enough for him to make on his own.

Easy though the recipe looked, Enjolras was still only six years old, and brilliant though he may have been, navigating the kitchen without the help of an adult, when he was still too short to reach a lot of things, and he was encountering a whole lot of words that were *not* on his sight reading list at school, turned out to be too much for him. Two hours of effort produced a horrible state of disarray in the kitchen, a blackened mess in the bottom of a frying pan, and a plate of rubbery, lightly charcoaled French toast.

He was staring at the plate mournfully trying not to cry when Yvette walked into the room. She was in the process of tying on her apron, and then she saw the state the kitchen was in. “Oh my.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll clean everything up. I was just trying to…” He motioned hopelessly to the plate. “It’s Mother’s Day. I wanted to…to…”

“Oh sweetheart.” Yvette let out a warm chuckle and ran a hand through his hair. He scrunched his face up at her, as he’d managed to keep his golden curls neat and tidy despite his adventure in the kitchen, but that only made the housekeeper laugh even more. “Enjorlas, I’m sure your mother will appreciate the effort you made.”

“You really think so?” Enjolras asked.

Yvette nodded. “I’m sure of it. Any mother I know would be blown away if they saw their little man go through so much work to show their love for her. Here, let’s get this on a tray. We’ll add a pretty flower and some orange juice, and you can let her know that I’ll have her usual breakfast on the table when she’s ready.”

“That’s a good idea. Then she’ll know I tried, at least.”

Yvette helped him set the tray up and then carried it up the stairs for him. He took it back from her once they got to his parents’ bedroom, so Yvette had to knock on the door for him. Paul sleepily
called out, giving Enjolras the okay to go inside. Yvette whispered a quick “Good luck” and then went back downstairs. Enjolras pushed the door open and walked up to his parents’ bed.

Paul was sitting up and rubbing at his eyes, but Marie was flat on her stomach with her head turned away from him. Paul peered at Enjolras in some confusion, then let out a loud yawn. “Enjolras? What’s all that?”

“I… I tried to make Mama breakfast in bed. It didn’t work very well, but…”

Paul smiled. His smiles were rare, at least, the ones without any cruelty or mocking in them were, so Enjolras did his best to commit the moment to memory.

“That was very thoughtful of you, son. Marie, get up.” Paul roughly shook her shoulder and she let out a rattling snore.

“Huh? Whasha…”

“Marie, get up. It’s Mother’s Day. Enjolras has a present for you.”

Enjolras jogged around to the other side of the bed as quickly as he was able without spilling the orange juice. “Happy Mother’s Day.” He held out the tray and offered his mother a shy smile, sure after the way Yvette and Paul responded that she’d be pleased at his efforts.

It was too much to hope for. Marie took one look at the mess on the plate and screwed her face up in disgust. “You’re not expecting me to eat that, are you?”

Enjolras barely had time to register the hurtful comment before he was flinching away from his father’s raised voice. “Really Marie? Really? Your six year old son miraculously brings you a plate of food he cooked himself, unsupervised, without burning our damn house down, and that’s what you have to say?”

“Oh, it’s well and good for you to be Mr. Perfect Dad right now, but you’re not the one expected to eat that crap, now are you? Speaking of which, are you going to make some awful half burnt half I don’t even know what you did to that bread for your dad on Father’s Day, or am I the only one who has to suffer like this? Well? Enjolras, answer me!”

Enjolras bit his lip and looked away. “I did my best.”

“Well you failed, Enjolras. And I don’t appreciate being woken up to that garbage either. I’m going back to bed, and the next time I open my eyes I expect to see real food.”

Tears welled in Enjolras’ eyes. He tried to blink them back, but that only made them slide down his cheeks all the faster. He was so angry he was shaking. Yvette had said that a good mother would thank him for trying, not make him feel ashamed.

He threw the tray on the carpet and ran from the room.

That was the only time Enjolras had tried to cook for his mother. In a fit of directionless defiance, Enjolras had mastered french toast when he was in high school. He kept practicing, looking up dozens upon dozens of recipes and combining the aspects he liked best from all of them until he’d learned how to make the best french toast anyone had ever eaten. And just because he was still bitter all those years later, he never once cooked it for his parents.

The dish had developed a special meaning for him though, so he cooked it for the people that really mattered to him. Freshman year, when Jehan made him his first home cooked birthday cupcakes, he
returned the favor by making him a birthday breakfast. Every time Combeferre got dumped (because
the poor guy never seemed to be the one to do the dumping) Enjolras made him french toast in an
effort to cheer him up. Most recently, he’d cooked it for Grantaire for breakfast in bed on Valentine’s
Day morning…

And now he had the ingredients sitting in a bag on the seat next to him while he drove to his friend’s
childhood home.

He showed up on Bridget’s front doorstep, the real one as he still felt a bit weird walking into her
kitchen, and rang the bell. Bridget looked a bit surprised to see him, even more so when she realized
he was alone, but she waved him inside all the same. “I was just tidying up the kitchen.”

“Ah. I was hoping to speak to you about something while in that room.”

“Oh. Of course, dear. Right this way.” She led him through the living room and on into the true
gathering place of her home. Enjolras set his bag on the counter and started unpacking it while he
explained the purpose of his visit.

“When we first met the other day, I made the observation that you’re the sort of person who shows
their affection for others in home cooked meals. I owe you quite a bit of gratitude, so I was hoping
you’d let me return the favor by preparing the only meal I’m any good at making. I’d have brought a
container of finished french toast with me, but it doesn’t travel well.”

“Oh. Sweetheart, that sounds lovely. I can’t remember the last time anyone’s cooked for me.”

Enjolras paused. “…really?”

“Well, generally people prefer to sit back and let me do the cooking. Now, while you’re preparing
everything, would you mind telling me what you’re feeling so grateful about? It’s…not what I think
it is, is it?”

Enjolras put a lot more concentration into measuring out his vanilla milk than he usually bothered
with. “Grantaire got drunk the other night. He stole a bottle of wine from you.”

“I’d hoped I’d just misplaced it. Oh dear. I’m sorry. I should have called you as soon as I noticed it
was gone.”

“It’s alright. He’d hidden it. It wouldn’t have stopped him, anyway. He’s…he’s got a disease. It’s
going to take time and effort for him to overcome it. Anyway…I think I only handled the shock and
disappointment of it as gracefully as I did because of our conversation. Your advice and support
helped me support him in turn. I appreciate it.”

Bridget smiled at him, and there was only a little sadness to it. “I’m glad I was helpful. How’s my
boy doing now? He’s still determined to quit, right?”

“Oh yes. And I made him promise to come to me if he’s ever feeling that tempted again, no matter
what the circumstances. I was very careful not to judge him.”

“Good boy, Enjolras. It must have been hard.”

Enjolras nodded, again taking an inordinate amount of care in adding just the right amount of nutmeg
to his batter. “It’s very difficult, knowing he’s in pain and that there’s only so much I can do to help
him.”

“What’s he up to now? Not to offend, dear, but I was rather surprised to see you alone.”
He’d expected that. “Grantaire’s out with our friend Eponine. Considering I came here to talk to you about him… I figured it was best to come without him and keep the visit to myself.”

“Ah.”

Bridget gave his arm a little squeeze, then went to sit at the table and waited, giving him space while he cooked. She chatted with him about lighter things; some volunteer work she did with her church, polite inquiries about Enjolras’ school work, and some amusing anecdotes about Courfeyrac’s childhood that he likely would have objected to having his friends know about (if he’d been present to hear them, anyway).

Bridget whipped up homemade hot chocolates with fresh whipped cream to go with the breakfast-for-supper meal, and the two coconspirators ate in a companionable silence. Enjolras didn’t explain the full significance of cooking the french toast for her, but he was still pleased to add Bridget to his list of Pain Perdu recipients.

The next few days passed pleasantly enough for the college boys and their high school friends. Jehan, Joly, and Legle were pretty rattled from their experience of the bombing, but their friends helped them overcome it. Joly and Legle hadn’t been near the blasts themselves; Joly had run through the crowds to offer his skills and training for the benefit of the victims (Legle had then panicked, as Joly had moved too fast for him to keep up, and they’d lost track of each other for almost an hour).

Jehan, on the other hand, had been at the finish line. Luck had prevented him from getting injured or worse. He’d stepped out of the crowd to buy a bottle of water and use the bathroom five minutes before the first bomb had gone off. People he’d been chatting with while they waited for their respective runners were in the hospital. One of his old friends from high school had lost her right leg from the knee down.

But still. The friends were a good support system for each other, and Courfeyrac seemed almost supernaturally attuned to Jehan’s fluctuating moods. He anticipated seemingly sudden fits of sadness and grief with perfectly timed comforting hugs and thoughtful caresses. He even woke up a few minutes before Jehan started awake at night, one time meeting him with a mug of tea.

Jehan had stared at him as though he weren’t real.

“I just had a feeling,” Courfeyrac mumbled. Truth be told, he was freaked out by everything Jehan had told him and it was wreaking havoc with his own sleep, but he knew better than to admit that while he was the one giving comfort.

By Friday things were starting to feel a little bit normal again. Then their home turned back into the plot of a hackneyed action movie.

As they had Monday afternoon, the friends all made their way to Courfeyrac’s house. With a wary eye on his boyfriend, Courfeyrac turned on the local news, and the friends gathered with their open laptops to watch for updates on the hunt for the surviving bombing suspect.

“Huh. Did anyone expect Chechnyans? I mean seriously, is Chechnya even on anyone’s radar anymore?” Bahorel asked.

“I think Chechnya’s on Russia’s radar,” Feuilly said coldly. He let out a long suffering sigh. “God. I hope they’re not Muslim. This is going to kick up a whole world of shit for American Muslims no matter what, because bigots are too stupid to differentiate between cultures, but it might help a little if
these psychopaths were any other religion.”

“They could be atheists,” Courfeyrac said brightly, and Grantaire whapped his arm.

“Or agnostics,” Grantaire countered, sticking his tongue out at his friend.

“Is anyone else concerned about the way the government’s turned Boston, Watertown, and the surrounding communities into a police state?” Enjolras asked suddenly, cutting off a half-assed slap fight between Courfeyrac and Grantaire.

“What’s the alternative?” Bahorel asked. “They’ve got to find this guy, Enj.”

“But they’re setting a precedent.”

“It’s something to keep an eye on, but there’s no evidence anyone’s rights are being violated,” Combeferre pointed out. “So far everything I’ve read says that the police and the FBI are asking for civilian cooperation. I think when they’re searching houses and telling people to stay indoors, everyone’s doing it voluntarily.”

“That’s the impression I’m getting too,” Feuilly said.

Legle leaned over Combeferre’s shoulder to look at the article he was reading. “Wow. That would be what you guys worry about when there’s a bomb making, cop shooting terrorist hiding out a couple towns away from us.”

“Precedent based law system,” Enjolras near-growled, but most of his friends rolled their eyes at him.

People filtered in and out throughout the day. Their city wasn’t actually in lockdown, and it seemed to be taking the police for fucking ever to find the nineteen year old terrorist.

As it got later and later, Bahorel got disproportionately antsy and short-tempered while the rest of them started to get bored with the repetitive news reports. Grantaire finally asked him about it.

“What’s got your panties in a twist?”

“’Taire, don’t you realize what it means if this guy gets away?”

“Uh…I mean, I guess he could strike again, but I was kinda thinking that his older brother was the mastermind of the operation, and the cops already killed him.”

“I’m not worried about future acts of terror. I’m worried about them not taking the city off of fucking lockdown!” Bahorel snapped. “Boston Comic Con is supposed to be tomorrow, but they can’t hold the con if the fucking Hynes Center is closed!”

Everyone shot him confused or slightly concerned looks. “Bahorel…I’m not sure your priorities are exactly where they should be, my friend…” Combeferre said carefully.

“Fuck this noise. Do you know how many crunches I did for my Starfire costume this year? And I was supposed to be taking Eponine’s little brothers to the show with me on Sunday. They cannot cancel the con, not after all of this. That’d be letting the terrorists win.”

Grantaire frowned and leaned forward on his elbows. “Shit. I paid for a table by myself in artist alley this year. Do you think they’ll refund me if they do have to cancel?”

“You got a table?” Enjolras said, surprised.

“Yeah. I did one last year too, but I went halfsies with a girl from my Form and Design class. I made
two hundred in profit last year, and I was just going on a whim. I kinda had some hopes for this year.”

At least Enjolras wasn’t the only one staring at him now. “I had no idea you made money selling your art.”

Grantaire looked a little embarrassed by the attention. “It’s not really my art. It’s just fan art and commissions. But the money is pretty good. I was going to hand out business cards this time and everything. Y’know, so people can email me for commissions after the con too.”

“Guys, they caught him!” Marius yelled, at the exact same time Bahorel let out a wail of displeasure at seeing a facebook post announcing the postponement of Boston Comic Con.

The celebrations and patriotic pride in their city was tamped a bit by Bahorel and Grantaire’s displeasure at having their con pushed back to sometime in the vague future. Still though, there were more important things going on, and overall everyone was happy to hear that the second suspect was taken alive and therefore able to be questioned.

They were still celebrating that when Joly announced the sobering news that the cop that had died in the shootout with the terrorists Thursday night had gone to their college. “Sean Collier,” Joly read. “Salem State University, class of 2009.”

“I was still in school in 2009,” Feuilly muttered. He’d had to drop out for financial hardship, but he’d been able to take a few semesters before he’d reached that point. “Shit. I wonder if I ever saw him on campus.”

“He was in criminal justice and you took, what, social work? Probably not. I suppose you could have had some core classes together though,” Courfeyrac said. “It’s still weird to think about.”

“One of my coworkers went to high school with the twenty nine year old that was killed in the bombings,” Joly said.

“My Mom goes to church with some ladies that are friends with the family of the little boy that was killed,” Courfeyrac added. “God, this is just so fucking weird. This shit isn’t supposed to happen in real life. Not to people we know.”

“I’m gonna get going,” Bahorel announced. “If I don’t have a purple metal bikini to squeeze into tomorrow then I’m going to treat myself to some long overdue cheese fries. Anyone wanna come with?”

Legle shot a hopeful look Joly’s way, and he did his best to convey ‘heart disease’ in a disapproving stare of his own. Legle looked between his scowling boyfriend and Bahorel’s departing form, then finally bounded off towards the door. “I’ll come with you!”

Joly rolled his eyes, but followed after the two of them.

After another twenty minutes or so it was just Courfeyrac, Marius, and Jehan sitting in the living room. The three of them chatted, careful to keep the topic of conversation away from anything with weight and importance, until eventually Marius asked if Jehan was spending the night again.

Jehan threw Courfeyrac a smile that he found nothing short of radiant, and then nodded.

Jehan borrowed a pair of pajama pants and a t-shirt from his boyfriend. They settled into a nice cuddle in bed, and for the first time all week, both of them slept soundly through the night.
If anyone's interested, Governor Patrick and Mayor Menino set up the One Fund to raise money for people affected by the bombing. I already made my donation through the Boston Celtics shop. They sold a special t-shirt for $26.20 (the Boston marathon is 26.2 miles) with 100% of the cost going to the One Fund. Personally, I think that's the best way to wear my Boston colors right now. Here's the website for the One Fund: https://secure.onefundboston.org/page/-/donate4.html and this is for the Celtics t-shirt: http://www.celticsstore.com/adidas-celtics-boston-stands-as-one-t-shirt-greenbr-all-proceeds-to-one-fund-boston/detail.php?p=450699&v=celtics_apparel_t-shirts
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Bossuet gets out of getting a job. Enjolras has a confrontation with his parents that's been a long time coming.

Chapter Notes

Alright guys, I did something this chapter that's going to make quite a few of you incredibly happy. And, because I'm me and this thing is apparently a fucking soap opera, I also did something really awful to poor Combeferre and Enjolras. So prepare yourselves for some emotional whiplash.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘Alright Feuilly, this is it. You're really going to bring it up today.’ He did his best to psych himself up, but then, as usual, as soon as he walked through the door his resolve crumbled.

Joly cheerfully smiled at him as he walked in. He was holding a bag of groceries and heading towards the kitchen. “Hey roomie! We’re doing a taco night. If you want in, I picked up that guacamole you like.”

“Oh…yeah, sure.”

“We’re going to catch up on Community while we eat. Have you seen any episodes from the new season? It’s actually still good even though they forced Harmon out,” Legle chimed in. He was sitting on the couch folding scrubs, which meant he and Joly had gotten through their couple spat for the day and would simply be cheerful good company for the night. Easygoing though Joly habitually was, he got downright pissy when the laundry wasn’t done, and it was pretty much the only thing he expected his boyfriend to do to pull his weight.

Once again, Feuilly decided against having the talk with them in favor of munchies and TV time. Then his phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out and opened a text from Eponine. ‘Quit being a corwd :P’

Smirking, Feuilly felt his resolve return. “Hey, guys, before taco night can we have a talk?”

“What’s up?” Legle asked.

“Is it anything we need to be concerned about?” Joly added.

“Um…well it’s not really bad, but it is important.” He followed Joly into the kitchen, went over to the fridge, and grabbed a soda for himself. Legle put the laundry down and joined the two of them. “So you know how Eponine’s trying to get custody of her brothers?”

“Yeah. Has she figured something out?” Joly asked. “Is it something we can help with? What’s the
plan?"

Feuilly sighed. “There’s not much of a plan in place yet, but...okay. So, we were thinking that if she got a roommate then once she graduates and can get more hours, or maybe a better job or at least a second one, she’ll be able to get a good enough apartment to satisfy the state. It’ll still be a longshot, because she won’t have much free time for childcare, but if she applies for some assistance programs and stuff...she might be able to get custody. So...so she really needs a roommate.”

“Yeah, definitely. I can ask people at work if they know anyone who’s looking,” Joly offered. He’d begun fussing with the stove and was in the process of cooking up the meat for their tacos while they chatted.

Legle leaned against the counter next to his boyfriend but fixed his attention on Feuilly. “And I can ask around at school too. I mean, I’m not sure I know anyone who likes kids enough to live with three of them, but I'll do anything to help Ponine.”

“Actually, I was thinking that I could be Eponine’s roommate,” Feuilly said. He glanced warily between the two of them. Joly seemed to get the full significance of the statement first, based on his expression, but Legle was the first to comment.

“Kay, there’s definitely not enough space in here for us, three boys, and Eponine...wait. What are you planning, exactly?”

“Well, I mean, we know this place splits easily enough between two people. So if you guys officially move in together...y’know. You’ll be fine. And then me and Eponine can get a place and I can help her take care of the boys.”

“We can’t afford this place without you,” Legle snapped. Joly quirked an eyebrow.

“We could afford this place incredibly easily if you got a job.”

And there it was. Feuilly had just kicked off a couple-fight and that had been the last thing he wanted to do.

Although really, at this point it was hard to have sympathy for Legle. Feuilly had been busting his ass for as long as he could remember, whereas Legle had been coasting for as long as Feuilly had known the guy. He liked Legle, really he did, but he couldn’t help but feel some of the man’s famed “bad luck” was really just laziness and more contentment with his lot than good sense dictated he should have. He was so comfortable just sitting back and laughing at his misfortunes that he never did anything to turn his luck around. Hence, when his dorm room turned out to be a total nightmare, rather than complain to the school and possibly get a new room he just accepted homelessness and mooching off of his boyfriend. And if Feuilly was frustrated with Legle, Joly, who was the one doing the most work to support him, had to be fed up too.

Legle frowned and rubbed at the back of his neck. “Um...yeah, I guess I could do that. But...” He mumbled something inaudible.

Joly put his hands on his hips. “Do you have a way to finish that sentence? Bossuet?”

“N-not as such, no. I think you’d hit me if I said I just don’t want to.”

“No he wouldn’t,” Feuilly said. “Joly’s much too much of a sweetheart. Me, on the other hand...”

“Yeah, Feuilly, you can’t move out! I need you to smack the shit out of Bossuet and be my enforcer when he tries to charm me out of standing up for myself.”
“You could grow a spine,” Feuilly joked, glad they’d found a way to settle into their usual easy dynamic.

“I suppose. But it’d be much easier if you just stayed with us,” Joly whined. Legle nodded his agreement.

“Ah, well, guess I’d better tell Eponine to go fuck herself then.”

Joly sighed. “I guess you can’t do that. Fine, move out. We’ll still be friends.”

Legle took a melodramatic flop into a kitchen chair. “Is the nursing home still hiring?”

“Yeah. They always need people for the kitchen.”

Legle looked less than thrilled with that employment prospect, but he was sensible enough not to complain about it.

Joly continued moving about in the kitchen, cooking up ingredients for the taco night, and Feuilly pitched in by chopping up veggies and putting them in bowls. Everything felt normal enough, but he still didn’t trust it. “You guys aren’t mad at me, are you?”

“Of course not,” Joly quickly assured him.

“Frankly, I’m surprised the both of you have put up with my mooching as long as you have.”

“And you’re not even getting sex out of the bargain,” Joly added with a laugh. Feuilly pulled a face at them, then turned his attention back to the cutting board. “Besides, much as I’ve enjoyed having you as a roommate, and really I have…we’re probably past the point in our relationship where we should be living together on our own.”

“Mm,” Legle agreed. “The six year’s getting close. I’m working up some good ideas for how to celebrate.”

Joly’s cheeks went a bit pink. He took the seasoned hamburger off the burner and started aggressively sifting it with the spatula. “So when are you and Eponine planning on moving?”

“Probably not until July. She’s going to stay part time at Brammer Street until she finishes with high school, and she thinks she’ll need at least a month to figure out her employment situation after that. I think she’ll probably need a few months though, so August or September is more realistic.”

“Ah. So we’ve got time then. Good.”

“Bossuet, you can still get a job before September.”

He thunked his head against the table and gave an exaggerated groan. Feuilly and Joly both started to tease him for his lack of work ethic when he suddenly sat up straight and turned a playful look on Feuilly. “So are you going to confront your sexual tension with Ponine before or after you move in together?”

Feuilly’s face fell. He was used to his friends giving him shit for all manner of things, but no one had ever poked fun at his crush before. He wasn’t even aware his friends had noticed his developing feelings for Eponine. “Uh…”

“Oh come on, Feuilly. You’ve been a bit obvious about liking her,” Joly said with a playful smile.

“Have I?”
“Yeah, kind of,” Legle said. “Well, maybe not very obvious. Some of the other guys probably haven’t noticed, but we do kind of live with you.”

“I think it’s cute how you drop everything and run out to see her whenever she texts you,” Joly said. He picked up the bowl of taco meat and brought it into the living room. Feuilly followed after with the bowls of lettuce and tomato he’d prepared, leaving Legle to carry the cheese, tub of guacamole, and the taco shells.

“You haven’t made your observations generally known, have you?” Feuilly asked.

Legle plopped down on the couch and shrugged his shoulders. “I can’t remember bringing it up. Have you said anything Jol?”

“No. I didn’t think you were ready to talk about it yet.” He threw Legle a significant look that he missed.

“Oh, wait! We did talk about it the other night. Me and Grantaire…oh shit, no, that was the other way around.”

“What?” Feuilly asked, thoroughly confused.

“Sorry, we weren’t talking about you liking Eponine. We were talking about Eponine liking you. I had it backwards. Grantaire’s pretty sure Eponine’s been flirting with you.”

“O-oh.” Feuilly reached to start making a taco, hoping his friends wouldn’t give him too much shit for the pleased little smile he couldn’t suppress. “I suppose Grantaire would know.”

“So you do like her then?” Joly asked.

“I’d say it’s obvious he does.”

“I wasn’t talking to you, Mr. Clean. Feuilly, you do like Eponine?”

Feuilly slowly nodded. “Very much, yes. That’s part of the reason I want to help her so badly. I know what it’s like to struggle. Thankfully, I’ve only struggled for my own welfare, not for the welfare of younger siblings who were dependent on me, but all the same, I’d like to save her from any suffering I can.”

“That’s really sweet!” Joly said with a cheesy smile. Legle rolled his eyes. “But um…if you do like her that much, living together’s probably not the best idea in the world. I mean, you guys aren’t actually dating, y’know? When you live together, it kind of changes the dynamic. If you want to start a relationship then you’ll need some distance from each other every now and then while it’s developing. Otherwise every little thing she does is going to drive you batshit.”

“Don’t hold back, Joly. How do you really feel?” Legle asked sarcastically. “You’re not exactly a perfect roommate, you know.”

“Mm. He leaves hairs all over the shower,” Feuilly teased. Legle reached over and smacked his arm.

“I don’t do anything of the kind!” Joly screeched, missing the joke. “I always wipe the shower down after I use it. Do you know how unhygienic it is to let water sit like…oh, you were making fun of him for being bald, weren’t you?”

“Quick as ever, love.”
“Shut up.”

For the next few minutes they were each busy fixing tacos for themselves. Legle cast an assessing glance around the room, then finally reached for the remote and queued up an episode of Community. “We good to start?”

“Uh…just one more thought about the whole me and Eponine thing,” Feuilly said. “Do you guys think, um…that Combeferre…”

“He definitely likes her too,” Joly said.

“Yeah. Boy’s gotten positively stupid over her,” Legle agreed.

Feuilly let out a sigh. Not only did he not want to compete against one of his friends for a girl, he also couldn’t see Eponine picking an impoverished professional Bingo caller over a guy like Combeferre. She’d said she wasn’t interested in him, but common sense would catch up with her eventually.

“You can start the episode. I don’t want to fucking think about this anymore,” Feuilly muttered bitterly.

Legle shot Joly a look, the couple traded some kind of silent communication, and then they proceeded with their evening of tacos and TV as though no difficult conversations had been had. With the knowledge that they had a finite number of evenings like these in the future, the three friends made the most of it and appreciated each other’s company.

The next morning Feuilly met Eponine for coffee and told her the good news.

“So no one freaked out?” she asked matter of factly.

Feuilly stirred some cream into his coffee and sighed. “No, no one freaked out. I still think it was perfectly reasonable of me to be nervous though.”

“Come on sweetie, it’s not like you’re not giving them any notice,” Eponine returned. She started idly flipping through a plastic dessert menu on their table. “I was looking at some prices on Craig’s List. Where exactly were you thinking of looking for a place? Because two nearly minimum wage incomes still doesn’t get a lot around here.”

“No, it really doesn’t. We’ll have to be vigilant about it if we want to snag a good deal. The cost of living in Massachusetts is ridiculous.”

“Yep.”

They chatted about their respective jobs for a few minutes, then Eponine’s phone started blowing up with texts. She cast it a casual glance for the first one, her face scrunched up in distaste, then she turned it facedown on the table and pointedly ignored the subsequent texts. Feuilly let it go for about ten or eleven texts before he asked her about it.

Eponine scrubbed a hand through her hair and sighed, sliding down in the booth a little. “Urgh…you know how I said I was pretty sure Combeferre was going to ask me out?”

 “…yeah.” Feuilly tried his best for a neutral expression.

Eponine waved at her phone and then folded her arms across her chest. “We talked. He’s…taking it
“Really? That doesn’t seem like him.”

Eponine shrugged her shoulders and continued fiddling with her hair. “It’s probably my fault. I do like the guy, after all, so I didn’t want to hurt his feelings. I didn’t give him the straightforward rejection he deserves and…I think I might have just confused him.”

“He. False hope.” Feuilly turned a pensive look at her phone. “Shouldn’t you take one of those and, y’know, clear it up for him?”

“More coffee first.”

That was probably fair.

Eventually Eponine’s phone quieted down and they were able to have a pretty decent discussion about the boys. Eponine showed off a drawing she’d been given by Little R to hand off to Grantaire, and then she had to leave for a shift at the café. Feuilly dropped her off at the bus stop, then went home to grab a nap. He had an odd late shift at the nursing home, as his boss was throwing an open house to show off the “new and revitalized” activities department (technically it was always new, as the activities staff had an incredibly high turn around rate).

Feuilly walked into the living room, kicking his boots off andshrugging out of extraneous clothing as he went. He tripped over the jeans around his knees when he heard a wolf whistle from the doorway leading to the bathroom.

He landed flat on his face, pushed up onto his elbows, and gaped at the half naked woman leaning against the doorway. She laughed, pleasant round face lighting up from her mirth. “So you’re Feuilly, I take it? Man, the boys said you were friendly, but I had no idea…” The stranger was only wearing a towel and a bra, with another towel around her shoulders to catch droplets from her dripping hair.

“Who’re you?” Feuilly asked, struggling to get his jeans back up.

“And of course they didn’t tell you I was coming to stay.” She shook her head, still grinning with amusement. “I’m Musichetta. I’m replacing you when you move out.”

“And you’re here…now?”

Musichetta shrugged. “What can I say? Legle really doesn’t want to get a job.” She sauntered the rest of the way into the living room, toweling off her hair as she went, and dropped onto the couch. “It’s nice to finally meet you though. I like what I’ve creeped so far on facebook.”

“And uh huh. Um…I’ve got to, I’ve got work later so…yeah. Nice meeting you.” Feuilly grabbed the articles of clothing he’d already completely shed, raced into his room, and slammed the door shut.

Musichetta let out another little giggle. “Oh dear. That probably could have gone better.” She grabbed her phone out of her purse and informed the boys through text that she’d met their roommate.

Enjolras parked his car behind the convertible Marie must have just taken out of the garage with the recent shift towards sunny weather. He couldn’t remember if that was the same convertible his mother had been driving last year or not, but decided it didn’t matter either way. However many cars she had, collecting them the way she did was a waste of resources, whatever the actual number was.
He took a look at his much loathed childhood home, scowled, and got out of the car. He’d been ignoring his parents for as long as he thought he could get away with it, but now his father was leaving him ominous voicemails too. If he really didn’t want to get cut off again he had to get the confrontation over as quickly as possible and then get on his way again.

At least he’d have Grantaire waiting for him when he got home. When he’d left, his lover had been snuggled in the blankets watching a Simpsons DVD. It had been harder than Enjolras cared to admit to tear himself away from the comfortable scene, especially when he had this to look forward to.

He walked up to the door, rang the bell, and waited. Yvette let him in. The poor woman looked slightly traumatized. She cast a wide eyed look at him, shook her head, and then stepped aside. “Be careful, hon. You know how many years I’ve been working for your family, and God as my witness, I have never seen your father in a mood like this one before.”

“Really.” He was much more intrigued than horrified. Yvette tried once more to convey the seriousness of the situation to him, but she couldn’t get Enjolras to share her misgivings about his parents’ lack of domestic tranquility. Frankly, he’d started wishing they’d get a divorce when he’d first learned what the word meant.

Yvette put her coat on and ran out the front door. Clearly she meant business, if she’d ended her shift early to avoid their confrontation. More curious than ever, Enjolras walked through the house until he found his mother in the den. She was sitting on the couch with her arms crossed over her chest, eyes red rimmed but clear.

Huh. It was past noon on a weekend. She was usually smashed by now.

“Hello dear,” she whispered in a choked voice he barely recognized.

“Hi Mom. Are you…are you okay?” He couldn’t even remember the last time he’d felt sympathy for her. Yvette was right. Whatever was going on was serious, and it was finally starting to unnerve him.

Marie mustered a small, unconvincing smile. “I’m…unable to answer that, actually. Let’s just get this over with. I’ll let your father know you’re here.” She picked up her phone and texted him.

That was actually probably pretty practical, considering the size of the house. Enjolras shrugged out of his coat and sat down across from her in an armchair.

After a few minutes Paul banged the double doors open stormed across the room. He remained standing, eyes blazing with anger and betrayal as he looked between his wife and son. “So? What do you have to say for yourselves?”

“He doesn’t know, Paul.”

“The hell he doesn’t know! Don’t tell me he doesn’t know!” Paul thundered.

Enjolras gave an involuntary shudder. He tried not to outwardly show it, but when Paul’s moods overtook him like this he was terrifying and Enjolras was human enough to be unnerved. After all, he remembered spending a summer with a cast on his wrist from “a bad tumble down some stairs” when he was ten.

“He doesn’t! Paul, I swear, this had nothing to do with Enjolras. It was my own indiscretion, so don’t take it out on-”

Paul shut her up with a backhand that knocked her to the ground. Enjolras shot to his feet and dove between his parents. “Get the hell away from her!”
“You really don’t know, do you?” Paul asked. He let out a bitter laugh that was just as disquieting as his shouts had been.

Marie remained on the floor, sobbing into her arm. “I told you, you miserable bastard! It’s not Enjolras’ fault, it’s just mine. Just leave him alone!”

“What the hell’s going on?” Enjolras shouted.

“Tell him, Marie. Tell Enjolras what you’ve been doing with his school friends.”

“What?” Enjolras looked at his mother in confusion. “I’d heard you’d tried to call Feuilly, but he said he wasn’t taking your calls. Mom, what’s going on?”

Marie let out a loud sob. “I just wanted some attention, that’s all. I was flirting, okay?”

“You were sending him naked pictures, you stupid slut. That’s not flirting!” Paul moved to hit her again, but Enjolras caught his arm and forced him back. Paul calmed a little when he saw his son straining against him. He shook Enjolras off of him, then patted at his own hair, moving a few stray strands back into place and trying to look as dignified as he could despite his rage-fit. “Anyway, I don’t know why I’m as surprised by this as I am. It’s not like this is the first time you’ve gone whoring yourself around to strange young men.”

Marie struggled up to her knees and sobbed loudly, staring at her husband with tear filled eyes. “I’m sorry, Paul, I’m sorry. But you promised to try harder! You promised, and you’re still working all those hours and you don’t even try to hide your contempt for me. You make me hate myself so much! Of course I’ve been looking for comfort.”

“And so you decided to use our son’s friends as your little harem.”

“Dad, Feuilly would never-”

“Paul, please, I didn’t actually do anything with him. It was just harmless fun. You’ve got to believe me.”

“Why in the hell should I believe you?” Paul yelled, making both his wife and son flinch. “It’s not like this is the first time you’ve fucked one of Enjolras’ friends!”

Marie fell backwards as though he’d struck her again, crying out in anguish.

Enjolras felt like he’d been hit too. “Wh-what?”

“Eponine, um, I don’t mean to bother you…but we’re really not supposed to be using our phones while we’re working.”

“Put a sock in it, Pontmercy. I’ll put my phone away if a customer actually comes in.”

Marius actually looked a little wounded by the sharp jest, so Eponine stuck her tongue out to let the puppy know she’d been joking. God, but he would have made an exhausting boyfriend. Not for the first time since she’d become better friends with Marius, she silently wished Cosette luck.

As soon as Marius was distracted with cleaning out the coffeemakers, Eponine turned back to her phone. As it turned out, the texts from Combeferre had nothing to do with their awkward as ass late night conversation, but everything to do with the poor kid needing a friend. Eponine chewed her lip, and read over his summary of a recent fight with Enjolras.
“Why did he pick me though?” Eponine muttered to herself. She was grateful Combeferre didn’t want to avoid her or anything, but it still struck her as a bit odd that he’d reached out to her like this less than twenty four hours after she’d rejected him. Maybe she’d been better at it than she’d thought. She’d certainly heard enough rejections recently that she’d gotten an idea of what sounded cliché and trite and what actually made you feel better.

Eponine texted him back and offered to meet up with him when she got out of work, but he declined. Apparently he had to go and have it out with Enjolras again.

“Eponine, we have a customer,” Marius hissed.

Eponine jumped. “Oh. Sorry, um…can you handle it? I just need another minute.”

Marius looked at her in some concern. “Is everything okay?”

“I think so, but considering our friends you never really know, do you?”

“I suppose not. Head into the bathroom though. I’ll handle the customer.”

Eponine spent a good ten minutes trading texts with Combeferre, and when she went back into the main room the café was empty again. Marius was refilling the glass jars they kept their tea bags in.

“So what’s going on? Or are you not at liberty to say?”

“I…I think I can say, since I don’t really know a whole hell of a lot. Enjolras and Combeferre had some big fight today,” Eponine said with a puzzled frown. She scrolled through her texts, as though reading them back again would clear everything up. “He wouldn’t tell me what it was about, he just said that it was serious and he wished it would go away.”

“Wow. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Enjolras and Combeferre fight before. Did you get any idea what it was over?” Marius asked.

Eponine frowned. “I…I’ve got an idea. Kay, so you know how when Grantaire was kidnapped Combeferre was the one to bring me and Enjolras to the police station so we could talk to the detectives?”

Marius nodded. “Yeah. Enjolras came over to me and Courf’s after, and he looked really out of it. It was a good thing he couldn’t drive.”

“Well…see, the thing was we were both freaking out really badly and, um…Combeferre picked me.”

Marius didn’t seem to understand. “Picked you for what?”

“He dropped Enjolras off with Feuilly and then he comforted me. He knew we both needed help, and he picked me over his best friend. I…I don’t know that that’s what they’re fighting about, but if it were me…I’d be mad at Combeferre over that. And I wouldn’t be surprised if Enjolras hated me again.”

“Eponine, I’m sure that’s not it,” Marius said reassuringly. He didn’t have anything to follow that up with though.

As it turns out, Eponine was wrong. Combeferre and Enjolras had fought about something else entirely, and Grantaire was the unlucky member of their clique to be the first to find out about it.
Grantaire was in the bedroom not-drinking (he wasn’t doing anything, really, but the important part was that he was sober while he wasn’t doing anything) when he heard the front door open. He bounded out of bed and ran through the apartment. It was the weekend before finals. Enjolras was supposed to be home all day studying and working on projects, but he’d disappeared that morning at noon to run an errand and Grantaire hadn’t heard a peep from him since.

He was irrationally worried, and needy besides. “Where the hell have you been? You could have fucking texted…back…” He dropped off when he saw how miserable his lover looked. “En-Jenjolras?”

Enjolras turned a haunted stare Grantaire’s way, gave himself a little shake, then walked through the room without saying anything. It was definitely not the most encouraging start to a conversation they might have had.

Grantaire followed after him and met him in the bedroom. Still wearing his shoes and coat, Enjolras had curled into a fetal position on the bed. Hesitating only a second longer, Grantaire crawled into bed behind him and wrapped his arms protectively around his boyfriend.

For a long few minutes, Grantaire silently held Enjolras, steeling himself up to deal with whatever this was by listening to the reassuring pattern of Enjolras’ deep, steady breathing. When he was sure he was less freaked out than his lover (and wasn’t that a reversal) Grantaire spoke. “Do you want to talk?”

“I want to cry, actually.”

Owing to the fetal position, Grantaire had been holding Enjolras from behind. That comment motivated him to shift their positions so that he could see his love’s face. “That doesn’t sound like you. Enj, what the hell happened?”

Enjolras hid his face against Grantaire’s chest and clung to him tightly. It was another tense awful few minutes before he spoke again. “My parents cut me off. It’s for good this time, and even if it wasn’t I’d make it for good, because I don’t want another dime from them. I don’t want those wretched, terrible monsters in my life at all.”

“Wh-what?” He had to have missed something. There was no way proud, idealistic Enjolras would be this broken up about not being rich anymore. “What’d you guys fight about this time? Enjolras?”

A loud sob escaped him, and Grantaire instinctually tightened his embrace in response. “Enjolras, please, whatever it is, just tell me.”

“I don’t want to say it again.”

Grantaire gently nudged Enjolras’ face up and wiped tears from his cheeks with his thumbs. It shook him to the core to see Enjolras cry. “I don’t think you should keep this burden to yourself. I love you. Let me in. Let me help carry this.”

Enjolras let out another quiet sob and lowered his eyes. “You know how I said Dad was pissy with me this time too?” Grantaire nodded. Enjolras had said that his father’s involvement had made this more than just his mom’s flight of crazy, and that he had to go out and address it. Grantaire had wanted to go with him, but Enjolras had insisted on going alone.

Now that he’d returned as a trembling wreck, Grantaire wished he’d fought harder about that.

“I went to talk to them and Dad…Dad said that Mom had…that she was fucking one of my friends, and that it wasn’t the first time.” He hid his face against Grantaire’s shoulder and Grantaire hugged
him on autopilot, too shell-shocked by the revelation to respond properly. He couldn’t have heard that right. “This time she’s not. It was about Feuilly. She’s been harassing him with text messages and calls since she met him at the hospital.”

“Okay…” Grantaire said slowly, starting to recover a bit from the surprising news. “What about the other time though?”

Enjolras took a deep breath before answering, and when he did he sounded sick. “When I was still in high school… I guess, I guess one night when ‘Ferre was over Mom slipped something in his drink and she took him upstairs and she… my mother, she… she actually…”

“Oh holy hell,” Grantaire breathed.

Enjolras’ voice broke with a sob. “When we were sixteen. She spiked his drink, took him upstairs, and raped him. My mother’s a monster. And my father only cares because he thinks it’s humiliating that she went after a high school kid when she was married to him. That’s his biggest problem with what happened. Oh my god, Grantaire, I hate them so much. I’ve never hated anyone like this before. I feel sick.”

Grantaire didn’t know what to say to that. What could you say to that?

Enjolras tried to curl closer, which was pretty much impossible at that point, and kept going. “And Combeferre never told me. He just kept it to himself all these years and I’ve been letting her, I’ve been-he talks to her for me, Grantaire. I’ve been leaving him alone with his rapist. I’ve been helping her abuse him. My own best friend, and I—”

“It’s not your fault. You didn’t know,” Grantaire insisted. He rubbed Enjolras’ back soothingly. “You couldn’t have known, and if you had you would have done something because you’re not like them. You’re a good person.”

“It was willful ignorance. I knew something was wrong. The way she’s been with him, the way she flirts and calls him her favorite, and pouts at him and baits him—”

“Enjolras, I promise you, however suspicious your mother’s behavior may seem now, it was not unnatural for you to not realize your mom violated your friend, okay? Seriously, I think it actually says something in your favor that you didn’t jump to that conclusion, because this whole situation is fucked and awful and I’m sorry. You and Combeferre don’t deserve this shit. I’m sorry.” Grantaire kissed the top of his head. “Have you talked to him yet?”

“Y-yeah,” Enjolras whispered weakly. “He didn’t want me to know. He said a lot of the same things you did. That it’s not my fault so I shouldn’t feel bad. But it’s…I should have noticed. I should have helped him.”

“How could you? Anyone who knows you even a little knows you would have done anything and everything in your power to help ‘Ferre. It wasn’t in your power, Enjolras. You don’t need to feel guilty.”

Try as he might, Grantaire couldn’t get Enjolras to calm down. He repeated his reassurances, and Enjolras kept crying and trembling until eventually Grantaire had to help him to the bathroom so he could throw up.

He calmed a little after violently emptying the contents of his stomach, but Grantaire doubted he felt any better. He was pretty sure the man was just physically and emotionally exhausted.

Grantaire helped Enjolras to bed and stayed with him until he fell into a restless sleep.
He couldn’t believe what he’d just seen. Enjolras was his rock, a constant source of strength and inspiration, proof that however fucked up the world might be, there was good and righteousness blazing in it. All that goodness had been captured and condensed into a fittingly beautiful package. He’d never seen cracks in the marble before, and it was messing with his head.

He found himself craving a drink worse than ever, but unable to keep his promise to Enjolras. How could he wake him and pour his demons out now? For the first time since they’d known each other, Enjolras was just as burdened and frail as he was.

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know, I'm horrible and so is Marie. On the plus side I finally figured out what I want to do with Musichetta! That makes me less evil, right?
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Grantaire and Combeferre have a heart to heart. Musichetta settles into the group.

Chapter Notes

EDIT: Hey guys. So this chapter used to contain some author’s notes on my thoughts on trigger warnings, but after having to file my first ever harassment report with AO3 I was encouraged by the site to take them down (note, not required, just encouraged-AO3 has been nothing but classy and respectful in all this drama). Not gonna lie, I'm saddened a few overzealous people ruined my chance to have a conversation about this, because I was speaking just fine to quite a few of you, but such is life. Remember not to feed the trolls.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Combeferre was spread out in his study with a deconstructed stack of research materials, trying to put the finishing touches on a twenty five page semester long research paper. He was having a difficult time concentrating though.

The room had been rearranged and turned back into a study after the Thenardier boys had been taken to their foster home. His piles of research materials were resting in stacks against the wall, excepting the one currently in use, which was spread out all over the hardwood floor. Gladiator was taking a nap on a textbook. Every now and then the obese cat shot Combeferre a challenging look, as though daring him to need to check a citation. The cots the boys had used were sitting in Combeferre’s section of the basement storage, waiting for the happy day when he could lug them back up to the apartment for a sleepover.

Azelma knocked on the side of the archway that led to the living room and threw him a tired smile. “Hey ‘Ferre. It’s almost midnight, you know.”

“This thing’s due at eight. I’ve got to get it done but I can’t think.”

“Do you want me to run out and fetch you some caffeine?”

“No…I will need to sleep for a few hours once I get these last two pages written. And edit all the rest of it. And format it. Oh who the fuck am I kidding? Sleep’s not happening tonight. Yeah, caffeine would be great.”

Azelma smiled encouragingly, then went into the other room to get her coat and her purse. As it was nearly midnight though, Combeferre decided to go with her. He rubbed at his eyes, then sat up, and his tired gaze fell on his phone. He hesitated for a moment before stuffing it into his pocket. Really, it was tempting to leave the damn thing behind, but ultimately he’d want to take any calls he might get from Enjolras. And a part of him was still hoping Eponine would call him back.
He really should have waited to ask her out until after finals were over. It had been hard to get back into the swing of things with that not-quite-right feeling dancing around in the pit of his stomach. And he really, really wished Paul and Marie had waited just one more week to have their fight with Enjolras. Really, he would have preferred if they went their entire lives without ever breathing a word of the damn mess to their son, but at least the fucking week would have been appreciated.

He supposed he had gotten six more years of silence out them than he’d expected, though he doubted that had anything to do with concern for his peace of mind.

Azelma was heading for the front door when she noticed Combeferre shuffling over to the shoe rack. “I’m supposed to be getting the caffeine for you so you can keep working.”

“It’s later than I’d like for you to be walking around alone. Besides, I could use the ten minutes away from my notes.”

“Fair enough.” She smiled at him and he tried to return it at least a little.

So far Azelma had been a pretty conscientious roommate regarding his recent drama. She’d sensed that something was wrong, but rather than pry she’d given him some space, and checked in with him several times throughout the day to see if he needed anything. It was encouraging to see the girl trading kindness for kindness, rather than the clingier ‘please notice me’ behavior she’d shown when they’d first met.

They were about to leave when there was a knock on the door. Combeferre opened it and found Grantaire standing on his doorstep. The kid looked a bit rattled; his hair was in disarray, he was pale and puffy eyed, meaning he probably hadn’t been sleeping, and he was avoiding holding eye contact.

He had a tray of coffees and a bag of sweets with him though, which negated the purpose of Combeferre and Azelma’s excursion. The teen let out a disappointed huff when she caught sight of the goodies.

“He knows. He must know by now. He knows and that’s why he’s here.’

Combeferre tried to flash one of his usual easy smiles. Grantaire still avoided making eye contact with him.

‘Yeah, I figured you’d need something. Finals and all. Um…d’ya want me to take off or is it okay if I come in and talk to you for a bit?’

Azelma put her hand on her hip and threw an impatient glance Combeferre’s way. He cleared his throat. “It’s cool. C’mon in.” He turned to Azelma. “You should probably head to bed anyway. You’ve got school in the morning too.”

“I guess.” Looking disappointed, she kicked her shoes back off and trudged off for the bedroom.

“I’d actually brought her a tea and a muffin,” Grantaire said.

“The muffin will keep for breakfast. Let’s just get this over with.”

Grantaire looked like he wanted to ask about the teenage girl going to sleep in Combeferre’s bedroom, but then he noticed the pillow and blanket thrown on the couch. “I keep forgetting. Are
“Six two,” Combeferre said.

“Ah. So…you’re cramming yourself onto the couch and the little pixie is taking your bed? You really are much too much of a gentleman ‘Ferre.”

“She’s homeless. I wanted to give her as much privacy as I could. Besides, when the semester ends I can convert the study into another bedroom, but at the moment I still need it for schoolwork.” He led Grantaire into the kitchen and the two of them sat down at the table. He gratefully sipped at the coffee Grantaire had brought him and tried to calm his nerves a little. “So you know?”

Grantaire leaned against the counter, momentarily ignoring his own coffee, and nodded. “Yeah. Enjolras…don’t be mad at him, okay? He was falling apart, and I’ve never seen him like that before and it scared me so I pressured him to talk, and-” Apparently Grantaire was as shaken up as he felt.

“It’s okay,” Combeferre said, waving a hand. “I told him to tell you. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I don’t want anyone else to know. But this is new for Enjolras and I could see how hard it was hitting him. I figured he’d need you.”

“Oh.” Grantaire inclined his head in something between a bow and a nod. “Yeah, good insight.”

“How’s he doing?”

“He’s a mess. He sobbed so hard he made himself sick, and no matter what I said I couldn’t get him to calm down. He finally exhausted himself though, so I figured it was safe to slip out for a few minutes while he was asleep. And I left him a few notes in case he wakes up before I get back. I just…didn’t think it was a good idea to sit in the place by myself. I don’t want him to have to deal with me fucking up again on top of everything else. And besides that, you and I should probably talk.”

“There’s not really a lot to say,” Combeferre muttered. He leaned on his elbow, letting his hair fall into his face and obscuring it a bit. “It was six years ago. It was awful, but I’ve dealt with it and moved on. Really I’d just rather not have it all dragged back up for me again, but Enjolras…is…I guess it’s something he needs to talk about.”

“Well yeah, he thinks it’s his fault.”

Combeferre let out a quiet snort and shook his head. “He’s going to have to get it through his head that not everything is about him.”

“H-he’s worried about you,” Grantaire said weakly.

“And he feels like he let me down. Seriously, ‘Taire, the way he was talking about it…you know what, never mind, I don’t…it’s just a shock. He’ll be okay, and then he’ll see that I’m okay, and then I won’t become one of his causes and everything can go back to normal.”

Grantaire finally looked at him, a thoughtful expression on his face. “I know what it’s like to be one of Enjolras’ causes. It’s not so bad to let him save you, you know.”

“I don’t need that kind of support though, because I’ve been taking care of myself. I mean, not to say that you haven’t, but-”

Grantaire cut him off with a ringing laugh. “Oh please, we both know that’s a steaming pile of shit right there. I was killing myself. Everyone knows that, just like they know that Enjolras has saved all
the bits of me that were worth saving and is putting them back together into a whole that’s not entirely awful. But thanks for trying to be nice. So you’re worried that, what, because he’s done a little social activism work on rape victims that he’s lumping you in with all his abstractions on the subject?”

Combeferre bit his lower lip, then slowly nodded. “He started spouting out statistics and shit that we’ve both read in articles and heard at lectures and round tables and stuff. I know he meant well, but it really doesn’t help. Besides, most of those talking points focus on women. My situation’s a little different.”

“Do you mind if I ask what happened?”

Combeferre sighed. Well he’d already dragged the story out once that day.

“When Enjolras had to do family obligation stuff, I was his go-to friend to invite along to make the whole thing more tolerable. His family took me along for a trip to New York, and I spent a few days at their house with them before and after we left. One night, Marie was playing cards with us, and then she and Enjolras got into a fight and he stormed upstairs and locked his door. I just kind of sat in the kitchen waiting for it to pass, and then I started feeling kind of…off. I thought I was sick and needed to lie down, so Marie took me upstairs. I don’t know what she put in my drink, but it dulled my memory of the night. I really don’t remember much.” Which was a bit of a lie, but that was as much as he wanted to tell Grantaire.

“Why didn’t you tell anyone what happened? I mean, you were only sixteen, right? Even if she hadn’t had to stoop to drugging you that still would have been illegal.”

“I tried telling my father.” Combeferre scrubbed a hand through his hair and shifted down in his seat a little. “He laughed. And my dad’s not a bad guy, not by any stretch of the imagination, but he thought the whole thing was funny. He said that when he was my age he would have chopped off his own arm for a night with a woman like Marie. That’s the thing—because she’s beautiful any heterosexual male, especially a teenager, must want to have sex with her, you see.”

“That’s horse shit. She fucking drugged you and your dad didn’t go to the cops? That’s horse shit!”

“Grantaire, do you not listen to us when we get on our activist soap boxes?” Combeferre asked. “Our society doesn’t want to deal with rape. We don’t want to even talk about it. We shame the victims until they shut up. Believe me, I learned that one through experience. I tried talking to my parents, Paul cornered me and decided it was somehow my fault, and then after that I just gave up.”

“And you kept it to yourself?” Grantaire asked.

“Mostly.” He’d tried talking to his girlfriend, and she’d freaked out on him. Christine had decided that Combeferre cheated on her and broke up with him. After that last heavy blow, he’d given up on finding sympathy. “I decided to just start being cautious around Marie.”

“Yeah. But I’d think you’d avoid her like the plague.”

“Actually, I take a small bit of satisfaction every time I can stay in a room with her and keep my cool. I like to show her that she hasn’t gotten to me, and that she doesn’t have any power over me. That wasn’t always the case though. This is what I need to get through to Enjolras. I have been dealing with this and working on myself for six years. This is new to you guys, but not me, and right now you’re picking at old scars. I don’t want to make them fresh again.”

“Kay. But they’re new scars for him, and I’m going to help him deal as best as I can.”
Combeferre nodded. “I expected no less from you. Grantaire…you must have realized that I don’t blame Enjolras for this at all. The only way this could possibly hurt my friendship with him is if he can’t get past his guilt.”

Grantaire picked up his coffee cup and started fiddling with the tab in the plastic cover. “I’ll work on that with him then.”

“I appreciate it. I should get back to work on my paper though. This has been more study break than I can afford to take.”

“Kay. Um…dude, I’m really sorry about all this,” Grantaire shifted his weight uneasily from foot to foot, back to avoiding eye contact. “I mean, I’ve had shit from my past dragged out when I was done with fucking dealing with it anymore, and I know how much that sucked, and I’ve never dealt with anything as gracefully as you have in my entire life. Like…like damn. You’re as inhumanly perfect as Enjolras, aren’t you?”

Combeferre couldn’t help but laugh at that. “My friend, Enjolras and I are a long way from perfect, but we do have ideals we’re striving towards. Thanks. That was actually a pretty nice compliment. I don’t feel very graceful or centered at the moment, actually.”

“Well you’re way more fucking centered than you have any right to be. But I’ll let you get back to that paper. If you need anything text me though.”

“I will. Thanks ‘Taire. I do actually feel a bit better for this conversation.” The not-quite-right feeling had lessened significantly.

Enjolras was going to be okay. Grantaire would make sure of that. And then maybe everyone would believe him when he insisted he was okay too.

Combeferre showed Grantaire out, then went back into the study with the remains of his coffee and a piece of fudge cake. The caffeine and sugar combo turned out to be exactly what he needed, and he was able to finish the paper off after another couple hours’ worth of effort.

However, when he tried to fall asleep he kept thinking back on memories he’d been willfully suppressing for years. Maybe he wasn’t as okay as he’d thought he was.

Musichetta had been living with the boys for three days before she got a chance to see Joly. Overburdened though a nursing major’s schedule may have been, the workload became nearly impossible at finals time. Joly dropped down to three hours of sleep a night and mostly lived out of his car while he was running between school, work, and favored study spots.

During this period, Musichetta got to know Feuilly a bit better, but only a bit. She didn’t see much of him either, as he was occupied with work and that teenager he was enamored with, but she developed a good opinion of him based on what she did see. Sadly, it turned out he only stripped when he thought the apartment was empty. Legle suggested with a lewd wink that she walk lightly, as the floorboards were old and creaky.

Musichetta walked into the apartment Wednesday evening to find Legle exactly where she’d left him that morning: sitting on the couch in his boxers and one of Joly’s t-shirts watching cartoons. Only now he was eating a pint of Ben and Jerry’s instead of breakfast cereal. Musichetta shook her head in amusement. The boy was never going to grow up. Poor Joly had the patience of a saint for putting up with him.

“Hey ‘Chetta,” Legle greeted. “How’d the job hunt go?”
“I’m hired at two places, you lazy asshole,” Musichetta informed him smugly. “I’ll be working at an occult shop, and I’m giving walking tours of Salem for the summer and fall. So what have you been doing all day?”

Legle grinned. “Can you keep a secret?”

“You know full well I can. Wasn’t I your beard for over a year?” She excitedly plopped onto the couch next to him while he muted the television and grabbed his laptop from the coffee table.

“Allright, so I’ve actually been misleading my friends and my darling Joly a little. Don’t tell anyone, but I’m gainfully employed and have been for close to two years.”

Musichetta started to laugh, but then she realized he wasn’t joking. “How can you be gainfully employed? You’re the biggest couch potato in the world!”

“Mm hm. I found a calling that suits my sedentary lifestyle. You know how everyone says I’m good with words? I mean, that’s how I got my nickname.”

“Oh, is that where Bossuet came from?” Musichetta asked, intrigued. Back home all Legle’s nicknames had revolved around his abysmal luck and his thinning hair.

“Yeah. Well, anyway, I thought I’d see if I could make a few bucks with my word smithing, so I started looking for freelance writing gigs online. I do little projects here and there when everyone thinks I’m goofing off. Articles, blog guest spots, short stories, that kinda stuff. I’ve written a few encyclopedia entries and essays for magazines and stuff too.”

“No shit. Why the hell aren’t you telling anyone?”

“Because, my dear, I’m squirreling the cash away for a reason.” He pulled a webpage up on his laptop and tilted the screen so she could see it. “I need your word you won’t breathe a word of this to anyone, ‘Chetta dear. I’ve worked too hard keeping this quiet for you to blow it now.”

“What is it? What is it!”

Then she saw the picture on the page. It showed matching white gold wedding bands. Musichetta slapped her hands over her mouth, a needless gesture as her excited squeak didn’t have enough breath support to be audible.

“I know they’re simple, but I think simple’s good for Joly, and lord knows I’m going to lose mine and need to replace it a hundred times or so.”

She was finally able to vocalize her squeal properly, and then Musichetta started bouncing up and down. She reached over and strangle-hugged her friend. Laughing, he returned the hug.

“Oh my God, Legle! That’s so—that’s wonderful! When are you proposing?”

“I ordered the rings last week. I was actually hoping you could keep track of them for me so I don’t lose them—”

“I was about to volunteer my services for that. So? When are you popping the question?”

“In June, on our six year. I’ve got a heap of cash saved up so we can throw together a simple ceremony and then maybe go away to a bed and breakfast or something somewhere for a honeymoon. What do you think?”
“Oh honey, I think that sounds perfect! So was this the ulterior motive in asking me to move in with you guys?” He’d mentioned one when he’d called her up and invited her out east, but she’d assumed it was just his desire to avoid getting a job.

Legle gave her hand a squeeze. “That’d be it, yeah. I want you to be our Best Maid of Honor. You’ve seen our relationship develop almost from the beginning, after all. Plus I’m going to need help planning a wedding and your skill and general awesomeness should be enough to offset Legle-Luck.”

“We’ll see about that, but I do promise to do my best to help you.”

“Thank you ‘Chetta.”

“You’re very welcome Mr. Clean. Urgh…I think the hardest part is going to be keeping this all quiet from Joly. Oh, how am I going to get this stupid smile off my face before he and Feuilly get back?”

“Just pretend you’re that excited about your new jobs,” Legle suggested.

“But then they’ll start harassing you about not having a job,” Musichetta pointed out.

Legle snorted. “Don’t worry; they’d do that anyway. I’ll handle it.”

Musichetta gave him one more hug, then took his laptop from him to squeal over the picture of the wedding rings. Before the night was out she’d emailed him a dozen articles on wedding planning and found patterns for suits and dresses she could sew herself.

Legle shook his head in amusement. He thought really hard about looking at some of the venues she’d found for him, but ended up on facebook instead.

Grantaire had never experienced a worse finals week. The irony that he wasn’t an active student this time wasn’t lost on him. Of course, he wasn’t usually any more stressed over finals than he was at any other point in the semester, as the only investment he had in his grades was that they meet the bare minimum to get him to the next semester.

Enjolras actually cared about his grades. His GPA was nearly perfect, he was a member of multiple honors societies, and besides that, he enjoyed academic work. When he finished writing a particularly challenging paper he passed it around the table at the Musain and bragged about his thesis. When he had to present a research project he always went through his power points with his friends a few times as both prep and again, just to show off his brilliance.

Usually, even though finals were stressful for him, it was a good stress that carried a sense of accomplishment with it. This time, it was clear he just wanted everything to be finished with. His parents had managed to rob him of enjoying yet another thing he cared about.

Grantaire did everything he could to help. He drove Enjolras to and from class and the library, fetched him coffees or teas, depending on his mood and his caffeine intake at the time, and asked him questions about his research whenever it was clear his enthusiasm was starting to wane. He had to pretend he cared about the challenge Frederick II’s sexuality made for the argument that historians have to read around the silences in the historic record regarding the LGBT community, but it was worth it to see some of Enjolras’ enthusiasm return, even if it only lasted a few minutes.

And when Enjolras wasn’t home, Grantaire packed.

At this point it was pretty obvious they couldn’t keep living in the apartment. Paul had them covered
through the end of May, but Enjolras wanted to get out before that if they could manage it. He was
eager to dissolve himself from every tie he had to his parents, and the apartment was the most
conspicuous of the lot.

Every time Grantaire got to drive that wonderful car he gave a little sigh of longing when he had to
get out of it again. Paul was going to be taking the Prius back once they’d finished moving too.

Grantaire drove Enjolras to school Friday morning, wished him luck on his last final and kissed him
goodbye, then drove to his studio apartment by the Musain. He was glad he’d never officially moved
out of the place, because now it was all he and Enjolras had. He was pretty sure his boyfriend was
going to hate living in the little rat hole. Still though, he was going to do his best to make it a rat hole
worthy of Enjolras.

Thanks to Eponine, the place was looking much better than he ever remembered seeing it. She’d
thrown out all his trash, reorganized what little furniture he had to create more space, and scrubbed
everything clean. As Grantaire had a bare patch of floor to work with, he sat down on it and started
going through boxes of his clutter, setting some things aside to be thrown out, some to be donated,
and some to be organized back into the small space.

Eponine showed up around two o’clock with burritos and a two liter of soda. “How goes the
organizing?”

“Not bad,” Grantaire answered.

Eponine sat down on his bed, unwrapped her burrito, and looked at his piles. “This isn’t your trash
pile, is it?”

“Of course it is. C’mon Eponine, it’s the obvious choice,” Grantaire said with a laugh. He took a
swig from the soda bottle. “Uh…did you want to use cups?”

“Do you have mono?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Then we don’t need to use cups. And dude, you realize that your trash pile is mostly made up of
your artwork, right?”

Grantaire looked at the pile in some surprise. “Now that you mention it…huh. Well I draw a lot. Not
all of it’s a masterwork, and a lot of that’s just soulless shit I had to spew out for school.”

“Can I keep it?” Eponine asked.

“Sure. Help yourself.”

“Cool!” She slid off the bed and started sifting through the pile, carefully rolling up sketches and
stacking bits of canvas. Grantaire was surprised by the enthusiasm she was showing for his castoffs,
but if it made her happy…

After all, he felt a bit guilty about forcing her out of the studio when he’d said she could have it
through the summer.

“Um…did you make new living arrangements yet?”

“Yeah. Combeferre’s going to let me crash with him and Azelma until me and Feuilly get set up with
our new place.”
“Oh.” Well that was going to be interesting. “Hey, Ponine-”

“I’d rather not talk about that.”

“Did you know what I was going to ask?” Grantaire asked with a teasing lilt to his voice.

Eponine stuck her tongue out at him. “Fine. If you’re really that curious, I’ll indulge you. I’m not planning on going out with either of them.”

“I’d say that’s a good plan, considering you have to live with both of them,” Grantaire said with a nod. “Do you think you’ll be able to stick to this mature resolution you’ve made? I mean, Combeferre has this charming purity about him that can be quite seductive in small, regular doses. And from what Bossuet says, Feuilly walks around his place all but naked if he thinks he’s the only one home.” He made a soft purring noise that had Eponine giggling.

“I know, I know. Two hot boys that both somehow actually want me are opening their homes to me. But I can’t. It’s just, I’m not in a good place for it, and I couldn’t give either of them what they need. I’m not ready, and their friendship is too important to me to fuck that up. I will ogle the hell out of Feuilly if I see him strutting around in his undies though.”

Grantaire toasted her with the soda bottle.

Eponine helped him chuck the actual trash out back to the dumpster, then they finished up their burritos, drove the donations to a goodwill drop box, and by that point it was time to meet up with everyone else at the Musain to celebrate the end of finals.

Quite a few of their friends were already gathered when Grantaire and Eponine walked into the back room. To Grantaire’s relief, Enjolras and Combeferre were sitting at a table together talking intently. It was the first time Grantaire had seen them together since Enjolras had learned Combeferre’s secret. From the looks of things, Enjolras wasn’t letting his crushing guilt impact his longest standing friendship.

“Hm. I guess the boys got over their fight,” Eponine murmured.

“Fight?” Grantaire repeated in some surprise. “They weren’t fighting.”

“Oh. Combeferre said he and Enjolras were having some issues. It wasn’t a fight?”

Grantaire shook his head.

“Well what was it? Or…something I should wait and see if he’ll talk about it with me? Urgh, alright.” She skipped off to go get a drink, and Grantaire went to join his friends and lover at their table.

He sat down next to Enjolras, who took no notice of him as he and Combeferre were involved in a passionate discussion about the collapsed factory complex in Bangladesh. “It’s the same old shit my ancestors did in the textile mills, it’s just the twenty first century version,” Enjolras said, voice dripping disgust. “And since it’s happening to faceless masses on another continent, no one here seems to give a shit that they’re directly contributing to the problem by demanding artificially low clothing prices.”

“Which is why I’ve been shopping exclusively at second hand stores since I was in middle school,” Jehan chimed in as he sat down across from them with a mug of tea. “Are we talking about Bangladesh?”
“Of course we’re talking about Bangladesh,” Combeferre said. “I was just saying that I think we’ve gotten as much accomplished as we can with petitions. We made the rounds with them pretty thoroughly after the Tazreen fire in November. I was thinking we could try making a video and see if we can get it to go viral. That Thrift Shop song might be helpful.”

“Ooh! Yes, that sounds exciting!” Jehan enthused. “Do you want to use Macklemore’s version, because I heard this really quirky cover by an old timey parody band called Postmodern Jukebox-”

“I guess I’m going to have to ask. Guys, what the hell are you talking about?” Enjolras asked, looking lost. Jehan took out his phone and pulled up a youtube video for him.

Courfeyrac derailed any further planning on addressing the plight of exploited Bangladesh garment workers by bursting into the room and excitedly ranting about how well his last theater final had gone. He reenacted a monologue for them, to wild applause. Then again, everyone was so relieved to be done with school until the fall that they would have burst into applause for just about anything.

Joly and Legle were the next to trickle in. They had Musichetta in tow, and a few minutes were spent introducing her to the friends who hadn’t met her yet. Cosette was obviously enthused about adding another girl to the group, but Azelma looked vaguely threatened by her.

To Enjolras’ annoyance and everyone else’s amusement, it turned out that Musichetta was a tarot card reader and had been hoping to find employment as a professional psychic in Salem. “Oh! We might be able to help you out with that,” Eponine said, motioning to Azelma. “Our parents have a shop in Salem. They don’t need any psychics right now, but I can ask them to keep an ear out and see if there are any openings.”

Combeferre looked less than thrilled with the suggestion. “Are you sure getting her a job with any of your parents’ acquaintances is a good idea, Ponine?”

“Mom and Dad’s place may be sketch as hell, but they talk to the respectable shops too,” Eponine said.

“Okay then.”

Musichetta had been shuffling a deck of cards while they spoke, so that naturally led to her giving some of her new friends simple readings. Enjolras folded his arms over his chest and scoffed but wouldn’t deign to otherwise vocalize his skepticism.

“Hey Musichetta, can you read me when you finish with the puppy?” Grantaire asked. In actuality, he thought fortune telling was a crock too. He was probably more skeptical of it than Enjolras, even, but he’d sit through a reading if it gave him an opportunity to tease his boyfriend.

“Sure thing,” Musichetta said with a friendly smile. She pulled a few more cards for Marius and assured him that he had a prosperous looking future ahead of him. Then Grantaire took a seat in front of her. Reluctantly, Enjolras turned in their direction, attention drawn to the reading.

“Alright. So this card represents your present situation…” she started. She flipped over the card and frowned. “Oh honey…”

“What’s that? What is it?” Eponine asked.

“The most unhappy card in the deck,” Combeferre said, giving Grantaire’s shoulder a sympathetic pat. “He pulled the Tower.”

“Hey, depending upon where they’re placed in the spread, there are cards that are potentially worse
than the Tower,” Musichetta said.

“Well if that’s true then you’ll probably find the worst placements possible for the worst cards. So things suck for me right now. What’s the next card then?” Grantaire asked, more amused than anything.

“This one’s the source of your current issues. See? That’s why it’s crossing your present. It’s a tarot pun.” She picked up the card that had been laid horizontally over the first card and flipped it over. She chewed on her lip when she looked at it. “It’s the Devil. It represents temptation and vice.”

“That makes sense,” Grantaire said.

“Yes, it does…” Enjolras murmured, so lowly that he probably thought no one could hear him.

Musichetta quirked an eyebrow. “So you’re the recovering alcoholic then?”

“Yes…”

“Then that card explains itself. Okay, this one’s your goals for the near future. Temperance. Hm…I think that one explains itself too. Okay, distant past, something that’s kicking up issues for the now. Queen of Swords. So this is an important feminine figure in your life. Someone tragic, someone a bit frail but who certainly doesn’t want to admit it. I’m getting that the two of you had a lot in common.”

“Yeah, I’ve got that one figured out,” Grantaire snapped. “You can move on.”

“Sorry. I’m not trying to poke emotional scars or anything, just reading what’s in front of me,” Musichetta said, holding up her hands.

Grantaire realized everyone was staring at him. He let out a slow breath and tried for a self-deprecating smile. “Sorry. Keep going. I’ll be less of a dick. What’s the next one?”

“Not so distant past. This would be something in the last couple of weeks that’s affecting the situation now. Oh good! It’s a happy card. Aw, it’s a cup. You got a happy cup card.” Musichetta smiled, looking relieved that the cards were finally giving good news. “This one’s emotional support.”

“Ah. Well I have had a good amount of that,” Grantaire said, shooting a quick look Enjolras’ way. He rolled his eyes, still trying to maintain his skepticism, but it was also clear he was following everything Musichetta and Grantaire said.

“This one’s near future…pentacles. With the placement next to your cup card here, I’m going to have to read this as creating a home. I mean, it’s not necessarily anything as literal as buying a house or something, but more like creating the atmosphere of a home. Someplace you feel safe and secure, which methinks based on the Tower up here is probably lacking in your life right now. Does that make sense?”

Grantaire laughed. “I take it someone told you about me and Enjolras moving into my apartment together?”

Musichetta shook her head. “Sweetie, I’m brand new to your clique and I’m shit with names. I don’t even know which one is Enjolras.”

“The one who’s been scoffing at your cards all night,” Jehan said with a grin. “Grantaire’s boyfriend.”
“Oh. Oh! That’s cute. You guys are moving in?”

Enjolras’ eyes narrowed. “Don’t insult our intelligence. Someone must have told you.”

She shook her head. “Pentacles represent the home and finances, and cups represent relationships. This cup’s a supportive friend and this pentacle is a household working towards prosperity. I just guessed based on their proximity in the spread that they were related. Anyway, it means good news for you. It looks like living together is going to work out nicely for you guys. Y’know, on an emotional level.”

“What’s the next card?” Joly asked. Everyone was leaning around the table, as this was by and far the most accurate and most interesting reading of the night.

“Okay, so I actually play the next two cards off of each other. The first one is how you see yourself, and the one after that is how someone close to you sees you. The truth is usually somewhere between the two of them.”

“So how’s Grantaire see himself?” Courfeyrac asked. “I have to wonder, since the Tower’s already been used.”

“I’m guessing it’s going to be a sword,” Jehan said.

Combeferre nodded. “My money’s totally on a sword.”

“I have no clue what you guys are talking about, but I get the feeling I should be offended,” Grantaire said.

Musichetta flipped the card and showed off the three of swords. “Heartbreak. You expect the worst, expect others to see the worst in you, and are prepared for heartbreak at any moment. Sound right?”

Grantaire let out a sigh, then nodded. “Yeah, sums me up pretty well.”

“Okay. So someone important to you sees you as…the five of cups.” She quirked her eyebrow and cast an intrigued look at Enjolras. “Okay, so this person has noticed your pessimism. See, the figure in the card has all their attention focused on these spilled cups on the ground, but there are blessings and abundance all over the rest of the card. There’s a lot of good here, you’re just not seeing it. My feeling, based on the position in the spread and what we’ve seen so far, is that this person is determined to make you see and realize your strengths and talents. And this is a cup, so we’re talking about a strong, emotional connection here. This person loves you.”

Impressed murmurs were heard from around the table. Musichetta smiled in satisfaction, then turned her attention back to Enjolras. “So will you stop scoffing at me now?”

“I still think this is guesswork and superstition. But…that was a pretty accurate picture of our circumstances right now,” Enjolras conceded.

“There are still two cards left,” Courfeyrac pointed out.

“The next one’s hopes and fears. Not necessarily what will happen, but what’s keeping you up at night.”

“Relapse?” Grantaire guessed.

“Hermit. You don’t want to be alone but you also think you kind of need to. The hermit lives in solitude so he can improve himself spiritually. You think you need a little fine tuning, but you’re
afraid you’ll lose what you have if you step away.”

“Oh. That’s cool. It’s both at once!” Jehan enthused. “You’re really good at this, ‘Chetta. Can you read me next?”

“Sure. Let me finish Grantaire’s reading first though. Okay, this card’s overall outcome.” Everyone leaned forward in anticipation, all of them intensely invested in Grantaire’s reading after so much intriguing accuracy. Their faces fell when Musichetta flipped the card, and Azelma let out a small scream. “Guys, let me interpret it before you freak out!” Musichetta yelped.

“What, is there a good way to read Death?” Azelma asked.

Despite his skepticism, Enjolras looked worried about the card. He was staring at the grim reaper depicted on it with a furrowed brow.

“Yes there is,” Musichetta snapped. “Guys, it doesn’t mean literal death. Combeferre, Jehan, you guys said you’ve both looked up tarot symbolism before. Back me up here.”

“It means transformation, doesn’t it?” Combeferre asked.

Musichetta nodded, then waved her hand at the rest of the cards. “And with a reading like this, drastic transformation is what you need. But death is more than just change, it’s change with loss, sacrifice, pain. You go through a lot and then you build yourself up again. The more you clear away, the more room there is for the changes you want to make. I mean, it might’ve been nicer to see, like, the sun here, but death’s not bad. It just means it’s going to take you time to make the changes you need to make. Your transformation’s a real commitment, y’know?”

Grantaire nodded. “So you’re telling me I’m not going to get mown down with a scythe?”

“Sadly, no.”

“Drat. Ah well. Guess you’d better read Jehan then.”

“Get up, get up!” Jehan said, playfully shooing Grantaire out of his spot. “Me next. You need me to pick ten cards, right?”

Grantaire sat down next to Enjolras and quirked his eyebrow. “So? Still think it’s a crock of shit?”

“Oh goodness yes,” Enjolras said with a smirk. “But I suppose there’s some value in seeing how different people interpret and apply archetypes. It’s psychologically illuminating, if nothing else.”

“Ah. Well just in case there really is some psychic work at play there, I think I’d prefer it if you skipped getting read.”

“I wasn’t planning on asking for a reading, but do you mind if I ask why?”

Grantaire sighed. “I really don’t want to see what kind of idiotic fluff Musichetta would get from the how I see you card.”

Enjolras grinned and gave Grantaire’s hand a squeeze. “That’s possibly the only card I’d be interested in seeing, now that you mention it.”

Their cute and fluffy moment was interrupted by a horrified squeak from Jehan. “You cannot be reading that right. Why would that card be there?”

“Because it’s all a crock!” Enjolras called without turning his gaze away from Grantaire’s.
“No one asked you,” Jehan pouted.

Chapter End Notes

If you're interested in seeing more of Musichetta, Joly, and Bossuet, I just posted a short prequel fic about how they all met.

I do actually read tarot, and have done it professionally on occasion. The spread Musichetta used in this chapter is based off of the ten card Celtic Cross. I found a bunch of different versions of that spread, took all my favorite interpretations of the positions, and made my own custom spread out of them. So if you see anyone do a reading with the Celtic Cross spread, it'll probably be a little different from what you read here.

I referred to Frederick II as Frederick II instead of Frederick the Great out of respect to canon-Feuilly. I can't see him endorsing the Great title, considering Prussia's role in the partitioning of Poland. If you look at him from the lens of an LGBT social historian though, he's an incredibly intriguing figure.

If you're interested in looking at rape culture, I recommend following the group unitewomen.org. They have a very active facebook page, and are currently running a campaign similar to the 'It Gets Better Project' where people send in their Unite Against Rape messages showing solidarity with the Jane Doe of Steubenville.

For info on the recent tragedies among Bangladesh garment workers, check out the groups SumOfUs and socialistworker.org.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Jehan and Courfeyrac finally have that honest conversation they so desperately need. Musichetta stumbles into an awkward situation. So does Enjolras.

Chapter Notes

EDIT: This chapter too formerly contained lengthy notes on my thoughts on trigger warnings, which I had deemed necessary to clarify my views after some heated messages from chapter 31. On the advice of the archive moderators, I'm removing them as well. Instead of giving you the reasons why I'm not going to use trigger warnings, I'll leave it at this: I've made a conscious decision not to use them, very sorry if you don't agree with me, and I'm perfectly in line with AO3 rules in abstaining from them.

And to everyone who was talking to me and being respectful, especially those of you who didn't agree with me, I really appreciate your support and I'm sorry this got so crazy. I'm working on the next chapter as we speak. So far it's light in tone and I...I'll just have to be careful what I say in my author's notes from now on :( See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jehan was still complaining about his tarot reading when he and Courfeyrac left the Musain that night. It was mild out, so Courfeyrac had left his car behind and they were walking back to his place. He kept trying to snag Jehan’s hand in an attempt at a romantic gesture, but the poet was fuming; clearly, now was not the time for sentimentality. Courfeyrac let out an exasperated groan. “Was she wrong?”

“What?”

He slowed his step a little and eyed Jehan. “You’re the one who’s studied this, not me. Were her interpretations wrong? Is that why you’re flipping out?”

“Well…it’s not like they were…look, that’s not how tarot works, okay? It’s intuitive. Different people could look at the same cards and get opposite interpretations from them, and they might still both be valid.”

“Okay. So were Musichetta’s interpretations valid?” Courfeyrac asked.

Jehan chewed his lip. “I suppose. I just didn’t like them. I mean, two of swords for my present? I’m not avoiding any issues, and my judgment isn’t clouded.”

Courfeyrac tensed a little at that. He hadn’t really been paying attention to Jehan’s reading when he’d had it, as he’d been too absorbed in heckling Enjolras about Grantaire’s eerily spot-on reading. From the sounds of it, Jehan might have had one of those eerie readings too, because Courfeyrac had been
harboring a sneaking suspicion that Jehan was hiding some insecurity from him, and possibly himself, for kind of awhile. “What else did ‘Chetta say?”

“I…I got the three of swords for the near future. That’s the break up card. And the overall outcome card was the hermit. She said it looks like I need to spend some time on my own.”

Courfeyrac tried to laugh it off, but the lightness he was going for didn’t quite make it into his features. “Babe, don’t put too much stock into this. I mean, it’s fun when the reading’s on target, but tarot’s not something that should dictate your life decisions.” He placed a reassuring kiss on his boyfriend’s cheek. “I have no intention of breaking up with you, and the tarot cards can kiss my white Irish ass for saying otherwise.”

Jehan tried to smile, but his eyes looked a bit troubled.

“Jehan…you’re not…thinking of breaking up with me, are you?”

Jehan’s voice shook when he spoke. “No, of course not.”

Courfeyrac let out a pained breath, turned, and walked back a few steps before stopping and leaning against the wall of a nearby shop. He brushed a hand through his hair, then straightened up and faced Jehan, who looked like he wanted to cry. “You are thinking of dumping me, aren’t you? God, I’ve heard you sound more sure of yourself when you were talking about which brand of toothpaste you wanted to buy. ‘No, of course not.’ Bullshit, you want to dump me. Well what did I fucking do?”

Jehan chewed on his lip and shook his head. “Courfeyrac, darling…I’m not discussing this with you in front of a twenty four hour convenience store and a fried chicken shop. Let’s keep walking for now, alright?”

“Alright.” Courfeyrac fell into step beside Jehan, who no longer looked like he wanted to cry; he looked like he was sick to his stomach instead. Which was fitting, because Courfeyrac felt that way himself.

They walked to his apartment in silence. Courfeyrac fumbled with the key a little when he opened the front door. He flicked on the living room light and was relieved to see that the futon was unoccupied. Marius had left the Musain before them, but he’d also left with Bahorel, Eponine, Cosette, and Feuilly, so there was a good chance the five of them were still out having an impromptu fast food party at the beach or something. Whatever his roommate was doing, Courfeyrac hoped it would keep him occupied for awhile.

He kicked off his sneakers and then sat down on the couch. Jehan stiffly sat down next to him and kept his hands folded in his lap. He kept his coat and boots on, which wasn’t a great sign.

“Why do you want to dump me?” Courfeyrac asked, voice low and scratchy from his nerves.

“I don’t,” Jehan said softly.

“But you’re thinking of it?”

He fidgeted a little, eyes averted, and then slowly nodded. “I just…this doesn’t feel right to me.”

“What am I doing wrong?” Courfeyrac asked. He turned so that he was facing Jehan directly, and tried to take one of his hands but Jehan wouldn’t move. “Please, just tell me. Is it just the sex thing? Because I’ve been working on that. I’ve been trying to plan the best fucking date ever, and then I can get rid of Marius for a couple of days or we can go to your place instead, and just make it really special and fantastic because it’ll be your first time and I want it to be everything you deserve, but I
suppose if you’re breaking up with me I don’t really need to get into details with you.”

“Courfeyrac-”

“Unless you’d still be willing to sleep with me even if we did break up-”

Jehan put a hand over his lips to get him to stop babbling. Then he scowled. “Wait, excuse me, did you just try to pitch friends with benefits? We’ve been dating for months, you’ve been unwilling to touch me, but if I dumped you you’d be all over me?”

Courfeyrac could feel his face heating up, but he maintained eye contact. He kissed the pads of Jehan’s fingertips, then gently guided his hand away from his mouth. “I love you, Jehan. Of course I don’t want to be fuck friends, but if I’ve fucked up the relationship already then I’d like to get to love you physically at least once under whatever circumstances you’ll take me.”

“Courfeyrac, I love you too. I have loved you for years now. Almost since we met, actually. But… this just doesn’t feel right to me. Haven’t you noticed anything? I feel like… like you’re holding back when you’re with me. Like I still don’t really know you. Don’t things seem a little rehearsed?”

“I suppose.Sometimes.” He ran a hand through his hair again and turned away. “It’s my fault.”

“Talk to me, dearest. Why are you putting on an act for me?”

“Well…” Courfeyrac tried to puzzle it out, because really he still wasn’t sure himself. “I don’t know. I guess… I guess because you’re you and you’re too good for me. You’re all… innocent. Noble. Pure.”

“Oh hell.” Jehan let out a sigh. “This is the same shit Enjolras has been getting from Grantaire. I can’t believe it. I thought you were confident.”

“I am, most of the time. But I’m also kind of an asshole and I’ve never dated for love before. I’ve fallen a little in love with my boyfriends and girlfriends in the past, but it’s not the same as this.” He finally managed to grab Jehan’s hand, and already he felt a bit better for having the slender white fingers between his. “This is serious. You make me want to be a better person, so I guess that’s why I’m coming off rehearsed. I’m not the guy I want to be yet and I’m trying to figure out the new role.”

“Darling, I love you as you are. I’d like you to just be you and be comfortable in your own skin,” Jehan insisted. “Also… this idea you have of me, can you tell me a little more about it? You think I’m good and noble and pure? And… innocent? Courfeyrac, are you concerned that you may sully me with your crudeness?”

“When you say it like that it sounds silly.”

“That’s because it is silly. I’m two months older than you and I promise you, I am a sexual creature. I’m just a bit more introverted than you and I never put much effort into dating before. You don’t have to worry about protecting me or romancing me. Okay? I want you to be comfortable around me, so please don’t step into this awkward role. I don’t like it. I like you, and I want you to be happy.”

Courfeyrac nodded. “I’ll try to be less stupid then. I’m sorry.”

Jehan brushed his fingers down the side of Courfeyrac’s face, and he let his eyes slide shut at the soft caress. He let out a pleased murmur. “I was so scared I’d fucked things up.”

“Darling, the only reason I was thinking of breaking up with you was because I didn’t think I was
making you happy. I love you too, you know. The last thing I want to do is see your love for me turn to resentment.”

Courfeyrac’s eyes snapped open. “That will never happen.”

Jehan let his boyfriend pull him into an embrace. He nuzzled his face against Courfeyrac’s chest and breathed deeply. “Good. I didn’t actually want to end things, because I’m selfish and even though I want you to be happy, I just want you even more.”

Courfeyrac removed the hand that had been clutching at Jehan’s back so that he could dig his phone out of his pocket. Jehan leaned up a little and quirked an eyebrow. “What are you doing?”

“Texting Marius and telling him to crash at Bahorel’s tonight, if he can. If you really do want me, I think it’s about time you had me.”

Jehan smiled softly. “I do, I really do.”

This time Courfeyrac caressed the side of Jehan’s face. “Good. I’m all yours.” He pulled Jehan up off the couch and led him to the bedroom.

Marius was indeed sitting on the rocks at the beach with Cosette, Eponine, Bahorel, Feuilly, and a good sized bag of french fries when he got Courfeyrac’s text. He frowned at his phone in bewilderment. “Guys, Courfeyrac just asked me to sleep out tonight. Um…can I stay with one of you?”

“Sleep over Cosette’s!” Eponine squealed. “I want to see what Valjean’d do!”

“Do you think he’d actually use the fencing foils?” Feuilly asked. “Ooo…I bet he’s better with the hatchet.”

“Guys, my papa isn’t going to murder Marius if he has to sleep on the couch,” Cosette pouted. Marius smiled at the reassurance, but his face fell at her next words. “It’s still probably not a good idea for you to sleep at my place though. Even though Papa wouldn’t kill you, he still wouldn’t be happy.”

“You can crash with me at Grantaire’s place. He and Enjy are still at the palace for another few days so there’s room on the crack head mattress,” Eponine offered. Based on the way Cosette squeezed his hand, digging her nails sharply into the soft flesh at his wrist, that wasn’t actually an option.

“Thanks anyway Eponine, but um…”

“You can stay with me, Marius,” Bahorel said. “Musichetta’s got Feuilly’s couch, and it looks like the other options would get you murdered by a member of the Valjean household.”

Feuilly and Eponine snickered at that, but Cosette looked legitimately annoyed. Marius squeezed her hand, careful to keep the gesture gentle so as not to give her angry little red marks like the ones she’d just given him.

“Speaking of Musichetta…she’s quite the character, huh?” Eponine asked. She leaned over and grabbed a handful of fries.

“I like her,” Cosette said. “I think it’ll be nice having another girl in the group.”

“Mm…” Eponine trailed off thoughtfully. “I think she’ll settle in nicely. She’s a good natured flirt,
after all. We do have rather a lot of those.”

“Is she? A flirt, I mean? I, er, hadn’t noticed,” Marius said. And once again his friends all laughed at his expense. He was well used to it, after this many months in the clique.

“Marius, the first thing she did tonight was figure out who was dating who,” Cosette said dryly. “You might not have noticed her flirtiness because she wasn’t flirting with you.”

“Next on her agenda’s going to have to be figuring out who’s gay. She was definitely flirting with me when she did my reading,” Bahorel said. “It was kind of fun, actually. She’s good at it.”

“Oh, is that why you were flirting back?” Feuilly asked.

“Bahorel!” Eponine squeaked. “That’s not nice! You’re gay! You shouldn’t lead straight girls on. That’s fucking douchey.”

Bahorel shrugged. “If she’d asked me directly I’d have said something. I’d kind of figured Bossuet and Joly would have tipped off their friend that most of us are queer. You guys think she was flirting with me in sincerity?”

Eponine, Feuilly, and Cosette nodded, so Marius did too.

“Fuck. Okay, I’ll tell her I’m gay the next time we hang.”

The friends spent another hour or so at the beach before going their separate ways. Eponine got into Feuilly’s car without any transportation arrangements being discussed, and as the two of them were clearly lost in conversation with each other Cosette refrained from imposing on them and asked Bahorel for a ride instead.

“Yeah, hop in.” He shifted some junk around to clear a seat for her while Marius climbed into the passenger seat. “So is that tension bothering anyone else?”

“What tension?”

Cosette rolled her eyes. “Of course. Marius, he’s talking about Eponine and Feuilly. How they like each other?”

“Oh. Well of course they like each other, they’re fr-oh! Oh, really?”

Bahorel laughed and shook his head. “Yeah dude. Feuilly’s had the hots for Ponine for weeks. I don’t even know what’s holding him back anymore. ‘Ferre asked Eponine out this week and she said no, so she’s not into him. That’s like an all-clear, isn’t it?”

“Just because Eponine doesn’t want to date Combeferre, it doesn’t necessarily mean she wants to date Feuilly,” Cosette said. “I think she likes both of them, actually. But she’s not in a very good place to date at the moment and she’s trying to stand by that. I’m proud of Eponine. Just a few weeks ago even, she wouldn’t have been mature enough to recognize that. It…is a bit of a shame though, because I think she likes Feuilly an awful lot and that they’d be good together.”

“Yeah,” Bahorel agreed. “And Feuilly deserves a break. Combeferre’d get over it. Nothing shakes that guy for long.”

“I’m surprised he doesn’t have a girlfriend already,” Cosette said. “He’s really a catch, isn’t he?”

“Yep.” Bahorel let out an exaggerated sigh. “Damn that insistent heterosexuality.”
“You have a crush on Combeferre?” Marius asked, startled.

Bahorel laughed again and shook his head. “’Ferre? Hell no. I mean, I’d do friends with bennies, but our temperaments would fucking clash. I think if I could turn one of our straight boys gay for me I’d pick Feuilly. We’ve already got kind of a bro thing going, and I could turn that into a relationship pretty easily.”

By this point he’d reached Cosette’s house. Cosette leaned into the front seat to give Marius a goodbye peck, then ran up to the front door. Bahorel waited until she got inside before pulling back onto the street. “You get over your shock about her moving out west yet?”

“Yes. Courfeyrac and Feuilly helped me figure out bus schedules, and they’ve finally stopped making fun of me so I’d appreciate it if you’d resist the urge too.”

Bahorel snickered but didn’t say anything else. “Did Courf say why you couldn’t come home tonight?”

Marius shrugged, then checked his phone to see if he had another text. His cheeks colored when he read it. “Sexy times with Jehan and a winky face.”

“Oh good,” Bahorel said cheerfully. “Those two really needed to get laid. Like, worse than Enjolras before he started to date Grantaire needed to get laid, and that was…what? Twenty two years of willfully repressed and redirected sex drive? Okay, so maybe Jehan and Courf weren’t that bad, but this is definitely still good news.”

Marius nodded distantly, gaze directed out the car window as they headed back towards Salem. Then something occurred to him. “You don’t think I’m going to have to leave the apartment every time they have sex, do you? Bahorel?”

But the guy was laughing too hard to give him a straight answer.

Meanwhile, Jehan and Courfeyrac were engaging in a heated make-out session on Courfeyrac’s bed. So far they were both still fully clothed, and Courfeyrac was radiating tension, but some of their demons had been addressed and they were there, in the bedroom, with their intentions stated, so Jehan had to count it as progress.

But the make-out session just kept going. Courfeyrac kissed him hungrily, but the actions of his hands didn’t match. Jehan finally broke the kiss, gripped Courfeyrac by the hair, and forced his boyfriend to look at him. “Darling, if you’re not ready to do this…”

“I am, I promise I am.” Courfeyrac took a few deep breaths. “I just still can’t believe you are. That we’re doing this. Y-you were right. My idea of you was really messed up. This stupid ideal I had, that you were, y’know…”

Jehan took his hand and kissed his palm. Finally, he felt like he was starting to get it. He’d watched Courfeyrac carefully for three years, feeling the sting each time the man he cared so deeply for threw himself into emotionally bereft but physically satisfying situations. The poor boy knew a lot about fucking around, but he’d never made love before either. It wasn’t just Jehan entering a new situation.

Well, no wonder he was frightened. Jehan could understand that. He wanted what they had to be special too, after all. He could understand Courfeyrac not wanting to taint it with his old habits.

Jehan had been keeping a lid on his more sentimental urges, sure they would open him to gentle ridicule from his boyfriend. Both of them had been acting, then. Jehan made a conscious effort to
take the barriers down and love Courfeyrac as passionately and even poetically as he’d been wanting to, ridicule be damned.

“We’re not so different, my love,” Jehan said, keeping his voice low and soothing. He rolled onto his side so that they were facing each other and lightly ran his fingertips over Courfeyrac’s arm. “You’ve never really done this before either, have you? It’s a bit different from a casual drunken tumble.”

Courfeyrac lowered his eyes and nodded. “I’m not sure how to touch you.”

Jehan let out a nervous laugh. “Me either, but I think my hesitation has different causes from yours. Let’s…try something.” Jehan sat up and started undoing the buttons on the baggy magenta cotton work shirt he was wearing. “Sit up, dearest. I think the first and most obvious step for physical intimacy is for us to be nude.”

Courfeyrac seemed a bit distracted. His eyes followed the movement of the shirt as it glided off Jehan’s shoulders and then slowly traced back up the leanly muscled arms, danced across the strong chest and down the lithe torso to the planes of his stomach. Jehan smiled warmly when Courfeyrac’s eyes found his again. “I’m going to take my pants off now. Will you at least take off your sweatshirt?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Sure.” Courfeyrac sat up and gracelessly yanked it over his head, sending his hair into utter disarray.

Laughing, Jehan smoothed the wild brown strands down and started reciting a poem:

"i like my body when it is with your
body. It is so quite new a thing.
Muscles better and nerves more.
i like your body. i like what it does,
i like its hows. i like to feel the spine
of your body and its bones, and the trembling
-firm-smooth ness and which i will
again and again and again
kiss, i like kissing this and that of you,
i like, slowly stroking the, shocking fuzz
of your electric fur, and what-is-it comes
over parting flesh….And eyes big love-crumbs,
and possibly i like the thrill
of under me you so quite new"

Jehan was naked by the time he’d finished, but Courfeyrac had stopped halfway through taking off his shirt. He had most of the material wadded against his elbows while he stared at his boyfriend in wonder. “Was that one of yours?”
“Sadly no, that was E.E. Cummings. Did you like it? Is it okay if I recite poetry to you?” Jehan untangled Courfeyrac from his t-shirt as he spoke and kept his fingers resting against the naked skin of his arm after he’d finished.

Courfeyrac didn’t answer. He kissed Jehan instead, passionately but not quite so desperately as the kisses they’d started with. There were feelings here. Jehan sensed them out of the way Courfeyrac sucked on his lower lip, the way his tongue seemed to dance against Jehan’s, and the way he took his time with his movements. If Jehan had to guess, he’d say that Courfeyrac had never kissed any of his other partners this sweetly.

Jehan encouraged him by tangling his fingers in the wild brown hair he so loved and making sweet noises against the warm red lips so tenderly parting and caressing his. He slid onto Courfeyrac’s lap and warmed himself with strong arms against his back and hands finally willing to map out his skin.

“You’re beautiful,” Courfeyrac whispered.

“I feel it,” Jehan replied, smiling as brightly as he was able. “I feel sensual too. Can you see me that way?”

“Yes.” Courfeyrac’s voice sounded slightly strangled. “God, yes. I don’t…I’m sorry, Jehan, normally I’d be dirty talking here but that seems really wrong-”

Jehan pressed a finger against Courfeyrac’s lips.

“Where true Love burns Desire is Love’s pure flame;
It is the reflex of our earthly frame,
That takes its meaning from the nobler part,
And but translates the language of the heart.”

Courfeyrac’s mouth open and closed a few times before he got anything out. “That is so much better than dirty talk.”

Jehan grinned. He was going to have to do some research then. At the moment not much of the poetry he knew well enough to recite was bedroom-appropriate, but it would certainly be fun to tackle that task.

Courfeyrac buried his face against Jehan’s neck and dropped a warm, wet kiss on the juncture of his neck and shoulder. “Do that Cummings one again.”

“I like my body…” Jehan began, but let out a soft gasp when Courfeyrac took his cock in hand. “My b-body…when it is with your body. It is…oh.” He bit his lip as Courfeyrac gripped and began to stroke.

“Keep going, love. What is it?” Courfeyrac asked huskily.

“It is so quite a new…quite new a thing. Muscles better and n-nerves more…” Jehan dug his fingers into Courfeyrac’s back. Courfeyrac kissed his neck, then gently pushed him off of his lap and urged him down against the mattress.

“I like your body,” Jehan breathed, looking at his lover from under hooded eyes while Courfeyrac gazed down at him with love and lust reflected in equal parts. “I like what it does, I like its hows.” He reached for Courfeyrac, but Courfeyrac wriggled away from his hands to curl over him. Jehan
pouted. “I like to feel the spine of your body and its bones, and the trembling firm-smooth ness…”

His recitation was interrupted by a long, indecent moan when Courfeyrac swallowed down his erection. Courfeyrac held Jehan’s hips against the mattress and bobbed his head a few times before letting the swollen cock free with an accompanying indecent wet noise. “Am I distracting you, dear?”

“H-huh?”

“You stopped reciting the poem. You were at trembling firm smoothness.”

Jehan looked at him dazedly. “You just had my cock in your mouth.”

“Yes I did.”

“Will you put it back?” Jehan asked, wriggling his hips as much as he could against Courfeyrac’s hands.

Courfeyrac smirked. “Only if you keep reciting that poem.” He bent down again and placed a kiss on the head of Jehan’s cock, then tongued the slit.

Jehan grabbed onto the sheets so he wouldn’t pull Courfeyrac’s hair in frustration. Where had he been? Firm-smooth ness, right. “And which I will again and…fuck, again…and again…” Courfeyrac resumed his blowjob, this time letting Jehan shallowly thrust his hips along with his ministrations.

“Kiss,” Jehan rasped. “I like kissing this and that of you, I like…mm…slowly stroking the, shocking fuzz…” Courfeyrac momentarily removed his face from Jehan’s crotch to tongue at the soft ginger hairs of his happy trail, then he enthusiastically delved back into his task. Jehan squeezed his eyes shut. “And what-is-it c-comes…over parting flesh….I-I can’t, Courfeyrac…”

Courfeyrac let Jehan’s cock slip from his mouth again and nuzzled at the soft skin of his inner thigh. “Do you want me to keep sucking you off?”

“N-no…I want…that is…” He closed his eyes and tried to get his breathing under control. “I want to make love to you.”

Courfeyrac shimmied out of his pants and underpants, then leaned across the bed to fumble around on his nightstand. When he sat up he was holding lubricant and a condom. “Good. That’s what I want too. How do you want to do this?” His cheeks colored a little as Jehan eyed him with naked hunger.

“I would be the one to take you, if you don’t mind.”

Courfeyrac’s eyes fell shut and his legs opened a bit in an action that looked to be unconscious. “I don’t mind at all.”

Jehan crawled over the bed to him, draped himself over Courfeyrac and kissed him hungrily. “You’re so beautiful,” he murmured. “I’ve dreamt of this moment almost since we met.”

“Jehan…” Courfeyrac breathed. “You’ve got to…we’ve got to start or I’ll finish before we’ve done anything.” He brought Jehan’s hand to his mouth, kissed the pads of his fingers, and then helped him coat them with lube. “I’ve done this before, but I usually top so…”

“Be gentle?” Jehan asked with a little smirk.
“Be thorough,” Courfeyrac said, possibly blushing though it was hard to tell as they were both rather flushed at this point.

Jehan carefully inserted a finger into Courfeyrac, marveling at the feel of his lover’s body welcoming the intrusion. He imagined how that velvet embrace would feel against his cock, and let out a low groan as he started working his finger in and out. Courfeyrac rocked his hips against the finger, letting out delicious little moans and pants.

“Add another,” Courfeyrac said in a breathless voice so unlike the amiable tones Jehan was used to hearing. Jehan complied with the request, and when the resistance lessened he began slowly scissoring his fingers.

“You look wanton,” Jehan whispered. “Lover, you’re writhing for me. You’re so beautiful, my dear one.”

“Jean, please…please, I’m ready…”

Jehan shook his head. “I’ve got skinny fingers. You’re going to take at least three before you get my cock.”

Courfeyrac let out a startled gasp, and then he was babbling nonsense, begging for Jehan’s fingers, for his cock, for anything of his, just for more. Jehan added the third finger and watched Courfeyrac’s face, spellbound by his reactions. He thrust his fingers more and more roughly as his own desire mounted, then finally slid them out.

“Are you ready? Tell me the truth, darling. Did I stretch you enough?”

“Yes,” Courfeyrac gasped. “Yes times a fucking million, now fucking fuck me.” Courfeyrac spread his legs, and Jehan found himself powerless to resist the invitation. He somehow managed to roll the condom on despite his shaking hands, and then he breached his lover, moving slowly, inch by delicious inch, until they were joined.

He stared at Courfeyrac in wonder, eyes wide and probably blown from the feel of that delicious body enveloping him. “Oh…oh my love…are you alright?”

Courfeyrac’s eyes were squeezed tightly shut, and Jehan couldn’t tell if it was a similar rapture to what he felt or discomfort. He stroked the side of Courfeyrac’s face, and then his lover looked at him dazedly, mouth open in an expression that was much easier to read. “Move,” Courfeyrac gasped, and Jehan complied.

Their actual coupling didn’t, couldn’t last long, as Jehan was already so over sensitized and worked up from their earlier activities. He lost himself in the perfect movements of their bodies, Courfeyrac’s hips rising to meet his increasingly desperate thrusts, and the beautiful noises of their mingled voices and breathy pants. Before he realized it he was releasing into his love.

He felt awash in sensation and bliss, and when he came to himself again he was resting in Courfeyrac in wonder, eyes wide and probably blown from the feel of that delicious body enveloping him. “Oh…oh my love…are you alright?”

Courfeyrac’s eyes were squeezed tightly shut, and Jehan couldn’t tell if it was a similar rapture to what he felt or discomfort. He stroked the side of Courfeyrac’s face, and then his lover looked at him dazedly, mouth open in an expression that was much easier to read. “Move,” Courfeyrac gasped, and Jehan complied.

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He felt awash in sensation and bliss, and when he came to himself again he was resting in Courfeyrac’s arms with a rather insistent erection digging against his belly. “You didn’t come. Oh my love, I’m so sorry. I should have been stroking you.”

“It’s okay,” Courfeyrac said. “That was still…Jehan?”

Jehan changed their positions, settling between Courfeyrac’s legs instead of in his arms. He hadn’t earned that yet. He dropped his head and closed his lips around Courfeyrac’s cock. “Fuck!”

Courfeyrac gasped. “Jehan, you don’t have to…oh…” He trailed off, as Jehan gave explorative licks and sucks to Courfeyrac’s straining erection. He wrapped his hand around the base and took more
and more of it into his mouth until his lips were brushing against his fingers.

He felt proud of himself when he coaxed Courfeyrac to orgasm, even if the sudden release surprised him a bit. He was going to have to get used to the taste of that...

Of course, it was definitely an act that was worth practicing.

He settled in Courfeyrac’s arms again, wrapping his own tightly around the man’s waist. Courfeyrac curled his fingers in Jehan’s short auburn hair and let out a content sigh. “I feel so warm and fuzzy. Jehan, you’re... I don’t even know what to say. You deserve the best pillow talk in the world. I wish I could write you some poetry.”

“I never finished my second recitation of the Cummings poem,” Jehan said drowsily. He leaned up and brushed his fingers over Courfeyrac’s cheeks. “And eyes big love-crumbs, and possibly I like the thrill of under me you so quite new. I’d never thought to use a word like crumbs, but you do have the loveliest eyes I’ve ever seen.”

Courfeyrac smiled goofily at him. “Love you.”

“I love you too,” Jehan whispered back.

Musichetta thought she was the first one awake Saturday morning, but upon closer inspection it appeared that Feuilly was already up and gone, as evinced by his used coffee mug in the strainer. She brewed a fresh pot of coffee and then walked into the living room.

She found Joly on the couch, looking incredibly cozy in a flannel bathrobe, fluffy slippers, and surrounded by pillows and blankets. There was a pot of tea and half a cinnamon bun sitting on the coffee table in front of him, and he had his laptop open in his little nest of softness and warmth. “Good morning ‘Chetta!”

“Hi Jol. Shouldn’t you be sleeping in? The semester’s over.”

“I did sleep in! It’s eight thirty.”

Musichetta giggled. “It’s seven thirty.”

“Oh.” He glanced down at the date/time display on his laptop to confirm that. “Well that’s still sleeping in for me. What are you doing up so early?”

“My last job was an overnight stocking position. My sleep schedule’s still a bit messed up from that. I don’t have to be at the shop until noon today though. When are you leaving for the nursing home?”

“I’m three to eleven today, so I’ll probably head out around two thirty. Jeeze. I don’t even know what to do with all this free time.”

Musichetta sat down next to him and glanced at his computer screen. “Farmville?”

“I don’t judge your lifestyle.”

“I suppose that’s true…”

Joly sighed. “Marius got me playing again. I place all the blame on him.”

She couldn’t help but giggle again at that. “You’ve got lots of quirky friends out here, don’t you? If you get bored with all this exciting new free time it seems like you could call any one of them and
have your afternoon filled in an instant.”

“Probably, yeah. How’re you liking the group so far?”

“Quite a lot, actually. I think my favorite is Jehan,” she said, leaning closer to him in a conspirational manner. “Is he completely gay?”

“Yep. No one’s ever gotten a whiff of heterosexuality or bisexuality off of him.”

“Oh. Drat.”

Joly frowned. “Besides his orientation, there is the matter of him dating Courfeyrac.”

“Yes, but I don’t see that lasting much longer.”

Joly shot her a look and then quickly turned back to his computer screen. “Sweetheart, I know you’re proud of your tarot reading, but just because Jehan pulled a few negative relationship cards last night doesn’t mean his boyfriend is going to dump him. Courf and Jehan are in love.”

Musichetta shrugged in a ‘if you say so’ kind of way. “Alright, so Jehan’s gay and taken. What about those tall red heads?”

“Bahorel’s a gay queen-”

“The one with the lighter hair, right? The cute bookish one?”

Joly snorted. “No, the one with the darker hair. The muscly brawler does drag, and he’s like a magician with it. Seriously, when he drags up he looks like a biological woman. It’s incredible.”

Musichetta cocked her head to the side. “You’re fucking with me.”

“I’m not. I swear, ‘Chetta, he’s a total fish.” Joly pulled up Guillotina’s facebook profile. Musichetta stared at it in shock.

“Oh my Goddess. He’s prettier than I am!”

“I don’t know about that, but he is a good drag queen, isn’t he?”

“Mm…so he’s gay too?”

Joly shot her another odd look. “You’d want to date a drag queen?”

Musichetta smirked. “I have a certain fondness for androgyny. I think that’s really hot. But I suppose I don’t have the equipment to interest him. What about the other redhead then? The cute bookish one?”

“That’s Combeferre. He’s straight, but he’s smitten with Eponine.”

“Oh. Wait, isn’t she the girl Feuilly likes?”

“Uh huh.”

Musichetta shook her head. “This is quite the group, isn’t it? So how do you think that’s going to end?”

“Well…as I live with Feuilly and I’m close with him, I feel obligated to say Ponine’s going to pick
him…but really I’m not sure. He’s been pretty obvious. They both have, actually. Combeferre just asked Eponine out a few days ago and she said no, but I’m not sure it was to do with him so much as the idea of dating anyone right now. If she wanted to date either of them then she would be."

Musichetta considered that. “I’m not sure who I’d pick. Maybe that’s what’s holding her up. They’re both hot and smart. What more do you need?”

“A good heart,” Joly said immediately, probably thinking of his own boyfriend. “And ‘Ferre and Feuilly have that covered too. It really is a tough call.”

Joly’s attention was focused on his computer screen in a way a game like Farmville did not require. Curious, Musichetta leaned over to see what he was doing. Joly tried to change tabs, but he was too late.

“Are you looking at wedding rings?” Musichetta squawked.

Joly violently shushed her. “Keep it down! This is one of those things you try to surprise your future husband with, and Legle is on the other side of that sweat thin wall.”

“Sorry,” Musichetta hissed. “So…you’re going to propose to Legle?”

“I think it’s fairly obvious that that’s what I’m planning, yes. Do you want to see the ring I picked out?”

She rested her head on his shoulder while he pulled up the page. Joly showed her a picture of a titanium band with simple ornamental etchings and a small decorative stone laid in the center.

“The stone’s a lab created white sapphire. I wouldn’t want our friends to worry about putting together a lecture on blood diamonds for me, after all. You don’t think it’s too feminine, do you? I’m having a hard time working out what the conventions for a same sex proposal should be.”

“Sweetheart, I think it’s beautiful. And masculine,” she added quickly, as Joly’s face fell at her adjective of choice. “But um…we both know Legle. Don’t you think he might lose it?” That seemed like a safe way of talking Joly out of proposing before Legle got the chance.

“I don’t expect him to wear it much,” Joly said. He switched tabs and showed her a small keepsake box. “I’ll buy him this too, and we can keep it on the dresser. That should make the ring relatively Bossuet-proof. I just want something traditional to do the proposal with. When we get our bands we can get cheap ones that’ll be easy to replace, because you’re totally right. He’ll probably lose his ring the day he gets it.”

“You know that’s a really…really solid plan.” Shit. “So you think you guys are really ready for marriage?”

Joly frowned. “I suppose I haven’t talked it over with him, but…he’s the only man I’ve ever been with and the only one I’ve ever wanted. I can’t see spending a day without him. A-and we’ve been together for nearly six years. Why? Do you think I shouldn’t ask him?”

Shit-shit-shit! “No, no-no, that’s not it! I just, I mean, you’re young and you’re not even finished with school…it’s just the timing that’s throwing me. Y’know?”

Joly nervously rubbed at the back of his neck. “I have been having some second thoughts. I mean…when we first found out about Feuilly moving out we talked about living together just the two of us, no roommates. And then he called you and asked you to stay with us…and he…we didn’t talk about it. Do you think this is too much commitment for him? I mean, he didn’t want to live alone with
me…so maybe he doesn’t want to marry me.”

Musichetta was at a loss. The most effective way to comfort Joly would be to betray Legle’s trust and ruin the good natured goof’s plans. She loved her boys immensely, but they certainly had a talent for putting her in uncomfortable positions.

“Joly…Legle’s made for you. That’s the most important thing, right?” she finally said weakly.

Joly didn’t look terribly reassured. He cast a pensive look at his laptop screen. “I’m going to give this some more thought before I buy the ring, I guess.”

Good. Then she could tell Legle to propose ASAP and everything would work out. Hopefully drama-free.

“Chetta, you’ve got to promise me you won’t say anything about this to Legle.”

Well fuck bunnies on that.

Boxing up Enjolras’ possessions was much easier than anyone had anticipated. Even if he’d wanted to keep most of them, which he didn’t because he viewed the contents of his apartment largely as detritus of his parents’ cultural elitism, he couldn’t have. Not much was going to fit in Grantaire’s decrepit little studio apartment.

Enjolras packed up personal belongings, like clothing and photographs (all photographs of his parents were left in a shoebox on the counter), some basic necessities he didn’t feel guilty about holding onto, like his toaster, and that was all he could really take. He wanted to keep his books, but he had far too many to be able to store them all at Grantaire’s, so he filled two boxes and then split the rest of his personal library between his friends.

“We should take the bed,” Grantaire said.

Enjolras was standing in the walk-in closet dividing his wardrobe into piles, one of donations and one to be packed. “We’re not keeping the bed. It’s almost as big as your apartment. We’d have no room for living space.” He threw a grey sweater behind him, hoping it landed somewhere in the vicinity of the ‘to be packed’ pile.

“After your first few nights on the crack head mattress you’re going to regret this decision, I promise.”

“Grantaire, we can’t fit it. Besides, I couldn’t afford something like that on my own so I damn well don’t want to accept it from my parents now.”

Grantaire stuck his head in the closet and took a pair of jeans to the face. “Uh…pack or donate?”

“Donate.”

“Enj, are you okay?”

“Yes, fine.” Even if that clipped tone wasn’t fooling anybody.

“Enjolras…”

Enjolras turned away from the racks of unsorted clothes to face his boyfriend. “Really, I’m fine. I’ll be fine. I’ve hated my parents for years and now they have no power over me. This is incredibly liberating.”
Grantaire regarded him skeptically. “You might feel differently the first time you have to choose between food and utilities. And when you have to use shampoo as body wash because we just couldn’t afford them both at the same time.”

“Feuilly said he can get me a job at one of his old places. I have a good work ethic. Come on Grantaire, I’m confident that between our combined incomes we won’t have to choose between our basic necessities.”

“Uh huh.” Grantaire folded his arms over his chest and leaned against the closet’s doorway.

“Look, to be frank, your place isn’t very nice. The rent can’t be that much money.”

Grantaire smirked. “It’s seven fifty a month, nothing included.”

“For a one room shit hole?” Enjolras yelped, more startled than he would have liked to let on, considering Grantaire’s bitter amusement at his naiveté.

“In downtown Salem almost touching the nice parts of the city? Yeah. We live in a ridiculously expensive part of the country. This place must be close to two grand a month,” he said, peering behind him into the master bedroom. The master bedroom with a skylight, floor to ceiling windows looking onto a porch with a fantastic view of the ocean.

Not that any of that was important, in the grand scheme of things.

“Is it…possible to afford a place to live while making minimum wage?”

“Sure. If you live in a homeless shelter.”

Enjolras threw a pair of slacks into the donation pile, some of his frustration showing in the violence of his movements. “Grantaire, please be serious. I honestly do not know.”

The cynic let out a humorless chuckle. “I am being serious. But you’re friggin’ adorable, is what you are. I’m going to steal us a few more goodies from the kitchen while you finish up in here.”

“Okay.”

It took him another twenty minutes to go through his closet. Enjolras looked at the pile of name brand, ethically produced and therefore expensive clothes he’d accumulated over the years and considered selling them instead of donating them. If Grantaire wasn’t just trying to scare him then they were going to be in a fair bit of financial trouble, and neither of them had a safety net. Enjolras was never asking his parents for a dime ever again, and he wasn’t even sure if Grantaire spoke to his family, which meant he probably couldn’t hit them up for money either.

Enjolras poked into the kitchen, intent on questioning Grantaire about the realities of a low income, but only found half-filled boxes on the table. “Grantaire?”

“In here,” a muffled voice called from the pantry. Enjolras walked in and found his boyfriend holding the bag from Amazing that Enjolras had hidden weeks ago.

As stressful as things had seemed then, with Grantaire on the verge of failing out of school and slipping into a depression once more, Enjolras would have given anything to go back to that time and savor the safety he felt and the hopes he had for the future.

“Hey…” Grantaire said distantly, fingers toying with the plastic bag. “I’d completely forgotten about this thing.”
“Me too,” Enjolras admitted. The stabbing had happened shortly after Enjolras’ trip to Amazing, and Grantaire had gotten his leave before things had calmed down enough for them to even think about the rewards Grantaire was supposed to be earning. In the light of two near death experiences and a shit ton of drama besides, their sex lives had cooled off anyway. For the most part, their physical shows of affection had been reduced to tender cuddles.

“Damn,” Grantaire said with a crooked smile. “I can’t believe I forgot about a bag of sex toys.”

Enjolras could feel his face heating up. “It’s really nothing all that exciting. You might as well open it now. I was, um, thinking we’d try some of the more adventurous things from the store later.”

Grantaire had started to open the bag, but he stopped at that comment and gaped at Enjolras. “You were looking at adventurous sex toys?”

“I, ah, figured…I mean based on your drawings…that might be what you wanted some point down the line.”

“Only if you want it too. Enjolras, really, just getting to sit next to you and stare stupidly at you is enough to make me cry happy tears. Everything else is more than I’d hoped for and way more than I deserve.”

Enjolras frowned at that. “You deserve everything I can give you, ‘Taire. Just open the bag.”

“Okay.” Biting at his lip to keep his smile in check, Grantaire extracted a small white box. Enjolras turned away. Much as he wanted to try this out, he wasn’t looking forward to talking about it…And he had a feeling that Grantaire was going to talk. A lot.

“Fetish Fantasy Beginner’s Cuffs?” Grantaire read off of the front of the box. “You…want to handcuff me?”

“No,” Enjolras blurted out. He was sure he must be bright red. The pantry felt a wee bit claustrophobic so he walked into the kitchen and started pacing beside the table.

“Ooo…free love mask,” Grantaire read off in a high-pitched mocking tone of voice. “Wait, did you want to be cuffed then?” He strode out of the pantry still holding the box of leather cuffs and the bag, looking a bit confused but otherwise pleased about the contents of his mystery bag.

“I was…um…yes. Look, at the time…and actually even still…you’ve been very gentle with me, which I do appreciate but um.” Enjolras stopped and took a deep breath. He was supposed to be good with words, damn it, and he’d studied sexuality before. This shouldn’t be as difficult as he was making it. “There’s also this attitude you get, this sort of reverence you have for me…that’s, um, well it’s not exactly bad, but…”

To his horror, Grantaire snorted. Enjolras snapped his head away from the linoleum tile he’d been pretending to be fascinated by and gaped at his boyfriend in surprise and a bit of hurt. “You know I don’t like talking about sex.”

“Sorry. I’m sorry, that was rude. But come on…I never get to see you flustered like this.” Grantaire chewed his lip, eyes still shining in amusement even if the rest of his features were aiming at repentance. “Sorry.”

Enjolras raked a hand through his hair and tried to get his breathing under control. “Stop looking at me like that. This isn’t funny.”
“Considering how easily you fluster me, seeing you discomposed like this is a hoot. But I’ll stop. It’s not funny if you’re actually upset.” Grantaire walked forward a few steps, closing the distance between them so he could place a soft kiss on the side of Enjolras’ face. “Keep going, love. Why do you want me to tie you up?”

“I was thinking that, um, that if we went into a sort of role and you had the, um, that is…control. I mean, you already sort of do because you have experience and I don’t, so if you were to fully step into that and embrace it you might not treat me like I’m made of glass, or something to be worshipped, but more like…like equals. If that makes sense. I know you have me on a pedestal, ‘Taire, and I wish you didn’t. I thought if I ceded some power to you in such blatant and visual terms that it might level us out a little.”

“Do you want to do BDSM stuff?” Grantaire asked.

Enjolras honestly had no idea. “Could we…start with the handcuffs and see where it goes from there?”

Grantaire considered the box. “Yeah, definitely…there’s just one problem though.”

“What?” Enjolras asked, stomach lurching unpleasantly. He already felt humiliated enough with the discussion and wasn’t looking forward to finding out he’d gotten something wrong when he picked out the cuffs.

“Well, if I’m going to restrain you then I rather like the idea of cuffing you to the headboard. But my crack head mattress obviously can’t accommodate that.” He kept his tone serious, though his eyes were dancing with mirth. “Inconvenient though it may be, I think the only option is for us to have sex here before we lose that magnificent bed of yours. And as we don’t have much time available to us before we have to turn the key into the landlord, we’ll just have to do it now.”

Enjolras let out a shaky laugh. “Sorry ‘Taire, but I’m not in the mood and that’s an understatement.”

“Drat. Well it was worth a shot. What if I’m really good and helpful with the moving stuff? Maybe later tonight?”

“I’ll…think about it.”

“Good. We should take advantage of that bathroom a few more times before we lose it too. Also, for some stupid reason I’ve also really wanted to screw in your study. Can we try that out before the good will people swing by to get your desk?”

“Oh my god Grantaire, will you just stop?” Enjolras asked around a laugh.

“Your fault,” Grantaire teased. He waved the bag. “You just opened Pandora’s box of pervy fantasies.”

Enjolras walked up to Grantaire, grasped him by his biceps, and kissed him. “If we’re very good and we get a lot done, then I’ll indulge you.”

Grantaire’s face lit up. “Sweet.”

“But not the desk one. We’re donating the desk, ‘Taire. Covering it with bodily fluids first is just inconsiderate.”

“I guess…if you want to be boring about it.”
“The unrelenting flux of life’s changing conditions is inevitable, yet we labor to hold on to pleasure, and we labor equally hard to avoid pain. So many images from our world tell us that it is wrong to suffer; advertising, social mores, and cultural assumptions suggest that feeling pain or sadness is blameworthy, shameful, humiliating. Underlying these messages is an expectation that somehow we should be able to control pain or loss. When we experience mental or physical pain, we often feel a sense of isolation, a disconnection from humanity and life. Our shame sets us apart in our suffering at the very times when we need most to connect.” (Sharon Salzberg, LovingKindness: the Revolutionary Art of Happiness p.9)
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Enjolras begins adjusting to poverty.

Grantaire, Enjolras, Eponine, Combeferre, and Azelma go to visit the Thenardier boys at their foster home.

Chapter Notes

The only thing I want to chime in on regarding the recent drama with my now-pulled author's notes is that I'm being misrepresented as someone who wants to shut people down if they don't agree with me. I promise, that's not the case. I only shut people down for being rude to me, and I hope you guys realize that I welcome hearing views that challenge my own as long as I'm not being insulted while they're being presented. I don't want anyone to ever feel like they can't talk to me, and I'm not trying to intimidate anyone, I promise. That being said, hope you guys like the new chapter. Thanks to everyone still along for the ride. Plenty more chapters to go! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Enjolras looked around the one-room apartment, took a deep breath, and tried to feel that sense of exultation and liberation he'd felt when he'd told his father to go fuck himself. He was done living off of money unfairly accrued through the sweat and blood of innocents. After centuries of exploitation, he was severing his family’s ties to unjust work practices. He had no brothers or sisters; he was the last of the line to use that blood money.

It was good. Really, this was good.

And that was not a cockroach scurrying across the floor. Nope. Not a roach.

Though upon closer inspection it was actually a centipede. Enjolras pulled his legs off the floor and hugged them to his chest. “Gran-Grantaire? Do you have…much vermin in your studio?”

Grantaire was in the process of reorganizing his dresser so they could put Enjolras’ clothes in it. He turned towards his boyfriend and gave a little shrug. “Not really. Depends on your definition of much. I’ve got a lot of spiders and they take care of the scary bugs. So if you see any webs going, just leave ‘em alone. The spiders and I have an understanding.”

“I don’t think spiders can handle centipedes.”

“Aw, shit. I've got centipedes again? I fucking hate centipedes.” He then proceeded to do absolutely nothing about the centipede crawling across the floorboards.

“Grantaire? There’s a centipede right there. Can you do something about it? Please?”
“Probably not. Those little fuckers are fast.”

He took a deep breath. “Grantaire, please. I'm actually begging you right now.”

Grantaire set the armful of t-shirts he’d been clutching in a cardboard box, stood up, and let out a chuckle. “You’re actually afraid of it, aren’t you?”

Enjolras glared at him, but he didn’t let go of his knees or bring his feet anywhere near that floor. “In my experience nature has always kept itself out of doors unless invited inside through an aquarium or bird cage.”

Grantaire rolled his eyes, but he dutifully walked over to the centipede and stomped on it. Enjolras gaped at him in horror. “I didn’t want you to kill it! It’s still a living thing!”

"Uh huh." He bent down, picked the dead centipede up, and tossed it into the trash. “Kay. Next time I’ll try the paper and cup trick.”

“How’s if we don’t have a next time? Can’t we do something to keep the bugs from living here?”

Grantaire laughed and shook his head. “Cute. Very cute, Enjolras. I can’t afford an exterminator, and even if I could there’d be no point. We’re just going to get more bugs crawling to us from our neighbors.”

Enjolras felt like he was going to cry. He took a few deep breaths.

“Enj, are you okay?” Grantaire sat down next to him and squeezed his hand. “They’re just bugs. You’ll get used to them after awhile. I’ve never seen a bug in this place that’s been at all dangerous, and the spiders really do take care of most of them.”

“I’m not actually a huge fan of spiders.”

“Give it a few weeks,” Grantaire said, clapping a hand on Enjolras’ shoulder. The action wasn’t as comforting as he probably intended it to be. “Now come over here and let me know if I’ve cleared enough space for you in the dresser.”

Enjolras got up and allowed himself to be distracted by the boring but necessary tasks that went along with unpacking. He didn’t let himself think of the vermin again until he and Grantaire were getting ready to go to bed.

Every time he closed his eyes he felt a phantom, skin crawling sensation of little legs running over his body. The normally unflinchingly confident and self-righteous young activist ended up draping himself over Grantaire in an effort to have as little of his body touching the dirty mattress as possible. Grantaire put his arms around Enjolras, stroked his hair, and crooned gently to him until he finally managed to fall asleep.

He probably would have fallen asleep sooner if the gentle crooning weren’t interspersed with the occasional mocking chuckle.

Grantaire knew it was a bad idea the instant it jumped into his head. He knew it was a terrible thing to do to his boyfriend, and that acting on this particular impulse was going to destroy any chances he may have had for morning sex.

That didn’t stop him from taking a straw wrapper and tickling it up the back of Enjolras’ knee when he realized he’d woken up first.
Enjolras jumped up and let out a sound that could only be described as a girlish shriek of terror. One of his flailing limbs caught Grantaire on the jaw and he fell off the mattress while Enjolras curled himself into a ball.

“Ow!” Grantaire tenderly patted at the bump on his face. Thankfully it wasn’t a very far fall to the dirty floorboards, seeing as there was no bedframe or box spring, otherwise his butt would probably have been sore as well. Enjolras was definitely capable of throwing a solid punch when he needed to. “You fucking hit me in the face, you jerk! I can’t believe this! I’m the victim of domestic assault.”

Enjolras remained in his little ball, rocking back and forth. “Tell me it wasn’t a centipede. Oh god, I feel sick. There was not a centipede crawling on me while I slept.”

“No, there was not. There was an asshole boyfriend trying to tease you with a straw wrapper.” Grantaire crawled back onto the mattress and showed Enjolras the wrapper.

Which was probably a mistake, because when Enjolras uncoiled himself he was wearing that expression of terrible rage that frightened anyone with a healthy sense of self-preservation. Grantaire’s sense of self-preservation was a bit wonky though, so while still finding that look intimidating he also found it arousing.

“You are an asshole,” Enjolras agreed in a low, deadly voice. He picked up Grantaire’s pillow, bunched all the stuffing into the end so that it was tightly packed like a brick, and started wailing on him with it. “You unimaginable bastard! That is not the way to wake up someone you care about!”

Grantaire was laughing, interspersed with very real cries of pain. “Ow, oh come on, it was funny the way you-ow!-shrieked like a little-ow-girl!”

“I do not shriek like a girl!” Enjolras tackled him and pinned him flat against the mattress. Grantaire leaned up and kissed his nose, and the look of fury finally left the handsome face poised just a breath above his. “I think the most infuriating thing about you right now is my inability to maintain my anger with you.”

“Infuriatingly sexy, isn’t it?”

“You’re not getting rewarded with sex for waking me up with a panic attack. I had nightmares about being covered in bugs last night, Grantaire! You could be more sensitive.”

That just made Grantaire laugh harder, so Enjolras shoved a pillow over his face while continuing to berate him for being a jerk. Grantaire rolled Enjolras off of him and reversed their positions so that he was the one pinned. Then he kissed Enjolras’ nose again. “I’ve never seen this flinchy-pouty side of you before. It’s frickin’ adorable.”

“I hate you,” Enjolras growled.

“Hmm…that might be a problem for you, because there are way more bugs outside so sleeping on a park bench by the beach might be more of an issue than my rat hole.”

“Mm. Or I could stay with ‘Ferre, Jehan, Courfeyrac, or Bahorel until I got on my feet again.”

“Fine, I’ll be more sensitive about the bugs.”

“Damn straight you will.”

Grantaire leaned in for a kiss, which was probably foolish but he was reasonably sure Enjolras
wasn’t going to bite him. He was allowed his kiss, and when he pulled back again Enjolras looked more exasperated than angry. “I’m sorry about the straw wrapper. It was stupid of me and I won’t do it again.”

“Thank you. Can you let me up now?”

“I don’t know…I rather like our positions at the moment.” Grantaire gave his hips a tiny roll. Then he was bodily shoved aside.

Enjolras sat up and ran a hand through his hair, somewhat taming his bedhead. “My but you’re a presumptuous ass this morning.”

“I apologized! Withholding sex is just vindictive when you’ve gotten an apology.”

“Then I suppose I’m vindictive. Besides, Combeferre will be on his way over soon and your door doesn’t shut, let alone lock. I’d rather not take the chance of having one of our friends walk in on us.”

“I think we’d put on a good enough show. You don’t have to be embarrassed.” Grantaire leaned back on his elbows and waggled his eyebrows. He wasn’t really surprised when he had a pillow tossed at him.

“I’m taking a shower,” Enjolras informed him. “Please take the time to extract your mind from the gutter. We are heading out to visit small children.”

Grantaire stuck his tongue out at Enjolras, but then he got up to make an effort at being presentable. They’d made arrangements at the Musain the other night to visit the Thenardier boys with Combeferre, Eponine, and Azelma. Grantaire was actually ridiculously excited; it was the first time he was going to see the boys since they’d been taken to the foster home.

The last time he’d been able to give Little R a hug had been at the emergency room…

That thought tamped down his enthusiasm a little bit. When Enjolras got back from the shower stall at the end of the hall (the expression on his face when he realized Grantaire shared a bathroom with the entire building had been priceless) he found Grantaire sitting on the crack head mattress looking pensive. He tossed his clothes into the hamper, hung the towel up on a hook Eponine had screwed into the wall, then sat down next to Grantaire and lightly brushed back some of his hair. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, just stupid stuff.”

“Grantaire, we’ve been over this. If your thoughts make you look so dejected that I feel compelled to check in with you, whatever it is isn’t stupid. Will you talk to me please?”

Grantaire sighed. “The last time I saw Little R was right after we got rescued…what if he’s all…I dunno, traumatized from everything? Do you think it’s a good idea for me to be visiting him?”

“He’s been asking for you,” Enjolras reminded him. He kissed the side of Grantaire’s face. “I’m sorry if you’re nervous, but I’m not going to let that evil asshole ruin this for you two. You’ve bonded with Little R, and his brothers as well. You should continue to enjoy it.”

Grantaire nodded. He leaned against Enjolras and closed his eyes. “Thanks. You’re really good at pulling me back towards rationality when my moods start getting at me. This is way better than drinking myself stupid and being a sarcastic jack off.”
Enjolras smirked. “Look at that, something we agree on.”

“It’s bound to happen once in a while.”

The trip out to visit the boys was a smidge awkward. Azelma and Eponine kept making catty comments to each other (Azelma from the front seat, where she was ideally positioned for awkward attempts at flirting with Combeferre), eventually prompting Enjolras to murmur his gratitude for being an only child. Grantaire grinned. “It’s probably just because they’re close in age. I get along well enough with my sister, but she’s six years older than me.”

“You have a sister?” Eponine asked, startled. “I didn’t know that. What’s she like?”

Grantaire didn’t seem to know how to answer the question. “Older and more mature than me, I guess. We don’t see much of each other.”

“Oh. Do you have any other siblings you’ve kept quiet about?” she teased.

“No, just Jacqui.”

“Does she look like you?” Azelma asked.

Grantaire shook his head. “I take after our mom and she looks like our dad.”

“By the way, you guys’ parents,” Combeferre cut in. “Seriously. Are you sure you two weren’t adopted?”

“Snatched off a playground would be more likely, given our folks,” Eponine said with a laugh. “No, we’re really Thenardiers. I know Zelma and I don’t look much like Mom and Dad, but we’ve seen family photos and we bear much more of a resemblance to some of our other relatives.”

“So it is luck with recessive genes then,” Combeferre said thoughtfully. “It’s just, you’re both very pretty and your parents…”

“Aren’t,” Eponine said, snorting. Azelma was visibly trying to suppress the urge to squeal at being called pretty by Combeferre, so he and Enjolras struck up a distracting conversation until she could get control of herself. Well, Enjolras wasn’t aware that that’s what they were doing, but Combeferre talked loudly about Bangladesh garment workers and Enjolras took the bait.

Grantaire was riding bitch in the backseat, and so didn’t have the option of leaning his head against the window and sleeping through the activist discussion. He dropped his head onto Enjolras’ shoulder instead, and Enjolras tried to shake him off. “Will you stop that? We’re trying to have an important conversation.”

“What’s your activist projects. Wouldn’t you rather have me sleep than interject my opinion into the conversation?”

“Fair enough.”

Grantaire dozed, and Enjolras wrapped an arm around him, which looked a little odd as he was otherwise tense and fiery for his conversation with Combeferre. Eponine covertly took a picture of him and texted it to Feuilly and Courfeyrac so they could share in the amusement.

Combeferre’s GPS directed them to a generic ranch in a typically middle class suburban neighborhood. They parked on the sidewalk in front of a chipper looking lawn bordered by a white
picket fence. There were flowers planted along the walkway, and the house had windows with shutters painted to coordinate with the front door and the fence. “Wow. This is awfully cheerful looking,” Eponine said slowly, sounding vaguely threatened by the brazen normalcy of the place.

“This is what houses look like on TV,” Azelma added.

“I’m glad I’m not the only one who thought that,” Grantaire mumbled, groggily rubbing at his eyes.

They piled out of Combeferre’s car, walked up to the front door, and Combeferre rang the bell. They listened for the thunder of little feet running for them, but after a few minutes the door was opened by a smiling woman in her forties. Combeferre took an involuntary step back. There was something oppressive about her over the top June Cleaver smile.

“Why hello! Eponine, honey, it’s so nice to see you again. And these are all your little friends, aren’t they? Come in kiddos, come in!”

“Kay…” Eponine trailed off.

“This is not consistent with what I’ve seen from kids getting thrown into the system,” Grantaire hissed. Enjolras elbowed him in the side.

They were shown into an immaculate living room stocked with educational toys and books. There was an entertainment unit with a television, but the glass doors were padlocked. Combeferre quirked an eyebrow when he saw it.

The woman smiled at them. “TV time is strictly monitored. Right now the boys are having creative play outside time.”

“Is your husband outside with them?” Eponine asked.

“My husband won’t be home from work until seven o’clock. Rush hour traffic, you know. Why do you ask?”

She was clearly biting back a smile of her own. “Because I know my brothers, and if you left Gavroche alone in the yard for five minutes he’s probably jumped the fence and taken himself for a walk by now.”

To everyone’s surprise, the woman’s expression hardened. “Ah yes, Gavroche. That little…angel has quite the independent streak, doesn’t he?”

Enjolras and Combeferre traded smirks. They rather liked Gavroche’s independent streak. Up until the recent drama, they’d been tutoring Gavroche in civil disobedience, strategies he’d been implementing at school in the hopes of getting some oppressive recess policies lifted.

The woman turned on her heel and marched out of the room. She returned a moment later, looking frustrated. “You’re right; he’s not in the yard.” She took out her cell phone and hit a few buttons. “Luckily, I got him an emergency phone with a built in GPS. I’ll run out and pick him up while you kids start your visit with Michel and Jean.”

“Who the hell are-” Grantaire started, but Eponine stepped on his foot.

The foster mother showed them out to the backyard, then disappeared with her coat and purse.

The yard was pretty large, fenced in, and shaped like an L, as the house was on a corner lot. They had playground equipment and a fair few trees, and lots of sports equipment. Grantaire muttered
something else about this not being at all consistent with his experiences of the system, but no one
shushed him this time.

Peter Parker noticed them first. He’d been running around the yard in circles with the dog, a chubby
little beagle, but he changed courses abruptly to run up to them. His older friends couldn’t help but
gape at the changes in his appearance. His hair had been cut short, and it was neatly brushed and
clean. He was wearing khakis, a button down shirt, a sweater vest and crocs, all of which were well
dusted with dirt and grass stains. “Hi guys! Hey Ponine, hey Zelma!” He jumped into Eponine’s
arms for a big hug and gave his sister a kiss.

“Hey little guy. Where’s your brother?”

“In the club house. He just hides in there when Mrs. Lawrence sends us outside for creative play
time.” Peter Parker pointed towards a plastic log cabin tucked between two pine trees.

Grantaire ventured over, bent down, and knocked on the little door. He saw a tuft of blond hair and
two wide brown eyes look up through one of the glass-less windows, and then the green plastic door
flew open and he had skinny little arms clamped around his midsection.

“Hey buddy!” Grantaire pried Little R off of him so he could scoop him up himself. “Miss me?”

Little R didn’t say anything, but he nodded so forcefully that Grantaire worried for his neck. He
buried his face in Grantaire’s chest and hugged him so tightly it hurt. The poor thing was trembling.
He was dressed just as dorkily as his brother, but it stood out worse because his clothes were neat
and tidy, as he obviously hadn’t been playing.

It might have been Grantaire’s imagination, but he thought Little R felt a bit lighter than he had the
last time he’d picked the boy up.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get here for a visit sooner. I tried, but things got crazy on us again.”

“Montparnasse didn’t- ” he started to screech, but Grantaire gently shushed him.

“That asshole’s still in jail, and he’s going to stay there this time. It wasn’t anything like that. Enjolras
get into a fight with his parents, so we had to move out of the palace. We moved into my old
apartment, and it’s small and gross so we’ve been busy trying to clean it up.” Grantaire sat down on
the grass in front of the pine trees and settled Little R on his lap. “Don’t tell anyone, but it’s all really
scary for me.”

“It is?”

“Yeah. You saw how beautiful Enjolras’ old house was. I don’t want him to be uncomfortable in a
gross place like mine.”

Little R regarded him with a serious look that still came across as comical, what with him being a
four year old. “Don’t be ascared for that. There’s more important things than how pretty a house is.
This house is really, really pretty and full of nice things, but I don’t like it much at all because it
makes me miss the people I love. I’d live in the tiniest, ugliest, messiest house in the world if it meant
I was with you and Ponine and Ferre and Jean and Bucket and everyone again. I think Statue Man
feels the same way I do, and he won’t miss the nice things because he has you instead and that’s
better times a million.”

Grantaire’s eyes watered a bit at the earnest little speech. He gave Little R a tight squeeze and ruffled
his hair. “You’re the best kid in the world, you know that buddy?”
“Thanks.”

“I’m sorry you’re so lonely here. Your foster mom seems nice though.” Which was a bit of a lie. She seemed like a high strung control freak, but she certainly had a lot of good things to offer the kids. Really, the Thenardier boys seemed to have lucked out.

“She is. She’s really nice, and so is her husband. And it’s neat to have my own room and as many crayons as I want. I still miss my friends and my sisters though. I want to go home.”

“I’m sorry. I really wish I could take you home with me.”

“It’s okay. ‘Taire. I know you would if you could. Can we color together while you’re here?”

“Sure thing.”

Grantaire stood up and had Little R crawl onto his back for a piggy back. He rejoined the others, who were gathered around Peter Parker asking him questions about school. “Did the Stepford Wife get back with Gavroche yet?”

“Nope. She found his phone in one of her neighbor’s planters,” Combeferre said. Enjolras coughed into his hand, and everyone pretended the action wasn’t designed to cover a laugh. “Eponine and I are going to cruise the area for him.”

“I think we’ll be able to find him at a convenience store shoplifting some candy. Mrs. Lawrence doesn’t let the kids have refined sugars so he’s probably jonesing for a fix right now. We’ll be back in a little bit.” Eponine edged behind Grantaire and gave her little brother a kiss on the cheek, and then she and Combeferre headed out of the yard.

“Is Mrs. Lawrence inside?” Grantaire asked.

“Yup. She’s starting supper,” Peter Parker said.

Grantaire walked over to the screen door that lead to the kitchen, and Little R knocked on it. Mrs. Lawrence looked a bit surprised when she opened the door to let them in.

“Jean, it’s so nice to see you with a smile!”

His smile wavered when she called him by his real name. “I know we’re a’posed to play outside right now, but can I inside play with ‘Taire? I like coloring with him.”

“We’ll be good,” Grantaire promised with only a smidge of a sarcastic inflection.

Mrs. Lawrence looked ecstatic at the prospect. “Take your shoes off first, and then yes, by all means, color away! Do you want me to put on one of the ambient music and fine art programs while you color, or is this going to be quiet time?”

“I…I dunno.” Little R hid his face against Grantaire’s shoulder.

“We’ll probably be fine without the background noise, but thanks. C’mon buddy, you heard her. Drop down and get those shoes off.”

Little R slid off his back and shucked his crocs with an uncharacteristic eagerness. Grantaire pulled off his own shoes, and then Little R’s hand was clutching his and dragging him out of the kitchen, down the hall, and into a large, sunny bedroom.

Grantaire probably would have done unspeakable, awful things for a room like that when he’d been
a child. Hell, he’d have done a decent amount of unspeakable things for a room like that as a twenty-four year old. It was decorated a little too cheerfully for his tastes, but it was spacious and stocked with just about every Crayola or Crayola knock off product in existence. Little R grabbed them each a giant drawing pad and then took out a tub of crayons and set it on the floor between the two pads.

“Sit down and color with me, ‘Taire.”

Grantaire was still staring at the easels and art tables, but he gave himself a little shake and joined his young friend on the plush sunshine yellow carpet. He started working on a crayon portrait of him and Little R sitting out in the Lawrence’s yard, thinking it might cheer the kid up the next time he got lonely.

They spent a good two hours in Little R’s room coloring together. Grantaire worked on the portrait the entire time, in enough earnest that the others were a bit surprised when they realized he’d made the entire thing just with crayons (“Hey, they’re totally a legit medium if you use them right!”), but Little R drew eight pictures in the same chunk of time. He gave two of them to Grantaire (a picture of a flying space cow and Grantaire and Enjolras in a fairy tale style castle, respectively), one to Enjolras (of the Fresh Beat Band), one to Eponine (a blocky girl with long dark hair, eyelashes, and pretty sparkles holding hands with a blocky boy with curly brown hair and tired eyes), one to Azelma (a light haired blocky figure with a word balloon that said ‘I M STRAOUNG’), one to Combeferre (two fat house cats chasing a fly) and the other two were for his foster parents (one of their beagle and one of their house with a rainbow over it).

Mrs. Lawrence teared up a bit when she looked at the pictures. She hung them both up on the fridge, and then sat Little R down at the kitchen table with his brothers (Combeferre and Eponine must have returned with Gavroche while they were coloring—the kid was dressed similarly to his brothers but his blond hair was still long and he’d ripped holes into the knees of his khakis).

For a long, uncomfortable moment, Mrs. Lawrence just stood there with her hand over her mouth. Just when Grantaire was going to try to say something polite to excuse himself, she finally spoke. “First of all, I just want to say that I misjudged you entirely and I am very sorry for that. I just, forgive me, but we’ve never done this fostering thing before, and the boys came to us in rough shape. I didn’t believe them when they said that even though their parents weren’t treating them well, their sister and their friends were. I figured you kids, well, I wasn’t quite sure what to think, but I thought the poor dears might benefit by having some time apart from you.”

“We’ve only ever been trying to help the boys,” Grantaire said, his tone guarded.

“I know, I know! I see that now and you’ve…” She broke off into a wavery sob. “I’ve been trying so hard to get through to little Jean, but nothing’s worked. He just pulls more and more away from me. His therapist said it’s normal, and that he needs time to recover from what happened to him, and it’s obvious the poor little dear is still terrified of that man who kidnapped him, but it’s also frustrating to be trying so hard and not get anything for my efforts. On most days he won’t even talk to me.”

“He’s always quiet though. That’s just him. Seriously, we don’t say much when we hang out. If you force it then you’ll just make him uncomfortable.”

“So...so quiet is good, then?” It was really kind of sad, how desperate and hopeful she looked.

Grantaire nodded. “Yeah. He likes you, by the way. He thinks you’re nice. He’s just sad and he’s a
little lonely because he misses all of us. The kid doesn’t make friends very easily.”

“Okay…can you visit more then?”

Grantaire rubbed at the back of his neck. “I want to. I definitely want to, but my boyfriend and I just fell into some financial difficulties. We had to give up his car, and I’m not sure if buses run out here. Most of my friends have cars though. I’m sure I can bug them for rides.”

“I’ll compensate you for the gas money. Wait, did you say boyfriend? You know what, never mind, that’s not important. You’ve got my youngest angel talking to me. It doesn’t matter what you get up to behind closed doors.”

“The kids know I’m gay,” Grantaire snapped. “The girls aren’t raising their brothers to see that as a problem.”

Mrs. Lawrence’s smile tightened. “To be fair, dear, the girls aren’t actually raising the boys at all. And whether or not your lifestyle is a problem is for you and the Lord to work out. Now, can we move on? We both care about the little boys, don’t we? Just keep your sinful lifestyle out of my home and I’m sure we can come to an agreement.”

Grantaire narrowed his eyes in dislike. “Can we take the boys out for day trips and sleepovers and stuff?”

“I don’t think so, dear. I want to be involved in their lives, and I’m not entirely confident you’ll be exposing them to age appropriate ideas.”

“And Little R doesn’t like talking to you, huh?”

“No, Jean is a bit introverted, as you’ve said.” Her eyes turned hard and the woman's smile was reminiscent of armor.

“Hm. How bout that. We done?”

“I think so.” Mrs. Lawrence nodded curtly and then headed off for the dining room. Grantaire followed after her and resumed his seat between Enjolras and Little R.

Little R immediately stuck his hand in Grantaire’s. He then started shoveling casserole into his mouth with the other hand. Mrs. Lawrence’s eyes widened. “Jean, sweetheart! I haven’t seen you have such an appetite in all the time you’ve been here.”

His cheeks went red, but he didn’t look up. He stared at his plate as he continued clearing it. Grantaire gave his hand a little squeeze and started picking at his own portion, though he didn’t have much of an appetite anymore. The casserole was followed up with break and bake chocolate chip cookies, and then the boys had to wash up and start winding down.

“This is about as late as I usually let visitors stay. I know you had to travel a bit of a distance to get here though, so I’ll let you have another twenty minutes.”

Enjolras’ expression turned slightly bewildered at her passive aggressive cheerfulness, but the young people managed to hold themselves in check. They made the most of their twenty minutes with lots of snuggles and hugs on the part of Eponine and Azelma, lots of complaining about the snuggles and hugs from Gavroche and Peter Parker, and a bit more activist advice from Combeferre and Enjolras for Gavroche. Grantaire sat with Little R the entire time and spoke quietly with him about school.

When it was time for them to leave Little R clamped his arms around Grantaire’s neck and refused to
let go. Eponine and Enjolras ended up having to pry his tiny hands apart and force him away from Grantaire, and then the poor kid cried so hard he threw up on the floor.

Eponine kept her own tears in check until they were in the car. “I don’t know why I expected to feel better after that. I feel like a worse sister than ever. God. Why do I have to suck so bad at taking care of them?”

“It’s not your fault, Eponine,” Grantaire said dully, though he didn’t feel that great about the situation himself.

“At least the boys are getting the care they need and deserve now,” Combeferre said gently.

“Mm, more than they want, even, especially in Gavroche’s case,” Enjolras added. “For a woman unrepentantly and thoughtlessly buying into the capitalist delusion that security is attained through the accumulation of useless comforts secured through the exploitation of others, she seemed nice enough. And she has the boys’ best interests at heart. The situation could be much worse.”

Mindful of the fact that Eponine was still crying, Grantaire kept his mouth shut. He’d talk to his friends about the Stepford Wife’s homophobia later. At the moment, they were all still allowed to come over and visit the boys. If he broke the news about the woman’s bigotry to a carful of social activists while they could still drive back to the house and give the woman a piece of their minds without the time and space to cool off, that would not continue to be the case.

The first thing Grantaire did when he got back to the studio apartment was hang Little R’s pictures up on the wall. He didn’t actually have any blank wall space to do this, so he taped them over a flyer and some old sketches by the kitchenette. He smiled at the cute scribbles, then went and sat down on the mattress.

The first thing Enjolras did when he got back to the studio apartment was to crawl around the floor on his hands and knees with a cup and a piece of stiff paper in readiness. He found another centipede, jumped backwards with a shriek, and sat on the mattress hugging his knees until Grantaire caught it with the cup and paper and brought it outside.

Grantaire desperately wanted to tease Enjolras over that, but he realized he’d pushed his luck a bit too far already with the straw wrapper. He spent the night cuddling with Enjolras in an effort to calm him down, and in the process calmed himself down an awful lot. He almost didn’t feel upset about the situation with the Thenardier boys by the time he fell asleep.

Then he woke up the next morning with a runny nose and itchy eyes. He couldn’t figure out why his sinuses ached so badly, or why he wanted to rip his eyes from their sockets.

Then he opened his itchy eyes and saw the young male cat sitting on his chest.

“Mrowr!” the cat screamed.

Enjolras was sitting in their chair sipping tea. “Good morning, ‘Taire. I was talking to Combeferre yesterday while you were playing with Little R, and he said cats are good at hunting bugs.”

“So you got one?” Grantaire yelped. The cat dug its claws into his chest and then shoved off, barreling across the room shrieking angry little meows as it went.

Enjolras frowned. “You weren’t doing anything about the bugs, unless you count mocking my discomfort. This is a natural solution.”
“Enjolras, I’m allergic to cats!”

“Oh. Do you think that’s going to be a problem?”

Fucking hell but the man was lucky he was so damn gorgeous.

Chapter End Notes

I'm going to risk being activist-y again to talk about the tragedy in Bangladesh for a sec. For anyone not aware, Bangladesh recently witnessed the largest industrial disaster in modern history. The last official source I checked in on had the body count past the 700 mark, with people still missing and unaccounted for. The factory complex had been constructed illegally and shoddily, and when it showed signs of structural issues the workers tried to leave but were coerced back inside with the threat of losing a month's wages. This is only the latest in a series of events that demonstrate a lack of appreciation for human life in favor of corporate greed. Many Western brands have their clothes made in Bangladesh, though they try to distance themselves from these events when they happen. Groups of activists are trying to prevent this and hold these powerful businesses responsible for the effects of their insatiable greed. Here are some links to petitions I've signed on this issue: (http://www.avaaz.org/en/) (http://action.sumofus.org/a/joe-fresh/2/2/?sub=homepage) (http://action.laborrights.org/p/dia/action/public/?action_KEY=6280) Just to warn you, if you give that last one your email they'll contact you and ask you to bring a form letter to the store manager of a Gap, Old Navy, or Banana Republic.

I think the ideal solution here is to pressure Western big business to get on board with serious reforms from their suppliers. Having everybody pull out of Bangladesh entirely would destroy their economy and cause a different brand of suffering. However, it makes me feel sick to think that I've given money to people with such a callous regard for living beings, so I'm personally abstaining from buying new clothing. I'm going to do what I meant to do ages ago and be a thrift store patron from now on (with the exception of band t-shirts at concerts-I get to cheat every now and then, okay?!). I'm new to this branch of social activism though, so I was hoping maybe one of you guys out there in internet-land was more experienced and could help me out with something. Is there a way to purchase ethically produced undergarments? Those are not the kinds of things I want to buy second hand and so far my research isn't turning up anything useful :(.

Thanks for bearing with my rambles.
Grantaire expected Mother’s Day to be tough. It was far from his favorite day of the year under normal circumstances, and accordingly when he woke up Sunday morning he felt a familiar hollow sensation that he knew would collapse into a shit storm of horrible emotions and memories that would have had him clutching a bottle in the old days.

He didn’t want to focus on that though. For a variety of reasons, really, but mostly because he couldn’t monopolize Mother’s Day angst this year; not when everything was so fresh for Enjolras. Given his lover’s recent split from his family and the baggage Grantaire brought to the day, he figured it was going to be uniquely hellish for both of them.

When he reluctantly accepted the fact that he wasn’t going to be able to fall back asleep and thus delay facing the day, Grantaire rolled over and started wondering how to go about facing things. Then he noticed that he was alone on the mattress. He looked around the room and found Enjolras sitting on the kitchen chair they’d swiped from his old apartment. He smiled fondly at Grantaire when he noticed that he was awake, and then turned back to the book he’d been reading.

Okay, that was encouraging. Enjolras certainly didn’t look traumatized, so maybe things were only going to be hellish on Grantaire’s end. “What’cha reading?” he asked. He sat up and stretched out his back, and let out a groan as his body had not been enjoying the switch back to the old mattress, and was informing him of this through nearly constant aches.

“I’m reading No God But God. Feuilly loaned it to me. It’s pretty good so far, if you’d like to look through it before I give it back to him. There’s a strong Shi’a bias, but the author’s Shi’a so I suppose that can’t really be helped.”
“Ah. I’ll probably skip it.” Grantaire yawned, threw a glare at the cat, and then stumbled out of bed.
“Any plans for the day?”

“No. The obligations I usually have today have been cleared,” Enjolras said, shoulders tensing as he spoke. “What about you?”

“I’ve got to take a trip out a little later, but otherwise I’m clear. Want me to be distracting?”

Enjolras set his book aside and shifted his posture in a subtle invitation. Receiving the message, Grantaire straddled him and wrapped his arms around his lover’s neck. “Courf’s not picking me up until five, so you’ve got me for most of the day. I mean, if you want. You can read, if you’d rather.”

Enjolras let out a sigh, but otherwise ignored Grantaire’s little shot at himself. When he was having a good day Grantaire realized that Enjolras was just getting sick of repeating his reassurances that he liked spending time with his boyfriend, but when he had bad days it was hard to remember that. Frankly, he wasn’t sure if he was ever going to believe Enjolras when he said he did in fact love him back.

Enjolras trailed his hands down Grantaire’s back and leaned forward to kiss the side of his face. “I’m supposed to be filling out job applications with Combeferre when he gets back from taking his mother out for breakfast, but that’s not for a few more hours. What are you and Courfeyrac doing? Taking Bridget out to dinner?”

“Courfeyrac and his father are. I’ve got other plans. Um, so yeah. What do you want to do until Combeferre gets here?”

Enjolras considered. “Given our current state of poverty, there aren’t really a lot of options, are there?”

Grantaire grinned and waggled his eyebrows. That sounded like a good lead in to staying home and fucking around.

Sadly, that possibility didn’t occur to Enjolras. Grantaire had underestimated his boyfriend’s devotion to academic nerdery once more. Of course he knew all the museums in the area that let you in free with a student ID.

Oh well. At least the PEM was an art museum.

Later that afternoon, when Enjolras was sitting at a café working through a stack of job applications that he and Combeferre had gathered from businesses in the area, Combeferre made him aware that Enjolras had misjudged his conversation with Grantaire in the morning. “I…somehow doubt he was inviting you out for a museum date.”

“Oh course he wasn’t. I was the one who thought of it, but it’s not like he was pitching a lot of ideas. Really, we’re going to get bored very easily if he can’t think of more activities that don’t cost money.”

Combeferre took a sip from his latte (he’d spotted one for Enjolras, though he’d had to remind him of all the times Enjolras had spotted him before Enjolras let him) to hide his smirk. “So he was insistent about staying in, was he?”

“Yes…oh. He wanted to fuck, didn’t he? He could have just said so. It honestly doesn’t occur to me sometimes.”
Combeferre almost snorted his latte out his nose. “Don’t you ever get into the mood without reminders?”

“Yes. But as Grantaire seems to always be in the mood it’s never been an issue. I just tell him I’m feeling horny and we have sex. Shit, can we talk about something else? I got distracted and wrote something completely inappropriate for my job experience.”

Combeferre laughed. “Sure. What are you putting for job experience, if you don’t mind my asking? I wasn’t aware you’d had a job before.”

“I used to go into the office with Dad from time to time when I was in high school, so I’m putting down office work, and I volunteered at an animal shelter and the library.”

“Ah. Well, if none of these places bite, Ponine said she’s pretty sure she can get you hired at her café too. Her boss is in love with Marius, practically, so he’s developed a good opinion of her friends by default. I guess Marius really brings in the tips.”

Enjolras rifled through the stack of applications until he found the one he’d been looking for. “I already filled one out for Bramer Street, and I have Marius and Eponine as references.”

Combeferre was quiet for a few minutes, probably trying to picture his dignified friend working as a barista based on the way he kept stifling giggles. Enjolras only rolled his eyes a few times. He was aware his friends found the thought of him working wage jobs comical, but he didn’t really understand why. He’d been listening to them complain about their part time and summer jobs for ages, so he felt that even though he lacked experience in the field, he didn’t necessarily lack knowledge. He was pretty sure he could handle customer service. He was charismatic when he wanted to be.

“So where is Grantaire, anyway?” Combeferre asked after a few minutes. “Out getting allergy medication?”

“No. Joly ran some over for him the other day, so we’re stocked up for now.” Enjolras set his pen down, deciding he’d earned a break from filling the same information out repeatedly. “You know, he’s still whining about the cat even though he’s medicated for it now?”

“Enjolras, you brought an animal into his home without discussing it first.”

“To hunt the bugs that he wasn’t concerning himself with! Besides, I did it on your advice.”

Combeferre’s eyes widened. “Don’t put this on me. I didn’t expect you to actually run out and get a cat, and I most certainly did not expect you to do so while your boyfriend was asleep.”

“You make it sound like I was trying to hide it from him.”

Combeferre folded his arms over his chest. He didn’t say anything, but he didn’t need to with the way he was looking at Enjolras.

Enjolras sipped his latte and looked away. “The cat’s cute. I think he’ll grow on Grantaire eventually.”

“Ah huh. You didn’t answer me though. What’s he up to? He’s okay, right?”

“He’s heading out with Courfeyrac in a little-wait, why wouldn’t he be?” Enjolras set his cup on the table and looked at Combeferre in confusion.
Combeferre regarded Enjolras with equal confusion. “He usually has a hard time on Mother’s Day, doesn’t he?”

“Does he? I never noticed. He doesn’t really talk about his family though.”

Combeferre nodded. “That’s partly how you can tell he’s having a hard time, Enjolras. His silences are just as important as what he says. More so, even, with Grantaire. I can’t help but wonder about what kind of relationship Grantaire had with his mother though. He and Feuilly respond to the holiday so differently, you know?”

Now Enjolras was sure he was missing something. “Why would their responses be the same? Feuilly’s an orphan.”

Understanding dawned on Combeferre. “Oh…you don’t know. I suppose I wouldn’t know either if Courf hadn’t slipped up and told me when he was shitfaced last Halloween though…Enjolras, Grantaire’s mother is dead.”

Grantaire made his solitary progress through the graveyard with his hands in his pockets and his head down. In a distant sort of way, he noticed that the weather had really turned around. The day had started grey and drizzly, but now it was nice. The greenery in the place was in full bloom. Despite being a cemetery, morbidity was optional for the visitors on a spring day like this.

Other children were there visiting their mothers’ graves with flowers and other tokens of sentiment. Most were significantly older than Grantaire and seemed at peace with their actions. He’d been doing this for years, but that peaceful feeling still managed to elude him.

Lucette’s grave was to the far left, well past the graveyard entrance. It was actually out of view from the street, and even mostly obscured from the walkway by some tall headstones and a few trees. She was surrounded by Grantaire’s father’s relatives; second and third cousins, great uncles and aunts, and other people Grantaire had never met. There was a lot of privacy in that little stretch of mostly forgotten dead, for which Grantaire was grateful. He’d hated being alone with his mother in life, but in death he preferred it.

He sat down beside her tombstone, leaned forward, and pressed a kiss to the engraved letters spelling out her name. “Hey Mom. Me again, here for our biannual chat. Happy Mother’s Day.”

Grantaire brushed his fingers over the cold stone, his eyes already welling with tears. “Wow…it’s starting early this time. Um, I’m better-better than the last time I visited you. That guy I’ve been telling you about since I started school, he started liking me back. We’ve been dating for a few months now and I…I feel pretty good most of the time. He’s…he’s doing for me what Dad tried to do for you.”

And then, completely unbidden, the apologies came, torn out of him almost unconsciously.

“Mom, I’m so sorry. You tried so hard to get better, and it was my fault you couldn’t, and if I hadn’t gotten sick too then you’d still be here. I’m not angry anymore, because I’ve seen so much of what you went through and I just really wish you were here to talk me through it because underneath everything I really am still just a selfish fuck who takes love and never gives it back. I miss you so much and I wish you were here to help me, because my crazy is going to scare Enjolras away eventually but your crazy never scared Dad away and I’m just fucking scared of losing him. If I wasn’t such a mess you’d still be here to help me and this is fucking stupid. You can’t hear me. You’re dead and it’s my fault. I’m so sorry, Mom. I’m sorry.”
Grantaire snapped his head around, wet eyes widening in panic when he saw Enjolras standing behind him on the pathway, just in front of the obscuring headstones. “What are you doing here?” he rasped.

“I was concerned about you so I bullied Courfeyrac into telling me where you’d gone. I’m sorry to invade your privacy like this, but I don’t think you should be alone right now. May I…?”

It took Grantaire a moment to realize what Enjolras was asking, but then he nodded and his boyfriend sat down next to him in the grass. He wiped the tears from Grantaire’s cheeks and enveloped him in a hug. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize your mother was deceased. I thought you were estranged from your family.”

“No. Dad and Jacqui live out of state, that’s why I don’t talk to them much. I…yeah. They both moved after Mom…” He rested his head on Enjolras’ shoulder and took some slow, steadying breaths. Enjolras shifted his hold a little to accommodate the new position, and then he began gently stroking Grantaire’s hair.

Grantaire knew he should say something else, but he couldn’t get his voice to work. His throat felt too tight. Still, it hurt a little less sitting in front of her grave with those arms around him.

“Grantaire, I’m never leaving you. I love you too much for you to be able to scare me off now,” Enjolras said, voice low and deadly serious.

“You heard that, huh?” Grantaire mumbled.

“I’m sorry. I know that wasn’t meant for my ears, but I still want to address it. ‘Taire, you are so much more than your illness and your addiction. I love you so much, and I want you to be secure in that.”

Grantaire let out an involuntary sob. He actually felt pretty well defined by being unstable, depressed, and his temptation to drink himself senseless, but it was comforting to hear that Enjolras saw more.

They sat like that for some minutes, Enjolras stroking his hair and dropping the occasional kiss on the top of his head while Grantaire continued to flinch away and hide his face, until eventually he sat up and offered Enjolras a weak smile. “You’re perfect,” he murmured on impulse, because that’s all he could think, and his filter always left him when he visited Lucette. He was at his most open and raw state sitting beside his mother’s grave.

Enjolras brushed back some of his bangs and lightly kissed him. “I don’t want to make you uncomfortable, but my mind is swimming with questions and concerns.”

Grantaire chewed on his lip. His stomach twisted and his throat felt tight, far too tight to answer any questions.

“Don’t hide this from me,” Enjolras pleaded. “I want to help you, so very badly. Please don’t shut me out. If you think sharing your pain would disgust me, you can’t think much of me.”

“I-it’s not that,” Grantaire choked out. “It’s…Enjolras, I don’t want to tell you all the reasons I hate myself. I just want to forget everything.” That desire really was the driving force behind most of his actions.

Enjolras’ touch was gentle, but his expression remained firm. “You said once that it wasn’t in your
power to refuse me anything I really wanted, and since then I’ve struggled not to abuse that notion. But ‘Taire, it isn’t just that I want to know what happened to you.” He brushed his fingertips over Grantaire’s cheek. “I think I need to know. And I think you’ll feel better for talking to someone who loves you instead of bottling this up.”

Grantaire took a deep breath. “You’re…you’re probably…yeah, okay.” His eyes darted to Lucette’s grave once more. “But not here.”

“Okay. That’s completely fine.”

Grantaire extracted himself from Enjolras’ arms and crawled over to the tombstone. He patted the top of it and kissed her letters again. “I love you, Mom.”

Enjolras rubbed Grantaire’s back, and then helped him to his feet when he was ready to move again. He gave the tombstone his own reverent pat, and then he started to lead Grantaire towards the street.

“Courf was supposed to pick me up in an hour,” Grantaire muttered.

“I talked to him. Combeferre loaned me his car, so I’ll be taking you home instead.”

Grantaire looked down at their joined hands and managed to form a wobbly smile. As many walks as he’d taken through this cemetery, he hadn’t taken one with another person since the afternoon they’d put his mother in the ground. It made a difference, in a very important and infinitely reassuring way.

Meanwhile, Feuilly and Eponine were actually at the same cemetery, but they were on the other side and entirely missed Grantaire and Enjolras.

Feuilly had had a much different relationship with his parents than Grantaire had, and as per Combeferre’s earlier observation, he handled the holiday in a different spirit. He laid flowers in front of his mother’s grave then sat down cross legged in front of the tombstone with his guitar and played a few of his mother’s favorite songs. Eponine sat to the side and watched with her chin in her hands.

When Feuilly felt satisfied with the way he’d honored his mother’s memory he stood and they started walking towards the exit. “I didn’t know you played guitar,” Eponine said. “You should come to the music open mics at Brammer Street.”

“I haven’t been that into it since high school. No time to work on it, really. My mom liked to sing. We used to drive around aimlessly listening to chick rock together at night. Dad hated it. He’d get home from work and the apartment would be empty and cell phones were so not a possibility at our income so he had no way of getting in touch with us.” Feuilly smiled distantly. “We drove to Rhode Island once on a whim. It was awesome.”

“Your mom sounds like a cool gal. I wish I could have met her,” Eponine said. “What happened, anyway? Did they get into a car accident or something?”

“Oh, they didn’t die together,” Feuilly answered. “Mom was riding her bike to work and she got struck by a car. Dad died a couple years later. Some lung thing from his job. I didn’t catch the details. I was only ten, and no one really wanted to talk to me about it.”

“I’m sorry.” Eponine reached over and squeezed his hand.

Feuilly’s eyes were sad, but his smile didn’t waver. He shrugged. “Old wounds. They’re well scabbed at this point, I promise.”
They got into Feuilly’s car. Eponine immediately plugged in her mp3 player and put on a playlist she’d made for their increasingly frequent travels together. As Eponine wasn’t terribly invested in visiting her own parents on Mother’s Day, she’d made plans to tag along with a few of her friends for their obligations. Feuilly’s trip had been short, so they were meeting up with Bahorel to hang with him and his family. Eponine had never met Bahorel’s parents, or even really heard much about them, but Feuilly had assured her repeatedly that it was fine that they were going. Tag-a-longs were expected, apparently.

They spent most of the ride talking about Eponine’s brothers and their plans for their apartment. Feuilly had found a few leads that looked promising, including a complex in Danvers that was suspiciously nice to be in their budget.

Eventually Feuilly parked in front of a tiny little place on the edge of a field. There weren’t a lot of neighbors, and all the other houses were equally small and kind of dumpy looking. There were a lot of rusty chain link fences and chipped paint to be seen.

Eponine and Feuilly piled out of the car and started up the ‘walkway’ (the part of the yard where the grass had been worn down to dirt) and rang the bell. A cheerful looking, gangly man with thinning blond hair answered the door. “Hello Feuilly. Good to see you again.”

“Hey Alex.” Feuilly nodded at the man, and they were waved into a small living room. “Eponine, this is Bahorel’s dad, Alexandre. Alex, this is our friend Eponine.”

“It’s nice to meet you, sir.” Eponine smiled at him and he returned it as he shook her hand. “So where’s Bahorel? I saw his car outside.”

“He’s downstairs with my wife.”

“Camille’s not doing his laundry again, is she?” Feuilly asked with a frown, leading Eponine to assume they had a washer and dryer in the basement.

Alex laughed. “Really, Feuilly. We don’t mind helping our son out from time to time.”

Feuilly muttered darkly under his breath about the frequency of ‘time to time.’

They chatted with Alex in the living room for a good twenty minutes before Bahorel and his mother showed up. Eponine developed a favorable impression of Bahorel’s parents almost right away. His mother was very pretty and friendly, but there was an air of fragility about her. She sat down almost immediately, taking a good five minutes to recover her breath. There was an awful lot of merchandise scattered around the room designed with the aim to help someone quit smoking, and there was a pamphlet of frequently asked questions about emphysema on the coffee table.

Maybe Feuilly had a point in being annoyed with Bahorel about whining his mom into doing his laundry. Especially if she had to lug the drag queen’s wardrobe up and down a flight of stairs to do so.

“So where are we going for dinner?” Feuilly finally asked.

Bahorel shrugged. He listed off a few restaurants Eponine had never heard of.

Alex’s easy smile wavered. “I don’t know, son. Those places are a tad pricy.”

“Yeah, but it’s Mother’s Day. It’s not like Bahorel expects you guys to pay,” Eponine said. Feuilly clapped a hand over his mouth to cover his snort, and Bahorel scowled. Eponine whacked his arm. “Bahorel, you jerk! You don’t make your mom take you out to eat on Mother’s Day!”
“I was going to drive,” Bahorel snapped defensively.

“Oh my God. You are failing so hard at being a son right now.”

Feuilly actually started clapping at that one. “When I say these things he blows me off. Keep going, Ponine. How do you really feel?”

“Now wait a minute kids, you’re not really being fair to Bahorel. After all, the boy doesn’t have much money,” Alex said.

“That’s only because he doesn’t have a job,” Eponine returned. “I’ve been working to support myself legally since I was fourteen, under the table since I was twelve. If he wanted to pull his weight, he could.”

“Eponine, stop it,” Bahorel hissed. She smacked his arm again.

“I most certainly will not! Feuilly wasn’t exaggerating at all. You’re a leech!”

Bahorel crossed his arms over his chest and stuck his tongue out at her.

His mother almost jumped out of her skin. “Bahorel! You didn’t use our money to get that thing put in your face, did you?” She clutched a hand to her chest in horror.

Bahorel’s face fell as he realized he hadn’t taken out his tongue ring after his latest bar crawl. “Uh…” Then he made it worse by compulsively clutching at his ear, and confirming that all of those piercings were still in too. His parents’ eyes moved to the little hoops in his cartilage that his hair had been covering.

“We give you money to support yourself while you’re getting an education. We’re trying to help you better yourself,” Alex said. “And you’re spending it mutilating your body?”

Eponine was tempted to throw in a comment about Bahorel’s fantastic drag outfits and superhero costumes, but she held herself in check. Besides, his parents’ reaction to his facial piercings were really good enough for the moment.

Feuilly didn’t seem to agree. “You should see his tattoos.”

“What?!”

Grantaire was feeling tense again by the time they got back to the apartment. Being greeted first thing by a shrieking cat didn’t help his mood any either. He was tempted to kick the thing, but Enjolras shot past him and scooped the cat up before he got the chance to act on that impulse.

“Ssh. Calm down, kitty. I’ll feed you in a minute. Grantaire, why don’t you take one of those allergy tablets Joly gave you?”

Grantaire scowled. “Did you give the thing a name yet or can we just call him Shithead like I suggested?”

Enjolras’ cheeks colored a little. “His name is Raoul.”

Grantaire cocked his head to the side. “Raoul? Any reason?”

“I just thought it fit him. I mean, it’s kind of a dapper name, and he’s a tuxedo cat.”
“How is Raoul a dapper name? Urgh...never mind.” He stalked across the room to the counter, rifled around the junk that had accumulated for the pill bottle Joly had given him, and dry swallowed the allergy medication. He leaned against the counter and watched as Enjolras fussed with the cat (who Grantaire had yet to see attack a single bug). Enjolras filled up Raoul’s food dish and petted him while he ate, then freshened his water even though it was fine, and petted him some more until the stupid thing crawled into his lap and started purring.

Really, the cat looked a bit confused whenever it purred, almost like the noises he was making scared him.

“Are you ready to talk yet?” Enjolras asked.

“Don’t say it like that, Enj. I’ll put off this conversation forever if you let me.”

Enjolras picked the cat up and climbed off of the floor. “That’s not an option, so we’re clear. Come sit on the bed with me.”

“Okay.”

They curled up together on the mattress with the stupid fucking cat at Enjolras’ feet, and Grantaire was able to slouch down so that he was eye level with Enjolras’ chest. It was nice. He got the comfort of Enjolras’ amazing hands running down his back and through his hair without having to face his beautiful but oftentimes harsh eyes while he spoke.

“Talk to me, love,” Enjolras whispered. “How did your mother die? And why do you think it’s your fault?”

“Because it is my fault.”

“Grantaire…”

He let out a quick breath and closed his eyes. “My mother was sick, Enjolras. She had a laundry list of diagnoses that I never got around to memorizing but the gist of it was depression, anxiety, suicidal urges, hallucinations, delusions, and all other sorts of fun stuff. She was bad, really, really bad. She’d get confused and then she’d try to hurt herself, and sometimes when I was still a little kid she tried to hurt me. That’s usually what got her back into the hospital.”

“Grantaire, that’s terrible.”

“Mm hm,” Grantaire agreed distantly. “Dad wouldn’t throw her back in again if she was only scratching up her own arms or ripping out her hair or making herself throw up, because he said he could help her deal with it. But when she tried to ‘purify’ me or beat the sin out of me or something, as soon as she came to herself again she’d check herself back in. Then Dad’d get pissed off because of course it was my fault that he’d lost Mom again, but I was fucking five years old, okay? And all I knew was that Mom cut me with a razor trying to shave off my hair because hair is sin and it fucking hurt. Holy shit. I haven’t said anything about that one in years.”

Enjolras’ hands squeezed almost painfully on his biceps, but his voice was comforting low and soothing when he spoke. “Do you think it’d help to share some of those memories with me?”

“They’re all pretty much the same. When I was four she almost drowned me in the bath tub—that was the holy water, you see. The hair thing happened the next year, and when I was seven she burned me with matches. After that I was able to fight her off whenever she tried to save me from sin, or an evil spirit or whatever the fuck she was hallucinating about at the time. Plus she wasn’t home much at that point. They pretty much gave up on letting her out of the hospital after enough episodes.”
“I’m so sorry, ‘Taire. That must have been horrible, to feel so unsafe at home.”

“Confusing too. Mom was saying stuff that made no sense, but she believed in it so much. And everyone else who talked to me about it was so cold and distant and they were half-lying, because, y’know, I was a little kid and apparently you don’t sit down and explain mental illness to a kid. So they were fucking insincere as hell and I just stopped trusting anyone. Well, except Jacqui, but she wasn’t home much and Mom never fixated on her the way she fixated on me. I look like Mom, y’see, so I think when she got all nuts sometimes she thought she was talking to herself as a little girl, and that if she could save me she’d save herself. That’s just me trying to make sense of her babbling though. I don’t really know for sure.”

“When she died…was it suicide?”

Grantaire let out a shaky breath. He pressed himself as close to Enjolras as he could, entirely hiding his face in Enjolras’ shirt. “Yeah.”

“How old were you then?”

“High school. I was, I was seventeen. It was her first time home from the hospital in fucking forever. Like, I’d forgotten what it was like to have my mom be around at all by that point.”

Enjolras rubbed his neck and his shoulders, silently encouraging him to keep going.

“Um, so, so the doctors had said…they said she was stronger so I treated her like she was. Y’know? And there was so much I wanted to say to her. Because when you’re a kid and you’re visiting your mom in a fucking mental hospital all you can do is hold her hand and say ‘I love you’ if you don’t want Dad to beat the ever living shit out of you when you get home. So I told her how I felt, because, y’know, they said she was stronger. And then she…” Grantaire broke off, choking on a sob.

Enjolras’ breath hitched as well. “I’m sorry.”

Grantaire pulled away far enough to hide his face in his hands, but Enjolras wouldn’t let go of him. “I found her in the bathtub,” Grantaire sobbed. “I screamed, and Dad came running and he threw me against the wall and said it was my fault. And it was. All she ever wanted was to be a good mom, and I told her that she wasn’t because she was broken and she broke me too. I told her I hated myself and that it was her fault, that she made me that way. Th-the last thing she told me was that she’d only been living so she could c-come home for me and I said she shouldn’t have bothered. I killed my mom, Enjolras. I killed my mom.”

And now it was out. The moment he’d given up on trying to conquer his demons in adolescence, the moment from which he’d sunken headfirst into pain and addiction. He was a terrible person, and he didn’t deserve to recover, or to be loved by someone like Enjolras, or anyone really. Now Enjolras knew why he hated himself, and he’d have to hate Grantaire too. Then he could leave and let Grantaire go back to his self-destruction and let him finish the job in peace.

But Enjolras wouldn’t let go of him. He hugged him close, and rubbed his back and kissed the top of his head, since Grantaire still had his hands clamped over his face and wouldn’t look up. The silence stretched between them as Enjolras struggled to find something to say, while Grantaire dreaded hearing it. Finally, Enjolras found his voice.

“Grantaire, it sounds like you had a moment of weakness and bad judgment when you were still very much a child, emotionally if no longer physically. Moments of weakness and bad judgment happen to the best of us, though the consequences were undoubtedly much more painful for you than they
usually are for such a transgression. But you also can’t be held solely responsible for what happened. Clearly you didn’t mean what you said. I’ve barely heard you mention your mother, but from what I gathered today at the cemetery you did love her very strongly.”

Without moving his hands, Grantaire nodded. He’d always loved his mom, even when she’d confused and scared him, and that’s what made killing her so horrible. It downright terrified him that he’d snapped and done that to someone he cared so much about.

Enjolras forced his hands down and tilted his face up by his chin so that they were finally looking eye to eye. “Grantaire, there is no way your mother should have been left alone with a scared and angry teenager when she was still that fragile. Someone should have been there to calm her and remind her that adolescents act out and say things they don’t mean when they’re hurt, and you were understandably hurt. Clearly she was released from the hospital too soon.”

Grantaire let out a sob, and the next thing he knew he was being cradled against Enjolras’ chest, his boyfriend’s strong fingers carding through his hair.

“I love you, ‘Taire. I wish there was something I could do to ease this pain for you. You’re such an extraordinary person, and you’re capable of being more than you are if only you could get past this crippling worldview you’ve clung to for protection. I wish you saw in yourself what I see in you.”

“I see you,” Grantaire whispered brokenly. “And you make me want to be better than I am.”

Enjolras tilted his face up once more and tenderly brushed their lips together. “I love you,” he repeated.


“All you need to do right now is help me help you. What do you need from me, love? Do you accept my reasons for why your mother’s death was not your fault?”

Grantaire let out a shaky breath. “No one’s ever said anything like that to me before. I-it’ll take time to process it. She…my words are what set her off, y’know?”

“Grantaire, it wasn’t your fault that she was in a position to be set off like that in the first place. Suicide is a dramatic response to one fight, don’t you think? There are so many other actions that needed to come together to lead to that end. Ultimately, I’d place responsibility on the mental health system and your mother’s diseased mind, not her child.”

Grantaire couldn’t help but think of his own diseased mind, but he pushed the thought aside as soon as he noticed it. He was facing down enough demons without bringing that one into the conversation, even if that was one of the things that frightened him most when he thought about his mother.

He closed his eyes and thought of Enjolras’ words instead, and felt a bit dizzy from them. Enjolras’ view was a revelation to him. He’d carried this weight for seven years. Could he really let it go now? Grantaire tested it. “If I hadn’t shouted at her…”

“Something else would have come along to upset her. She was sick, Grantaire. It’s not your fault.”

“I broke her heart.”

Enjolras’ voice took on that quality he got when he was arguing social politics. Most people would probably have found it off-putting for such a personal conversation, but that passionate conviction was what had drawn Grantaire to Enjolras in the first place.
“If her actions hadn’t been so drastic and final, you’d have had a chance to speak to her in clarity after the first raw burst of emotion. And, might I add, the adults in your life failed spectacularly at considering your needs. You should not have been given the impression that it was safe to speak candidly with your mother when she wasn’t ready for it. Besides that, you should have been in counseling so that you could learn strategies to deal with anger and pain that were completely normal, given the circumstances. Grantaire, you have nothing to be ashamed of. The entire situation was tragic, and you were hurt by it. You’re a victim, not the villain.”

“Y-you really think so? You’re not just trying to make me feel better?” Grantaire actually felt some hope bloom in him. If Enjolras truly believed it, maybe he was right.

“I really think so,” Enjolras said, sounding as sure of himself as ever. Some strength returned to Grantaire’s limbs, and he was able to hug Enjolras back.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“It’s not a problem, ‘Taire. I wish you’d opened up to me about this sooner though.” Enjolras rubbed a few lazy circles against his back and Grantaire nuzzled against him, almost like the stupid cat rubbing against Enjolras’ feet.

“I don’t like thinking about it. Any of it. I only visit Mom’s grave on Mother’s Day and her birthday.”

“Do you want me to go with you from now on, or would you rather have privacy?” Enjolras asked.

Well that was a no-brainer.

“You. I’d rather have you. Always.”

Enjolras kissed him, and despite the discomfort of his allergies, Grantaire breathed better than he had in years, as though a weight had been lifted from his chest.

Chapter End Notes

The drama with Grantaire and his mommmy is being fleshed out in more detail in the prequel fic High School Boys. It’s going to take me quite a few chapters to get to the stuff I went over here though.

Happy Mother’s Day <3

(for Americans and all other people celebrating it today-I know some countries are different but I'm not well versed on who celebrates it when)
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Enjolras and Bahorel get new jobs.

Eponine and Feuilly move in together. Combeferre's not bothered. Nope, not in the least is he bothered...

Chapter Notes

Hey guys. So I still haven't spent much time looking up ethically produced clothing as I've been crazy busy. Last week was Nursing Home Week, which is supposed to be a celebration of nursing home employees, but at my place we decided to make it a grueling nightmare of extra work and crazy events instead! Woo...(seriously, do hot glue guns and scissors around dementia patients sound like a bad plan to anyone else but me?) And this week we had a mock survey, so I've just been swamped and exhausted. But I do appreciate you guys taking the time to contact me about this incredibly important issue. I even got some emails which I still haven't gone through yet...I'm so behind on my online correspondence :'( I'm sorry!

LonelySoul suggested ethicalocean.com and I definitely liked that place. I found this guy through them: (http://www.ethicalocean.com/seller_shop/38322) and they do make ethical panties. Unfortunately, all the bras I've seen so far look a little flimsy for a busty gal like me. I'll pass along the good news on the happy day when I do find an ethically produced bra that looks like it can handle sizable curves.

RainWillMakeTheFlowersGrow mentioned this place: (http://www.fairtradeshop.com.au/underwear/?sort=featured&page=1) which has some cute looking stuff. No bras, sadly, but ethically produced undies are definitely important.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hey guys,” Eponine greeted as she slid into the backseat of Courfeyrac’s car. He and Marius waved cheerfully from the front while Enjolras, despite sitting next to her, failed to acknowledge Eponine in any way. The guy looked a bit surly, even keeping in mind his prima donna ‘why doesn’t anyone care enough about social justice’ fits.

It was his first day working at Brammer Street, and as he was training he’d been scheduled for an afternoon-to-close shift so he could shadow Eponine and Marius. They weren’t expecting it to be very busy, as it was a non-open mic weekday, but there was usually a pick-up in traffic when their regulars got out of work in the evening. In other words, an ideal training shift.

Eponine hadn’t said this aloud to anyone but Feuilly, but secretly she was really excited about her chance to boss the haughty activist around.

She flashed a dazzling smile at Enjolras and gave him a look-over. The baristas at her café didn’t
have an official uniform, so to speak, but they were required to wear all black (which was as much for practical purposes as anything else-black was very forgiving when it came to coffee stains). It looked like Enjolras had dipped into Grantaire’s wardrobe to acquire his barista-wear; he was wearing black skinny jeans, a pair of converse, and a threadbare t-shirt with some paint splatters on it. At the moment he was intently trying to pull cat hair off of the jeans with a roll of duct tape.

Eponine gave him an approving nod. If he’d get that scowl off his face he’d look perfect for their crowd of trendier than thou hipsters, aging hippies, and downright elderly beatniks. It was going to take some training, but she hoped that eventually Enjolras would bring in tips as substantial as hers and Marius’. “You excited for your first day, sweetie?”

“Not particularly,” Enjolras answered bluntly.

“Hm…should I wait until we get to work before I start training you?” Eponine asked, even though she had no intention of keeping potential corrections to Enjolras’ behavior to herself.

“You didn’t wait for me,” Marius pointed out with a grin, no doubt looking forward to Eponine’s teasing remarks being aimed at a different target. “I think it’s safe to start now. Not only safe, but really it’s only fair.”

“I’m not on the clock yet,” Enjolras snapped.

“Doesn’t matter. Lesson one: if someone asks then yes, you’re excited about working at Brammer Street. You love the place because it’s hipster fucking paradise and all the customers should love it too, or they’re not good people because they don’t support a quirky small business. You’re always having a good day, and hey, it got better by getting to wait on a cutie like such and such.”

“I’m not saying that or anything like it!” Enjolras exploded. “I have a boyfriend. I’m not referring to someone else as cutie.”

“Do you call Grantaire cutie?” Courfeyrac asked. The others all snickered while Enjolras threw a scathing glare at the back of Courfeyrac’s head. He tossed one of his used pieces of duct tape at him and it stuck in Courfeyrac’s nest of curls.

He didn’t notice, but Marius picked it out for him. Eponine kind of wished he’d left it.

When Courfeyrac pulled up in front of the café he turned towards the backseat and addressed Eponine. “Should I get you guys at ten like always or do you think you’ll be able to close quicker with the extra body?”

“He’s training, Courf. Everything’s going to take longer because we’ve got to show him how to do it.”

Enjolras sniffed, looking a bit injured. “It can’t be that difficult.”

Marius climbed out of the front seat and, when Enjolras joined him, he fixed him with a serious stare. “You’d be surprised.”

“Right, so when it comes to the technical management of the place take your cues from me and do the opposite of whatever Pontmercy does,” Eponine instructed. “Seriously, the kid burns the milk, dates things wrong-somehow the coffee machines is always cleaner before he starts cleaning it.”

“Eponine,” Enjolras interrupted. “Why don’t you show him how to do these things correctly too?”
“Oh, he knows how to do everything, but the kid’s a ditz and he flakes out into a daydream while he’s working.”

“Is that…safe?”

Eponine shrugged. “The customers like him and he hasn’t burned the place down yet. He doesn’t make that much more work for the rest of us, so we just let it go. Now, I’m going to show you how to make a vanilla latte. Every other drink I show you will be in relation to this, so pay attention.”

Enjolras was a quick study on preparing drinks. He picked up the basics, and was working on a coconut chai with latte art in the foam when the door slammed open. The three baristas all snapped their heads over to the doorway, not used to such a violent entrance, and started when they saw Bahorel stalk up to the counter. He had his aviators on, but even with his eyes obscured it was fairly obvious his expression was irritable.

Eponine elbowed Enjolras in the side. “What, really? We know him.”

“So he’s good practice,” Eponine returned. “Look kid, the only thing here you’ve been bad at so far is customer service. Practice.”

Enjolras sighed, but he dutifully fixed his customer-service mask in place. He forced himself to smile in imitation of a wax statue and make eye contact with Bahorel’s tinted shades. “Hey, welcome to Brammer Street. What can I get started for you?”

Bahorel scowled. “A job application, because Eponine sucks.”

“Don’t bother,” Eponine snapped. “We’re not hiring anyone else, unless Enj can’t handle this and we have to let him go. So your parents decided they’d had enough of your shit?”

“They didn’t cut me off, but I have to help out with my own bills from now on. C’mon, you must be able to squeeze another barista into this place.”

“Bahorel, we’re not hiring. Seriously, I had to beg to get Enjolras here, and my boss likes me and trusts my hires.” She turned to Enjolras. “You’d better not blow that for me, pretty boy.”

Enjolras smiled exaggeratedly at Bahorel. “Would you like a latte today, sir? Or perhaps one of our fine pastries?”

“Oh come on, Ponine! It’s your fault I even have to get a shitty job to begin with!”

They argued with each other for a good twenty minutes while Marius showed Enjolras how to do some simple maintenance tasks. Despite Eponine’s warnings, Marius actually was pretty good at breaking things down and demonstrating tasks. What hurt the kid was being left to do them on his own, when his mind was free to wander.

Eventually Bahorel stormed out with a last parting shot. “Fine! I’ll get my own shitty part-time job! With blackjack, and hookers!”

Enjolras stared after him in confusion. “What…?”

“Pop culture reference,” Eponine said.

“Ah,” said Enjolras and Marius together.

“Eponine, was that really true about us not hiring? I thought Jenna and Haley were leaving, and we
didn’t get the usual college kids back for the summer…”

“Oh, we’re still hiring, and Jacques will totes hire whoever I tell him to. But damned if I’m going to get that lazy piece of shit a job. You should see the way he treats his parents. It’s disgusting.”

“He did save my boyfriend’s life,” Enjolras reminded her.

“Mm. But what has he done for us lately? Besides, Jehan wants a summer job and I’d much rather work with him.”

Enjolras couldn’t really argue with her on that point. He wasn’t personally annoyed with Bahorel the way Eponine was, but Enjolras had had plenty of opportunities to glimpse the kid’s complete and utter lack of work ethic over the years. Jehan would make a much better coworker.

Marius walked in from cleaning the glass door and promptly shoved the cleaning materials behind the counter. Eponine arched a brow at him. “I thought you were going to do the windows too?”

“The parking lot’s filling up with SUVs. I can’t tell if it’s the dance team or the color guard, but either way we’re about to get hit with a large crowd of chattering high school girls.”

Eponine smirked. She moved the tip jar to a place of prominence on the counter. “Oh good. Enjolras gets to meet your fan club on his very first night. Alright boys, smile pretty for the little girls.” She moved to take up a less noticeable position by the espresso machine. “I’ll make the drinks. You guys take the orders and Enjolras, at least try to flirt.”

“I already told you Eponine, I’m happily involved in a monogamous relationship. I’m not going to flirt with strangers.”

“He doesn’t even flirt with Grantaire,” Marius pointed out.

Enjolras whipped his head around so he could glare at Marius, who positively shrank under the strength of it. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“I, uh, it’s just that you…you’re not always very-very nice to him. But maybe that’s just when you’re in public? Can I stop talking now because I think I’m making it worse.”

Luckily for Marius the high school girls flooded in and the three baristas were too busy serving them to make conversation with each other. Enjolras would have to wait to find out why Marius thought his behavior towards Grantaire in public was problematic.

He’d thought it was rather obvious how in love with Grantaire he was. But Marius flaked out a lot, especially on matters not pertaining to his own love life. Clearly the guy’s observations weren’t reliable.

Grantaire was stretched out on the mattress with a sketchpad and a few sticks of charcoal trying to work, but the stupid cat kept jumping at his moving hand. Enjolras walked in just as Grantaire finally lost his temper and chucked the cat off the mattress. Raoul initially landed on his legs, but his momentum toppled him over, and he went skidding across the floorboards.

Enjolras was outraged. “Grantaire! You did not just throw my cat across the room!”

“If he was a normal cat he would have recovered balance and been fine. Seriously, I think there’s something wrong with that cat.” Insulting the little pest was not the way to get back in his boyfriend’s good graces, based on that look. Grantaire sighed, scrubbed a hand through his hair, and
set his sketchpad aside. “I’m sorry.”

Enjolras scooped the cat up and actually started looking the damn thing over for injuries. “Enjolras! I just swatted him away from me. He’s fine.”

“He appears fine, but you know, behaving aggressively like that towards him is still psychologically damaging.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake-”

“Don’t start with me, ‘Taire. I do not have the patience right now.” Enjolras angrily kicked the borrowed sneakers off his feet and sat down on the opposite side of the mattress from Grantaire. He settled the cat in his arms and started snuggling it. Raoul looked about as pleased with the arrangement as Grantaire was.

“Don’t give me that look, you little shit. I’d trade places if it were an option.”

Enjolras quirked an eyebrow. “Were you talking to the cat?”

“You talk to the cat.”

“I don’t swear at him when I talk to him.”

Grantaire rolled his eyes.

Enjolras released his cat, and Raoul ran across the room shrieking meows as soon as he was able. Grantaire crawled across the mattress, wrapped his arms around Enjolras’ waist, and rested his head on Enjolras’ thigh. “How was work?” he muttered. He could guess ‘not well’ all on his own, but it seemed like letting Enjolras bitch was the polite thing to do.

“Frustrating. Eponine wants me to prostitute myself to the customers.”

“Pardon?” Grantaire shifted position a little so he could look up at his boyfriend. “Is that how you interpret flirting for tips? As prostitution?”

“She wants me to make the customers think they have a chance of dating me. It’s dishonest, and morally suspect on other levels as well. Plus…”

“You wouldn’t be good at it even if you wanted to try it?” Grantaire guessed.

Enjolras curled his fingers through Grantaire’s hair. “Marius said something odd earlier. He said that I’m not nice to you in public. And Courfeyrac and some of the others have implied something like that in the past as well. I know I don’t really flirt in a conventional sense, but I do attempt romantic overtures from time to time. You notice…right?”

Grantaire sat up and placed a lazy kiss on the side of Enjolras’ mouth. “I have never wanted or needed clichéd, meaningless advances just to satisfy social conventions neither of us place much stock in. It’s one of the joys of dating a cynic. When it comes to romance I am spectacularly low maintenance. You don’t need to give me pet names or hold my hand or shit like that when we’re out in public. And fuck what anyone else thinks, okay?”

Enjolras nodded. “I thought so. I mean, if you want me to…to try to be flirtier, I don’t mind doing it for you.”

Grantaire grinned. “I’d be curious to see what you came up with, but I really don’t need that shit
from you. I kinda like what we already have.”

“Me too,” Enjolras said.

Grantaire leaned in for another kiss, and then he shrieked and howled in pain as he was overcome by the sensation of needles being driven into his bare foot.

Of course it was just the damn cat. Apparently he’d been moving his feet just a bit too much. Even though the thing was useless when it came to hunting bugs, he was quite adept at sinking his little claws and teeth into Grantaire’s exposed flesh.

“Oh my fucking god Enjolras, I’m going to kill that thing!”

“If you so much as touch a whisker you’re a dead man.”

Eponine didn’t end up getting back to Combeferre’s until nearly midnight. She crept in as quietly as possible, as he was still sleeping on the couch while she and Azelma lived with him, but she still wasn’t quiet enough. He shot to a sitting position as soon as her sneaker touched the first floorboard.

“Ponine, is that you?” he asked groggily.

She let out a little sigh. “It’s me, and it’s late. Go back to sleep, ‘Ferre.”

“Why were you out so late?”

Eponine rolled her eyes. She shrugged out of her sweatshirt, threw it over the loveseat, and sat down across from him on the coffee table. “Feuilly swung by to pick me up when our shift ended. We went for a drive and he gave me some good news. You know how we saw that apartment in Danvers the other day? The one in the suspiciously nice complex just off the highway? With the really great view and the park and the pretty old-but-renovated buildings?”

“Yeah…”

Eponine grinned so big it was almost painful. “We got it! We shouldn’t even be able to afford the place, but we’ve got it. Three bedrooms, washer and dryer in the unit, two bathrooms. I mean holy crap, this place should be completely out of our budget.”

“That’s…that’s fantastic.” The fact that Combeferre’s tone didn’t match his words could have been because he was tired, but his follow up question killed that possibility. “When are you moving in? With Feuilly?”

Eponine’s grin toned itself back to the realm of a normal smile. “At the end of next week, actually. So, y’know, you won’t have to put up with me and Azelma mooching off of you for that much longer. Cool, huh?”

Combeferre tried to smile. “Yeah. It’s great. I’m, um, sure you and Feuilly will be great roommates. Y’know, since you really get along with him.”

He must have been tired. That was the closest he’d come to calling Eponine out on her sudden and bizarrely close friendship with Feuilly, a topic he shied away from when he was more alert. Eponine frowned and looked down at her hands. She didn’t want to talk about it. She still didn’t even understand how it was possible for the two of them to like her, and she definitely didn’t want to talk about who she would pick if she did feel up to dating.
“I’d better get to bed. I’m…I’m going to help Feuilly pack tomorrow. He’s got more stuff than I do, so, y’know…we don’t have a lot of time. We’ve got to get started.”

“Okay. Azelma took the bed tonight so you’ll be on the sleeping bag on the floor. Good night, Eponine.”

“G’night ‘Ferre.” She offered him a tense smile that he returned without a hint of bitterness. Eponine stood to leave, but she couldn’t help but watch as Combeferre leaned back against the couch and tried to get into a comfortable position to go back to sleep. He ended up resting on his back with his long legs hanging over the arm of the couch.

Poor guy. He really was such a sweetheart. Still though, he was going to have his bed back by the end of next week, and then they’d have space, and maybe their friendship could go back to what it had been without all that damn tension between them.

Eponine crawled into the sleeping bag and closed her eyes with a sense of determination. She was going to get Combeferre and Feuilly into the friend zone, dammit. Though hopefully not permanently…

Maybe not surprisingly, given the size of their circle of friends, but Eponine and Feuilly managed to gather a pretty large group of moving buddies. Enjolras and Joly had to work the day of the move, Marius refused to set foot on Hawthorn Hill for some weird reason, and Cosette was busy with her church, so that left Combeferre, Grantaire, Legle, Musichetta, Bahorel, Courfeyrac, and Jehan for moving buddies. Jehan and Musichetta ended up doing more decorating than actual moving, but their presence was still appreciated so no one begrudged them their share of pizza.

“Bossuet, set that box down now!” Feuilly barked, making Azelma jump. “It says fragile on it for a reason, and the specific reason is so that you do not break our only set of dishes!”

“I’ve got it.” Combeferre took the box from Legle, who shrugged it off and went back to the truck. Combeferre carried the dishes to the kitchenette, which was just off the living area.

Eponine was in the kitchenette unpacking a box of non-perishables into the pantry. She threw Combeferre a friendly smile that he struggled to return. “Thanks sweetie.”

“Not a problem. Um, this is a nice place. I think…it looks like you and Feuilly are going to be happy here.” Shit. Why did he say it like that? Now he sounded bitter, and he wasn’t bitter, not really…

Eponine laughed the awkward comment off. “Hopefully we’ll be overwhelmed chasing after three little boys.

Combeferre pushed back a scathing thought about how much easier custody arrangements would be if she’d chosen him. He had better financial resources than Feuilly, and he’d taken some pre-legal classes for funsies a few semesters back and so was slightly more informed support for her. But that was more bitterness, and he didn’t want to be bitter.

He mumbled something even he didn’t understand, then ducked out and started back towards the truck for more boxes. His mood must have showed, because when Grantaire caught sight of him he grabbed his arm and pulled him aside. “‘Ferre, you need a break, and my smoker’s lungs damn well do. Let’s take a walk.”

“I’m fine,” Combeferre insisted. Even if he had been shooting Feuilly a few death glares before his brain caught up with him.
“I call BS,” Grantaire said, crossing his arms over his chest. “C’mon, they’ve got more help than they need. Feuilly has almost nothing and Ponine’s been living out of a suitcase. They only have like six more boxes and an armchair to move in. Take a walk with me.”

Deciding it was easier to just admit defeat than deal with Grantaire’s whining, Combeferre followed him away from the moving truck and off along the extensive grounds of the surprisingly nice complex. Combeferre had expected Eponine and Feuilly to be exaggerating when they said they shouldn’t have been able to afford the place, but they weren’t wrong. The complex was breathtakingly beautiful, on good land, and even afforded a view as far as Boston on a clear night. The buildings themselves were a sprawl of nineteenth century gothic architecture mixed with fairly recent renovations. Combeferre had to wonder what the catch was.

“Can you believe this place?” he asked as they passed by the playground. “It’s really beautiful.”

“Mm,” Grantaire agreed.

“Something’s got to be up. It’s way too cheap to be this nice.”

He’d figured the cynic might have some thoughts on the matter, as Grantaire was definitely skilled at seeing the worst in all situations, but he still didn’t expect the guy to burst out laughing. “You have to ask? It’s because the place is haunted as fuck, if you believe in that sort of thing. None of the locals want to live here, so the owners tried to make it a good deal.”

“What? Why do people think it’s haunted?” Combeferre asked, startled.

“You mean you don’t know where we are? C’mon ‘Ferre, I thought you and Enjolras were North Shore kids.”

Combeferre frowned. “We are, but we never spent any time in Danvers. So what, is this an Indian burial ground or something?” he asked sarcastically.

“It’s an abandoned mental hospital. They filmed a horror movie here back when we were in middle school. Arkham Asylum is loosely based on this place.”

“Arkham…?”

Grantaire scowled at him. “It’s from Batman. Jesus Christ, don’t let Bahorel know you didn’t get that reference. Yeah, the place opened in the late eighteen hundreds and closed down when we were kids. It was underfunded, but they tried for progressive procedures, so I’m sure you can imagine how that went. Lots of local tales about botched lobotomies and psychosurgeries and the like. I used to sneak up here when I was a kid with some of my almost-friends, and we’d get drunk and freak each other out with ghost stories.”

“I take it that was before they made it into apartments and luxury condos.”

Grantaire grinned. “Naturally. So does this mean Eponine and Feuilly don’t know they moved into the setting of a horror movie?”

Combeferre shrugged. “I don’t think they do.”

“Oh man. Okay, I get to be the one to tell them.”

Combeferre shook his head, amused at Grantaire’s enthusiasm to share bad news. “Go right ahead.”

Grantaire paused and leaned against the fence surrounding the playground. He patted at his pockets,
then scowled as he realized he wasn’t carrying cigarettes. Combeferre smirked at him. “How goes quitting smoking?”

Grantaire flipped him the bird. “I think you know how well it’s going. At least quitting drinking’s going better, but hiding the fact that I’m still smoking at least a couple of cigarettes a day now that Enj and I are living in a one-room is a bit of a bitch.”

Combeferre frowned sympathetically. “I’ve heard you’re having a hard time settling in. I’m…sorry about the cat. I did suggest it, but I assumed Enjolras would talk to you before bringing a pet in.”

“Where did he even get that little fucker?”

“One of Joly’s coworkers, apparently.”

“Ah.”

They stood in silence for a few awkward minutes, and then Grantaire came out and said it. “Do you want to talk about Eponine and Feuilly?”

Combeferre pressed his lips together and shook his head.

“You sure? I mean, I’m sure Jehan’d be better at this sort of thing, and Enjolras might give some interesting commentary with less than practical advice, but I’m still capable of being a good ear.”

Combeferre leaned against the fence next to him and crossed his arms over his chest. “There’s not really a lot to say. I like her, she doesn’t like me, she probably likes Feuilly, and the whole situation sucks. I just need to move on.”

“I’d kinda figured the two of you were going to end up together,” Grantaire admitted. “I was surprised when she said she didn’t want to go out with you. Maybe she’ll change her mind when she gets more stable.”

“Maybe,” Combeferre said, but he didn’t really believe it. He saw the sparks between his friends, and he was sure Grantaire did too. “I just…don’t get it. I’m nice, right? Girls always tell me I’m a good guy when they reject me. What the hell am I doing wrong?”

“I don’t know,” Grantaire said, even though the question was clearly rhetorical. “Maybe you should switch teams. Guys’d definitely be all about dating you.”

Combeferre rolled his eyes. “Okay. I’ll get right on switching my sexual orientation.” He glanced off into the distance, trying to admire the scenery again, but he was having a difficult time seeing the beauty in it anymore. “I swear, it’s like no matter how much work I’ve done to overcome everything, girls just somehow sense that I’m damaged goods and shy away. I haven’t dated anyone for longer than a couple of months since I was in high school.”

“I hope it doesn’t work like that, because that is awful news for me,” Grantaire said with a frown. “Y’know, considering I need a fuck ton more work before I can consider my damage even a little concealed. But I’m still managing to keep the love of my life interested in me. ‘Ferre, even if girls do have some kind of sixth sense for picking up emotional scars, the right girl won’t be a bitch about it. If you are repelling girls away by having some trauma in the past, those are girls you’d want to repel, right?’”

“I-I know. And I don’t think Eponine’s shallow or anything like that. I just wish she liked me.”

Grantaire gave a nod, reached up, and gripped Combeferre’s shoulder. “Sorry dude.”
Combeferre let out another sigh, and gave a curt nod. “Thanks. Can we stop talking about it now though?”

"Sure thing. So...I think Enjolras' cat is special needs."

That startled a laugh out of Combeferre. "What?"

"I'm trying to think of the right way to phrase it to him-"

"Don't. Trust me on this, 'Taire. There's no right way to tell Enjolras his beloved kitty is a short bus kitty."

Grantaire shook his head. "But really, there's something a little off about the fuzz ball!" He went on to enumerate all the odd behaviors he'd seen out of the cat. Combeferre was able to chime in with his own experiences looking after Gladiator and Logan, and before he even realized it his mood had improved substantially.

Huh.

He didn't say anything about it, but when the two of them started back for Feuilly and Eponine's apartment, Combeferre gave Grantaire an assessing look. The kid was a much better friend than he ever tried to let on.

Eponine and Feuilly’s moving day turned into a bit of a moving party. It was well past midnight by the time they got the last of their friends to leave (they had the hardest time getting rid of Musichetta, who wanted to host a séance once she learned of the supposed restless spirits). Eponine shut the door on the last of her friends, turned the bolt, and then glanced giddily at the first bit of space she could legitimately call her own.

“Holy shit. I have a home.”

Feuilly was stuffing used paper plates into the recycling bin, but he stopped to share his own giddy smile with her. “It’s a nice feeling, isn’t it?”

“Oh fuck yes it is. And we’re going to turn this into such the cuddly home, ghosts be damned. Did you see the wall clings Musichetta bought for the boys’ room? And Courfeyrac’s mom is going to give us his old bed, a motherfucking bunk bed, I might add, so we just need to get one more and then we’ve got a place to sleep all three of them. We’ve got income. We’re going to have this, Feuilly. I’m so going to get my brothers back from that Lawrence lady!”

“Do you and Azelma have beds yet?” Feuilly asked.

Eponine’s smile faltered. “That’s beside the point.”

“I think it’s very to the point!” Azelma chimed in from the bathroom. “Can we at least use the bunk bed until we get our own beds? The boys don’t live here yet.”

Eponine frowned. “I want to set it up in their room. Y’know, make it look all perfect in there so it’s ready and waiting.”

“Zelma, you can use my bed for now-” Feuilly hadn’t finished speaking before Azelma ran into the smallest of the bedrooms and slammed the door shut.

Eponine scowled. “Ungrateful brat. We’re getting her a job and making her pitch in on rent.”
“That’s fine. I’ve no desire to live with another Bossuet.”

“So where are you planning on sleeping tonight now that you’ve given your bed away to our freeloader?” Eponine asked.

Feuilly snatched a throw pillow off of their futon (a donation from Courfeyrac) and threw it on the floor. “I’ll be fine. I used to sleep on the floor at my first foster home.”

“Oh my God, you’re actually worse than Combeferre and I didn’t think that was possible. Help me pull the futon out. We’ll share it if you’re going to be that idiotically chivalrous.” It came out of her mouth on absolute impulse.

Twenty minutes later, when she was rolled onto her side staring down the wall and trying to ignore the warm body maybe two inches away from her, Eponine realized her mistake. And when she woke up the next morning with an arm flung over Feuilly’s chest, her face pressed into his neck, she reassessed the magnitude of her mistake.

At least she’d woken up first. Maybe he hadn’t noticed being sleep-cuddled. Eponine carefully got up from the futon, gathered some work clothes from a cardboard box stuck in front of her and Azelma’s future bedroom door, and ran into the bathroom to get ready.

Eponine was still in a less than stellar mood by the time Enjolras showed up at the café to work midshift. She was in no mood for the guy’s attitude. He wasn’t even trying to develop a rapport with the customers. He was still getting tips, but it was either because he really was just that pretty, or because their customers were really principled about tipping.

Marius’ fan club didn’t know how to react to Enjolras. Clearly, the girls (and a handful of boys) wanted to like him. They leaned against the counter, jutting their cleavage out to flattering angles, twirling hair around their fingers, and batting their eyelashes at him, waiting for an opportunity to laugh at something clever he might say (that was incidentally never going to come). And no matter how much they tried to make conversation with him, he kept everything curt and professional.

“That’ll be seven forty four. Cash? Here’s your change, have a good day.”

Eponine smacked a hand to her forehead. When the last disappointed looking sixteen year old left, she walked over to Enjolras and poked his shoulder. “I’ll compromise. You don’t have to flirt with them, but could you at least talk to them?”

“I am talking.”

“You know what I mean!”

Enjolras narrowed his eyes. “What would you have me say to them, Eponine? Shall I tell them what I think of their sweatshop made clothing? Would you have me lecture them on the environmental impact of their to-go cups? The gas mileage of their conspicuous-consumption vehicles might make a good conversation topic.”

Oh holy fuck. “Never mind! You are not allowed, under any circumstances, to make idle chit chat with the customers.”

He smirked in satisfaction and went off to clean the bathrooms. Eponine was tempted to throw a coffee lid at his stupid curly head.

While he was gone a lone high school girl approached the counter and ordered a chai. “Sure thing,
“Hey, um, can I ask you something?”

Eponine started pumping syrup into the cup. “Sure. What’s up?”

“That new guy that just started working here…is there something wrong with him?”

Eponine bit back a sarcastic affirmation and tried for a sympathetic frown. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, it’s just…I mean he’s so cold. It’s like…like he’s really sad or something. Is he okay?”

She covered her disdainful snort with the noise of steaming the milk for the chai. If Enjolras had been any less good looking, he’d just be a distant jerk. But since he was freakishly beautiful of course he had to be a sob story. Then again, that had been her own stupid teenage logic until fairly recently. Eponine finished the chai, popped a lid on it, and slid it across the counter.

“As a matter of fact…look, don’t tell anyone,” which would ensure that every member of the pretty-boy barista fan club knew about it before the day was out, “but actually, yeah. Enjolras is heartbroken. That’s why he comes across as so cold, y’know? Because he’s built up these, like, defensive walls. So he won’t get hurt again.”

“Oh. Do you think, um…like, maybe the right girl could…could teach him how to love again?”

Oh for fuck’s sake.

Eponine forced an encouraging smile. “Yeah, maybe. I mean, if people are really nice and patient with him, maybe he’ll believe in love again. You never know.” She ‘accidentally’ knocked the tip jar with her elbow while she rang the girl up. The girl popped in a few singles, face lit up like a fucking Christmas tree.

Enjolras exited the bathroom as she was leaving. She offered him a shy smile and a wave, and he returned it with a curt nod. The girl’s face went bright red as she all-but danced out of the café.

“Bathrooms are all done.”

Eponine grinned. “Cool cool. By the by, I changed my mind. You do whatever you want for your customer service persona. I mean, we’re still getting tips, so what the hell. I’m sorry I was infringing on your personal choices.”

Enjolras smiled approvingly. “Thank you, Eponine.”

“You’re very welcome.”

She briefly considered letting him in on the rumor she’d started, but ultimately decided against it. Enjolras had too much of a hard-on for truth and justice to go along with such an obvious scam on innocently delusional young girls. She was probably going to have to tip Grantaire off though. Her scheme would come undone if the devoted boyfriend showed up to visit his boy at lunch in front of the wrong set of customers.

Hm…that one was going to take a bit of thought.

Eponine was still puzzling out how to get Grantaire in on her scheme when Bahorel burst into the café for the second time that week. This time he looked triumphant rather than pissy.

“Screw you all, you pretentious barista bastards! I got my own crappy part time job, and it’s way
better than your shitty part time job!”

“Did you seriously drive across town just to brag?” Eponine asked.

“Apparently someone forgot how to text,” Enjolras said.

Bahorel scowled at them.

“So what’s your crappy part time job? Is there black jack?”

“Or hookers?” Enjolras chimed in.

“No,” Bahorel snapped, while Enjolras and Eponine snickered at him. “Musichetta got me hired at the tourist shop she’s working at. I’m going to make a buck an hour more than you guys, I get to wear costumes to work, and I’m selling people tarot cards and crystals and shit like that. Suck it, losers.”

“Oh wow, a buck an hour more than us…” Eponine dumped the tip jar upside down and littered the counter with bills and just a small handful of change.

“Is that a twenty in there?”

“Push up bras are wonderful things. But the twenty was actually Pontmercy during the morning rush. Do you get tips at your job, Bahorel?”

Bahorel put his aviators back on, flipped them both off, and stalked out of the café.

Chapter End Notes

Here's the wikipedia page on the renovated mental hospital Eponine and Feuilly just moved into: (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danvers_State_Hospital). Ignore that bit about Danvers State being rumored to be the birthplace of the pre-frontal lobotomy though, that part's utter bullshit. Lobotomies were widely performed at the hospital, but they were not in any shape way or form invented there. That BS was concocted for the horror movie Session 9 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Session_9) and the locals have really run with it.

Cool and true things about Danvers State include its location on Hawthorn Hill. Hawthorn Hill was the home of judge John Hawthorn, one of the judges in the Salem Witch Trials and grandfather of Nathaniel Hawthorne, who changed the spelling of his last name because he was ashamed of his notoriously cruel ancestor. Danvers State was referenced in a few of HP Lovecraft's works and influenced his creation of the fictional Arkham Sanitarium, which influenced Denny O'Neil, Neal Adams, and Len Wein when they created Arkham Asylum. The place really was turned into condos and apartments, the locals really do believe the place is haunted as all fuck, and if you ever consider buying or renting in the North Shore area of Massachusetts, you should do a lot of research first because we do a lot of stupid shit like this with our creepy old historic buildings.

In completely unrelated fangirl news, I'm going to see Ramin Karimloo in concert
tomorrow night. Epic squee! I'll let you guys know if he sings anything from Les Mis :)

Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Enjolras sucks at being poor.

Eponine shares a secret with the girls.

Chapter Notes

So the Ramin concert was one of the best nights of my life. Broadway combined with Bluegrass is a magical idea and he needs to make a CD of that right fucking now. He opened with 'Oh What a Beautiful Morning' and I swear, I had no idea that song could be bad ass, but it was. Empty Chairs at Empty Tables alone was worth the cost of tickets, but he kept going and we got I Dreamed a Dream, a really intimate version of Bring Him Home (not that that's hard to do with that song), Cathedrals, Constant Angel, some Cat Stevens, and a sing-along version of Do You Hear the People Sing, which he also sang in French. He ended with Music of the Night. Those were the songs that really stuck out for me, at least. Also, he's very personable and nice, and as pretty as you think he is from watching DVDs and creeping google images, he's ten times prettier in person. Fantastic night. Seriously, everyone go see him if you get the chance, and I'm fangirling harder than I ever have been before over this guy <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You know, when I first heard Enjolras was getting hired at Brammer Street too I got ridiculously excited. Then I found out he gave his car back to his parents along with all his other shit.” Courfeyrac let out a disappointed sigh, then turned down a side street that would put him within a few blocks of the café.

“Doesn’t Marius kick you gas money?” Grantaire asked. He was lounging in the passenger seat stealing fries from the lunches they were bringing their friends.

“Yes, but I’d still much prefer not having to cart his ass around everywhere. The kid can live on my couch as long as he wants, but he really needs to get his own car.”

“Mm. Ideally before his girlfriend moves across the state.”

Courfeyrac let out a groan. “I don’t care how cute the puppy is. He is not convincing me to drive him out to Mount Holyoke on a semi-regular basis. I’m not kidding! Feuilly and I helped him figure out the bus schedules and everything.”

“Uh huh.” Grantaire didn’t feel the need to add anything to his unenthusiastic retort. They both knew Courfeyrac would crack the first time Marius did that wobbly lip thing along with his puppy eyes. “You should start making some road trip playlists,” Grantaire added as an afterthought.

“Fuck you,” Courfeyrac said, in a pretty genial tone all things considered.
He pulled up to the curb beside the café and the two hopped out of the car. The place was packed, but the bike racks were mostly empty and the street didn’t have the usual beat up ancient station wagons, fancy new hybrids, or if-only-they-were-ironic VW buses. The usual vehicles had been replaced with SUVs, a couple VW bugs, and a smattering of convertibles.

Grantaire quirked an eyebrow. “Did the clientele of this place change or something?”

“The weather’s nicer. Maybe the hippies and beatniks are walking to get their caffeine.”

Shrugging it off, the two friends went inside.

Grantaire was tempted to walk right out again. The place was packed with chattering high school kids. Most of them were girls; silly looking, startlingly thin things in push up bras wearing mass-produced ‘eccentric’ hipster wear with bleach blond ironed hair and fake tans. Usually the place smelled like coffee, as one might expect a café to smell, but today it smelled like a Bath and Bodyworks.

The high school boys in the crowd were probably only adding to the sugary body spray smell. For the most part, they appeared to be flaming twinks in skinny jeans and light patterned scarves.

A few of the Brammer Street regulars were crowded into a lone table in the corner, looking distinctly displeased about the new crowd. Grantaire was tempted to ask them what they thought about Jehan’s Student Revolution now, but frankly he wasn’t exactly thrilled about the teeny boppers himself.

As expected, Marius, Eponine, and Enjolras were busy behind the counter. The line to be served was long, but none of the straight girls or gay boys seemed to mind, as standing in line afforded them the chance to sigh dreamily at Enjolras and Marius. Eponine had stationed herself in the back to make drinks, but she actively contributed to the spectacle by mussing Marius’ hair, distracting Enjolras when he was clearly about to say something rude, or just nudging the tip jar forward any time one of her coworkers accidentally set a drink in front of it.

“Mercenary, that girl,” Grantaire muttered.

“Can’t say I can complain,” Courfeyrac said. “I mean, Marius would be making much less if Eponine weren’t putting him on display for his admirers, and he barely contributes to our expenses as is. I fully support any and all actions that lead to better tips.”

“She just spilled water on my boyfriend. I don’t think that was an accident, and I don’t think Enjolras is buying it either.”

“Oh don’t be such a wuss. It’s not like his t-shirt’s white. And if you want those tips to keep rolling in, keep it down about him being your boyfriend.”

Grantaire threw Courfeyrac a skeptical look. “We’ve been regulars at this place for two years. I’m pretty sure everyone noticed when Enjolras and I started dating. That dazed poet that mentors Jehan bought my lattes for an entire night in celebration.”

“Does this look like the regular crowd?” Courfeyrac asked pointedly, just in time for them to overhear a girl try to say something deep about “how way evil and unfair corporate greed is, because, you know, China has, like people too and they need more than just rice to make our I-phones.”

“Enjolras is going to give himself an ulcer not preaching to these twits, isn’t he?” Courfeyrac asked.

“I think he’ll snap and get himself fired before he gets an ulcer. I don’t think this crowd’s thinning
out. I’m going to muscle my way to the counter.”

“You do that.” Courfeyrac glanced around the room for a free table, found none, and started for the door. “I’ll be in the car. Send the baristas to the Volvo for their breaks.”

Grantaire mock saluted him, then pushed his way through the crowd of teenagers to the end of the counter on the far side from the register. He stuck his fingers in his mouth and let out a shrill whistle.

Eponine noticed him first, and she positively iced over. Then Enjolras, and finally Marius spotted him leaning against the counter. Enjolras’ face lit up in a way Grantaire rarely ever saw, and it made him smile stupidly to see his boyfriend so obviously happy to see him. “‘Taire! How long have you been here?”

“Just a few minutes. I told you Courf and I were going to swing by for your breaks today. We brought food.”

“Oh thank god. Eponine, can I take my fifteen?”

Eponine shot a wary look at the crowd of kids waiting to be served, many of whom were now pouting at the possibility of being rung up by her instead of one of the pretty boys. “Sorry sweetie, but you know the rule. First one in is the first who gets to go on break, and that’s me by four hours. If Marius is cool with it, you can cut him but I’m taking my fifteen, at least.”

Enjolras’ face fell, but he nodded. “No, take your half. That’s-that’s fair. Marius and I can handle the rush.”

Grantaire tried to lean across the counter to give Enjolras’ hand a squeeze or something. He knew Enjolras didn’t mind being the center of attention, but he only thrived on it when he got to speak his mind by doing so. Keeping himself in check, particularly while sucking up to flirty teenage girls, couldn’t have been his idea of a good time and must have been draining. His boyfriend was unhappy and Grantaire wanted to offer whatever comfort he could with a quick gesture, but Eponine blocked his hand with a look that made him recoil.

“I’ll be back in a bit. Keep Pontmercy from burning the place down, yeah?” Eponine called to her coworkers. The crowd seemed to like the joke, but it looked like Enjolras was taking Eponine’s instructions to heart. He swatted Marius away from the espresso machine and waved him towards the register.

Grantaire tugged Eponine out of the café and led her to the Volvo, where Courfeyrac was waiting with their take-out. Grantaire got into the front seat, leaving her in the back. “Alright, what’s up?”

“Hm?” Courfeyrac took a break from devouring fries to shoot a questioning look Grantaire’s way.

“She’s up to something,” Grantaire said simply. He leaned up on his knees and wrapped his arms around the back of his seat, staring at Eponine where she was stretched out across all three seats with her legs crossed at the ankle. “Spill. What’s going on?”

“I…may have a bit of a scam going on Enjolras’ admirers.”

“Oh?” Now Courfeyrac was definitely invested in the conversation.

“Okay, so you know how Enjolras is absolutely abysmal at flirting?”

“Yes,” Courfeyrac said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world, while Grantaire shook his head.
Eponine rolled her eyes. “Come on Grantaire, he’s terrible at it. He’s too blunt and painfully honest. His idea of telling you you look hot is to say you’re not as grody as when you were drunk and depressed.”

Grantaire rolled his eyes. “He does more than that, for the record, but Enjolras is private about that stuff. And he gets flustered really easily when he tries to talk about love or sex. It’s actually wicked adorable.”

“Anyway,” Eponine said, as she clearly had no interest in pursuing that topic, “in addition to his lack of ability to flirt, he has a lack of interest in learning the art despite his access to a skilled tutor and a born natural. Because seriously, Marius kills at flirting and he never even notices he’s doing it.”


“The thing is, you cannot work this place successfully without a little flirting. Most of the customers expect it of us, and trust me, except for the real weirdos they all know it’s harmless and meaningless. Marius and I get phone numbers every now and then, but no one really thinks we’re trying to pick them up. It’s just part of the fun of getting your latte made by a pretty barista.”

“Uh huh. You know, Enjolras referred to what you’re doing as mild prostitution. I thought he was just being dramatic, but you do sound kind of pimpy right now,” Grantaire said with a smirk.

Eponine shot him a sarcastic smile before continuing. “I couldn’t impress on Enjolras the importance of being pleasant to the customers. He wasn’t doing anything technically wrong, but he was just being too coldly professional and it was really off-putting. Then I stumbled across something…the kids think he’s being distant as a coping mechanism. They got it into his heads that he’s been hurt and jaded by some vicious ex-girlfriend, or boyfriend if the tipper in question gets a better personal investment that way, and now that they think he’s a sob story they’re all determined to save his faith in the goodness of humanity and true love. It’s beautiful, really.”

Grantaire narrowed his eyes at her. “However did they come to the conclusion that Enjolras was heart-broken?”

“They only had a little help. Really, they did most of the work themselves. Teenage imaginations are pretty impressive.”

Courfeyrac smacked a hand over his mouth to cover his giggles. “Oh wow. So they think Enjolras is some fragile, tender hearted wreck trying to save himself with heavy emotional walls when really he’s just completely unromantic?”

“He’s not completely unromantic,” Grantaire insisted. “He’s just…kind of remedially romantic. He’s a little behind where most people are by his age, but he’s getting the hang of it. Listen, screw you both, okay? I feel plenty loved. Okay, that’s kind of a lie, but it’s not his fault; that’s just me being fucked up.”

Courfeyrac giggled again, then turned to face the backseat along with Grantaire. “Eponine, does Enjolras know about this tale of woe?”

“Oh hell no. Can you see him going along with it? That’s why I wanted to jump out here and tip you guys off before you blew it. Seriously Grantaire, when you visit Enjolras at work you cannot act like his boyfriend. And Courf, don’t mention that Enjolras isn’t heartbroken, okay?”

Grantaire narrowed his eyes at Eponine. “What makes you think I’m actually going to go along with
that? I mean seriously, not only are you asking me to lie to my boyfriend, you’re asking me to lie about dating him to a bunch of twits who want to steal him from me.” Also, the thought of lying to Enjolras (at least about something of this magnitude) was just plain terrifying.

Eponine reached into her purse and took out an envelope. She handed it to Grantaire. “That’s the tips from last night. Enjolras only worked four hours, and keep in mind, this is after splitting the tips three ways.”

Grantaire counted out the money, and his eyebrows shot up. “Holy shit, Eponine!”

“Uh huh. Not only will your sweetie be raking in the dough thanks to my little scam, but I’ll give you a share of my take for your silence.”

“What do I get?” Courfeyrac asked. “You know, as I’m now a coconspirator?”

“Similar terms,” Eponine said. “You benefit from Marius’ increased tips, don’t you? His fan club expanded substantially now that the kids think of this as the place with the pretty boy baristas instead of the barista. Seriously, they sit at the tables and argue the merits of Enjolras’ shiny hair over Marius’ dreamy eyes or some stupid shit like that. It’s actually kind of fabulous. I want to record some of the conversations and play them at the Musain sometime.”

“Oh my god, do it!” Courfeyrac exclaimed. “But if Grantaire gets a cut from being a coconspirator, I want a cut too.”

Eponine scowled at him. “Come on, Courf! I’m paying rent now and I’m trying to make a respectable home so I can get my baby brothers back. I kinda need the cash. I’m only willing to pay Grantaire off because I know this is asking a lot of him.”

“I think it’s asking a lot of Enjolras, really,” Courfeyrac said.

Eponine crossed her arms over his chest. “You really think asking Grantaire to let other people fawn over his boyfriend isn’t a big deal?”

Grantaire shifted uncomfortably. “It’s not like I really think Enjolras will leave me for some high school kid…” He trailed off and lowered his gaze.

Courfeyrac shook his head. “Fine, you don’t have to pay me off. But you know, Marius doesn’t kick in as much as he could for living expenses. In that, other than gas money, I think he’s given me twenty bucks in the entire time he’s been staying with me. You could drop a few hints, if you wanted. He’s great company but he’s kind of an awful roommate.”

Eponine held out her hand. “Done.”

They shook on it, and Eponine was bright and cheerful for the rest of her break.

Enjolras came out next, dropping exhaustedly into the backseat and letting his eyes drift shut without touching any of the fast food. Grantaire climbed over the seat and did his best to lay next to him, though they didn’t really fit on the seat together. He ended up with his knees on the floor of the car, leaning over the seat with his upper body draped over Enjolras. “Tough shift?”

“Mm. Tiring. I don’t think I like working Saturdays. None of the teenagers are at school, so they just keep coming and coming and coming, and they all buy like four or five drinks staggered out over the course of several hours. I hope the entire summer’s not like this. When do the high school kids get out for the summer anyway?”
“I dunno. A couple more weeks, maybe?” Courfeyrac guessed.

“You should eat something,” Grantaire said, trying to coax the paper bag towards Enjolras. He swatted it away.

“I really don’t think the nutrition in your fast food will help, but I do appreciate the thought.”

Grantaire frowned. “I know it’s not really your thing, but it’s all I could afford. I got Burger King for you. It’s a veggie burger and everything.”

Enjolras smiled tiredly and sat up. “Fine, I’ll give it a try. Thank you.” He gave Grantaire a quick kiss, then leaned against him for a half hug and begrudgingly ate the veggie burger. They didn’t talk much during the break. Grantaire kept an arm braced around Enjolras and lovingly stroked his hair back every now and then, and they kissed again before Enjolras reluctantly left to go give Marius his turn.

Grantaire climbed back into the front seat and picked at a few more french fries while they waited for the puppy. He scowled when he realized Courfeyrac was staring at him. “What?”

“Nothing,” Courfeyrac said. “It’s just…I guess I didn’t see it before, but you’re right. It’s quiet, but you and Enjolras definitely have your own romantic thing going. You sure you’re going to be okay with Eponine’s ruse?”

Grantaire shrugged. “Not really, but I don’t think I have much of a choice. Enjolras has only been cut off for a couple of weeks, but we’re already hurting for money. We need those tips.”

“How can you be hurting for money already? What about your savings?” Courfeyrac asked.

“I’m used to living on shit. I can get by with next to nothing. Enjolras…isn’t. My savings were for rent and utilities until I get my summer job back next week. It didn’t include things like three meals a day, trips into Boston for protests, and wireless internet.”

“You guys don’t live that far from the library. I don’t think you really need your own internet. Plus you can always swing by my place—”

“Enjolras is big on the social networking and blogging. You know, him and his causes. You do the same kind of shit.”

“Yeah, but my folks are helping me with my bills. You guys can’t afford it and you can totes piggyback from me.”

Grantaire shook his head. “I don’t want to ask him to give that up. It’s too important to him.”

Courfeyrac seemed to have an idea where that was going. “So what did you give up?”

Grantaire adopted a wry smirk, not exactly surprised that Courfeyrac knew him that well considering the long years of their friendship, but still impressed by his level of perceptiveness. “Art supplies. I should use up the shit I already have before I get new stuff anyway. It’s not a big deal.”

“Yes it is, Grantaire. It’s a big fucking deal. That’s the only coping mechanism for stress you have that’s healthy,” Courfeyrac snapped. He reached into his pocket and fumbled for his wallet. Grantaire tried to stop him, but he shoved some bills into Grantaire’s hand and wouldn’t take them back. “I’ll drop you at the mall after we finish here. Buy a fucking sketchbook, okay? And let me know if you need anything else. You need your art, Grantaire.”
Grantaire would have fought harder, but Marius climbed into the car for his break and Grantaire most definitely did not want to pursue this conversation in front of an audience.

Courfeyrac ended up dropping him off right in front of the arts and craft store, which was tempting enough without them having a sale on oil paints. But at the end of the day, the forty bucks Courf gave him wasn’t going to get him all that many colors anyway. And they needed laundry detergent and cat litter way more than he needed to paint.

Eponine’s shift ended before Marius and Enjolras’, which left her without a ride home. However, it also left her with a pocket full of money from their split tips, so she wasn’t in that bad a mood as she headed towards the bus stop. She was almost halfway to another futon, or a lamp for the boys’ bedroom.

She was lost in a pleasant fantasy of filling her apartment with cheerful furnishings she couldn’t actually afford when a jeep pulled up next to her on the curb. Eponine took a few startled steps back, then she caught sight of the friendly face beaming at her from the driver’s seat. “Hey ‘Chetta.”

“Hey sweetie! Get in. I’m giving you a ride to your place so you can get out of your work clothes, then we’re grabbing Cosette and doing a girls’ night out. So wear something cute.”

“Oh. Well thanks for letting me know.”

Musichetta laughed. “It was a spur of the moment kinda thing. I want to do some female bonding. Are you down for it? You can say no. I’ll still give you a ride.”

Eponine considered the other girl for a moment, then gave a slow nod. “Sure. It’s not like I had other plans, and I could use some girl talk.”

Getting Cosette from Valjean’s took a bit more doing, as the man was still obsessively protective of his “little girl” (though her membership in a demanding group of friends was slowly bringing the man around on her need for socialization without her father leaning over her shoulder). Eventually though, they left with Cosette in Musichetta’s backseat.

Cosette immediately flung her coat off and stripped off her cardigan. The floral print dress she was wearing was still much classier than anything Eponine owned, but it called attention to her graceful swan neck and delicate shoulders in a way Valjean probably wasn’t comfortable with. She took down her matronly bun and let her gorgeous chestnut locks fall around her face, then took some makeup out of her purse and started working on that while Musichetta drove. “Sorry. Papa doesn’t really understand the concept of a girls’ night, so I couldn’t really get ready in front of him. Come to think of it, I’m not sure I understand the concept of a girls’ night. I’ve never done one before. What are we going to do?”

Musichetta chuckled. “I’m not so sure myself. I’ve never had many female friends before. I mostly hang out with gay guys.”

“I’ve always been too catty to have chick friends,” Eponine said. “Um…I believe we’re supposed to go out dancing and drinking or some such, but Cosette and I are underage.”

“Let’s get cheesecake,” Musichetta decided. The suggestion seemed a little random, but the younger girls couldn’t think of a reason to object to a calorie fest, so Musicetta drove them to the Cheesecake Factory.

Girls’ night, it turned out, was a wonderful idea. Much as Eponine and Cosette loved their circle of
male friends, there was something refreshing about discussing hair and makeup without being corrected by the drag queen, or women’s reproductive rights without having their positions dictated by men who were most definitely never going to need birth control or even have to consider an abortion, even if they were very well researched on their talking points, and it was all kinds of fabulous to just gossip to their hearts’ content about the boys.

Musichetta was particularly invested in the boy gossip. After they finished contemplating how Eponine would look with short, choppy hair, she abruptly switched topics, even banging on the table with her palm to get the girls’ attention. “Eponine. There are only two straight, available boys in this clique. Which one are you dibsing?”

Eponine blinked a few times, startled. “Um…neither?”

“Oh come on, Ponine.” Cosette set her fork down and regarded her friend with a patient smile. “I respect your decision to hold off dating until you’re in a better place. Really, I think it’s wonderful and brave of you, but we all know you don’t want to be alone forever. Don’t you want to date one of them when you’re feeling up to it? You’d better let Musichetta know which one you like so she doesn’t accidentally steal him away from you.”

“Please do, Ponine. You’ve known them longer than me and must be more invested. I don’t want to be a catty bitch, but I also want to take one of those handsome guys out to dinner.”

Eponine crossed her arms over her chest. “Did the guys put you up to this?”

“No, of course not!” Musichetta insisted. “Frankly, I don’t give them enough credit to think of trying to get this info through us. They’re sweethearts, really, but I don’t think they’re terribly used to hanging out with chicks.”

Cosette laughed. “You have no idea, ‘Chetta.”

Eponine pushed some whipped cream around on her plate with her fork, and then let out a sigh. “I do like one of them…but I don’t think I’ll be dating either of them any time soon, so ‘Chetta, pursue whoever you want. You have my full blessing.”

“Eponine-”

“Hon, if you have feelings for-”

“Well who do you like?” Eponine asked pointedly. “You must like one of the boys better than the other by now too.”

Musichetta pressed her lips together. She was about to answer, when her phone went off with a text. She immediately went to answer it, but Eponine snatched it away from her. “Oh good, we can see for ourselves who you’re flirting with!”

“Eponine, give that back!”

“Who is it? Who is it?” Cosette asked eagerly.

Eponine gaped at the phone in confusion as soon as she opened the text. “Um…Musichetta? Why are you talking about breasts with Bahorel?”

Musichetta snatched the phone away from Eponine and stuffed it back in her pocket. Her face was bright red. “Alright, you found me out. I want to go on a date with a single straight guy so I’ll stop flirting with the gay one. I just…can’t help myself. I like him. And he’s flirting back.”
“A lot of gay guys do that,” Eponine said. “It doesn’t mean you’re changing his mind about girls.”

“I know! Believe me, I know. The first guy I ever asked out was Bossuet, okay? I only ever seem to wind up attracted to gay guys. I’d kinda hoped moving out here and falling in with a new clique might be a chance to change my pattern, but nope. Same old shit.” Musichetta ran a hand through her charmingly disheveled elbow length hair and sighed. “Much as I need the distraction of an appropriate crush, I don’t want to step on your toes, Ponine. I could use some girlfriends too, I’ve decided. So which boy is it? ‘Ferre or Feuilly?”

Cosette shifted her eyes uncomfortably between the two girls, trying to be polite despite how clearly eager she was to have this question answered.

Eponine rested her arms on the table and dropped her face onto them. “Feuilly. It’s been Feuilly, but I live with him now, and I’m trying to get my brothers back. I just can’t right now. I need the stability too badly, and trust me, when I pursue a guy I am anything but stable. And he doesn’t deserve to get fucked over by my crazy.”

Cosette reached over and rubbed her back. “Oh sweetheart, don’t say it like that. I was actually hoping you were going to say Feuilly. I think the two of you would be great together.”

“Just hang in there a little longer,” Musichetta said. “Once we get your brothers back, you should be fine trying to date again. Right now you probably are a bit too distracted, but you’re a good girl and that kid’s solid. And he clearly likes you too. I think you’ll be disgustingly adorable as a couple.”

“You guys think so?” Eponine peeked up from her arms, daring to show a little bit of the hope she’d been trying to tamp down for the past few weeks. “I keep thinking that all I’ll do is ruin a perfectly good friendship. Y’know, like I almost did with Marius. And my friendship with Courf is still a little awkward from time to time. Oddly enough, I think I have a better connection with Jehan now, and I used to fantasize about chucking the kid off a tall building.”

“Oh dear,” Cosette said with a laugh. “I don’t think I want to hear the fate you had planned for me.”

“Strap you to a rocket and fire you into the sun,” Eponine answered.

Musichetta giggled. “I’ll keep away from Feuilly then.”

“So that leaves Combeferre,” Cosette observed. She scrunched her face up. “I don’t know if I see the two of you together. You’ve got different temperaments.”

“Mm hm,” Musichetta agreed. “I didn’t actually feel sparks with either of them. To be perfectly honest, I was just trying to get an answer out of Eponine.”

“‘Chetta!” Eponine sat up and threw a wadded up napkin at her. “You jerk! You don’t like either of them? Wait, how can you not like either of them? Feuilly’s fucking dreamy, and ‘Ferre’s like freakishly nice and responsible and-”

“Exactly. He’s a good boy.” Musichetta shrugged. “I’m not a very good girl, myself. Speaking of which…” She slipped her phone out of her pocket and composed a message on the awesomeness of breasts for Bahorel.

Overall, Enjolras was pleased with how well he was adjusting to living an impoverished lifestyle. His back and neck were hurting from the god awful mattress (a spring had broken through the fabric towards the lower left of the thing, so he and Grantaire had to be even more careful about how they slept lest they get scratched), but Grantaire gave a good neck rub if he needed it. He was getting used
to most of the bugs, though anything that had more than six legs or was longer than a cheerio, or both, still freaked him out.

But for the most part, Enjolras was happy. He was earning his own income, he was living with a man he was crazy about, and he could secretly cuddle a non-judgmental cat on those rare occasions when he felt overwhelmed.

The fragile peace was tested the night before Grantaire started his first shift for his summer job.

He was a regular rehire for a comic book store downtown, an ideal arrangement for the art kid in more ways than one. Grantaire liked the fact that he was not only allowed but expected to read the merchandise when it was slow in the store, so that he could stay on top of current storylines and be more helpful for the customers. Enjolras liked the fact that the owner let Grantaire sell his own work for a small cut. It was the closest thing to ambition Enjolras had ever seen his boyfriend show. Grantaire was characteristically unreliable about his own work, of course, having only printed five of his comic books and never reprinting them after they sold out, but Enjolras still took it as a good sign.

They definitely needed the money Grantaire’s paychecks would bring in. Rent and utilities for June were going to finish off Grantaire’s savings from his disbursement checks and last summer’s employment, and Enjolras’ first paycheck had only been for eighty bucks (“I know I worked more hours than that!” “Did you remember to take out for taxes when you estimated the amount, Enj?” “Son of a bitch!”). However, when Grantaire started working too it meant he wouldn’t have as much time to keep the apartment clean and pleasant, something he’d been working hard on for Enjolras’ sake. And it also meant we was going to need his work clothes back.

Enjolras contemplated the one pair of black sneakers they owned between them. It’s not that he was fond of the ratty old pair of converse, per se. The soles were worn down with holes, which let in rain water and pebbles and made his feet stink no matter how careful he was with the talcum powder. However, they were also incredibly comfortable and he still wasn’t entirely used to being on his feet for eight hours at a time. Enjolras’ only remaining pair of black shoes were dress shoes, and the only other shoes Grantaire owned were flip flops. He’d had a pair of work boots that had been in slightly better shape than the converse, but Enjolras had talked him into throwing them out when he noticed the holes. This had been back when he’d still had money, and he’d planned on buying Grantaire a new pair of boots but had never gotten around to it. He was kicking himself for that now.

“Can’t you borrow a pair of my shoes?” Enjolras asked. Grantaire didn’t have a color specific dress code at his job, so it seemed like a perfectly reasonable solution to him.

Grantaire shook his head, then went back to digging through his dresser for work clothes. He needed something comfortable enough to stock shelves in that wasn’t falling apart at the seams, preferably without displaying any logos telling customers what his actual taste in comics were. He found it best to be able to pretend to like or hate whatever character he needed to based on the preferences of the fan boy or girl he was talking to at the time.

“I can’t borrow your shoes, Enjolras. Your feet are smaller than mine by one size. Makes sharing okay on your end, but it makes blisters for me. Can I wear one of your v-necks tomorrow? I think you’ve got all my safe black shirts in the laundry.”

“Shit. What am I going to wear then?”

“I don’t know. Frankly I’m a bit preoccupied with what I’m going to wear.”

Enjolras got off of the mattress and crossed the room to stand behind his boyfriend, who still wasn’t facing him. “Why didn’t you do the laundry? You said you were going to-”
“Because *someone* used his tip money for train fare into Boston for that fucking anti-corn farming protest, or whatever the crap that was—”

“It was against Monsanto, and that’s actually a really important issue that directly affects your life, so you might show a little bit of concern—”

“Right, well the point is, I needed those singles for the Laundromat.” Grantaire finally slammed the dresser drawer shut and turned around to face Enjolras, face twisted into a disdainful scowl that was rarely aimed at Enjolras. “I don’t know how you’re not getting this yet. *Everything* is budgeted. If you want to spend some money in some way I haven’t accounted for then something else has got to go. It was cat food or laundry, and I didn’t expect you to object to the choice considering you’re the reason we’re stuck with the little asshole.”

Enjolras felt a bit shaken, having all that frustration aimed at him from a sober Grantaire. It wasn’t like the old days, when they used to butt heads over abstract ideals in the café and Enjolras could dismiss half of what Grantaire said based on his state of intoxication. This was much more real, and Enjolras was frustrated too.

“You really couldn’t do any laundry at all because I needed train fare?” he asked coolly.

Grantaire balled his hands into fists. “No, Enjolras, I couldn’t! It’s two twenty five a load for the washer, almost three bucks for the drier because I swear it’s broken but the old guy who owns the place is a cheat and he won’t fix it. I have *no cash*. What do you want me to do, take the clothes down to the river and beat them with a stick?”

Enjolras lowered his eyes. “I suppose not. I—I’m sorry. You—I wish you had said something before. You know, when I was talking about going to the protest.”

“I thought you were getting a ride in with ‘Ferre. Uh…sorry for yelling.” Grantaire deflated a little, and Enjolras started to calm down a little too, but then he noticed the way Grantaire’s fingers nervously darted under his sleeve. He was rubbing at the scars on his wrist with his thumbnail, and that always made Enjolras tense up. He hated the ugly marks on his lover’s wrists and arms, and of all Grantaire’s nervous tics, the ones where he rubbed or scratched his old cutting and suicide scars bothered Enjolras the most.

Enjolras snatched his cat off of the floor, pulled him into a hug, and started almost aggressively rubbing his ears. Raoul let out a startled yelp of a meow, then settled into his confused purring. Enjolras nodded tersely at Grantaire in acknowledgment of the apology, then turned aside, sat down on the mattress, and focused on his cat. He needed to cool down before he tried talking again.

Grantaire didn’t give him that option. He sat down behind Enjolras and hesitantly touched his shoulder. “E-Enjolras? Are you…you’re not really mad at me, right? Because I can fix the laundry thing, okay? Let me call Courf and see if he’ll let me do laundry at his place. If I go at midnight, when his downstairs neighbor is in bed but before the guy who works the graveyard shift gets back, then no one will see and then they can’t rat us out to his landlord again—”

“Grantaire, will you just shut up?!?”

The kid shot back as though he’d been burned. “Kay. Kay, stopping. I’m, uh, I’ll just…be right back.” Before Enjolras could even think of saying something, Grantaire grabbed his sweatshirt and fled the apartment.

Enjolras carefully set Raoul down on his pillow, gave his ears another gentle rub, then picked up Grantaire’s pillow, pressed it to his face, and screamed. When he removed the pillow he felt
fractionally calmer.

Now that he thought about it, Enjolras was pretty sure he wore the same shoe size as Jehan. The guy had a lot of clothes; maybe he had a pair of black shoes he wouldn’t miss. Enjolras shot him a text inquiring after black sneakers, then he got up, found his own sweatshirt, and went outside.

He took his phone out, intending to shoot Grantaire a text, but then he saw him sitting on the front stoop of the closed skate shop smoking a cigarette. Grantaire dropped it when his frightened eyes fixed on Enjolras.

Enjolras’ stomach clenched with guilt. His lover looked absolutely terrified at being caught indulging one of his old vices. Enjolras was only ever trying to offer love and support to help his boyfriend, but Grantaire had him on that damn pedestal, like he was an authority figure instead of an equal. He made Enjolras feel like he needed to lecture him, chastise him, when all he wanted to do was help him.

“I’m not mad at you,” Enjolras blurted out. “And I’m sorry. Please come back upstairs. If you must smoke though, finish doing that first. I…I wouldn’t care as much if the apartment had some windows.”

“M-my nerves are—that’s the only reason I’m…I’m sorry.” Grantaire stared down at his feet (he was only wearing socks, as his converse had been under dispute when he’d stormed out). Enjolras was relatively sure his lover was fighting back tears, though it was hard to be positive about it in the dim light.

Enjolras wasn’t feeling completely calm himself yet. He’d been having a stressful week, and even though normally he had a good head on his shoulders for Grantaire’s needs, this time his patience was frayed to the breaking point. It wasn’t fair that Grantaire was the only one who ever got to be hurt, or freak out, or behave irrationally under the weight of strong emotions. Enjolras’ stock of patience and strength wasn’t limitless. He shouldn’t always have to be on eggshells about setting off one of Grantaire’s fits of sullenness.

He still sat down beside Grantaire and touched his knee. Thankfully, Grantaire didn’t flinch from his touch. “I’m not mad at you for smoking. It scares me for entirely different reasons than the alcoholism, but I do appreciate the fact that you’ve cut back significantly.”

Grantaire wiped at his face and kept his eyes averted. “I swear I’ll find a way to get the laundry done.”

“Oh okay.”

“…are you mad at me?”

Enjolras bit his lip before answering. “I just said I wasn’t. I’m stressed out, not mad. I’m not used to sharing my life this completely with another person. I mean, we’ve gone from living in a spacious apartment to sharing a room. I think I just need a little time to myself.”

Grantaire went positively rigid. Enjolras could have kicked himself. “Not like that!” he all but yelped. “I mean, like, an hour to…I don’t know, read or something. Just…never mind. Forget I said anything. Oh holy fuck, will you at least look at me? I don’t know how to reassure you right now, and frankly I’m getting a little sick of having to remind you that I love you and I want to be with you every single god damn day. Can’t I be stressed out sometimes without you deciding all the worst things about us?”
Grantaire hid his face in his hands and started rocking back and forth. “How do I stop the fight? I tried talking and it didn’t work, so I came out here and you followed me, and then I tried shutting up and that didn’t help. Can you just stop it? You don’t want to dump me, fine. Can we talk about something else before that stops being the case?”

Enjolras rubbed a slow circle against Grantaire’s back. “If I walk away so we can both cool down… will you be okay? I don’t like leaving you alone when you’re upset. I worry about you.”

Grantaire sat up a little and shot him a wry smirk that in no way reached his eyes. “I couldn’t get shit faced right now even if I wanted to. We’re too broke for booze.”

“We have razors,” Enjolras said hollowly. Grantaire involuntarily rubbed his wrist. Enjolras grasped his hand and pulled it far enough away that he could twine their fingers together.

“I haven’t done anything like that in ages,” Grantaire whispered hoarsely.

Enjolras nodded. It was true; none of the scars were at all recent, but the thing was, he’d started giving them a closer look than he’d ever bothered with before, and he’d finally noticed the length and depth of the ones on Grantaire’s wrists. He wasn’t planning on asking Grantaire about the cuts, but those scars scared him in a way the shallower marks never could, especially now that he knew about Grantaire’s mother.

“God, how did we get to this from me fucking up the laundry?” Grantaire asked with a bitter laugh. He ran a hand through his hair, then let out a shaky breath. “Um…do you want me to call Courf?”

Enjolras shook his head. “I just texted Jehan. I’m pretty sure I can borrow some work clothes from him. Grantaire, I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean to take out my temper on you.”

“Likewise. Let’s go back upstairs, okay?”

Enjolras nodded. He probably still looked a little freaked out, because Grantaire gently touched the sides of his face and stroked his thumb down Enjolras’ cheek. He leaned in for a slow, tender kiss that Enjolras hadn’t even realized he’d needed, but it made things start to feel right again.

They didn’t say anything else after that. Enjolras went back to the mattress and sat down by their pillows with his cat in his lap. He traded a few texts with Jehan and procured his work clothes while Grantaire laid out an outfit for himself.

Grantaire went to take a shower, and when he came back into the room he was wearing an old pair of sweatpants and a short sleeved t-shirt. He didn’t wear them very often, and when he did he usually covered his wrists as much as possible with a clunky watch and bracelets. He was still absentmindedly rubbing at the scars when he slid into bed next to Enjolras. “So they bother you too, huh?”

“Of course they do.” Enjolras rolled onto his side so that he was facing Grantaire. “I don’t like thinking of you in pain.”

Grantaire chewed on his lip. “I know you’re not crazy about tattoos, but I was thinking that if I worked enough hours this summer, maybe I could save up and start covering some of the cuts up. I’d probably have to do a sleeve on the left arm though. I cut the shit out of that one when I was in high school. Would that…be okay?”

Enjolras leaned up on his elbow. “What makes you think I don’t like tattoos?”

“You ripped into Bahorel pretty fiercely when he got his first one.”
“That’s because he did it himself at a party when he was drunk. If you’ll recall, I wasn’t the only one giving him shit for his lopsided Spiderman quote. I don’t think I’d ever get a tattoo myself, but I think they would suit you. What did you have in mind?”

Grantaire turned onto his side so that he was facing Enjolras as well, and their legs wound up tangled together as they leaned into each other. “I’ve only just started getting ideas. I mean, it’s going to take some cash to cover what I want covered, so it’s not really realistic to plan just yet…but I was thinking of doing a big calligraphy R on this side…” He touched a large swath of his left forearm. “And I like the look of text, so I was going to see if Jehan’d write me a poem or something to put on the underside. And if I ever get rich, maybe some Dali up here…”

They drifted off to sleep planning tattoos for Grantaire’s arms together. Idealistic though Enjolras was, he knew the tattoos were a bit of a fantasy with their current income and expenses, but he determined to do whatever he could to make the body art a reality.

Chapter End Notes

I know I promised some Enjolras and Eponine interactions after I wrote the last chapter. I did write a scene with them, but it didn't fit with the rest of this chapter so I'll be putting it in the next one.

Also, initially I attempted not to make the setting of this fic specific, but now I've given up on that and it's obviously set in Salem (so ignore that bit chapters ago when Combeferre acted like he wasn't used to kicking around Salem anymore, and also when Enjolras and Grantaire commuted out to visit Paul and Marie for the first time, their travel route now makes absolutely no sense). Anywho, one of my SSU friends, who isn't from the area, just let me know that Salem State University has a reputation as being a gay school. I'm from the direct area, so we just think of it as that place you go when you can't get into a better school. But in her neck of the woods they call it "Seldom-Straight University." I thought that was amusing and worth sharing. Apparently I accidentally sent the Amis to gay school :P
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Enjolras gets himself into a compromising situation.

Combeferre and Courfeyrac have a heart to heart.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Enjolras was not having a very good day.

At the moment he was sticky and covered in latte, the result of Marius not looking where he was going while bringing a tray of drinks to a table of grabby teen twits. Enjolras had cleaned up as best he could in the bathroom sink, fighting off at least a dozen offers of assistance before being allowed to retreat to the bathroom to do so, but the end result was still a horrid mess. His clothes were uncomfortably clinging to his reddened skin.

He walked past the door to his and Grantaire’s apartment and went right for the bathroom the occupants of the building shared. He tossed his bag in the corner, checked that his towel was still hanging where he’d left it on the hook behind the door, and then stripped out of his latte covered clothes.

He didn’t notice the cockroaches until he was fully nude.

Enjolras let out a shrill squeak and scrambled on top of the toilet.

The bottom of their shower stall had apparently become the home of at least four fat roaches. Whimpering, Enjolras snagged his towel from the hook, wrapped it around his hips, and started edging towards the door…

Where a big hairy wood spider was perched on the frame. He must have missed it in his haste to get out of his sticky clothes.

Enjolras’ eyes went first to the cockroaches, who seemed content enough to writhe on the floor, but who knew when that would change, to the positively enormous spider precariously perched on the room’s only exit.

He needed to get a grip. One of his life goals involved travelling to developing nations to administer aid. If he wanted to do that, realistically this was not going to be his last brush with roaches, and that would not be the biggest spider he was going to meet in the course of his life.

Shaking, Enjolras slowly lowered his foot to the ground. It caught on a hairball someone must have cleaned out of their brush, but it felt like vermin to a nervous bug-o-phobe. Enjolras screamed again and scrambled back up on top of the toilet tank.

He was trapped.
Combeferre was home reading when he got his phone call from Enjolras.

Well, he was home, and he had his free-reading book sitting next to him on the bed (an anthology of WEB Dubois), but really he was on facebook clicking through the photo album Eponine had posted of her and Feuilly’s apartment, which really was coming along rather nicely. Gladiator jumped up onto the bed and knocked the laptop screen with his face. If Combeferre were a little less rational he’d have to think the cat was judging him for creeping the page of a girl who’d rejected him.

In reality, the cat just wanted his ears scratched and Combeferre was still rational enough to recognize that. He complied until his ringing phone scared the cowardly feline away. “Hel-”

“I need you to get over here right now. Right now, ‘Ferre. I need you right this instant. I tried calling Grantaire already, but he’s not picking up and I’m getting desperate.”

Combeferre clapped a hand over his mouth. He was convulsing with suppressed laughter, which was making both of his cats stare nervously at their human, who was usually much more composed than this. “Enjolras…what?” Because clearly the kid had no idea what he sounded like.

“I’m trapped in the bathroom. There are bugs, ‘Ferre, and they’re bugs on steroids and they’re hairy and I’m only wearing a towel because I didn’t notice them until after I was naked, but my clothes are sticky and one of them is on the door and it could leap on me at any second and did I mention I’m in a towel in a bathroom that is for all intents and purposes public as the lock doesn’t latch properly? I need you to come over and save me. And never mention this to anyone as long as you live.”

“Enjolras…I’m sorry, but I don’t really hear why it is you need saving. Can’t you just walk past the bugs?”

Enjolras sounded frustrated when he answered. He used that tone he took on when he thought his opponent was being willfully obtuse. “The wood spider is on the door. It could jump at any minute, and it’s big and hairy. I’m not walking anywhere near that door until the spider is gone.”

“Enjolras-”

“Please? I’d help you if our situations were reversed.”

Combeferre sat up a little straighter, pressing the phone closer to his ear. “Oh really? You mean like when I was eight and I was afraid of heights so you pushed me off the jungle gym so I could face my fears? Because you thought I needed to develop a stronger character? You mean like that kind of help?”

“Shit. I was hoping you wouldn’t remember that. Combeferre, please. I know I need to get over my irrational fear of bugs someday, but now is not the-oh fuck, the roaches are moving! Combeferre, please!”

“Sorry. Still not driving out of my way for this. Face your fears or call someone else.”

“Come on, ‘Ferre! You can’t still be mad about the jungle gym thing! We were eight!”

“Yeah, and I trusted you and you betrayed me. You put me in a cast, Enjolras, and then when I was upset you told me I was being whiny. You said you were going to help me-”

“You wanted to get over a fear of heights! What did you think I was going to do?”

“I thought climbing to the top of the jungle gym was how we were helping me get over my fear, not having my respectfully wary attitude concerning gravity confirmed. Plus everyone laughed at me.”
“Combeferre, you’re being ridiculous.”

“You’re the one cowering in a towel because of a few bugs. Lot of that going around, I guess. Good luck finding someone to flick the bugs away for you, Enjolras, because it most certainly will not be me.”

He probably should have felt a little bad hanging up on his oldest friend like that, but his inner eight year old was far too satisfied for twenty three year old Combeferre to give a fuck.

Enjolras tried Jehan next, even though he had his doubts about his timid friend being any less afraid of gigantic hairy spiders or unnervingly frisky cockroaches. He heard some odd noises when his call was answered, and then a faint “-holy shit Jehan, you are not seriously taking a call right now!” Then there was the muffled noise of the phone changing hands, a pouty noise, and suddenly Courfeyrac was on the line. “He’ll have to call you back as I’m about to go down on him. Thanks, bye.”

Enjolras ended the call with a frown.

Shit. Courfeyrac had been his next thought if Jehan hadn’t picked up.

He tried Feuilly next and got no answer. Legle didn’t answer either, and Enjolras already knew Joly was working. He didn’t trust Marius to be any better with bugs than he was, so against all inclination Enjolras called Eponine.

“Hello?”

“Are you still in Salem?” Enjolras asked meekly. He and Eponine had gotten off the bus together, but they’d gone separate ways.

“Yeah. I’m downtown thrifting, and then Feuilly’s going to pick me up so we can do some foodshopping. Why? Is something up?” She sounded pretty confused about being called by Enjolras. Which made sense, because he really did have her at the bottom of his list. She would have been dead last if he didn’t have a foreboding feeling that calling Bahorel might result in pictures of him cowering in the bathroom naked save for his fluffy turquoise towel appearing on facebook.

“I’m…having a bit of a crisis.” Enjolras shot a nervous look at the roaches. “Can you swing by my place and trap a spider for me so I can leave my bathroom? Preferably without either killing the spider or giving me too much shit, but honestly at this point I will take whatever help I can get.”

To her credit Eponine only giggled for a minute or two. “Your kitty isn’t hunting the spider for you?”

“Raoul’s in the apartment. I’m in the bathroom. Also, there’s a good chance this spider is too big for-shit, Eponine, the roaches are moving again. Haste? Haste please?”

“Kay. I’ll be right over.”

Enjolras almost dropped the phone in shock. “Y-you will?”

“Yeah, sure. See you in like five minutes.”

“Thank you.”

It took Eponine closer to ten minutes to get to the building. She had a hard time imagining Enjolras,
who struck her as the most fearless human being she’d ever met, cowering in terror from a bug. Well, he’d mentioned cockroaches, and those little fuckers had freaked her out until she’d gotten desensitized to them, but still. The guy didn’t flinch when a psycho killer charged at him with a knife, but a spider on the doorway was enough to take him out…

Maybe she had fallen in with the right peer group after all. Even the selfless pillars of moral fortitude were fucking nuts.

She jogged up the stairs to the third floor, turned down the hall, and knocked on the bathroom door. “Enj? It’s me.”

“C’mon in. Be careful. The wood spider is still on the doorframe.” His voice was tight and clipped. Much as she loved to tease and hassle the proud and haughty activist, Eponine felt some sympathy for him.

She slowly opened the door and took stock of the room. Enjolras was on top of the toilet tank with his feet planted on the seat, only wearing a towel, just as he’d reported (unless you counted the spilled lattes which still coated his chest and shoulders as additional attire). Eponine quirked an eyebrow, tempted to tease him with a wolf whistle or some other kind of inappropriate comment, but then her eyes rested on the ugly marks on his chest and the urge turned to ashes in her throat.

It was her first time seeing the scars. Really, given Enjolras’ strength, it was difficult to even remember he’d been nearly fatally stabbed.

“Where’s the spider?” Eponine asked.

Enjolras pointed a shaking finger to a spot just to the right of her. Eponine turned around, flinched a little when she saw the ginormous spider, and then backed out of the room. “If you don’t want me to kill that thing I’m going to need to get supplies.”

“Okay. So…it’s not just me? It is an unusually large spider?”

“Oh sweetie, it’s not just you. Actually, let me snap a pic of it so we can vindicate you to the other guys.” Eponine reached into her purse for her cell phone.

“How did you know they were making fun of-”

“C’mon Enjolras, we both know I’m not your first choice for help in a crisis.” She took the picture, and to her horror the flash and the chiming sound set the spider scurrying off the doorframe and onto the wall. “Oh fuck!”

Enjolras dove off the toilet and flung himself for the opposite wall of the room. Eponine couldn’t help but appreciate how gracefully he moved, even when motivated by unfiltered terror. Then he almost stepped on a cockroach and the noise that was ripped from his throat, though amusing, also made Eponine take pity on her friend.

Despite Enjolras’ no-kill preference, she couldn’t leave him like that, even to go get a stiff piece of paper and a cup (or a cereal bowl, for a spider of that size). She grabbed Enjolras’ boot from the pile of shed clothing by the bathroom sink and used it to beat the spider to death. Then she grasped Enjolras by the arm and led him from the room.

“I’m not going to even try with the roaches, sweetie. You’ll need professional help to get rid of them. Hon…are you crying?”

“No.” She decided to let him have that lie.
She shoved him into his apartment and watched him unsteadily make his way to their sink. “Alright, you sponge bathe with those paper towels. I’ll go get your shit out of the bathroom.”

“Check my bag for roaches first!”

Eponine rolled her eyes, but she made sure there were no stowaways before returning the messenger bag and shed clothing to Enjolras.

He was in the process of getting dressed at this point. He’d already pulled on a pair of baggy brown pants she was pretty sure belonged to Grantaire, and was pulling on a red t-shirt when she walked in. Now that the shock of the jagged and ugly knife scars had worn off a little, Eponine noticed something else about the bared torso—it looked a little leaner than she remembered. And Grantaire and Enjolras weren’t such different sizes that Grantaire’s pants should be slouching down his hips like that.

“Sweetie, have you lost weight?” Eponine asked.

Enjolras shrugged. “I don’t weigh myself regularly. Possibly.”

“Ah huh.” Eponine pushed off the counter she’d been leaning against and searched through the three small cupboards that she’d used to store food when she’d lived there. One of them was empty save for a box of rice pilaf, one was stocked with books on social politics, and the last one had a mostly empty box of cereal and a carton of cigarettes in it.

“The fridge is in a similar state,” Enjolras said in a warning tone.

“Do you want to come food shopping with me and Feuilly?”

Enjolras frowned and shook his head. “Grantaire still hasn’t gone over the budget with me. I’m not allowed to spend money unless I know it won’t take away from our other expenses.”

Even though Enjolras had made his discomfort with the conversation and Eponine’s snooping apparent, she still flung the refrigerator door open and took stock of its meager contents. “So are you boys splitting a box of dry cereal for supper tonight or making the rice pilaf without any oil or margarine? I suppose you could always eat raw, unseasoned potatoes.”

“He’ll find some way to make supper.”

Grantaire probably would, not for his own sake but for the sake of his gloriously stubborn and beautiful blond. Eponine had little doubt of that. But she still didn’t see why it had to be a struggle for them. “Come shop with us anyway. We can swing by the comic book store first and ask Grantaire what your food budget is for the week. If nothing else, Feuilly and I can spot you for some ramen.”

“Eponine, I can’t take money from you and Feuilly.”

“Dude, ramen costs twenty six cents a bag.”

Enjolras stared at her, dumbfounded. “You can make a meal for twenty six cents?”

“Well… calling it a meal’s a little generous, but you do get something in your stomach.”

Somehow that comment seemed to unnerv e Enjolras almost as much as the bugs. The promise of affordable food did get him out of the apartment though. He grabbed his sweatshirt, made a thorough and paranoid check of his messenger bag for cockroaches, and followed Eponine outside to wait for
Feuilly.

Combeferre was still looking through Eponine’s photos on facebook, though by now he’d progressed to selfies and shots of her with her high school friends, when he was pulled out of his rather creepy (even by his own account) brooding by knocking on his front door. He put his laptop to sleep, set it aside, and went to answer the door.

It was Courfeyrac, wearing a strained smile. “Hey dude. Can I come in and hang for a bit?”

Combeferre tried to hide his surprise and stepped aside to admit his friend.

Really, Courfeyrac showing up out of the blue to hang out (or talk over some kind of issue, as the slightly-off smile indicated he might need to do) really wasn’t anything unprecedented in the years of their friendship. When they’d first known each other, Courfeyrac had sought him out all the time to hang out and laugh off the ridiculous dramas in their group of friends.

One of the more unfortunate side effects of all the recent romances in what had been a homogenous group of friends was that they’d turned into more of an overlapping set of cliques. Combeferre, Enjolras, and Jehan conversed with each other on emotional drama, while Courfeyrac, Grantaire, Eponine, and Marius consoled and distracted each other from their emotional scars (less aptly, Combeferre couldn’t help but think). And Bahorel and Feuilly supported each other, sometimes bringing in Eponine, while Joly, Legle, and Musichetta were their own mini-clique. And Cosette, darling that she was, reached out to everyone exactly as much as they needed while Azelma brooded on her own.

Combeferre was clearly in a clique with Courfeyrac’s boyfriend. He wasn’t sure how good an ear he was capable of being if Courfeyrac needed that kind of support.

“What’s up?” Combeferre asked, once Courfeyrac had settled himself on the couch with Logan in his lap.

Courfeyrac shrugged. “I was on my way home from Jehan’s and I wasn’t quite ready to deal with Marius and his fluffy ‘I’m so fucking in love with Cosette I can’t function’ thing, so I came here instead. How goes it with you?”

Combeferre leaned against his bookcase and crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m…fine, I guess. Did you get a call from Enjolras about a bug in his shower?”

Courfeyrac laughed. “No, but Jehan did. He called you first, huh?”

Combeferre recounted his conversation with Enjolras, much to Courfeyrac’s amusement. “So I take it you and Jehan didn’t help him either?”

Courfeyrac’s face fell and he shook his head. He slouched down against the couch cushions, expression sour. “We were…busy, at the time. And he still picked up the fucking phone when it rang. ‘Oh, it could have been an emergency! What if he was really hurt?’ Then he would have kept calling back, okay? When my mouth is touching your dick, you should not pick up the fucking phone on the fucking first ring.”

And there it was. Combeferre’s stomach tightened. “Courfeyrac…not that I don’t want to help you, but I’m not sure I’m the one you should be speaking with about something this personal between you and Jehan.”

“I…I know, I just…” He scrubbed a hand through his hair, making the brown strands even wilder. “I
just wanted to talk to someone with a good head on their shoulders for once." Combeferre couldn’t say he blamed him. Grantaire, Eponine, and Marius must have made odd confidants. "If I don’t mention the sex stuff, can I vent just a little?"

Combeferre sat down on the couch next to his friend and squeezed his knee. “Of course. I’d thought you and Jehan had worked through your issues though. At least, that’s what he lead me to believe. Are you still having problems then?”

Courfeyrac nodded. “For a guy who’s supposed to be all about romance and emotions, he sure is shit at talking about them. He’s got more girl crazy than any chick I’ve ever been with. I just keep fucking up, and he doesn’t tell me, and then it festers and explodes at the weirdest times. I have no idea what he even wants from me anymore.”

That was a pretty fair assessment, because from what Combeferre had picked up from talking to Jehan, Jehan had no idea what he wanted either. His relationship with Courfeyrac was the first serious emotional commitment of his life, something he’d pinned all sorts of ridiculous hopes and expectations on. Courfeyrac, being very much human and subject to error and not the lead in some storybook romance, was falling short of those expectations. Longing for him from afar for a couple years had only worsened the problem.

Jehan seemed to be fully aware that the problems were his own, that his lover was doing the best he could and wanted to make him happy, but that was only serving to make him feel guilty about having the feelings in the first place.

“He does love you, Courf. I’m sure it’ll get better as long as you both keep working on it.”

Courfeyrac nodded. “Yeah, I know. I know. I just…I’m scared he’s gonna give up before it gets easier. He’s tried to break it off a few times, and it’s getting harder and harder to convince him to stay.”

That got Combeferre’s attention. “Wait, what? He’s never mentioned anything about wanting to dump you.”

Courfeyrac let out a humorless laugh that rang through the small living room, startling both of the cats and sending them running for the bedroom. “Really? He brings it up to me at least once a week. Once every couple of days, if he’s having a mood swing.”

“Courfeyrac, that’s really unfair.”

“I know. I know it is, okay, but I can’t make him stop. I’m sorry. I know he’s one of your besties and that this is a really awful thing to do, putting you in the middle, but if you’ve got any magic insights you can help me with here I would really appreciate it. What am I supposed to do? Learn how to be a poet so I can write him a sonnet or something? I tried to get into poetry. I thought that might help, but apparently I suck at it. I tried reciting a love poem to him, but apparently I didn’t read it right and it was actually calling him a whore. He got all pissy until he realized I didn’t do it on purpose.”

Combeferre did remember hearing about that one. “He sounded amused when he told the story to me and Enjolras.”

“He sounded judgmental when he called me an idiot for not seeing the obvious degrading language. I wish I’d never asked him out. Then we could still be friends. Having his friendship was pretty spectacular.”

Combeferre reached over and squeezed his shoulder. “It’ll get better. I’m sure of it. You guys really
Courfeyrac nodded hollowly. Then, seeming to have enough of this uncharacteristic brooding, he visibly perked up. It was an obvious act, but Combeferre was willing to let it go. “So what have you been up to? Exciting house parties with your chubby kitties?”

Combeferre sighed. “That’s a sadly accurate description of what I’ve been doing. Since classes ended I’ve only really been leaving the house for our meetings at the Musain, which have slowed down since Enjolras and Grantaire obviously can’t afford to go and no one wants to call attention to that.”

“I was thinking we should start meeting up at Brammer Street. Four of our friends work there now. They should be able to sneak Enjolras and ‘Taire table rent, or at least not give them shit for not buying any.”

“That’s not a bad thought.”

They sat in silence for a moment, something hanging in the air between them, though Combeferre couldn’t for the life of him figure out what came next in the conversation. He was going to have to keep an eye on this. At one point in time, Courfeyrac had been one of his closest friends completely in his own right, not just because of who he was dating and who their best friends were dating.

Courfeyrac was the one to finally break the uncomfortable silence. “I heard you were having a hard time with Eponine rejecting you. You’re not just sitting around sulking, right?”

Combeferre’s body language went rigid, and Courfeyrac stifled a laugh. Realizing his facial expression must have turned absolutely ridiculous, Combeferre laughed too. “Sorry. But fucking Grantaire. I talk to him once in confidence-”

“Oh come on!” Courfeyrac whined. “That’s my thing! I’m good at it.”

Combeferre shook his head. “You’re good at finding hookups, and that is decidedly not something I’m interested in. I’m looking for a connection. I thought I had one with Eponine, but apparently I was mistaken. I can keep waiting for the right girl.”

“You shouldn’t have to though. Dude, you’re a catch. You just need to get out there more. Let me set you up. I know lots of cute girls.”

“Yeah, more than Jehan is comfortable with,” Combeferre joked. The joke fell a little flat when Courfeyrac looked momentarily stung, but he brushed it off. That was interesting. Jehan must have
actually been giving Courfeyrac shit for his past behavior.

Which really wasn’t fair, actually. Since Courfeyrac had been dating Jehan he’d completely restructured his social life. He flirted less and hadn’t been to any pick up hotspots at all, which was a pretty decent sacrifice.

“Er, anyway,” Combeferre muttered. “I’m good. I don’t want to be set up.”

“I wouldn’t set you up with just anyone. We’re better friends than that, Combeferre,” Courfeyrac said, dramatically clutching a hand to his chest. “C’mon dude, if I found just the right girl would you at least consider getting dinner with her or something?”

“What are the chances of you dropping this?”

“Not very good at all.”

“Fine. If you find just the right girl I’ll go on one date. One. Once. You don’t get to keep pestering me with girl after girl after girl, got that? And no hookups.”

Courfeyrac grinned. “Alright. You will totally not regret this, Combeferre. I’m going to find you your fucking dream girl, okay?” He rose to his feet and started for the door, looking much more cheerful than he’d been when he arrived, and honestly so.

Combeferre smirked a little self-consciously. He still didn’t really want the date, but if it made his friend happy…

Besides, there was always the remote possibility it could end well for him.

“So let me get this straight…you’ve nicknamed this place ‘Ghetto Basket’, but you shop here anyway?”

“Ghetto Basket?” Feuilly repeated with a bemused smirk. “I used to call it Trash Basket when I worked here in high school.”

“We call it Garbage Basket too,” Eponine said. She went to the carriage caddy, pulled one out, and started giving it tentative pushes to check the quality of the wheels. It took her a few times to find one that would turn properly.

Enjolras cast a suspicious glance around the place. “It’s a lot more crowded than Trader Joe’s, isn’t it?”

“Mm hm. C’mon, let’s get some ramen!” Eponine dropped her purse into the carriage and shoved her way aggressively through the crowd of shoppers.

“Feuilly, why is that clerk spreading sawdust on the floor? What’s the sawdust for?”

Feuilly glanced where Enjolras was pointing and tried not to laugh. “Just don’t step in it, Enj.”

“…what is it?”

“Here we go, boys! Breakfast, lunch and dinner for the next two weeks.” Eponine started grabbing bags of ramen and tossing them into the carriage. “I think the only vegetarian ones are the mushroom. It probably doesn’t actually matter, but you might want to stick with that one just in case the other flavors actually have enough meat juice to make you sick.”
“K-kay…can you really subsist off of noodles and what appears to be a packet of sodium?”

“Not well.” Feuilly admitted. He started throwing blue colored bags into the carriage. “Eponine’s got a trick though. If you sprinkle some frozen vegetables over the top before you zap them then it’s almost like eating a real meal.”

“Ah.”

“You okay, Enj?”

“Oh yes, just rethinking some of my life choices.”

Eponine patted his back bracingly. “Cheer up, Enjy. You’ve got a devoted boyfriend, a mentally subnormal cat, and a group of fantastic friends to show you the ropes of being poor. Now, to the frozen vegetables!”

Grantaire walked into the studio apartment wearing a clean pair of pajamas, hair damp and dirty clothes balled up under his arm. He was also carrying a broom for some reason. He tossed his clothes into the hamper, set the broom in the crack between the counter and the fridge, and went to the mattress to sit with Enjolras.

Enjolras, who’d only just gotten back from food shopping with Feuilly and Eponine (they’d taken a detour to the haunted apartment so Enjolras could use their shower), quirked an eyebrow at his boyfriend. “What were you using the broom for? Wait, did you take a shower? The bathroom was covered in bugs!”

“I know. I did get your voicemails.”

“Yeah, about that.” Enjolras sat up and set the book he’d been flipping through aside. “How come you didn’t answer your phone?”

“I was at work,” Grantaire said, looking a bit befuddled. “I’ve only been back for a week. I can’t goof off on my phone until my supervisor drops his guard, so I’ve been turning it off.”

“But what if there was an emergency? Like today?”

Grantaire laughed. “First of all Enj, a bug in the bathroom is not an emergency. Secondly, if you did have a real emergency wherein you actually did have to contact me right away I’d think you’d just call the comic book store and ask to speak with me.”

Enjolras frowned. “That hadn’t occurred to me.”

“Yeah, well you did sound pretty freaked out.” Grantaire leaned over and dropped a kiss on his shoulder. “The broom was for the bugs, by the way. I just chase them out into the hallway when that happens.” Enjolras figured his horror must have shown, because Grantaire pulled him into an embrace and gave him a gentle kiss. “Or you could just head over to Courf and Marius’ and use their shower.”

“Yes, I think I’ll be doing that. Grantaire…do you think it’s possible for us to get an apartment that’s even a little bit nicer than this one?”

“Not one close enough to school for us to easily commute when neither of us has a car. Um…I’m sorry the place is such a dump. I am trying, I swear. I’ve been keeping up with the dishes, and actually using the hamper and…I’m making it worse, aren’t I?”
Enjolras sighed. “No, but…I don’t know. I’ve just been having a bad day.” Enjolras pulled away and crawled across the mattress. He sat down by his cat and started stroking Raoul’s back. “Eponine and Feuilly gave us five dollars’ worth of ramen.”

“Oh cool. That should last awhile.” Grantaire dropped onto his back, eyes fixed pensively on the ceiling. He let out a sniffle and rubbed at his eyes, which were already watering.

“Did you take your allergy medication?” Enjolras asked, concerned.

“Yeah. I think I’m building up a tolerance to it or something. I’m gonna go snag a roll of toilet paper.”

Enjolras gave a small shudder. “Make sure you get a receptacle for your used snot rags as well.”

“Uh…uh huh.” He stumbled back over a few minutes later with a roll of toilet paper, wads stuffed up each nostril, a plastic shopping bag to dispose of his used tissues, and a bag of cough drops. He curled up on his side on the bed and wiped at his eyes. “Urgh…I feel like ass.”

Enjolras chewed on his lip and defensively pet his cat with more vigor. “I’m sorry. Is there anything I can do to help?”

Grantaire shot the cat a dirty look. “I can think of one thing.”

“Besides getting rid of Raoul.”

“Come on Enj, he’s literally making me sick. I wouldn’t do this to you. I mean, I quit smoking to make you happy. You said the scent of it made you feel sick.”

“And the taste,” Enjolras muttered, thinking back on what it had been like kissing his boyfriend after he’d smoked a cigarette. Still, it was a perfectly valid point. “I’ll…I’ll think about it.”

A few minutes passed in silence save for Raoul’s confused purrs and Grantaire’s pitiful sniffles. Enjolras rolled away from his cat and resumed reading. He was working his way steadily through monographs on pre-Stonewall activism for the sake of the research seminar he was taking in the fall (one semester just didn’t seem like enough time to do original research of the scope he wanted to present). This particular book wasn’t as well written as the one he’d just finished, however, and he found his attention periodically wandering. Grantaire’s sniffles and fidgeting weren’t helping.

After a frustrating ten minutes he shut the book and threw a glare at his boyfriend. “Can’t you make yourself useful somehow?”

Grantaire struggled up onto his elbows and stared back at Enjolras from puffy, half lidded eyes. “Huh?”

“You’re just sitting there sniffling and groaning. Isn’t there something you could be doing?”

“Like what?”

Enjolras huffed. “Oh, I don’t know, what about maybe drawing something? Now that you’re working at the store again, shouldn’t you be trying to sell more of your own comic books? Or what about your commissions? Can’t you show some ambition without someone prodding you into it?”

Even if he was feeling particularly short tempered, Enjolras’ comments weren’t exactly out of the ordinary for him. He’d been chiding Grantaire for being lazy and unmotivated almost since they’d met. For whatever reason though, Grantaire seemed to be taking the tired old criticism more harshly.
than usual.

“I’m…I’m gonna go take a walk.”

“‘Taire? Wait, what’s wrong?”

Grantaire got up, pulled the toilet paper out of his nose, and started looking for his shoes. “I can’t talk about this right now. I’ll see you later.”

Enjolras scowled, feeling an odd mix between defensive and guilty. “Fine, run off. You know, I can’t even remember the last time I saw you draw something, but clearly I’m the bad guy here.”

“Good night, sweetheart,” Grantaire snarled before closing the door with a loud bang. It swung right open again after him, but the gesture’s meaning was still conveyed.

Enjolras grabbed his cat and pulled him into a tight hug. He kissed the top of Raoul’s head, then picked up his phone and texted Combeferre: *I think I broke R. Do you have room for another cat?*

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Courfeyrac emerged from his bedroom with his laptop under his arm, heading for the kitchen to grab a snack. He paused when he noticed that the prone figure on his couch was not Marius. Courfeyrac backed up and turned to give his apparent guest a closer look. “Grantaire?”

“Enjolras yelled at me because I don’t draw anymore and he’s disappointed in my lack of ambition. Can I hide here for the night so I don’t grab him by his stupid curly head and shove it down our roach infested toilet?”

“You have roaches in your toilet?”

Grantaire shut his eyes and shook his head. “They are back in the bathroom though.”

Courfeyrac set his laptop on the coffee table and sat down on the arm of the couch. “I take it you didn’t use my money on art supplies then?”

“Cat litter and laundry detergent.”

“Ah.”

“We needed it more!”

“Uh huh,” Courfeyrac said, crossing his arms. “And yet, here you are. So would it help if I just gave you art supplies?”

“Maybe. I dunno. I’ll head out soon, if you want. I’m just kinda enjoying the ability to breathe through my nose.”

“He really should get rid of that fucking cat,” Courfeyrac said with a frown. “I’m sorry, dude. You’re still crazy for each other though, right?” Then Courfeyrac remembered to correct for Grantaire’s paranoia. “Or, you’re as nuts for him as ever, right?”

“Yeah, duh. This is just stress, not a deal breaker. Dude, he’s the love of my fucking life.” The cynic formed a small smile. “And you know what? I think…he might like me as much as I like him.”

Courfeyrac almost overbalanced on the arm of the couch, but he just managed not to face plant onto the rug. It’s not that he found the news of Enjolras’ feelings for Grantaire at all surprising—after all, he spent a lot of time with the couple and he wasn’t blind. Enjolras was nothing if not straightforward
about his passions, and Grantaire was one of them. But the fact that their relationship was solid enough for Grantaire, with all his dysfunctions, to believe it…

“’Taire, he’s definitely as nuts for you as you are for him. I’m glad you’re starting to notice.” Even if he did feel a bit dead inside for some reason. Okay, for the obvious reason of jealousy. Why couldn’t he and Jehan weather problems while keeping that faith in the rightness of their relationship in tact?

Grantaire tried to shrug it off, but he was still smiling goofily when he sat up. He was about to speak, no doubt with some dismissive quip about his emotions, when his phone rang. “It’s probably Enjolras,” Courfeyrac said. “I bet he’s checking in on you after the fight.”

“Nah, I texted him to let him know where I’d wound up so he wouldn’t worry. I don’t think I know this number.” He flipped his phone open and answered the call. “Hello?” There was a short pause as whoever it was spoke, then, eyes widening from some unpleasant emotion, Grantaire jumped to his feet and stalked into the kitchen.

Intrigued, Courfeyrac started tapping his hands on his knees, impatiently waiting for his friend to return.

It took kind of awhile though. By the time Grantaire came back from the kitchen Courfeyrac had his laptop open again and was uploading pictures to the online dating profile he’d made for Combeferre. “So what’s going on?” he asked.

Grantaire frowned. “That was Mrs. Lawrence. I don’t know how she got my number or anything, but she’s on her way over to get me. She said something’s wrong with Little R.”

Chapter End Notes

In light of my own allergies acting up in a manner that can only be described as hellish (the allergy medication, it does nothing!) I started feeling bad for R and have decided to work on the cat situation sooner as opposed to later.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Raoul goes to a new home.
So do two of the Thenardiers.

Chapter Notes

I has a fan art! Thank you Max for this lovely sketch:
Guys, this is frighteningly close to what I have in my head for Grantaire's studio. Like, seriously, I must have done a better job describing it than I realized! XD

Also, this chapter's a little emotionally heavy. I blame Little R. That kid really messes me up when I'm writing him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Grantaire shifted his weight from foot to foot, feeling incredibly jittery as he waited for Mrs. Lawrence to pick him up. He would have been smoking, but he didn’t want to give the stupid cow something else to criticize him over. Like it or not, she was the gatekeeper to see the Thenardier boys and he needed her to have some semblance of a good opinion of him…at least until Eponine got custody of her brothers. At any rate, Grantaire was pretty sure the Stepford Wife would turn up her nose if she saw him anxiously chain smoking on the curb in front of Courfeyrac’s place.

He was minutely thankful she’d caught him while he was still at Courf’s. From outside the place looked really nice—you had to venture inside to see the dirty laundry, trash, subversive literature, and other such detritus that might offend a middle class woman with social climbing type pretensions. Grantaire had actually spent a few minutes in Courfeyrac’s bathroom brushing his hair, and he’d swiped a button down shirt to cover up his Clockwork Orange tee.

A gold Oldsmobile pulled up to the curb and the window rolled down, bringing him face to face with a rather tired looking middle aged man. The guy gave off an immediate air of exasperation, even before he said or did anything. For a long moment Grantaire just stared dumbly at him, wondering what kind of impression he was making, and if the man was as bitchy as his wife. Because this had to be Mr. Lawrence. The community parking stickers and socially conservative bumper stickers put him in the same category as the Stepford Wife.

“Are you Grantaire?” he asked, sounding as exasperated as he looked.

“Yep.”

“I'm Hank Lawrence. My wife Lizzie sent me to get you.”
So her name was Lizzie Lawrence? That amused Grantaire more than it probably should have.

He got into the passenger seat and was assaulted with the aroma of faux-pine from the air fresheners dangling from the rearview mirror. Hank was listening to Glen Miller, which just felt odd originating from an mp3 player. The interior of the car was anal retentively clean to the point where Grantaire felt like he was going to stain the taupe colored seat he sat in with the bits of paint and ink in his clothes.

He decided he liked Hank about as much as he liked Lizzie.

Hank put his blinker on despite the abandoned state of the street and pulled back onto the road. Grantaire dutifully buckled his seatbelt and waited for some kind of update on the kid, but Hank remained coldly silent.

Grantaire was the one to break the silence. “So what’s going on with Li-uh, Jean, exactly? Your wife wasn’t very clear over the phone. She said he was freaking out over something and she was worried about him.”

Hank let out a long sigh, and Grantaire liked him even less. He didn’t seem particularly worried about his foster child-more annoyed about the inconvenience of being sent out to fetch a stranger at his wife’s insistence.

“Little Jean’s figured out how to lock himself into a storage unit in the basement. Short of taking an axe to the boards, I can’t think of a way to get him out. Lizzie thought you might be able to coax him upstairs.”

“Probably, yeah. How long’s he been in there?”

“Four days, if you count tonight.”

Grantaire’s stomach dropped. “Has he been eating? Y-you’re giving him food, right?”

“Lizzie’s leaving him meals. I think that’s a mistake, personally. Boy’d come right out if he was hungry.”

Grantaire doubted that. Little R had known hunger and neglect for most of his life. The discomfort of hunger wouldn’t interfere with his actions unless he made a conscious choice to let it.

Hank was quiet for most of the ride, and as Grantaire wasn’t all that inclined to make polite conversation with the guy, he was left to brood and worry on his own. He felt suddenly struck by the responsibility of caring for his damaged little munchkin the way he did. What if he couldn’t get Little R to come out of his hiding spot? What else would the Lawrences try?

Mrs. Lawrence was waiting for them on the front porch when they got there. She was wearing a floral print nightgown with a robe over it, and her greying hair was up in rollers with a hairnet. Grantaire just managed to bite back an incredulous snort, but it was a close thing. He had to wonder what was up with these people. Between the Glen Miller and the old fashioned housewife getup, he had to wonder what era they thought they were from.

“Come this way!” Mrs. Lawrence was on him as soon as he got the car door open. She latched onto Grantaire’s forearm, shiny red fingernails digging into his skin as she dragged him through her house and down the stairs to the basement.

Thankfully, it was a finished basement and didn’t seem to have any issues with mold. Grantaire’s sinuses ached enough from Enjolras’ damn cat without having to worry about what a basement
might do to him. There was an archway at the end of the rec room style area that opened to a more conventional type of basement set up, with cement walls and pipes on the ceiling, and this area had a washer, a dryer, and a sort of shed made of rough wooden boards. Grantaire figured that must have been the storage unit Hank had mentioned.

“Jean! Jean, it’s me. Mrs. Lawrence.” She walked up to the door and bent down so that she would have been at eye level with Little R had they been on the same side of it.

“Go ’way,” came the weak little wisp of a voice.

Mrs. Lawrence flinched, but smiled hopefully. “I brought ‘Taire with me, just like you asked. He’s right here.”

“Stop lying and go ‘way.”

Grantaire wondered how many times she’d lied about him being there before giving up and calling him. “She’s not lying, buddy. It’s really me.” Grantaire stepped beside Mrs. Lawrence and peered between the slats of the locked door. He could just make out a pair of wary brown eyes.

“…’Taire, you’re really here?”

“I’m really here. Promise.” He held his hand up to one of the gaps in the door, and Little R pressed his hand against it as well. They weren’t touching, as the boards were too thick, but it was a nice gesture either way.

“H-hi ‘Taire. I didn’t, um, I wasn’t sure if I was ever gonna see you again. Mrs. Lawrence said she didn’t want me to, because you’re a bad man and that you’re—that you’re going to hell. You didn’t really go to hell, did you?”

Grantaire had to take a few quick breaths before he trusted himself to respond, because he had an earful for the abysmal human being crouched next to him, tearfully trying to jostle her way closer to the little boy who rightfully wanted nothing to do with her. But Grantaire’s first priority was the frightened child, and as casual wording had already done a number on the poor little guy he was going to be careful not to add to that distress.

“C’mon kiddo, do I look like I’ve been to hell? Don’t you think I’d have some cool burn scars or something if I did?”

Mrs. Lawrence scowled, and was clearly about to say something about his flippant remarks on what was to her a serious topic, but she fell silent at the look of unfiltered anger Grantaire shot her. Grantaire schooled his features back into a trustworthy smile when he turned back to the wooden door.

All he could really see of Little R were his eyes, which looked contemplative. “I guess not, but I can’t see much of you.”

“Will you unlock the door? I could give you a hug that way.”

“I don’ wanna come out just yet though. Can we talk some more first?”

Grantaire nodded. “Yeah, sure, of course.”

“Can…can you tell Mrs. Lawrence to go back upstairs too? I want to talk to you just us.”

Grantaire nodded again, a rather tense smile stuck on his face. “Sure thing, buddy. Heck, if she tries
to say no I’ll throw her over my shoulder and carry her up the fucking stairs.”

“You will most certainly not use language like that while you’re in my home-”

“Lady, and I use the term loosely, you don’t wanna hear the words I’ve got rattling around for you right now. You should do as the kid says and go upstairs unless you want this to get ugly.”

Mrs. Lawrence stood up, putting her hands on her hips. “Are you threatening me?”

“No. Just telling you that you’re gonna hear worse than f-bombs if you try me right now.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, but eventually the Stepford Wife departed, hairnet, house slippers and all.

Grantaire turned towards Little R and put his palm back over the gap in the boards. “Alright bud, it’s just us now. So she said I was going to hell, huh? Was it because I’m in love with Enjolras?”

The tearful brown eyes bobbed up and down as he nodded. “Sh-she said that boys aren’t a’posed to be with boys like that, because it’s unnatural and it means they’re perversions and abobations and that God’ll judge ‘em for it and send them to hell where there’s fire and bad things and pain, and I want to be wherever you and Ponine are, but I don’t want to be in pain. And sometimes Ponine kisses girls the way she’s a’posed to kiss boys, so she’ll go there too, right? I don’t like fire. It’s too hot.”

“Calm down, dude. That’s just what some people think, and the people that think that way are assholes.”

“Mrs. Lawrence said that that’s a bad thing to say. You’re not a’posed to say asshole.”

“Mrs. Lawrence can suck a dick,” Grantaire returned. “Her views on right and wrong are fucking atrocious.”

“Teacher said the a-word is a bad word too, and I like my teacher. She’s nice, and she doesn’t try to scare me when she teaches me things.” The brown eyes were downcast for a moment, then they locked with Grantaire’s again, wide and painfully vulnerable. “She scared me loads, ‘Taire, because you were the first friend I ever had. You gave me food that I didn’t need to take, and you let me watch what I wanted on TV and talked to me and wanted to call me by a name and stuff. And you colored with me and said I was good at it and showed me other things, and you made sure I had a place to sleep at night. I thought it was because we were friends.”

“We are.” Oh fuck. His cynic cred was fucking shattered, because that croaky little speech had his eyes welling. “I promise, buddy, we’re definitely friends. Did Mrs. Lawrence say we weren’t?”

“Yeah.” His voice somehow managed to get smaller. Grantaire had to lean closer to hear it. “Sh-she said men like you were b-bad, because, because they want things they shouldn’t because they’re perversions. She said you just wanted me around because I’m a little boy and men like you do bad things to little boys. But I told her that you do good things, like the coloring and piggy back rides and tickle games, but she said you were just trying to trick me and if I didn’t stay away from you then I’d go to hell with you. But if you’re really going to hell I want to go too. I’ll get used to it being hot eventually. I just don’t want to be here anymore, ‘Taire. No one laughs enough when they’re here and we were always laughing with you and Ponine and Bucket and ‘Ferre and the others.” He paused to take a breath, then continued on in innocent earnestness. “She’s wrong though, isn’t she? You’re really my friend and you wouldn’t hurt me, right? Because if you were going to hurt me then you just would, wouldn’t you? Like my dad?”
Grantaire’s hand had balled into a painful fist at his side. His nails were digging uncomfortably into his palm, and besides that his fingers just hurt from the squeezing. He kept the other palm loose and flat against the wooden boards. “I will never hurt you. I promise. We’re friends. We’re friends and that fucking selfish cow lied to you. I’m so sorry, buddy. If I’d known what awful things she was saying I would have tried harder to get back here for a visit so I could tell you myself that she’s wrong. She’s an evil, hateful woman. We will always be friends, okay?”

For one long minute Little R just stared at him and Grantaire held his breath. Then the eyes disappeared, and Grantaire felt the tears he’d been blinking back slide down his cheeks. But there was the sound of heavy things being scraped across the cement floor, and then the door squeaked open and Little R flung himself into Grantaire’s arms.

“I knew you were my friend. I mean, really I knew. I was just scared that maybe you weren’t.”

Grantaire kissed the top of his head. “Believe me kiddo, I know how that feels.”

“Yeah?” Little R leaned back far enough to wipe the tears off of Grantaire’s face. He pushed a little harder than he probably meant to, but Grantaire didn’t mind. He made a silly face as the skin of his cheeks pushed up against his eyes under the pressure of tiny fingers. Little R giggled. “I get scared that people don’t really like me all the time. That happens when you get big too?”

“Not always,” Grantaire said. “But it happened to me.”

“I like you. I’d tell you if I didn’t, but I do. I like you and I’m glad you’re my friend.”

“Back atcha.”

Little R’s eyes crinkled with the force of his smile, but it only lasted one happy, but incredibly fleeting moment. “’Taire, what happens now? Mrs. Lawrence thinks you’re a bad man so she won’t let me and Peter Parker and Gavroche play with you anymore. She only let you come over tonight because I was asking for you for so long.”

“I’m going to have to talk to her,” Grantaire said, heaving a reluctant sigh. “I’d better call for backup first though. I can so see me blowing this on my own.” He reached into his pocket for his cell and sent Enjolras a text.

“Are you calling Ponine or Statue Man?”

“Statue,” Grantaire answered. “Trust me on this, he’s the one we want arguing our points.”

“Okay. Can we go upstairs and color until he gets here?”

Grantaire settled Little R on his lap and wrapped an arm around him, using his free hand to text with Enjolras. “Let’s stay down here a little longer. I want to make sure he’s coming first.”

“Okay. But if we can, I’d really like to color with you.”

Combeferre dutifully showed up at Grantaire and Enjolras’ apartment with a cat carrier, but he also brought a couple of lattes and a bag with two scones in it. It was a signal more than anything: he wasn’t actually in the mood for coffee, but he also wanted to make it clear that Enjolras wasn’t going to just be handing his beloved cat over after stubbornly insisting on keeping him in the face of some pretty substantial suffering on Grantaire’s part without some kind of explanation.
When Combeferre walked into the apartment he found it immaculately tidied (something that hadn’t even seemed physically possible when Grantaire had lived there alone). All of Raoul’s things were laid out on the TV tray they used as a kitchen table, and Enjolras was sitting cross legged on the mattress hugging the cat and stroking the fur on his back. He looked up when Combeferre walked in and offered him a strained smile. “Hey.”

“Hey. I still haven’t actually met the little guy yet. So this is Raoul?”

“Yeah.” Enjolras beckoned Combeferre over, so he set the carrier and the café goods down, crossed the room, and joined Enjolras on the mattress. Combeferre held his hand out for Raoul to sniff, and the cat let out a pitiable meow. Come to think of it, there was something a little off about the pitch of that meow, not to mention the vocal tremors he made. Maybe Grantaire had a point about the cat being special needs.

Combeferre tried to pet the cat, but even though Enjolras was still holding him (and the cat obviously liked and trusted Enjolras), he got scared being touched by a stranger. Combeferre gave up and scooched backwards on the mattress a bit. “Did you tell Grantaire you were getting rid of him?”

“No. But he wants me to, so I don’t anticipate it being a problem. And you know as well as I do that Grantaire asks very little of me. The fact that he’s willing to mention this at all means that it’s important to him.” Enjolras sighed. “I’ve never had a pet that was actually mine before. The fish and the birds we had when I was growing up were mostly decorative. I really liked having a cat.”

“Yeah, they’re good company.” Combeferre tried once more to pet Raoul, but the little fur ball shrieked again like he was in agony. “Maybe someday, when you and Grantaire have more space. As it is, you don’t even have any windows in this pit. I’m sure ‘Taire’d give you a menagerie if it wasn’t for the allergies.”

“Mm hm.” Enjolras gave his cat’s ears a last scratch, then handed him over to Combeferre. Raoul resisted, digging his little claws into Enjolras’ shirt, but he gently extracted them and shifted the cat into his new caretaker’s arms.

“It’s okay, little guy,” Combeferre cooed. “I’ve got some tubby housecats for you to come over and terrorize. Oh, Enj, he might get fat living with me. I’ve been trying to get Logan and Gladiator in shape for over a year now, but it’s not working.”

“What kind of cat food do you buy them? Do you get the indoor formula?”

“I do, but nothing works. I feed them once a day, the exact amount the vet tells me to…but, y’know, I do get them an awful lot of treats…and they’re not very active.”

Enjolras looked slightly exasperated, but he gave a curt nod. “I suppose I’ll forgive you if you make my cat obese.”

“Y’wanna come back to my place with me and help him settle in?”

Enjolras frowned and started picking at a loose thread in the bedspread. “I was thinking of doing a load of laundry, actually. And sweeping up again and wiping down all the furniture. You know, to get the allergens out. I can’t though. We don’t have enough quarters to do the bedding a second time this month.”

“Stuff it in a bag and do it at my place. C’mon, you and Grantaire barely get out of the apartment anymore. Come hang out with me for a couple hours. He’s out blowing off steam, isn’t he? I think you should get out of the house too.”
Enjolras’ eyes darted around the apartment, no doubt making a check list of things he needed to get done. But the room was clean enough. The dishes were done, everything that had a place was in it, and the scrub down wouldn’t matter as much if he didn’t get the cat hair off the bedding. “Alright. If you don’t mind me doing laundry at your place, I’ll come over for a little while.”

It only took them a few minutes to load the cat accessories in the car. Enjolras hadn’t been able to buy much for the cat, so there was just his litter box, his food and water bowls, and some extra litter and food. The laundry took up a lot more space, and then the two of them piled in, with Raoul and his carrier sitting on Enjolras’ lap.

Enjolras went right to Combeferre’s basement to put the blanket and some pillow cases in the washer, so he missed Raoul’s introduction to Logan and Gladiator.

Apparently it didn’t go well, because when he got upstairs Gladiator was letting out slow, angry yowls from underneath the couch while Raoul ran frantically between the living room and kitchen. Logan was nowhere to be seen.

“They will get used to each other, right?”

Combeferre laughed and nodded. “Yeah, eventually. They might never like each other though. Remember freshman year, when I first brought Gladiator back from the shelter? I’d only gotten him because I thought Logan was lonely when I was gone for classes all day. When we lived at home, he had my parents and my brother and the dog to fill up the house, but out here at college…anyway, Gladiator and Logan do like having company when I’m away, but they still don’t like each other and they get competitive for my attention. It’s kind of cute, actually.”

Combeferre put away the cat litter and the bag of food while Enjolras enjoyed the novelty of interacting with his cat with the aid of cat toys and scratching towers. He decided he was going to like visiting Raoul at Combeferre’s apartment. Raoul was particularly amusing when engaged in a futile struggle with the laser pointer.

Combeferre returned with the lattes and scones. He set them on the table, sat down on his yowling couch, and fixed Enjolras with a patient but expectant look. “So what’d you fight about?”

Enjolras set the laser pointer down and frowned thoughtfully. “I’m not quite sure, actually. I was…I was hounding him about his art a little, but it wasn’t like any of the myriad other times I’ve done it. It used to be that he was slacking, or unfocused and really needed prodding to do anything of merit. But since he’s quit drinking, his art attained this focus. He’s been doing some really incredible work, ‘Ferre, and I was hoping that now that he’s back at the comic book store he might start doing something productive with it.”

“I think his art’s more like a hobby, Enj. Well, that and free therapy. He definitely works out his issues with it.”

Enjolras nodded. “Yes, but it’s also pretty much his only passion. And the jaded pessimist had to pick one of the most impractical passions in the world to try to make a living on. If he’s ever going to get anywhere with it, he’s going to need to have faith in himself. He’s got so much talent, but he doesn’t see it. That’s why I know I have to stay on it and make sure he keeps up with it, because he can do this. He doesn’t think he can, but I can think it hard enough for him until he starts to believe in himself.”
“Except tonight you ticked him off,” Combeferre pointed out.

“Yes, well apparently I need a new strategy,” Enjolras said, feeling a bit self-conscious. “He’s not the same man he was fall semester when I had to nag him nearly every night for a month just to get his work exhibited in the student show. Confronting his lack of productivity directly hit some kind of nerve. I’ll have to be more cautious with my wording.”

“Maybe it’s because he’s working on sensitive stuff right now. The student show was all school stuff, and he’s pretty clear about the difference between the work he does for a grade and the work he does on his own,” Combeferre said thoughtfully.

“I think that’s probably the difference. I don’t know. I’ll talk to him about it when he gets back, I guess.” Enjolras sighed and sat down on the couch, just in time for Gladiator to shift from yowls to a low, menacing growl.

Logan peeked his head into the room, confirmed that the new cat was still there, and retreated back into the kitchen. Raoul meowed pitifully, then ran headlong into a scratching tower before he managed to find the little hole that let him crawl inside it.

“It’s not that we’ve been fighting a lot since I walked away from my parents and their wealth,” Enjolras continued. “But…everything feels differently now. I’m leaning on him when he’s supposed to be leaning on me.”

“Can’t you both just lean a little together and support each other?”

“Well yes, I suppose…but I like feeling like I’m helping him. And I’m not sure he’s ready to be my support. I’m pretty sure he’s still too fragile for it.” Enjolras scrubbed a hand through his hair. “There’s not much to be done about it though. I just need to keep my temper in check. I’m barely sleeping anymore, and it’s wreaking havoc on my nerves. I feel like snapping at him for every little thing.”

“Why aren’t you sleeping?” Combeferre asked, leaning forward a bit with his elbows resting on his knees. His kind eyes were fixed on Enjolras, who was finally appreciating the wisdom in coming here and giving voice to his frustrations.

“I’m not entirely sure, as there are a number of contributing factors at play. For starters, the mattress is uncomfortable. I thought I’d adjust by now, but I swear, it’s only getting worse. And…my mind is restless. I’ve never been this discontented before. Which is odd, because I’m still satisfied with my actions. I just wish none of us had been in those circumstances to begin with.” Here his gaze dropped, and Enjolras’ words failed him. They were skirting pretty close to a subject he wasn’t sure he wanted to get into again, as it had the potential to wound his friend as well as himself.

Combeferre gave his knee a bracing squeeze. “I think that’s probably the right response. Neither of us did anything wrong, and it’s unfair that you’re the one who lost your security as a result. I get why you’re upset, Enjolras. Does it help to know that I’m eternally astounded by you and grateful to have you as my friend?”

Slowly, Enjolras nodded. His voice felt heavy when he spoke, thick with emotion. “I’m sorry-”

“Enjolras, we shouldn’t talk about this right now,” Combeferre said gently. “There are other things you need to focus on besides guilt that isn’t yours. Okay? We’re still good, you and I, and we always will be. I don’t think I need to say anything else about it right now, and you don’t need to apologize. But we very much do need to figure out a way to help you sleep at night. We’ve got physical discomfort and a restless mind so far. Anything else?”
Enjolras chewed his lip and then just blurted it out. “Raoul runs around crazily around midnight, knocking into walls and chasing imaginary creatures that only he can see. That usually wakes me up. And some nights he sits on the counter and yowls.”

“Oh good. I’ll make sure to shut him out of my bedroom at night then. Bet Grantaire loved that.”

“His allergy medication knocks him out, actually. I didn’t tell him about Raoul’s nighttime episodes. Actually, I’m pretty sure Grantaire hasn’t noticed that I’m not sleeping, since he’s been sleeping so heavily himself.”

Combeferre regarded him thoughtfully. “Did he notice you’re losing weight?”

“You’re the second person who’s said that to me.”

“Well it’s getting pretty obvious, Enj. Do you know how much you’ve lost?”

Enjolras shrugged. “I’ve never weighed myself regularly. However…” He stood up, undid his belt, which was on the very smallest notch, and held out the waistband of his jeans to show how large they were on him. “I consider this a worrying sign.”

“Yeah.” Based on his expression, Combeferre did too. “Why don’t you hit up a food pantry or something?”

Enjolras fixed his pants and sat down again, feeling antsy. “I donate to food pantries, I don’t patronize them. There are people who need the help more.”

“Enjolras, you’re starving. Like, literally starving. Food pantries exist for exactly this kind of situation.”

Enjolras shook his head. “I’m eating though. Grantaire’s been very good about making sure we have at least two meals a day, usually three. I’m just not eating well, or food that I’m used to. Eventually my body will adjust to the new level of nutrition and my weight will plateau again. I don’t think Grantaire’s lost any weight, and it’s because he’s used to eating the kinds of things we’re eating.”

“Well also his weight shifted around when he quit drinking and cut back on the smoking. I still think you need to…” He was cut off by Enjolras’ phone chiming with a text. “Let me guess…he’s looking for you?”

Enjolras took out his phone and nodded when he saw that the new text was from Grantaire. But he frowned when he read it. “He’s at Mrs. Lawrence’s house with Little R.”

“What?” Combeferre leaned closer to Enjolras, trying to read the text over his shoulder. “What’s he doing there?”

“Little R had some kind of panic and…” Another text came in, and then another one after that, all incredibly long with messy spelling indicative of haste and a certain amount of frenzy. “Shit. He needs my help. ‘Ferre, can I borrow your car?’

Once Grantaire was sure that Enjolras was on his way he stowed his phone back in his pocket, picked Little R up, and carried the boy upstairs. The Lawrences were in the kitchen, Mrs. Lawrence pacing anxiously by the cellar door while Mr. Lawrence read from an e-reader at the table.
“Oh thank goodness!” Mrs. Lawrence exclaimed, clearly missing Grantaire’s livid expression and focusing solely on the child clinging to him. Little R burrowed his face in Grantaire’s neck, curling as far away from the woman as he could.

“My boyfriend’s on his way over,” Grantaire said coolly. “It’s a forty minute drive, but I expect him to make better time than that. I don’t think we should talk until he gets here, so I’m just going to take Little R to his room.”

A funny look came over Mrs. Lawrence when Grantaire used the boy’s chosen name instead of his birth name. She saw the action for the challenge it was, and her body language implied that she was ready to rise to the challenge. Meanwhile, Hank couldn’t have appeared any less invested in the conversation if he tried.

“I think we ought to speak at least a little,” Mrs. Lawrence said in the worst approximation of a kindly mother Grantaire had ever heard, and as his own mother had tried for that tone a fair few times, he’d heard a lot of variations on the theme. “Besides, Jean needs a bath. He’s been in that basement for days.”

“Mm. He’s been locked in a dark space alone and scared for four days. There are more immediate needs than hygiene to tend to.” Grantaire shifted Little R onto his hip and started walking for the boy’s bedroom. “I’m sure Enjolras will text me when he gets here.”

“Now just a minute! Don’t you dare walk away from me!”

Grantaire set Little R down in the living room hallway. “Go hang with your brothers for now, buddy. I’ll be in in a minute.”

Little R desperately squeezed his hand. “You won’t go away?”

“Nope.”

Slowly, he nodded. “Okay ‘Taire. I believe you.” He dropped the much larger hand and ran into Gavroche’s room.

Grantaire turned around and faced the angry housewife. “Listen lady, you told that kid that I was going to rape him. Not in so many words, but you wanted him to think I was a pedophile. Believe me when I tell you that you do not want to talk to me until my boyfriend gets here to hold me in check. And we’re not going to talk about this in front of Little R. You’ve already done enough damage to the poor kid.”

“I can’t just let him wander around with strange homosexuals! He has to know what to look out for to-to stay safe!”

Grantaire had never really been one for physical violence. He much preferred an excoriating wit to trying to get his outrage across with his fists. However, words were abandoning him under the weight of a blinding rage. He wanted to hit something, badly, but he managed to still that unfamiliar impulse.

“I would never do that to a child, you fucking crazy bitch! I’ve got an adult lover—an adult. For fuck’s sake. I’m a gay man. I’m attracted to men. My own age.”

“I don’t know. There’s something boyish about that other dirty pervert you’re seeing.”

He took the steps forward to hit her, but then Grantaire felt like his father and the self-disgust was enough to temper his hatred of the vile woman in front of him.
Without saying another word he turned on his heel and shut himself up in Gavroche’s room with the boys.

“Oh my fucking god I’ve never been so insulted in my fucking life.”

“Taire?”

“Whippy?”

Grantaire blinked a few times. “Gavroche? You’re taller than the last time I saw you.”

“I’m ten. That’s how it works.”

The kid was at least a couple inches taller. Still short-still kid-size, but a few more growth spurts would put him in danger of surpassing his sisters (and no doubt the brat was looking forward to the day). His straggly blond hair was now long enough for a pony tail. Grantaire was struck with an oddly sentimental thought looking at the kid; this was the next generation of his group of friends.

“We heard you screaming at Old Blisterbutt,” Gavroche said with feigned indifference. “Does that mean we get to leave soon?”

Grantaire scrubbed a hand through his hair. “I doubt it. At least, not tonight. Legally, Old Blisterbutt has everything in her favor. But we’re going to work on it. There’s no way we’re going to let you stay with that stupid cow without a fight.”

“Stupid cow? Ooh, I like that.”

“Really? I rather liked Old Blisterbutt. The alliteration gives it a nice ring.”

Grantaire chatted with Gavroche all while they waited for Enjolras. Little R crawled onto his lap, and Grantaire stroked his back and his greasy honey colored hair until he thought he’d fallen asleep. He was awake though, sad eyes looking mournfully out across the room where his big brother was slouching against the bed.

Peter Parker was in the room too, but he hadn’t said anything, or even looked up when Grantaire walked in. He was sitting on a bean bag chair in the corner with headphones and an I-Pad.

Grantaire finally got a text from Enjolras, and a moment later the doorbell rang, sounding awfully ominous despite the cute little chiming noise. Little R burrowed closer, to the point where Grantaire had to contort a bit to see the screen of his phone. “Guys, Enjolras wants me to stay in here with you while he sorts everything out.”

“Hm…” Gavroche seemed to be struggling against opposing desires. “It’d be a shame to miss the fireworks, but the Statue’ll probably work best without us distracting him. And I do want to leave this dump. He knows that, right?”

“Oh uh huh.” Grantaire actually had no idea what Enjolras was going to say. He didn’t know what the fix was. The whole situation was miserable, and he wanted to run away from it all and never think about blister butted Stepford wives as long as he lived.

To Enjolras’ credit, if there were raised voices in the discussion they never got loud enough to reach the boys. Grantaire was sure he couldn’t have accomplished that, which was a good chunk of the reason he’d called Enjolras. Hell, he’d already said things he shouldn’t have in front of the boys.

After the first hour Little R actually did fall asleep. Grantaire carried him to Gavroche’s bed and
tucked him in. Peter Parker nodded off with his headphones still on, and by eleven o’clock Gavroche was asleep, curled up at the foot of his bed, almost like a scruffy blond puppy.

Grantaire almost fell asleep himself, but just as his head was starting to nod the door creaked open. Enjolras walked in and gently touched his shoulder. “Hey. Sorry, that took longer than I expected.”

“How’d it go?” Grantaire asked, rubbing his eye with the heel of his hand.

“Mrs. Lawrence accepted responsibility for psychologically harming Little R. If he doesn’t want to stay, she’ll let us take him to Eponine’s, but only on the condition that we take Gavroche too.”

Grantaire let out a small laugh, mostly out of surprise. Really, it wasn’t funny that a foster parent was that eager to get rid of her foster son, but Grantaire couldn’t help but imagine the shit Gavroche had been pulling to make the desperate wannabe-mommy that sick of him. “Wait, what about Peter Parker?”

Enjolras frowned. “She’s of the opinion he’d want to stay here.”

“Even without his brothers?”

“Grantaire…they didn’t actually always live together before you brought the Thenardiers together. Besides…in her own odd way, she cares for Peter, or Michel, I guess.” Enjolras sat down next to Grantaire. “We came to an agreement. I’m not thrilled with it, but some kind of compromise was necessary.”

“Kay.” Grantaire eyed his boyfriend expectantly.

Enjolras sighed. “The Lawrences are going to start the adoption process this week. Mrs. Lawrence admitted that she isn’t of the right temperament to care for Little R, she has no desire to adopt Gavroche…but she loves Michel. If we don’t try to get in the way of her adopting Michel, she’ll do everything she can to help Eponine get custody of Gavroche and Little R.”

Grantaire shook his head. “We can’t split them up. That’s, no, we’ve got to-Eponine could get custody of all of them. We haven’t even tried yet.”

“’Taire, it’s a working compromise and it’s good enough for tonight. Let’s just take the boys to Eponine and Feuilly’s, alright?”

Grantaire glanced at the child slumbering on the sleeping bag in the corner, a bone-weary sense of unease overtaking him. But ultimately, Enjolras was right. This didn’t all need to be decided right then, and really, it couldn’t without Eponine present to put in her two cents.

They woke the boys up, Enjolras talked to them a little, and then they helped Gavroche and Little R pack up a bag of clothes and a few things the Lawrences didn’t mind them taking. Then they loaded them up into Combeferre’s car, said goodbye to a frustratingly indifferent Peter Parker (“Does this mean I get three bedrooms now?”), and set off for Danvers.

Chapter End Notes

This is foolish of me to promise, but I expect to have another chapter up soon. I’ve got a lot to write about for the month of June-Joly and Bossuet are both planning to propose, I’ve got some stuff in the works for Jehan and Courfeyrac, Cosette and Eponine are
graduating high school, and there are some romances that are about to bloom. However, I also have a ridiculously busy June planned for my RL, so the story might fall a few weeks behind the real-time posting I've been doing.

Also, I attended the Boston Pride parade and festival yesterday and had a blast. I will have to document that in the fic :)
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Joly and Bossuet celebrate a milestone in their relationship.

Another couple isn't so lucky.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Enjolras silently thanked the vague possibility of the existence of a creator-deity that the bunk bed had already been transferred to Feuilly and Eponine’s apartment. Grantaire carried Little R to bed without waking him, but Gavroche was already tall and lanky enough that that was an impossibility for him. Enjolras kept a gentle hand on the sleepy ten year old’s back while he guided him through the apartment and to the bedroom.

It was fairly obvious that Eponine wanted to pounce on them with questions, but it was equally obvious that Grantaire wasn’t in any kind of state to give answers. Once Enjolras had guided Gavroche to his new bed, he similarly put a protective arm around his lover and led him back out to the car.

He texted Combeferre an update before he started the car, and felt a swell of gratitude for his impossibly perfect best friend when Combeferre told him to return the car in the morning, and to go home and rest.

Enjolras did take them home, but he knew the much needed rest was going to be delayed for a little bit longer.

Grantaire, who had been uncharacteristically silent except for when he’d said goodnight to Gavroche and the slumbering Little R, continued in this worrying trend. He flung himself on the mattress and gazed up at the ceiling with a deadened expression.

Enjolras sat with him. He positioned Grantaire’s head on his lap and caressed his messy dark hair. “Do you want to talk?”

“Not really, but kind of. Enj…how do you fucking do this? Like every single day, how do you do this and not go nuts?”

Enjolras frowned as he tried to puzzle the cryptic bit of speech out. “Love, I’m not sure what ‘this’ is.”

“Exposing yourself to narrow minds for the attack. I’ve seen your facebook feed and your blog posts, not to mention the shit you do face to face with those assholes. I’ve never actually felt insulted by anything anyone’s ever said to me before, because y’know, usually they’re right. But I wanted to tear that bitch’s throat out when I realized she’d told Little R I was a pedophile. I’ve never been insulted in such a raw way like that before. And again, you get that shit every day. How? How do you fucking do it?”

Oh. Now that he thought about it, Enjolras could see how that would be befuddling to Grantaire.
Plus it was probably easier to talk about how Enjolras dealt with bigoted insults than the fact that Grantaire had finally been insulted in such a way that it hit him harder than the insults his own sick mind threw at him.

“Well ‘Taire, that sort of hatred rarely gets under my skin because it’s ridiculously unfounded and patently untrue. The hatred they spew at us is just simple minded bigotry, and the only way to combat it is to face it. By being a visible presence and actively representing my ideals, I make the fear based hatred of the Mrs. Lawrences of the world look desperately paranoid and idiotic.”

“Ah.”

“I don’t think she actually believed you wanted to molest any of the boys, by the way. She appears to be jealous of the connection you forged with Little R, and in a moment of passion she decided to make him fearful of you. And then it backfired.”

“She scared the ever living shit out of him, the miserable bitch.”

“Well, I don’t think it was a well thought out decision. ‘Taire, are you going to be okay?”

Grantaire’s eyes slid shut, and he repositioned himself so that he could wrap his arms around Enjolras. “Yeah. I’m sure the anger’ll dissipate by the morning. Especially if you keep petting me like that. Wait…petting—where the fuck is the cat and why can I breathe out of both nostrils at the same time?”

He sat up, looking around the room for the cat and no doubt taking in the empty spots where the litter box and food dishes had been. “Enjolras…did you get rid of your cat?”

Enjolras nodded. “‘Ferre’s holding onto him for me. Maybe someday when we have a better place and he won’t bother your allergies as much I’ll be able to take him back, but for now…I was being selfish.”

For a moment, it looked like Grantaire was about to agree with him (and even though it was true, Enjolras still inwardly rankled at the possibility of his lover pointing out his selfishness). But Grantaire lowered his eyes and started fidgeting with his hands. “I’m sorry.”

He even looked a little heartbroken, so Enjolras made an effort to clear the last vestiges of disappointment about the loss of his first pet from his demeanor.

“Your comfort is important. And I’m sorry I was insensitive earlier when I spoke of your art. I won’t bother you anymore. I know with creative endeavors it’s important to work at your own pace.”

For whatever reason, Grantaire’s features hardened and Enjolras wanted to cry out in frustration. That was the most sensitive way he could think of to address their fight. Was there really just no right answer regarding the conflict?

“Never mind then. I won’t bring it up again.”

“Wait, Enj…” Grantaire grabbed his arm, squeezed his eyes shut, and just came out with it. “I got all pissy because I want to be drawing. Or painting, actually. I’ve been itching to paint, but I’m out of like all the colors I need and I don’t have any canvases left. I’ve just been doodling on the back of receipts and fliers at the store.”

Enjolras stared at him as understanding finally dawned. “We’re…we’re that poor?”

“Yeah,” Grantaire said. “Plus art supplies are expensive. I usually go without when I’m between
Enjolras felt helpless. He wanted to give Grantaire so much, to show him how precious and wonderful he was, and he was trying so hard to make the jaded young man believe it. But now, thanks to Enjolras’ short sighted self-righteous indignation, he couldn’t even provide Grantaire with the basic trappings of his one healthy emotional outlet.

Maybe he shouldn’t have turned his back on his family. He could have put up with them for another year, just until he graduated and got settled into a job. Enjolras didn’t even see much of them, really. He could have put up with them for just a little longer for Grantaire’s sake…

“Enjolras? Whatever you’re thinking, stop it. I’m okay. I can get by without fancy oil paints. I’ve done it before.”

“But I don’t want you to have to. This is ridiculous. We’re both working our asses off. How the fuck can we be this fucking poor?”

“Because you make eight dollars an hour, I make eight fifty, and neither of us are full time. That’s how.”

“But it’s so grossly unfair.”

Grantaire leaned back against the bedding and smirked. “Well yeah, but isn’t that what you circulate petitions for and bitch out legislators and write up angry rants for the choir you’re preaching to on the internet? Didn’t you know all this already?”

“I-I did, but…living it’s quite different.”

Grantaire leaned over and gently touched Enjolras’ shoulder. “We’ll get by.”

“If I could, I’d give you oil paints.”

“I know. If I could, I’d give the world a livable minimum wage, full benefits, full marriage equality, and all that other stuff you’re always bitching about,” Grantaire returned.

Enjolras laughed. “You want social justice so that I’ll be happy, not because it’s just?”

Grantaire shrugged. “I know this shit must be just, because it’s you that wants to see it happen. I believe in you.”

Enjolras smiled and gave a slight nod in acknowledgment of Grantaire’s expression of devotion, which was no less touching for its repetition. He was fully aware at this point, though, that his ideals and zeal had tempered Grantaire’s cynicism and sometimes even brought him back from the brink of the worst parts of his depressive cycles. He hoped that maybe a comparison based on his passion and faith in his pursuits might help Grantaire in another way.

“I believe in you too,” Enjolras said firmly, keeping his intense blue gaze fixed on Grantaire’s own somewhat more nervous one. “I think your art is brilliant, and I want you to succeed in it. We’re going to find a way to get you your paints.”

“Enj, there are more important th-”

“No there aren’t. I don’t care if I have to live off of white rice and tap water: we’re getting you art supplies.”
Grantaire didn’t fight him on it anymore, and when they went to bed he was still wearing that wavery little smile he got when he was too surprised by a swell of happiness to quite believe its reality.

Feuilly’s alarm got him up for work at six in the morning, and initially he was in a shitty mood. He wasn’t feeling particularly well-rested, what with his sleep being interrupted by Gavroche and Little R’s sudden and mysterious arrival, and he was always a little grumpy when his sleep got interrupted. As such, he didn’t see the unexpected reunion with two of Eponine’s little brothers as the blessing it was, but rather was annoyed by the fact that Enjolras and Grantaire had dropped the kids off and run away without answering any questions.

Really, that was just rude.

Feuilly stumbled out of his bedroom, rubbing blearily at his eyes, light brown hair in an epic state of disarray as he hadn’t found the time to cut back his curly mop for at least four months. Then he heard the cheerful music coming from the kitchen, and his grumpy mood started to shift.

Eponine was prancing, really there was no other word for it but prancing, around the kitchen in booty shorts and a baggy t-shirt with her hair up in a cheerful ponytail that bobbed in time to the music. She was singing along with some pop song Feuilly was getting too old to identify right away (turned out it was by someone called Cher Lloyd), and she was cooking fried dough.

“Hi Feuilly! What time do you leave? Are you going to have time to eat with me and the boys?”

Feuilly sniffed cautiously, and then decided that he definitely had time to stay for breakfast.

It wasn’t that Eponine was bad at cooking, sometimes she was rather fantastic at it. But in her efforts to remake herself as an ideal homemaker, sometimes she bit off more than she could chew and tried making grand, fancy dishes that were beyond her ability. And it’s not like they had the best kitchen in the world. Most of their supplies came from the dollar store.

However, it looked like she knew what she was doing when she made fried dough, and she damn well knew how to make a good cup of coffee.

“When are you getting the boys up?” Feuilly asked.

“In about fifteen minutes. I just called ‘Chetta, and she’s agreed to bus me around for the day in exchange for coffee, fried dough, and a mani-pedi. Well, the mani-pedi’s actually for a tarot reading I want her to give me, but whatevs. Once we get the kids to school we’re going to have a girls day. It’s a good thing it’s practically the end of the school year, and that Enjolras got my brothers back the night before my day off. This’d be one big mess if I had to work.”

Feuilly doubted that. Enjolras, Marius, and Jehan all worked at the café with her and would each pick up a shift on no notice in a heartbeat if she needed them to. “Mm. It still would have been nice to get some notice. Did you hear from Enj and ‘Taire yet? Do you know why we have two of the kids but no Peter Parker?”

Eponine shook her head. “You saw Grantaire last night though. He looked awful.”

“You think Grantaire looked bad? Enjolras is looking like a fucking skeleton lately.”

“I was just talking emotionally, but yeah, Enjy’s seen better days. It’s starting to affect his tips.”

Feuilly rolled his eyes. “Heaven forbid.”
“Hey, he’s not going to get his pretty back by making even less money than he already is. I don’t get it. I know he and ‘Taire are living off of, like, ramen right now, but still. Marius, Jehan and I have been letting Enjolras clean out the bake case every shift practically since he started. He should be eating, and eating well.”

Feuilly poured a mug of coffee and sat down on a stool next to the stove. He watched Eponine move around the little kitchenette, looking perfectly at home as she made their meals. “How does cleaning out the bake case equate to eating well?”

“Because it gives him the opportunity to take sandwiches and wraps home with him,” Eponine explained. “That’s why everyone wants the task. Since we cater to hippie dippy liberal types, like you guys, it’s all stuff he should want too. Organic, no GMOs, at least half the stuff is veggie and a couple of them are full vegan. Technically we’re supposed to throw out the expiring sandwiches, but everyone knows they’re still good so no one ever does.”

“So wait…has anyone told Enjolras that the expectation is that he’s taking this stuff home for him and ‘Taire?”

Eponine’s eyes widened with epiphany. “Son of a bitch! He’s been throwing out nine dollar sandwiches! Oh I’m going to kill him. That stupid, anal retentively ethical jack ass!”

Feuilly couldn’t help but laugh, and after a few more colorful exclamations Eponine joined him. She pushed her bangs out of her eyes, then picked her spatula back up and tended to the fried dough. “I can’t believe that kid. Honestly, he’s so stupidly responsible.”

“So you’re going to tell him to take the sandwiches home from now on, right?”

Eponine nodded. “Yeah. He needs them more than we do. I’m definitely calling dibs on the cookies though. We’ll need them to bribe Gavroche for good behavior. Speaking of which, would you mind shaking him and Little R awake for me?”

Feuilly gulped the last of his first cup of coffee, nodded, and went to the boys’ room.

By the time he returned with two groggy munchkins Eponine had set their table (acquired from a yard sale by Combeferre’s mother), refilled Feuilly's mug for him, and dragged Azelma out of the bedroom.

Apparently Eponine had forgotten to tell Azelma her brothers were back, because her eyes widened in shock when she saw them. “Gav! Little R! Oh my God, c’mer!” She darted forward and pulled them each into hugs that neither of them wanted, and kissed both of their cheeks.

“Geroff me!” Gavroche yelled. “It’s too early for this. I need coffee.”

“You’re ten. You don’t need coffee,” Eponine snapped.

“I drank coffee when I was ten,” Feuilly said off handedly.

Eponine put her hand on her hip. “You probably drank coffee as an infant. It doesn’t mean I’m giving this child caffeine before handing him off to some poor fifth grade teacher. Gavroche, if you’re good you can have a cup of cocoa with the fried dough.”

Feuilly refrained from commenting on the amount of sugar Eponine was willing to give the boys while objecting to caffeine. It was a celebratory breakfast, after all. Even if one of their chairs was still empty, it was nice to have the kitchen *almost* full.
Feuilly was walking through the second floor dining room picking up spilled Bingo chips when Joly walked in. The usually bright and cheerful CNA looked uncharacteristically gloomy, which was odd to see not only for being uncharacteristic, but also because his forlorn expression contrasted with his lime green Carebear scrubs.

“Hey. Do you have a minute?”

“I’ve got twenty, but I need to clean up the Bingo cart and do my books while we talk,” Feuilly answered. “What’s up?”

“I…I think I’m about to make a mistake, but I can’t be sure because I’m only talking to Musichetta, and when she doesn’t use her tarot cards she’s not always that great at giving advice.”

Feuilly finished scooping up the chips while he waited for more info, but apparently that was his intro. “Jol, what’s actually wrong?”

Joly let out a melancholy sigh, then reached into the pocket of his scrubs pants and took out a small velvet jewelry box. “I want to propose to Legle, but now I’m full of doubts. I’m not sure if he’d want to marry me.”

Feuilly came alarmingly close to spilling the Bingo chips he’d just picked up. “Wait, what? When did you—you’ve got a ring?”

“Y-yeah,” Joly answered shyly.

“Well can I see it?” Feuilly set the chips on his activities cart and walked over to his friend. Joly flipped the box open and showed off the elegant band he’d picked out with Musichetta. “That’s not a dia-”

“Lab created white sapphire.”

“Okay, good. Then I approve.”

Joly still looked really nervous. “Do you think he’ll like it?”

“I think when he destroys it, it won’t be for a lack of appreciation. It’s a nice ring. If a guy were going to pop the question with me, I’d totally dig that ring. What makes you think Bossuet would say no? Hasn’t he been following after you like a big, clumsy goof since you were a teenager?”

“Well, yes…it’s just…marriage is something adults do. It’s a commitment, y’know? And Bossuet is…um, not inclined towards growing up. Plus I think ‘Chetta was trying to sway me away from proposing, and she’d only do that to try to spare my feelings. I think Bossuet must have said something to her.”

“Why would he tell Musichetta he doesn’t want to get married?” Feuilly asked, feeling puzzled. “I mean, that’s not a normal conversation topic to have in the negative, y’know? Especially for gay guys. I mean, you don’t really have as much of a societal expectation even though it’s legal here.”

“I-I guess.” Joly returned the ring to his pocket. Feuilly had finished putting everything back on the cart, so they set off for the activities office together.

They both shot Mr. Gillenormand’s closed door a wary look as they passed it. “Have you talked to Marius yet?” Joly asked.

“No. Have you?”
“No.”

Feuilly frowned thoughtfully. “We should send Eponine. Though that might make us cowards.”

“I’ve never considered myself particularly brave,” Joly said with a teasing grin. Feuilly lightly slapped him with a Bingo card.

Feuilly shut them both up in the office, shoved the Bingo cart into the corner with the sensory cart, and then the two of them sat down in folding chairs at the desk. “I think you should propose. And you obviously do too, as you’ve already bought the ring.”

“I know. I know, I definitely want to. It’s just, now that it’s here I’m so nervous. What if this isn’t what he wants? You know? We’ve got this great dynamic between us already, and like you said, there’s no societal pressure on us to do this even though we’ve already been together for so long. We’re both guys. We could wait forever if we wanted to. It might not even have occurred to Bossuet to want to marry me.”

“If that is the case, I can’t see the news that you want to formally commit to being with him for life being a problem. The guy loves you, Joly. Didn’t he move out to Salem just to stay with you?”

“Well…yes, I suppose so. Okay. You’re right. I’ve just got cold feet. Okay, I’m going to do this. Because I love him, and I want to marry him.”

Feuilly grinned. “Congrats, dude. So how are you going to pop the question?”

Joly laughed and ran a hand through his hair. “I have no idea. I know I want to do it on our anniversary, and we’re going out to dinner tomorrow night so I should probably do it then…but that’s all I’ve got so far.”

“That’s probably enough.” Feuilly reached for the binder with his residents’ charts in it and started marking off Bingo attendance while they spoke. “I don’t think you need some grand epic speech or anything.”

“I’d still like it to be special.”

“Just because an action is simple doesn’t make it any less special. You’re sharing a moment with your future husband, whose idea of a perfect date night involves homemade nachos and a movie he’s seen with you enough times to recite it. You don’t need a spectacle-those are for audiences. Just do something heartfelt.”

Joly’s face lit up. He surprised Feuilly with a sudden hug that had him accidentally drawing a large black squiggle through Elaine Jackson’s chart. “Oh Feuilly, thank you so much for the pep talk! It was exactly what I needed. I feel so excited and hopeful again, like the way I felt when I first started looking at rings.”

“You’re welcome?” Feuilly muttered, wishing Joly would let go of him.

Joly pulled away, still smiling so hard it looked like it hurt. He definitely matched his Carebear scrubs now. “I’ve got to get back to work, unfortunately, but thanks again for letting me throw my crazy at you. I feel so much better now.”

“Hey, good luck tomorrow night. Make sure you call me afterwards and let me know how it goes.”

“I will.” Still beaming with happiness, Joly got up and near-skipped out of the office. He was gone for barely a heartbeat before he ran back in again. “Oh! Feuilly, if he does say yes…will you be my..."
best man?”

Feuilly was rendered speechless for a moment, but he eagerly nodded his agreement. When his voice returned, what came out wasn’t all that intelligible anyhow.

For the rest of their shifts, Feuilly and Joly were both much more cheerful than your average nursing home employee. Feuilly privately decided that Legle had damn well better say yes, because he was already getting rather attached to the idea of being a best man.

Nothing about Legle and Joly’s six year anniversary felt quite right, and it started first thing in the morning, when Joly woke up alone in bed.

He’d requested the day off work months in advance, even before he’d determined on it as the big day to pop the question. Joly had built up a wonderful fantasy of starting the day off with cuddles, maybe some fooling around, and venturing out into the apartment sometime in the afternoon, stupid and giggly in the way they should have been when they’d first gotten together, but couldn’t be owing to the horrible situation they’d been in while having to keep their relationship secret.

Joly was never the last one to wake up. Yet there he was, alone in bed with no warm spot lingering beside him. He sat up, rubbed at his eyes, and looked around the room for his boyfriend.

“Bossuet?” He put on his robe and crept out of the bedroom.

Musichetta was in the living room doing her makeup while checking her facebook feed. “Go back to bed, darling. Your better, balder half just ran out for a minute to run an errand.”

Joly pouted. “But it’s our anniversary. What errand is so important that he has to run out and let me wake up alone? He never leaves the house before noon.”

Musichetta frowned sympathetically. “Maybe he’s getting a present for you or something. Anyway, he left specific instructions that I was not to let you leave the bedroom as he’s coming right back for romantic morning cuddles.”

“Okay…” Joly hung his head while he trudged back into the bedroom. He kept his robe and slippers on while he lay on top of the bedding, waiting for his lover.

Musichetta left for work before Legle got back. He looked sufficiently embarrassed and repentant when he poked his head back into the bedroom, so Joly forgave him on the spot.

They had their cuddles and lazy morning sex, and it was well past noon before they ventured out for food. Everything felt good and right between them again, and for one flighty minute Joly decided to propose right then and there instead of waiting for dinner.

But then Legle tried to cook something at the stove instead of the microwave, and Joly had to intervene lest Legle finally make good on a lifelong threat to burn his place of residence to the ground.

By the time he’d finished cooking them grilled cheese sandwiches he determined once more to wait for their romantic dinner. Feuilly was definitely right about honest sincerity and simplicity being best, but he still wanted the proposal to be romantic, and their anniversary dinner was going to be romantic.

They had reservations for seven, which gave them a good chunk of time to hang out before they even had to think of getting ready. They spent it goofing off watching movies and playing video
games, but something in the couple’s dynamic was off. Legle’s mind was clearly elsewhere, and Joly was spacing out an awful lot too, worrying and fussing again over the proposal. It made conversation tricky, and keeping Mario safe from goombas utterly impossible.

Joly started getting ready at six. Even though he’d planned an outfit out in advance (with Musichetta’s help and ignoring several kindly meant but undeniably horrid suggestions from Jehan), Joly still spent nearly an hour getting ready. He showered for almost twice as long as he usually did, and he kept obsessively changing shirts before ending up in the outfit he’d planned on wearing all along.

Legle showered too, but he casually threw on a pair of black jeans and the first shirt with a collar he pulled out of the closet. He put on his “fancy” hat, which he reserved for special occasions, a grey fedora with a black and crimson band and a silver decal. “Ready to go Jol?”

“Yep.” Joly willed his nerves away, smiled dazzlingly for his boyfriend, and followed him out to the car.

He left the ring box on top of the dresser, a victim of his frantic and pointless outfit changes.

Legle excused himself halfway through dinner, calmly walked to the men’s room, locked the door, then sat down in the corner and started frantically texting Musichetta: *Something’s wrong with Jol. Won’t smile, keeps zoning out, tried to order shellfish even tho thinks he’s allergic. Is he going to dump me or something?!??!

The return text only took a few seconds: *No you ass!*

Legle frowned at his phone. “Well that’s not very nice. Calling me an ass while I’m panicking.”

Of course, Legle couldn’t know that Joly had used his absence as an excuse to also frantically text Musichetta. *I left the ring at the house! I left the ring at the house! U hafta leave work and bring it 2 me!*

Musichetta’s response was as curt as her response to Legle had been. *No I don’t and I can’t anyway. Just calm down and enjoy your dinner.*

Joly made an affronted noise and shoved his phone back into his pocket. “God. How could I remember my phone and forget the stupid ring?”

Legle spent a suspicious amount of time in the bathroom, and in the end only left because another patron needed it, and the restaurant was nice enough that it was a one-person bathroom devoid of stalls. He slumped back over to the table, hoping the fact that he’d sat down in a wet spot on the tiled floor didn’t show too badly. At least he was wearing black jeans.

He didn’t notice that he’d also sat on wet toilet paper, and that it was clinging to his rear until Joly pointed it out to him. He helped Legle pull the bits of soggy toilet paper off of his ass, smiling warmly as he gently teased his lover about his never ending lack of luck.

“You know Jol, I never say it enough, but I really appreciate the fact that you don’t embarrass me about this kind of shit. You get so many opportunities, but you never really knock me in any serious way. I wouldn’t be so okay being me if it weren’t for you.”

Joly was startled by the unexpected and frank bit of sincere speech, but it spread a warmth through him that almost tempered the annoyance he felt with himself for forgetting the ring. “You’re welcome, I guess. Really I’ve always loved the way you respond to Legle-luck. You roll with it so
well. I love that we’re always laughing when we’re together.”

Legle resettled himself on his seat and took Joly’s hand in his. “It’s been a good six years.”

“Mm,” Joly agreed. “May the next six be as good.”

“May the whole damn lifetime be as good.”

Joly couldn’t quite bite back the little whine he made in time, because that would have been the perfect opportunity for his proposal.

Fortunately, Legle was thinking along similar lines, because the next thing Joly knew his lover was down on one knee with a ring box open. Joly didn’t hear whatever he said, because he was too busy hyperventilating from joy.

Most of the friends were gathered at the Musain. Feuilly and Musichetta had leaked their secrets, so everyone had agreed to meet up and wait for news of the proposal together. Courfeyrac had spotted Enjolras and Grantaire table rent so that they could join their friends, and Bridget was babysitting Gavroche and Little R so Eponine and Azelma could join in on what promised to be a fun impromptu engagement celebration.

Musichetta had her phone in the center of the table, and pairs of eyes kept darting to the device, waiting for it to light up with a text. After what felt like hours, Jehan let out an excited squeak and grabbed for the phone. “It’s a picture message! It’s a picture message!”

“Open it or give it to me! It’s my phone!” Musichetta yelled.

Jehan got the phone opened, let out another shrill noise, and passed the phone around the table. The picture showed a furiously blushing Joly holding up his hand, showing off the simple band Legle had picked out for him.

“Oooooh!” Cosette cooed. “That’s so cute!”

“Lookit how red he is,” Bahorel laughed.

“It’s too bad Joly left the one he was going to use at home,” Feuilly said with a sigh. “But really, how funny would it have been if they both proposed as the same time?”

“Is anyone else surprised that Joly is the one who botched the proposal but not Bossuet?” Grantaire asked, to murmurs of agreement.

Musichetta grinned. “Legle’s luck has been so abysmal for so long that he knows how to plan for it at this point. He had me look after the rings for him, which alas, Joly didn’t think to do. I slipped it into his pocket right before I came here.”

Feuilly set the velvet box with the white sapphire ring in it on the table. “Joly had me swing by his place and get the other one. It actually worked out pretty good though; Joly got the engagement ring and Bossuet got the wedding bands. For all intents and purposes, they’re covered.”

“Are they coming here or going somewhere more private?” Eponine asked.

“On their way over now,” Musichetta said, eyes on her phone screen. “Alright then. Drinks for everyone! We’re having a fucking party!”

Everyone roared their approval, toasting with the lattes and hot chocolates they already had.
The party at the Musain was among the more memorable hosted at the establishment. Being loyal regulars, they were generally well liked by the employees (or at least tolerated), and the baristas kept coming over to give their own congratulations and hugs. The owner actually showed up at one point and asked to take a picture of their table for the café’s facebook page.

Everyone was still smiling by the time the café closed. Musichetta left with Eponine, Azelma, and Feuilly so that the lovebirds could celebrate in privacy (here she winked lewdly and Joly turned red once more), Enjolras and Combeferre each extended the couple more subdued and polite congratulations before Enjolras pulled Combeferre aside to inquire after his cat while Grantaire waited impatiently by a streetlamp, Bahorel called dibs on planning the bachelor parties before driving off, and Jehan and Courfeyrac each called their well wishes before heading off together.

Everyone was much too distracted with Joly and Legle’s good news to notice how strained their smiles were, how artificial their well wishes sounded, or how ever so slightly reddened Jehan's eyes were.

When Enjolras and Grantaire got home they had another stupid fight, this time about the café sandwiches. Feuilly and Eponine had made the disastrous mistake of talking to Enjolras about how he was expected to take the sandwiches home with him instead of throwing them out in front of Grantaire, and he’d been surly ever since.

“We could be eating a real meal right now,” Grantaire pointed out for what must have been the hundredth time.

“When I was trained I was told that we needed to throw out the expired food.”

“But no one actually does!”

“I was told that taking it home with me was akin to stealing,” Enjolras snapped. “I didn’t realize everyone took the food anyway, okay? I apologized, and I’m going to bring it home with me from now on. What more do you want?”

“A fucking nine dollar sandwich, that I could be eating. Do you know how much shit I’ve been giving up for your comfort, and all this time we could have been eating gourmet fucking sandwiches?!”

Enjolras threw a pillow on the floor, snatched a blanket, and huffily slid off of the mattress.

“What the hell are you doing?” Grantaire asked.

“We live in a one room studio. I can’t exactly go downstairs and sleep on the couch.”

“So you’re going to sleep on the floor? You? The bug-o-phobe?”

“If you don’t stop yelling at me about an honest mistake, then yes. Frankly, right now I find the company of cockroaches much more appealing than your bad temper.”

Grantaire scowled at him, and tried not to read too much into the throwaway insult. It’s not like Enjolras was the only one being petty.

Enjolras returned to the mattress at the first brush of an imaginary insect on his ankle, but he curled up as far from Grantaire as he could get while still avoiding the jagged spring. They were both pretending to be asleep with their backs facing each other when Grantaire’s phone went off.
Enjolras bolted upright in response to the loud and sudden noise. "‘Taire, answer your damn phone. And tell whoever it is to fuck off. It’s three in the morning!"

Grantaire rubbed at his eyes and then groped for his phone. Scowling, Enjolras snatched it from the floor and shoved it into his hand. “Hello?"

“H-hey. I’m outside. Can I come up for a few minutes?”

Grantaire sat up straighter. “Courf? Yeah, of course. Is everything-” Courfeyrac hung up before Grantaire could finish.

Enjolras dropped against the mattress and pulled a pillow over his head. “You did not seriously just invite him upstairs, did you? I have to be at work in four hours, ‘Taire!”

“Enjolras, I think he’s crying.”

The door creaked open, and then Courfeyrac was peeking into the room. His eyes were red, but he wasn’t actively crying, for which Grantaire silently thanked the deity he didn’t believe in. He wasn’t very good at counseling his friend when he had issues, and Courfeyrac almost never had serious issues to begin with. “H-hey.”

Grantaire shot to his feet, then nervously started fidgeting with his hands. “Hey. What’s going on?”

Courfeyrac rubbed at his eyes, looking just as twitchy and nervous as Grantaire, the threat of further tears looming thick in his voice. “Jehan and I, we, um, we had a fight. He…he…”

“A bad fight?” Enjolras gently prompted, even though that was rather obvious, as it took a lot to get Courfeyrac rattled like this.

Courfeyrac nodded, one fidgeting hand moving to fist in his messy hair. “Yeah, it was, it was a pretty bad one. He dumped me.”

And then the tears ceased being a threat, but a god awful reality.

Grantaire froze like a deer in headlights. “Oh fuck.”

Chapter End Notes

Please don't hate me!
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Courfeyrac and Jehan grieve for the end of their relationship.

Grantaire and Enjolras feel a little pressure while offering their support.

Chapter Notes

So I messed up my own timeline a bit. A Gift and an Escape is set in June, and Courf and Jehan are still together in that fic. That's actually why I waited until June to break them up. I was supposed to drop a reference in this, the main story, when A Gift and an Escape happened, but I forgot.

So yeah, at some point there will be a mention in passing that Enj and 'Taire went on a trip together. And I'm really annoyed at myself for screwing that up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Wait, what?” Grantaire shook his head, unable to make sense of Courfeyrac’s news. Even if he wasn’t feeling slow and groggy, he would have had a hard time processing it. Courfeyrac and Jehan belonged together. Besides that, they were such easy going, pleasant, seemingly emotionally healthy people. If Grantaire and Enjolras could make a relationship work and talk through their problems, it should have been a breeze for a couple like Courfeyrac and Jehan. “Courf, I thought you said you guys fixed everything.”

Courfeyrac rubbed at his face with the heel of his hand and let out a dejected sniff. “I thought we did…”

Enjolras was at Courfeyrac’s side before Grantaire could hobble over. Together, they got Courfeyrac seated on their kitchen chair, and then Enjolras backed away, keeping a respectful distance.

Courfeyrac just sat there with his elbow on his knee, hiding his face in his hand. His breathing was labored and his shoulders were shaking. Grantaire stared at him, trying to think of something to do or say but feeling at a complete loss. He knew his friend thought of Jehan as his one; being dumped by him would be like Enjolras dumping Grantaire, and if that happened Grantaire knew he’d be completely devastated. His empathy for the situation was paralyzing him.

Enjolras finally shouldered past Grantaire and rested a comforting hand on Courfeyrac’s back. “I’m so sorry, Courfeyrac. Do you want to talk about it? If you do, I can step outside so you and Grantaire can have some privacy.”

“No,” he said quickly, sitting upright. “No, don’t do that. I-it’s like three in the fucking m-morning. I’m not kicking you out no matter how fucking awful I feel. I’m sorry enough for showing up like this but I…I didn’t want to go home.”
“So this like just happened?” Grantaire asked. Courfeyrac nodded. “Is there any chance that once he sleeps on things he’ll change his mind?”

Courfeyrac shook his head. “He was really firm. He gave me back the key I made for him and…and the necklace I gave him on our one month.” He trembled from fresh sobs and hid his face once more. “He fucking deleted me from his phone!”

Grantaire shot Enjolras a terrified look. Enjolras stood just behind Courfeyrac and gripped his arm, while his other hand gently rubbed slow circles over his back. “What did you fight about?” Enjolras asked, voice low and soothing.

“We didn’t,” Courfeyrac answered weakly. “That’s the worst part. H-he said…he said that I’m unhappy, and that’s because I’m dating him. Th-that I’m trying to change too much, and it’s making me miserable because being with him isn’t the kind of co-commitment I’m ready for. And he’s breaking it off so I don’t end up hating him. But I could never hate him. I love him. He’s the love of my fucking life, and he won’t believe me. I couldn’t make him take it back. He won’t take me back. Fuck. I don’t know what to fucking do.”

“Courfeyrac, I’m sorry. I can’t believe he’s responded this way,” Enjolras said, looking just shy of heartbroken himself. “I knew he was having some doubts, but this…”

Grantaire finally unfroze a little. He got some clean tissues for Courfeyrac and crouched down in front of him. “Don’t give up hope, Courf. He loves you too. He’ll realize his mistake.”

“I don’t think he will,” Courfeyrac whimpered. “This has been building for weeks. I’ve been begging him not to leave me for weeks.”

“What?” Enjolras gasped, and Grantaire was minutely relieved that he wasn’t the only one shocked to hear that.

“When we f-first started dating I used to, like, badger him to go out for dates, but he only ever wanted to st-stay in,” Courfeyrac said, and Enjolras and Grantaire both nodded, as they each remembered hearing about that discussion from ‘their’ half of the couple. “I tried negotiating, like can we have a date night a week or a fucking month maybe, and he decided that it was a sign that we’re, like, fundamentally incompatible. So I tried to drop it and then he decided I was being resentful. So then I tried as hard as I could to convince him that I wasn’t resentful, that everything was f-fine, but…it just kept coming back and blowing up. I thought we’d worked th-through it. We settled on me going out sometimes on my own. And then he got all paranoid that I was going to find a partner that suited me better, because apparently he’d been expecting me to hit bars and clubs with, like, you or Eponine, y’know, someone he thought of as safe. Meanwhile, I thought bar hopping with my friends who have substance issues was bad fucking manners. So yeah, that was another fucking fight. I dunno. Maybe we are incompatible.”

Enjolras shook his head. “Relationships aren’t easy. There are always going to be issues, but that just means you work through them, not that you throw in the towel. I’ll talk to Jehan for you. I know how strongly he feels for you. This is his first serious relationship. He’s probably just scared.”

“Must be. Because it kind of sounds like he’s been jerking Courf around,” Grantaire said with a scowl.

It was Courfeyrac’s turn to shake his head. “That’s not…I mean, he’s been so good to me too.” He let go of Enjolras’ hand so that he could wipe his face with the tissues. “When you went missing, ‘Taire, he never left my side. I would have lost it without him.”
“That’s fine, but it doesn’t excuse him telling you that your feelings don’t matter,” Grantaire said. “I mean, that’s what he’s doing, isn’t it?”

Enjolras let out an indignant little huff, but quickly got control of himself. He fixed his attention exclusively on Courfeyrac, and Grantaire tried not to feel stung.

They were going to have to talk about that one later.

Courfeyrac wadded up a fistful of used tissues, tossed them into the trash, and then slumped over with his head down. His voice sounded childishly lost when he spoke. “Enjolras, why did he stop loving me? Did he say anything? Was I pissing him off? I thought we were doing better. I really thought we had this.”

“I don’t know why he broke it off, Courfeyrac,” Enjolras answered, in a surprisingly gentle voice he almost never used. “But I’m sorry he did. I can only hope he’ll reconsider.”

Courfeyrac stayed for about an hour. Grantaire didn’t do a terribly good job comforting his friend (break up protocol in days gone by involved alcohol and video games, neither of which were an option owing not just to his issues but also because his noble old Gamecube had finally bit the dust, depriving him of any game systems), but Enjolras did a remarkable job stepping up. He skillfully urged Courfeyrac to talk about what he needed to get out of his system, while steering him away from thoughts that would only fester into bitterness. Grantaire watched in fascination as Enjolras used his persuasive abilities to encourage and reassured the poor, broken hearted kid without bringing his hopes up unrealistically high.

When Courfeyrac left he was shaky, but in much better spirits.

Grantaire, on the other hand, was sitting on the mattress by the pillows, wringing his hands together compulsively. Enjolras shut the door, turned the light off, and crawled into bed beside his lover.

Even though they’d been fighting when they went to bed, Enjolras let Grantaire crawl into his arms and bury his face in his neck. Enjolras sighed. “Break ups aren’t contagious, ‘Taire.”

“Don’t they come in threes?”

“That’s bad news, I think. Or deaths.”

“I’d die without you, so that’s like the same thing. I know you hate it when I do this, but can you just promise real quick that you’re not going to dump me? Even though I’m an asshole who flies off the handle over sandwiches?”

Enjolras tightened his embrace. “I’m not going to dump you, Grantaire, ever. We’ll be together for the rest of our lives, as long as I have a say in it. I love you. Is it okay if I keep babbling like this, or is your low self-esteem going to reject what I say?”

Grantaire settled into a less desperate embrace and rested his cheek over Enjolras’ heart. His eyes fluttered shut. “You can keep going.”

Enjolras talked until Grantaire drifted to sleep, and even afterwards. Grantaire rarely gave him the opportunity to speak so openly about his feelings, though he was pretty insistent about doing so himself. The cynic was never comfortable being praised by his lover, unless it was with physical affection. Enjolras made the most of this rare opportunity and spoke until he couldn’t keep his eyes open.
When Courfeyrac woke up he immediately flung out an arm, looking for Jehan. Then the night before came flooding back, and he remembered that he was single, and he proceeded to spend a pathetic thirty minutes crying into his pillow.

After that he got a grip on the crying, but he couldn’t find the motivation to do much else. He stared at the ceiling, trying to muster the energy to get out of bed. Really though, what was the point? The only person he wanted to see didn’t want to see him. The person he wanted most in the world didn’t think he was adult enough for a commitment. The person he wanted to pledge his life to thought he needed to sow some wild oats, or some other outdated fucking clichéd shit like that.

There had to be some way to change Jehan’s mind.

Courfeyrac finally dragged himself out of bed. He fished his phone from the pocket of the previous night’s jeans, hit the speed dial for Jehan, and got an error message. He opened his contact list, scrolled through the J’s, and swore loudly when he realized that Jehan must have swiped his phone at some point to delete his number. Courfeyrac hadn’t put in the effort of memorizing a number since he’d gotten his first cell phone.

Without giving it a second thought, Courfeyrac charged into the living room and cornered Marius, who was sitting on the couch eating a bowl of cereal in his work clothes.

“Marius, give me your phone.”

“Um…if this is about Jehan then I’m not allowed to.”

“What if I tell you it’s not about Jehan?”

Marius looked nervous. He set his cereal down on the coffee table and shifted position, no doubt wedging the pocket his phone was tucked in against the arm of the couch. “He said to use my judgment, and that he’d still be mad at me if I gave you my phone when you were blatantly lying. I’m sorry, Courf. But he made me promise before you guys had your fight last night, and besides, I don’t want to get in the middle of whatever this is.”

“Well, he fucking dumped me. He doesn’t want to talk shit over. He never wants to see me again.”

If he hadn’t been feeling like total shit, Courfeyrac would have laughed. He actually came pretty close. “No, Marius, you don’t need to call out of work. I’ll be okay. If I need to, I can always crawl back to Grantaire’s for another pity party.”
“Okay. I mean, Feuilly and Eponine are on their way over to get me now, but if you want me to hang with you we can always call Enjolras in. Everyone knows he needs the hours, so, y’know, I kinda always have coverage at work if I need it now.”

Courfeyrac assured Marius he was going to be fine, and when Eponine texted him about five minutes later, he did leave though he looked reluctant to do so. Courfeyrac curled into a fetal position as soon as Marius was out the door, took out his phone, and called Grantaire.

“I’m not calling Jehan for you.”

“Oh come on! You’re supposed to be my best friend.”

“Exactly,” Grantaire said firmly. “So keeping you from doing stupid ass shit that’s only going to hurt you worse is one of my duties.”

“You’ve never been that fussed about it before.”

“And being your best friend also makes me exempt from your vitriol. You’ll forgive me for seemingly dickish behavior that’s actually in your best interest once you recover a bit of your sanity and composure.”

“Fuck you.” Courfeyrac crossed his arms over his chest, obviously sulking and looking terribly childish while he did so. Grantaire would have found it amusing if the circumstances weren’t so frustrating.

“I don’t like this role reversal any more than you do, Courf,” Grantaire informed him. He scrubbed a hand through his hair, then went back to texting with Enjolras.

Courfeyrac curled back into his fetal position on the couch. Under Grantaire’s influence he’d showered and put on pants, which made Grantaire feel almost proud. He couldn’t tell if he was doing a better job comforting Courfeyrac than Courfeyrac had ever done comforting him during a depression, or if Courfeyrac was just more reasonable and manageable even while depressed than the wretched drunk had ever been.

Enjolras was working a short shift at the café, and then Combeferre was going to pick him up so the two of them could visit Jehan. No one had heard from Jehan since the breakup, so Enjolras and Combeferre were going to ambush him at his apartment and check in on the kid. Grantaire was trying to convince his boyfriend to pry and get some answers, but Enjolras flatly refused. He’d snapped that Grantaire could do whatever he wanted to comfort Courfeyrac, and he should respect Enjolras’ right to do the same with his friend.

“But your friend was wrong!” Grantaire had whined.

It might have been his imagination, as it was always hard to tell with texts, but Grantaire thought Enjolras might be responding to his texts in an unnecessarily curt manner.

Courfeyrac rolled onto his back and kicked out his feet so that they landed in Grantaire’s lap. Grantaire didn’t even flinch until Courfeyrac kicked his phone. “Will you stop texting your fucking boyfriend? You’re supposed to be distracting me from thinking about how mine just left me.”

“And I’m failing. I was asking for advice, Courf, I don’t know what to fucking do. We used to get shitfaced and play through an old game. Do you want to play video games sober?”

Courfeyrac bounced his foot up and down a few times, also bouncing Grantaire’s phone in the
process. “Not particularly. Okay, fine. Let’s go out.”

“Out?” Grantaire’s own instincts when distressed involved slinking off someplace solitary and wallowing until he had a change of mood that allowed him to face the world again. He quirked an eyebrow, not sure what to make of this social impulse. “Where do you want to go?”

“I dunno. The Musain?”

Grantaire texted Enjolras and told him to keep Jehan away from their usual haunt. “Okay. I just dibsed it for us.”

“Text some of the other guys. See what Bahorel’s up to. I could use a drinking buddy.”

Grantaire felt himself tense up a little, but he did as instructed. Other than his one lapse, he’d been doing pretty well with sobriety. And even though he’d been under a lot of stress lately, he wasn’t feeling medically depressed. He was pretty sure he could handle being around alcoholic beverages in an open, public atmosphere.

And if he wasn’t okay, he’d just leave. Courfeyrac would understand.

And his hand totally wasn’t shaking when he sent the group text out to their other friends. Not even a little bit.

Enjolras and Combeferre were generally pretty quiet for the ride over to Jehan’s, lost in thought and steeling themselves up for an uncomfortable encounter with their friend. They hadn’t warned him they were coming, figuring an intervention-style ambush would be most effective.

They were only a couple streets away from his apartment building when Enjolras spoke. “I don’t know why he did it.”

Combeferre sighed. “I think he’ll tell us. Enjolras, remember; we’re not here to choose sides.”

“I know. I know that.” But Courfeyrac was suffering so much, and he’d done so in Enjolras’ living space. Enjolras knew he shouldn’t pressure his friend to take his lover back, that Jehan must have had reasons for ending a relationship he’d been so invested in, but he was sorely tempted to grab the poet by his bony shoulders and give him a good shake.

They fell silent again. Within a few minutes they were standing in front of Jehan’s door. Enjolras silently hoped for the best, and Combeferre knocked.

Jehan looked absolutely wretched but was trying to smile anyhow. It might have gone over better if he hadn’t had burst blood vessels around his eyes.

Without a word, Combeferre enveloped him in a tight hug.

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Jehan was freely crying by the time they settled in the living room, but luckily his skinned-smurf bathrobe had deep pockets stuffed with tissues. One of his old lady teapots was set up on the coffee table, and the couch was covered with quilts. It looked like he’d really settled in to nurse his broken heart.

Which was really confusing to Enjolras, as Jehan was completely responsible for his own heartbreak. He’d created the emotionally devastating situation; how could he possibly be this devastated?

Enjolras hovered uncertainly by the coffee table while Combeferre sat with Jehan, keeping an arm
braced across his back. “Jehan, what on earth happened?” Combeferre asked.

“I-I had to. I didn’t want to, but I had to.”

Enjolras just managed to bite back his “no you didn’t.” His “why?” still sounded a bit harsh though.

Jehan was too busy mopping at his eyes with tissues to answer right away. “I-it…we were so unhappy for so long, and it w-wasn’t getting better o-or easier. I can’t, I mean, I shouldn’t have asked him o-out. We’re too different.”

“But you love him.”

“I know,” Jehan sniffed. “Don’t you think-God, Enjolras, it's because I care about him that I had to end it. He needs some more time to be stupid and reckless and youn before he ties himself down to someone like me. We were just making each other miserable, and I hated it. I hated making him unhappy.”

“Well he’s not exactly jumping for joy right now,” Enjolras snapped.

Jehan sat up a little straighter. One of his hands clenched around the tissue he’d been holding. “No, but when his heart heals he’ll see the wisdom in my decision. And he’ll be infinitely gladder to be rid of me.”

Maybe that was true; if Jehan was going to be this thoughtless with Courfeyrac’s heart then the other young man was probably better off alone.

Combeferre’s one armed embrace tightened, but his gaze was on Enjolras, who couldn’t quite make out whatever he was trying to say without words. Befuddled, he decided to let the comment hang in the air.

Combeferre did most of the comforting, as Enjolras’ mind was much too full of last night’s conversation with Courfeyrac to be very sympathetic to Jehan’s needs. He recognized that he wasn’t in a good place to talk to his other friend and kept mostly silent, though he did refill his tea cup for him and fetch a few more tissues. Then he started getting texts from Grantaire.

At first they were an annoyance, but after an hour or so he found them to be a much needed distraction, as biting his tongue was getting severely trying. He was a little amused by the text asking him to keep Jehan from the Musain. Enjolras glanced first at the horrible bathrobe Jehan was wearing over a pair of loud orange and pink checked pajamas, then at the stack of chick flicks stacked by the television, and finally the fat notebook of poetic works-in-progress on the coffee table, and texted back that he was pretty sure Jehan had no intention of leaving his apartment any time soon.

To Enjolras’ intense displeasure they ended up watching one of Jehan’s chick flicks with him. The trite, hackneyed romantic comedy seemed to be improving Jehan’s mood, but Enjolras was bored, and even Combeferre looked like he was reaching the end of his friendly sympathy.

He was hoping one of Grantaire’s texts might give him a pretext to leave, when one finally arrived. Unfortunately, it promised to replace the tedious situation Enjolras found himself in with an infinitely worse one: Come to Musain and rescue me. Courfs v. drunk and it sucks :( 

Enjolras stuck his phone in his pocket and stood up. “I’ve got to go, I’m sorry. It’s Grantaire.”

“Is he okay?” Combeferre asked.

Enjolras shrugged into his sweatshirt and indulged in a scowl. “Courfeyrac’s turned to alcohol to
forget his woes, and he’s doing so in front of Grantaire. I’m just going to run down to the Musain and make sure he’s okay.”

Jehan’s eyes widened. “Oh dear…Enjolras, I’m so sorry. Please let me know how Grantaire’s doing-”

“Yeah, let me just make sure your fuck up hasn’t taken my boyfriend’s hard earned sobriety from him first,” Enjolras snapped. He regretted his words as soon as he got outside, but he was too worried for Grantaire to run back in and apologize. He’d shoot Jehan a text when he got to the Musain. Getting to his lover’s side was his highest priority.

Enjolras was out of breath when he got to the Musain about twenty minutes later. He darted right for the back room where he and his friends usually congregated, and found a good sized group sitting at the table farthest from the counter. Courfeyrac was wedged between a sympathetic looking Musichetta and a highly uncomfortable looking Grantaire. The kid was more than a little drunk and loudly bemoaning the cruel whims of a heartless poet.

Feuilly, looking more in sympathy with Grantaire than Musichetta, moved down the table a seat, allowing Enjolras to squeeze in next to his boyfriend. He immediately gripped Grantaire’s hand and questioned him with a gaze. Grantaire returned the concerned look with a quick nod and a helpless shrug. So yes, he was desperately uncomfortable, but no, he didn’t want to leave. As unpleasant as it was sitting next to Courfeyrac while he reeked of booze, there wasn’t much to be done for it. No doubt owing to their long years of friendship, and the fact that Courfeyrac had done this for him on numerous past occasions, Grantaire felt his place was at his best friend’s side.

Enjolras quietly supported Grantaire while he supported Courfeyrac, though after about twenty minutes he started trying to think of excuses for the two of them to leave. In his opinion, Courfeyrac was being a bit of a baby. Enjolras had had plenty of sympathy for Courfeyrac initially, but the shock of the break up must have worn off this many hours later. It appeared to him that Courfeyrac was now using the well intentioned feelings and attentions of his friends to wallow in his misery. If he wanted to try to get over it, or at least be distracted for a bit and give everyone a breather, he could have made an attempt.

Plus the obnoxious displays, though not explicitly asking anyone to choose a side, were hinting that everybody ought to. Enjolras had no intentions of choosing between his friends, no matter how badly Courfeyrac was behaving or how much he privately blamed Jehan.

“I just don’t know what I did wrong,” Courfeyrac lamented, for at least the dozenth time since Enjolras had sat down. “I loved him as much as I could. I offered to do anything I could to save the relationship, and he still walked away. He destroyed me. Fucking destroyed me. Don’t date poets. They must get off on examining dark emotions, so they’ve got to create ‘em first. That’s how they write the really good melancholy shit, by playing with your heart.”

“And that’s enough of Mr. Alcohol tonight,” Grantaire said, scooting Courfeyrac’s bottle across the table to Bahorel, who did his duty by his friend and chugged it. “Louison, Courf’s cut off, okay?”

The girl looked relieved. “Want me to bring him a coffee?”

“Yes please.”

“Hey, just wait a sec-”

“Courf, you sound like me. Trust me: beer is not your friend right now.”
Courfeyrac pouted and slumped down in his chair. “So is that why you always drank yourself into oblivion, ‘Taire? Because of how much it sucks to love someone and then have them treat you like shit?”

The table went quiet, many uncomfortable gazes shifting towards Enjolras and Grantaire before quickly darting to look at anything else.

Poor Grantaire didn’t seem to know what to do. “Courf, um…maybe you should head home-”

“What a reversal. I remember being the one to say that when you were the one who was drunk and embarrassing. Remember those days ‘Taire? When I had hopes and dreams and wasn’t at the mercy of a beautiful, cold hearted bastard hell bent on destroying me by playing with my heart? Remember that? It used to be you, and I was the happy one.”

“Courfeyrac,” Enjolras said sternly. “Your heartache only excuses so much. If you don’t stop attacking Grantaire for his past I will get involved, and you don’t want me involved.”

“Who’s attacking Grantaire? I’m not attacking Grantaire. He’s my buddy,” Courfeyrac slurred, slinging an arm around Grantaire’s shoulders, apparently oblivious to the way his friend stiffened at his touch. “I understand you now, ‘Taire,” he added with a seriousness made horridly comic by his intoxication. “Feeling this way all the time, rejected, not good enough for the guy you love…no wonder you did what you did.”

“Courfeyrac, enough.”


Enjolras jerked backwards in his seat, surprised that he was the one being rebuked. He did as instructed though, and Grantaire proceeded to comfort Courfeyrac in a low murmur that didn’t travel well in the noisy public space.

Eventually Courfeyrac’s outbursts grew quieter, until eventually he was just leaning on his friend letting out the occasional low and broken sound of loss.

Perceptive though he was, it took a while for Enjolras to realize that his reactions had been making Grantaire upset, not Courfeyrac’s callous words. Because Courfeyrac’s barbs hadn’t been aimed at Grantaire, they’d been aimed at Enjolras.

The group slowly dispersed when Feuilly left to get Eponine and Marius from work. Bahorel offered to go with him, blatant in his desire to be anywhere but near a drunk and whiny Courfeyrac. Musichetta offered to see Courfeyrac home, and Enjolras and Grantaire breathed quiet sighs of relief that they weren’t going to be burdened with the task.

It was late when they got in, and as Enjolras had another opening shift in the morning, this time with Jehan, he wasn’t in a stellar mood. He needed to sleep, but he was perceptive enough to realize that he wasn’t going to get much rest without talking to his lover first.

“I’m sorry.”

Grantaire turned to him in some surprise. “Okay…um, what for?”

Enjolras shrugged. “Everything. The sandwiches, the cat, letting Courfeyrac’s rambling nonsense get under my skin…”

Grantaire smirked. “It’s okay. I kind of wanted to tell Courf to shut up about us too, but that was
only going to make him rant more. Enj...you weren’t actually cruel to me when you rejected me. I felt like shit about it because I was really fucked up. Still am, but you’re helping me with that. Courfeyrac saw me at my most pathetic while I was pining over you, but it still wasn’t your fault I was hurt. You were pretty classy about the whole thing.”

“I don’t know. I lost my temper a lot. I said things I shouldn’t have.”

“You don’t need to feel guilty about that shit, Enj. I was provoking you,” Grantaire reminded him. “Remember the first time I goosed you?”

Enjolras arched a brow. “I’m surprised you do. You were barely able to walk, if I remember correctly.”

“Yeah, but I was unnaturally coordinated when I copped the feel for someone who was supposedly falling down drunk.”

“You were faking?”

Grantaire laughed. “I was still drunk, but I wasn’t as drunk as I pretended to be. Anyway, I really remember the black eye you gave me. One of my professors pulled me aside and gave me a flier for a workshop on domestic violence after that.”

“You startled me. I didn’t mean to hit you; it just kind of happened.”

“Oh wow. You look almost as mortified now as you did that night. Man, I’ll never forget the look on your face when you saw me lying on Courfeyrac’s floor clutching my eye.”

Enjolras frowned. “I don’t like losing my temper.”

“You were good about it afterwards though. You got me ice and sat with me, even though I was a grabby pervert.” Grantaire sat down on the mattress, lost in recollections of the past and their slowly developed friendship. “I don’t know why you gave me so many chances to redeem myself.”

Enjolras sat down next to him and kissed his cheek. “Because I saw this in you, Grantaire.” He twined their fingers together. “You’re becoming everything I knew you’d be. Besides… I’m not immune to the weaknesses of the young and stupid. I thought you were cute.”

“What?”

Enjolras regarded him with wry amusement. “We’re sleeping together, Grantaire. Do you really find it this surprising that I’m attracted to you?”

“Well, yeah, but even more so for back then. When we first met I looked like a fucking junkie. I was not in a good place.”

“Being underweight, the bad skin, the disregard for basic hygiene and the subsequent toll it took on your appearance were all obvious side effects of your unhappiness. Whenever I imagined how you’d look and what your mind would be like without the weight of depression… I liked what I saw. I always liked you, Grantaire. I’ve never mentioned that before, have I?”

Grantaire shook his head. “No, I thought you used to hate me.”

“Never,” Enjolras answered, with a quick and natural sincerity that Grantaire had no choice but to believe. “You tried my patience a lot, but you were always going for that so I’m sure you noticed. But I never hated you.”
Grantaire basked in that thought, and it made him stupidly happy and warm for the rest of the night.

Later, when Enjolras had drifted to sleep with one arm flung out over Grantaire’s chest, Grantaire thought back to the spring of their sophomore year, when Courfeyrac had spent the night before his oral history final prying bottles out of Grantaire’s hands and cleaning vomit off of his chin.

“He fucking hates me, Courf, and he always will.”

“He doesn’t though. Grantaire, you just need to be less of an asshole. Seriously, I don’t know what kind of strategy you think you’ve got going, but tearing apart your beloved’s cherished beliefs is not working.”

“Won’ make a diff’rence. He hates me. At least he noti-notisheshes me th’s way.”

Courfeyrac had sighed, braced an arm around Grantaire’s back, and stopped trying to speak sensibly to him. Grantaire had caught a quiet, agitated little murmur of, “fuck all if I understand why, but I’m pretty sure he likes you. Just stop being an idiot.”

Moving carefully, so as not to wake Enjolras, Grantaire fumbled along the floor for his phone, turned the volume off, and sent Courfeyrac a text. He didn’t say anything he hadn’t already said in the past twenty four hours, but he was feeling overcome with gratitude to his friend for at least trying to help him for so long, and a feeling of inadequacy and shame knowing that he wasn’t returning the favor very well. He had to at least try to make Courfeyrac feel better.

He didn’t get a response until morning, and it was only a winky face with a ‘thanks’ but it still made him feel better.

Courfeyrac had the decency to look embarrassed when he arrived at the train station Saturday morning. His friends were visibly surprised to see him.

Bahorel offered him a pair of sunglasses, but Courfeyrac waved them away. “I’m okay. The hangover wasn’t too bad. So you’re suspiciously normal looking, considering we’re going to a gay pride parade. You dragging up when we get to Boston then?”

Bahorel grinned but otherwise remained silent. His level of normalcy really was suspicious, as he was wearing a trench coat to cover whatever indecent garment he was wearing to the Pride. He had on a pair of Toms that would no doubt be replaced by some kind of fantastic heels, and his hair had been buzzed short again to make wig application as easy as possible. He had a good sized bag with him, so whatever prep he was going to do was probably going to be substantial.

Musichetta was already glammed up for the day. She’d bleached her bangs and the ends of her hair and dyed it rainbow colored, and she had on rainbow tights under a skimpy black dress. Courfeyrac kept meaning to ask where she fit on the LGBT spectrum, as Musichetta didn’t seem like the kind of girl to be offended by straightforward questions, but he kept forgetting.

Joly and Legle were sitting on a bench together, smiling a little stupidly and still in obliviously happy couple mode from their recent engagement. Legle was wearing the white sapphire ring on a chain around his neck, and they were hand in hand. Legle was wearing a rainbow beanie in honor of the occasion, but other than that they looked pretty normal. Considering they’d been in the closet for so long, holding hands in public was probably exciting enough for them.

Grantaire was on a bench on the other side of the platform, likely at Joly’s insistence because he was smoking. As was his habit, he was wearing mostly black, though he’d stuck a Batwoman pin on his shirt and he was wearing a rainbow bracelet Courfeyrac had bought for him three Prides ago (“I’m
not wearing that tacky flag-waver crap.” “Oh come on, ‘Taire. The proceeds went to an AIDS fund. You can show a little solidarity with the community without being a flag-waver.” “If I wear it will you quit your bitching?” “…for now.”

Courfeyrac joined him on the bench, resting his hands awkwardly on his knees and trying not to fidget too much. “Hey dude. I’m surprised to see you here.”

Grantaire shrugged. “Likewise. Enj really wanted to go to this thing so he can do more of his activist networking, and I had the day off so, y’know, what the hell, right? I think we’d have been better off spending the train fare on something more practical, but Enjolras took home a bunch of sandwiches the other day so at least we don’t need to go grocery shopping.”

“What is he?”

Grantaire stubbed out his cigarette and flung it off down the platform. “He had to work the morning shift so he’s meeting us here. I think Feuilly and Eponine are grabbing him.”

“Ah…um…”

“Jehan’s not coming.”

Courfeyrac nodded, and the urge to fidget grew infinitely worse. “Yeah, uh…I’m sorry about the other night. I don’t really remember much of what I said, but I remember enough to know that I was really out of line.”

“Don’t worry about it, Courf.”

“No, it wasn’t okay-”

“Courf,” Grantaire’s voice was firm. “We’re good. You put up with way worse from me before I cut my bullshit, and you never guilt tripped me or gave up on me. I can handle one bad night every, what, five fucking years or so? Trust me, we’re good.”

Courfeyrac smiled, but there was a grimness to it. He decided to just come out and ask. “Does Enjolras want to kill me?”

“I think he seriously contemplated bitch slapping you at one point, but no, he’s good too. He gets it.” Grantaire’s tone heavily implied that he’d made sure Enjolras got it.

Courfeyrac and Grantaire sat together talking about the comic book store and making fun of Salem tourists until the last of their group showed up, when they went over to join their friends. Enjolras was still wearing his work pants, a pair of Grantaire’s ripped and paint stained black skinny jeans, but he’d changed tops for a Harvey Milk t-shirt and he’d put on his own rainbow bracelets. The look wasn’t really him, but it was incredibly hot. Grantaire’s mind had obviously gone to dirty places, but he came to his senses when Courfeyrac whistled his approval.

Enjolras’ cheeks colored a little. “Oh shut up.” Then he mumbled defensively about how at least he wasn’t wearing rainbow suspenders.

Courfeyrac gave his suspenders a defensive flick, and boasted about how he intended to buy a rainbow bow tie to go with them.

Feuilly was wearing a Day of Silence ‘fine by me’ t-shirt that was old and threadbare enough to be a leftover from high school. He was carrying Little R on his back. The kid looked adorable; he was wearing a Rainbow Brite t-shirt and waving a pride flag. Eponine was also decked out in rainbows,
including an awful lot of body glitter. Gavroche was keeping a careful distance from her, with that cooler-than-thou expression unique to pre-adolescence. He was wearing normal clothes, but there was a little bit of glitter sprinkled over his blond ponytail, which Courfeyrac rightfully suspected to have been involuntary.

Little R immediately scrambled off of Feuilly when he saw Grantaire, and he ended up piggy backing him around the platform while they waited for the train. Once inside Little R sat on his lap and excitedly babbled about his plans for the summer, and his cool new bunk bed, and all the pictures Eponine was letting him color for their new house.

They had lunch at North Station, since they had to wait for Bahorel to get into drag. He’d started basecoats for his makeup while they were on the train, which made him look kind of like a confused art deco zombie. “Why didn’t you drag at home?”

“Because I had to walk to the train station by myself and I don’t walk around in drag in broad daylight by myself,” Bahorel snapped.

“Dude, you could have asked me for a ride,” Courfeyrac said. “I’d have come and picked you up.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t expect you to still be going.”

They were just finishing up their fries and shakes when Bahorel returned from the men’s room, attracting quite a few stares and appreciative murmurs from the other commuters.

“That must be his Starfire wig,” Grantaire murmured.

“His what?”

“One of the Teen Titans. He said he had a Starfire cosplay,” Grantaire explained.

Bahorel was wearing a brilliantly orange wig that went down to his ankles. Upon closer inspection, the outfit was a pride-fully altered Starfire cosplay. The metal space bikini was pink instead of purple, the body paint was a pearlescent white sheen, he was wearing lenses that made his eyes entirely black, and the floor length orange wig was dusted with rainbow glitter.

“I’m pretty sure Starfire’s straight,” Grantaire said, crossing his arms over his chest. “Y’know, her thing with Nightwing?”

“I think her friendship with Donna Troy is only surpassed in gayness by Batman and Superman’s bromance,” Bahorel returned coolly. “Plus I did Wonder Woman last year.”

“Wait a minute, I go to Pride every damn year. How did I miss that?” Courfeyrac whined.

Bahorel grinned. “You didn’t. You took a picture with me and put it on facebook.”

“What?” Courfeyrac yelped. “No fucking way.”

“Yeah way, dude. I was just wearing that much makeup.”

That got everyone with a smartphone on facebook looking for the picture in question, and eventually Joly turned it up. “Yep. That’s definitely Bahorel. I don’t know how we didn’t see it before.”

Grantaire scooped Little R up onto his shoulders once more, Feuilly yanked Gavroche back over by the collar, as he’d clearly been about to take himself for a private tour of Boston while his caretakers were distracted, and Enjolras made sure all their trash ended up in an appropriate receptacle. Then
they were off for Government Center and the 2013 Pride Festival.

Courfeyrac sighed, watching all the couples setting off hand in hand, excited and energized by the safe public space to show off their love. He’d really been looking forward to going to Pride with a boyfriend, for once.

He wondered if Jehan was having the same thoughts, wherever he was spending the day, though it didn't seem to him that his former lover was being touched by regret the same way he was.

Chapter End Notes

BTW I'm sorry I have so many unanswered comments hanging on the fic again. I fell behind in replying, as seems to be my habit these days, but I do really appreciate getting them and I fully intend to sit down and do the replies when I have a minute. I often have to choose between working on the story or answering comments, and I figure you guys would prefer me prioritizing new content.

I'm on vacation for the next couple of days, which will either result in tons of time for writing or none at all as I visit with my cousin and her boys (either way, LOADS of petite Thenardier inspiration). Hopefully I'll get the rest of those comments answered while we do our Les Mis marathon (I'm going to be showing the boys the 10th and 25th anniversary concerts) and construct our chocolate bar barricade.

I also just want to drop a word of thanks for supporting me through 40 chapters. The length of this fic and the audience it has accumulated in such a short period of time amazes me. I mean, I'm long winded, so the fact that I could write this much in six months isn't the shocker, but the fact that people are still reading it is. Thanks so much guys. I was in a bad place about my writing before I started this fic, but you guys have brought back my confidence like whoa <3
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Jehan is insensitive, Combeferre is helpful, and Feuilly gets a haircut.

Chapter Notes

As it turns out, I'm having way more time for writing than I can even make proper use of ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Joly…?”

“Hm?” Joly looked up at his fiancé (and wasn’t that a ridiculously exciting thing?) with innocent confusion, but Legle only smiled at him in some wonder, so he went back to staring at the thin little rubber rainbow bracelet on his wrist. Legle had just purchased it for him at one of the booths of the pride festival, and he couldn’t take his eyes off of it. He’d never done anything that daring before, never made his orientation that overtly obvious to others.

Bahorel was standing not ten feet away in a pink metal bikini, covered in body paint and rainbow glitter, but to Joly the almost invisible strip of rubber was a momentously huge declaration.

Legle only smiled because it wasn’t worth commenting on. He’d been by Joly’s side for their teen years and he remembered what he’d struggled through for falling in love. Feeling grateful and more than a little awed at how things had progressed since then, Legle wrapped an arm around Joly and walked him towards the line for hot pretzels and lime rickeys.

Grantaire had lost Enjolras almost first thing, an act that had been intentional for him and obliviousness for the activist. As soon as the first pro-choice booth got Enjolras’ attention, Grantaire scooped Little R up and dragged him off to get a rainbow painted on his cheek. He wasn’t too concerned about the group splintering off; they all had their phones on them, and besides that, Enjolras tended to make himself easy enough to spot in even the most vaguely social-political gatherings (plus if they really got in trouble, they could always gather around Bahorel, who was impossible to lose sight of).

Grantaire probably would have been bored as fuck without Little R’s enthusiasm to pull him out of his funk. Apparently the Thenardiers had never taken him anywhere fun before (which wasn’t really a shocker, come to think of it), so he’d never seen a parade of any kind, let alone one that featured so much clapping and music and half-naked people in ridiculous outfits. Everything was new and exciting to him, so Grantaire made sure the kid got to see as much of the spectacle as possible.

They were making their way back towards the festival booths to grab a snack when Grantaire spotted Enjolras chewing out a PETA member who’d made the mistake of trying to hand him a flyer.

“Hey! Enj, want to join me and the kid who’s afraid of raised voices for a soft pretzel?” he asked pointedly.
Enjolras scowled, but he let the poor PETA kid off the hook and walked with Grantaire towards the food stands. “Can we afford a soft pretzel?” he asked softly, possibly a little ashamed about the inquiry.

Grantaire sighed. “Yeah. Little R’s got his own spending money and I spent a little less on laundry this week than I expected. I think the cheap fucker finally got the drier fixed.”

“You’ve got spending money?” Enjolras asked, surprised.

“Yes.” Little R smiled shyly. “I go to work with Feuilly on Tuesdays and Thursdays and help him, so he gives me five dollars.”

“Eponine works Tuesdays and Thursdays too and they haven’t found a babysitter yet,” Grantaire muttered, low enough that Little R couldn’t hear from his piggybacked position. Enjolras gave a quick nod, and they went to stand in line.

They were sitting on the cement steps by the flagpole eating their snacks when the first group came up to them to tell them what a cute son they had. The next pair, an indulgently happy young lesbian couple with their own obviously adopted baby boy, flashed them the thumbs up and said they were an adorable family.

Grantaire smiled, nodded, and felt no desire to correct the misconceptions, but Enjolras looked startled. Clearly it hadn’t occurred to him how sitting with his boyfriend and a cute little rainbow covered four-year-old would look at a Pride event. He glanced at Grantaire out of the corner of his eye, shrugged, and also refrained from correcting the misconceptions.

He brought it up when they were on the train back home as though it were the most baffling thing in the world. “At least a dozen people congratulated us on our son,” he said in amazement.

Eponine shrugged. “You guys looked like a family, and that’s kind of what people do when you’re walking around with kids. I don’t get it as much with Gavroche, because I don’t look old enough to be his mom, but a lot of people think Little R’s my son when I’m out with him. Plus he looks younger than he is, and that doesn’t help.”

“Yep. Most of my residents think he’s my son and I just run with it,” Feuilly added.

“I call Feuilly ‘Daddy’ in front of Mrs. Taylor, because otherwise she gets upset and thinks I’m being disrespeckful,” Little R said. “It’s okay though. Daddies are s’posed to take care of their kids, and my daddy doesn’t so I don’t mind calling Feuilly daddy instead.”

Feuilly reached across the seat and ruffled the kid’s hair. “When I do have kids, I hope they’re at least half as cool as you.”

“Ditto,” Grantaire said, snuggling Little R closer (the kid was already sitting on his lap).

Enjolras’ eyebrows rose at that, but he didn’t say anything and almost everyone else missed it, as they were too distracted by Little R, who had turned bright red and suddenly shy while being the center of attention. Eponine saw though, and she frowned, anticipating an uncomfortable discussion for her friends.

Enjolras walked over to Jehan’s apartment after he got back from the pride festival. Though he found the consumerism thrust on pride events somewhat exploitative, he knew he was in the minority among his friends about that, and he thought the necklace he’d gotten Jehan as a souvenir (an endeavor funded by Combeferre) might cheer him up.
He wasn’t surprised to find Combeferre sitting in Jehan’s living room with him when he got there. Thankfully they were playing cards this time, not watching chick flicks. Jehan looked much better than he had the other day, but there was still an air of melancholy to him. And, of course, wearing his horrible blue bathrobe didn’t help.

“Hi Enjolras,” he said, voice so low it was almost a whisper. “Did you have fun at Pride?”

“I did,” Enjolras answered. “I got you a souvenir.” While Jehan opened the bag and admired the little rainbow charm dangling from its black cord, Enjolras slipped Combeferre his change from the purchase.

“Thank you. It’s lovely. I’ve needed a new necklace.” He let out a sigh and patted his chest, where the little milky white quartz crystal Courfeyrac had gotten him used to hang.

With great effort, Enjolras refrained from rolling his eyes. Any day. Any day now, Jehan should realize his mistake and take back his devoted lover.

But honestly, if he waited much longer Courfeyrac might have the sense to give up on him and refuse to take him back. He’d been flirting with a vigor and skill at the festival that Enjolras hadn’t witnessed in ages. Apparently Courfeyrac’s goal was to rebound and rebound hard. He’d gotten at least five phone numbers just in the short time Enjolras was walking around with him.

Enjolras gave himself a little shake, mentally and even physically. Part of the reason he’d come over was to take strides in overcoming his petty behavior. He took a deep breath, and came out with his prepared speech. “Jehan, I’m sorry I’ve been distant with you. It wasn’t my intention to pick a side in this conflict, but living with Grantaire and seeing so much of Courfeyrac’s suffering…I should have guarded my feelings a bit better instead of losing myself in my empathy for Courfeyrac. Combeferre, as is his habit, set a better example and made me aware of my mistake.”

“We still don’t agree with your reasoning,” Combeferre said, careful to keep his tone from sounding judgmental. “But we respect your decision. It’s your life and this is a highly personal matter. We intend to support you no matter what.”

“Thank you.” Jehan’s voice shook a little as he spoke. “I’ve just, I feel really alone right now. I know everyone must think I’m some kind of monster, but it wasn’t an easy decision. I’m hurting so much, and I miss him, and I hate feeling this way. I wish I could just take him back, but I know it wouldn’t solve anything.”

“Jehan, isn’t it possible that if you’re hurting this much you might have made a mistake?” Enjolras asked. He sat down beside Jehan on the couch and fixed him with an earnest stare, hoping his concern was showing through adequately. Combeferre tried to cut him off, but Enjolras spoke over him. “You could reconcile, I’m sure of it. He feels so strongly for you. Whatever changes you need him to make, I’m positive he’d try his best to please you.”

Jehan’s gentle features hardened at Enjolras’ well-intentioned words. “Enjolras, you may be content to transform your partner into a fundamentally different human being, but I find that idea abhorrent,” he said, surprising Enjolras with the bite in his voice.

Enjolras was taken aback. “I haven’t changed who Grantaire is at his core-”

Jehan shook his head. “Yes you have! He’s like a completely different person now. No offense, but I won’t be taking advice on matters of the heart from someone who conflates blind worship and love.”

“Jehan, that was out of line,” Combeferre said, brow furrowed in worry as he looked between his
two closest friends.

“He crossed the line first,” Jehan snapped. “I’m sick of being told to just take Courfeyrac back. Do you honestly think I came to this lightly?”

“I don’t know,” Enjolras said, rising to his feet with an outraged calm that put his friends on guard. “You’ve demonstrated a cavalier enough attitude with peoples’ emotions tonight.”

“Enjolras.” Combeferre stood up, but he didn’t follow when Enjolras stormed out of the apartment. He helplessly watched as the front door slammed shut. “Jehan! Why did you say that to him? You know Enjolras has been worrying about his influence on Grantaire. That was the most personal way you could have possibly attacked him.”

Jehan’s tears were falling freely once more, but he was crying quietly, with a sort of odd dignity. “He wasn’t being a very good friend either.”

“He’s trying to help. And really, there is some sense in what he tried to tell you. You might be able to work out your issues with Courf. I think you gave up too soon.”

Jehan doubled over and grabbed his hair. “Stop it! I want everyone to stop saying that. I’m not taking him back. I can’t take him back when nothing’s changed. Just stop judging me.”

Combeferre reached over and rubbed his back. “I’m sorry. Jehan, I’m not judging you. I won’t bring it up again.”

“Thank you.” His voice was almost a whimper.

Combeferre bit his lower lip. “You need to apologize to Enjolras though, and I’m not going to silence myself on that.”

“At least let me do your bangs. They’re hanging in your face. There’s no way you can see like that!”

“I see perfectly fine, thank you very much. Now put the pointies back in the kitchen drawer and go about your business.”

Eponine scowled and pushed her own overlong bangs out of her face (that was a different matter though; she could clip them back without looking ridiculous, but bobby pins were not an option for her baby brother). She was still pleading with Gavroche to let her cut his hair, and failing miserably at the task, when Feuilly made the mistake of passing through the room fresh from the shower.

Their unit had a washer and dryer by the kitchenette, so that was where they’d parked their hamper. It was all within easy view of the dining area, which was where Eponine was having her battle of wills with Gavroche while Little R colored at the table.

“Come on Gav! It’s getting ridiculous. You look like a little girl.”

“I do not. I look punk. Besides, if I didn’t let Old Blisterbutt cut it, what makes you think I’m going to fold for you?”

“Because I’m your sister and you love me?”

Gavroche laughed. “I thought you knew me better than that, Ponine.”

“I’m already getting enough shit from your teachers and your classmates’ parents without you showing up for school looking like a baby hobo.”
“School’s out for the summer at the end of the week. Besides, why do you care what those old biddies think?”

“Because the social workers are going to think the exact same thing!”

Feuilly walked past them to toss his towel and dirty clothes into the hamper, determined to accomplish his task and get the fuck away from the kitchen before they managed to pull him into their dispute. Alas, Gavroche locked eyes on him and seized on a new defense. “Feuilly’s hair is long too, and that’ll look just as bad to the social worker. How come you’re not nagging him?”

Eponine was about to tell Gavroche off, but then she noticed that he had a point.

It had been months since Feuilly had gotten his hair cut. He usually covered the mess with a worn old Red Sox cap, so Eponine hadn’t noticed just how long it had gotten. His curls were tighter than Grantaire’s or Courfeyrac’s, which were charmingly disheveled and very messy (Enjolras’ wave of hair model perfect golden waves were a category all their own), so his hair generally looked shorter than it was-as long as it was dry. With water weighing it down, it was obvious that his hair had grown long enough to hang down between his shoulder blades.

“Y’know Feuilly…the brat’s got a point. It won’t help us any if your hair looks like a crazy hobo’s too.”

Feuilly chewed his lip. “I’ll get it cut on payday. I just haven’t had the time lately.”

Eponine held up her scissors. “I can take care of it right now.”

Feuilly took a few cautious steps backwards. “That’s okay. Really, I’ll take care of it this week.”

“Feuilly, if you don’t let me cut your hair then Gavroche is never going to let me cut his. You’re helping him win this fight.”

“It’s true,” Gavroche said with a wizened nod. “I can be very stubborn about these things, and if someone I even slightly consider an authority figure goes against her point I’ll never submit to her will.”

Eponine snorted. “Oh man. I can’t tell if hanging out with ‘Ferre and Enj is good for you or a total disaster.”

“Little bit of column A, little bit of column B,” Gavroche answered with a cheeky grin.

Scowling, Feuilly plopped down on a kitchen chair and started grumbling swears under his breath. With an excited squeal, Eponine clipped a towel around his shoulders and started brushing out the damp curls. She ran her fingers through his hair, and he tried not to shudder when he felt her long nails scrape against his scalp.

That shouldn’t have been as hot as it was.

“Hm…” She walked around him, leaning close as she inspected his hair. “I’m not sure how much to cut. It looks really different when it’s dry.”

“It grows fast. Do whatever you want to it.” Just finish it. Having Eponine crowding his personal space like this, putting her hands on him however innocently, was a kind of torture.

“Okay. Um…hm.” She contemplated him a moment longer, then her pensive little murmurs were replaced by the rapid squeak of her scissors busily trimming back and neatening his untamed mouse
brown hair.

She spent way longer cutting his hair than he expected. Eponine was mostly silent, such was her level of focus as she crouched around him, tilting his head this way and that and accidentally getting his face far too near her cleavage more than once.

Gavroche was bright red trying to suppress his giggles. Generally Feuilly liked the little spitfire, but he found himself adamantly wishing for Eponine to shave the brat’s head.

Finally the ordeal was finished. Eponine fluffed his hair with her long, skinny fingers, tongue sticking out as she contemplated her work. “Hm. Let me go get the hair dryer. I want to see how it looks dry.”

Feuilly didn’t trust his voice to function properly, so he just gave a jerky nod. Eponine pranced away, and Gavroche lost his battle with his giggles. He doubled over holding his side.

“Oh shut up,” Feuilly growled.

“Will you just ask Ponine out already? Not that this isn’t funny to watch or anything, but really it’s going to be sad soon.”

Little R, whom everyone had forgotten since he was so quiet, looked up from his drawing with round eyes. “You like Ponine?”

Feuilly didn’t get the chance to answer, as Eponine returned with the hair dryer. They remained quiet while she plugged it in, and then there was too much noise while she dried and fluffed his hair for even the most awkward attempts at conversation. Feuilly closed his eyes, determined not to embarrass himself while the girl he was intensely attracted to massaged his fucking head.

He really should have stayed in the bathroom until Eponine finished her fight with Gavroche.

He jerked up when Eponine clicked the drier off. She was smiling, and not in a cruel or overly emotional way, so he had to assume the haircut hadn’t come off horrible. “Oh wow, I’m not bad at this. Feuilly, you look really good.”

“Do I?”

“Yeah.” She held up one of her makeup mirrors so he could see. It was cut close, for the most part, and he immediately appreciated the niceness of having the hair off his neck in the oppressive June heat. The top was a bit longer, but his curls were nicely manageable, a few not quite bangs falling attractively over his forehead.

“Wow. Wow, I didn’t even know it was possible for my hair to do this. Thanks Eponine.”

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. “You’re very welcome. Alright then.” She unclipped the towel, brushed some stray hair off of his shoulders, and shooed him out of the chair. “Gav, you’re up next.”

“I still haven’t agreed to this.”

“I don’t fucking care. Get your spoiled little butt in the seat.” Eponine waved the scissors menacingly, and still looking sour about it, Gavroche complied.

Feuilly darted from the room as soon as it was even vaguely polite to do so. He barricaded himself in his room, took out his phone, and texted Bahorel: *Corinth, beer, and bitching. Now.*
He snagged his wallet, car keys, and Red Sox hat without waiting for a reply.

“We should have gone to Beerworks. These are the most god awful fried pickles I’ve ever eaten.”

“And yet you’re clearing your plate. Or, I’m sorry, plastic basket with a greasy piece of wax paper over the bottom. Bahorel, I’ve heard you criticize the shitty fried pickles here more times than I can count,” Feuilly snapped. “Why the fuck do you order them if you hate them so much?”

“Why the fuck do you drag me out to bitch about Eponine once a god damn week when I’ve got nothing new to add to the conversation and your stories all boil down to the same tired sexual frustration? I still think you should just ask her out.”

“I can’t ask her out,” Feuilly grumbled, slouching down in his seat a little.

Bahorel rolled his eyes and popped another miserable excuse for a fried pickle into his mouth. “Yes you can, and you fucking should.”

“She won’t say yes. She said no to ‘Ferre.’”

“Well duh. She doesn’t want to date Combeferre.”

“And now I’m spending money I could be putting towards the apartment on fucking beer and substandard fried pickles. I’m fucking useless.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. By the way, I’ll pay for my own awful pickles. I’ll cover your beer too.”

Feuilly was startled enough by Bahorel’s uncharacteristic show of generosity to momentarily forget about his problems with Eponine. “That’s…rather nice of you.”

Bahorel shrugged. “Earning my keep’s made me reconsider some of my choices a little. So yeah, I’m going to cover some of your drinks from now on so don’t make a big fucking deal of it, okay?”

Feuilly nodded his agreement, and then he let Bahorel drop it. Bahorel and Feuilly were really different about these things, and whereas Feuilly would have liked to say a few words about how much he appreciated this particular change in Bahorel’s behavior, he knew doing so would only make the guy uncomfortable.

However, Bahorel was more than comfortable going back to dissecting Feuilly’s much more painful and awkward girl problems. “So you really don’t think Eponine’d say yes if you asked her out?”

“Again, she rejected Combeferre. She’s not going to accept me.”

Bahorel rolled his eyes. “God Feuilly, cut the shit. You don’t do wounded with low self-worth as charmingly as Grantaire. You’re going to need confidence to seduce Eponine. Look, I know we all like ‘Ferre and that he’s a great guy and all that, and that he’d probably be a good boyfriend…but I think Eponine said no because she doesn’t like him like that. I’ve never noticed any chemistry between them, and she doesn’t check him out. She likes him as a friend.”

“Yeah, well I’m pretty well along in friendzoning myself. I mean, we take fucking late night drives and talk about our issues, and I’m babysitting her brothers and today she gave me a haircut. She’s going to see me more like a girlfriend than a boyfriend.”
“You’re so fucking clueless. She opens up to you, shares her hopes and fears, and you said the haircut took twice as long as it needed to, so she spent an unnecessary amount of time caressing your god damn head, and you still think that’s all friendly?” Bahorel laughed while Feuilly flipped him off. “Trust me, she likes you. I think ‘Ferre’s noticed too. I mean, he backed off. He’s not trying to fight with her bullshit ‘I’m just not in the right place’ reasoning anymore, is he?”

“No, I suppose not.”

“Right.” Bahorel finished off the last of the fried pickles, took out his wallet, and dropped some cash on the table. “Ask her out.”

Feuilly took a sip of his beer and gave the prospect some serious thought.

As had been the case for the majority of the week, Courfeyrac was in a funk and Grantaire wasn’t sure what to do about it. The two of them were sitting on the crack head mattress, ostensibly watching a DVD on Enjolras’ computer, but really Courfeyrac was gazing into space and Grantaire was worrying about him.

Enjolras unintentionally butted in on their awkwardness, though he was too distracted himself to do more than nod at their guest. He was fresh from the shower, already changed into work clothes and rubbing at his hair with a towel. He hung the towel on the hook in the wall as he passed it on his way to their kitchenette.

Enjolras opened the fridge and looked for something he could prepare quickly (he’d had two days off in a row, so their stock of sandwiches and wraps was depleted). They didn’t have much of anything, let alone a meal he could make in the ten minutes he had before Feuilly was picking him up for work (he’d be dropping Enjolras off at the café while picking Eponine up at the end of her shift). Sighing, Enjolras opened the freezer instead, wrinkled his nose in distaste, but ultimately took out the box of three-cheese Lean Pockets Grantaire must have purchased with him in mind.

He flipped the box over and scanned the instructions, muttering under his breath as he complied with them. “Unwrap sandwich…” Enjolras gave the plastic wrapped dough brick in his hand a doubtful look. “That’s a sandwich then? Alright, unwrap sandwich, insert into crisping sleeve and place on paper plate. Oh look, they know their audience.”

“Is he…is he reading the instructions to cook a Hot Pocket?” Courfeyrac asked.

Grantaire giggled. “Lean Pocket, actually. Those were the only ones I could find that didn’t have dubious pink stuff in it they were trying to pass off as ham. Babe, just stick it in the microwave for two minutes!”

“It says two minutes and thirty sec-”

“Trust me, two minutes, let it sit for a minute, and then nuke it again for another twenty seconds to unfreeze the center. If you do it all at once it’ll overheat and you’ll burn your tongue.”

Enjolras dropped the Lean Pocket on their microwave safe plate, unsettled by the clanging sound it made as it hit the ceramic. He put it in the microwave and defiantly punched in two minutes and thirty seconds, just as the packaging had instructed.

Grantaire sighed. “Noob.”

“Yep. You know Enj, you really don’t even need to bother with a plate. The crisping sleeve’ll catch most of the mess when it explodes,” Courfeyrac said, somewhat restored to his more familiar good
humor by Enjolras’ continued incompetence at being poor.

“That doesn’t sound very sanitary,” Enjolras said with a frown.

Grantaire made a dismissive motion with his hand. “It’s fine. I spritz it once a week with the Windex.”

Enjolras felt like gagging. “You use Windex on the microwave?!”

“…dude, I use Windex on everything.”

Courfeyrac smirked. “You kind of have to when it’s your only cleaning supply.”

Two minutes and thirty seconds later Enjolras opened the microwave, somewhat unnerved by the fact that Courfeyrac and Grantaire were now watching him instead of their DVD. He narrowed his eyes in a mild glare, but it wasn’t strong enough to deter them. “Now really, is watching me eat a Lean Pocket actually more entertaining than whatever it is you’re watching?”

“Surprisingly, yes,” Grantaire answered. “Hear that, Enjolras? You’re more entertaining than the Shining, and I love Kubrick. You should feel honored.”

“I don’t know if that’s really that sad for Kubrick,” Courfeyrac chimed in. “I get the feeling you could watch Enjolras tie his fucking shoes and be enraptured.”

Enjolras rolled his eyes, but really he was quietly relieved to see Courfeyrac cracking good natured jokes about Grantaire’s rather unusual level of devotion. It didn’t feel as caustic as the comments he’d made earlier in the week.

Courfeyrac was definitely still in a funk more often than not, and Enjolras was sure he was having a hard time when he was on his own, but he was visibly starting to recover. He hadn’t taken any more cruel shots at Grantaire, and thankfully he hadn’t insisted on going out for drinks a second time. As is, Enjolras had spent a few nights talking over the experience with a shaken lover, and Grantaire had woken up twice that week in tears after suffering through frighteningly realistic dreams of falling off the wagon.

Enjolras liked Courfeyrac an awful lot, and had gotten quite close to him when they’d done a seminar together freshman year. Their close friendship, which would have existed even if they didn’t have so many friends in common, was the only reason he hadn’t dragged the kid out behind the Musain and kicked the shit out of him for putting Grantaire through that.

Enjolras took a bite of his Lean Pocket and promptly spit it back onto the plate. “Oh fuck!” He ran for the sink, filled a glass of water, and chugged it. “Will you stop laughing? I just burned my tongue. That’s not funny.”

“I told you how to cook the thing properly and you ignored me. What do you want?” Grantaire asked around his giggles.

“Some sympathy and compassion. My injured tongue has negative repercussions for you, you know.”

Courfeyrac gasped, pretending to be scandalized. “Enjolras, was that a sex joke? Did you seriously just make a joke of a suggestive nature in front of company?”

“Oh come on Courf, you’re hardly company.”
“I can’t believe how much you’ve corrupted him,” Courfeyrac teased. “He used to be so pure, so virginal. Alas.”

Enjolras stuck his burned, and decidedly impure and unvirginal tongue out at Courfeyrac, then gave his Lean Pocket a cautious prod. It felt like it was a safe enough temperature for consumption, but he still had to get past the awful taste. To his annoyance, Grantaire and Courfeyrac continued watching him eat, now amused by his winces. “I think this is the worst thing I’ve ever tasted.”

“Just be glad you’ve never endured the ones with ham in them,” Grantaire said.

“Well do you buy them if they’re this awful?”

“Because they were on sale ten for ten dollars, and I thought it might add some variety to the ramen and café sandwiches.”

Enjolras let out a sigh, because there wasn’t really a better response for the awful truth, and washed down his less than satisfying lunch with tepid tap water. Then his cell phone chimed with a text.

“That’s Feuilly.” He walked over to Grantaire, thought better of kissing him on the mouth immediately after downing his awful meal, and kissed his cheek instead. “Combeferre’s picking me up after work. I’m going to be a little late. I guess he needs to talk to me about something.”

“He’s not giving the cat back, right?” Grantaire asked. Courfeyrac snorted but covered it by pretending to cough.

Enjolras rolled his eyes. “I’ll see you later.”

“Bye. Have a good shift.”

“You guys are so friggin’ domestic together. It’s adorable,” Courfeyrac pretended to gush. Enjolras looked slightly exasperated when he closed the door behind him, but he was also smirking. “So what do you want to do now? There doesn’t seem to be much point in even pretending we’re watching the Shining anymore.”

Grantaire shrugged. “Eponine’s getting out of work if Enjolras is going in. Want to see if she wants to hang at your place? We could do a round of Mario Party or something.”

“Works for me. Uh…do you think it’d be tacky if I asked her about Jehan? She’s worked three shifts with him this week, so y’know…”

Grantaire frowned. “It’d be tacky as hell, dude.”

“Right, right.” Courfeyrac hung his head, trying not to look bitter. “I just haven’t heard from him at all, and y’know…just kinda can’t help wondering if he’s starting to miss me yet.”

Grantaire reached over and squeezed his shoulder. “We should probably talk about something else for a little while. You’ve already stewed an awful lot today, and you said you wanted me to put a cap on that. Actually, when we get ahold of Eponine…there’s something I’ve been kinda wanting to get your opinions on.”

“Okay. Distractions are definitely welcome.”

Grantaire and Enjolras had been hiding out at the library for the free air conditioning the first time it happened.
It happened during the first heat wave of the year. Grantaire, wearing baggy black shorts, a tight fitting band t-shirt, and regretting the abundance of black in his wardrobe with every fiber of his being, really and truly was just there for the AC. He was sitting in one of the big armchairs by the stairwell feeling bored and cranky, but at least he was recovering from the long trek to the library in the pre-summer sun. He ran his hands through his hair, scooping the thick black strands off of his neck.

Enjolras was sitting in another armchair next to him, but placed far enough away that it wasn’t incredibly obvious they were there together. The fact that he was busily working (on god knows what-the semester was over, after all) and seemingly content in the library set him apart from Grantaire.

A girl with spiky pink hair, a gratuitous amount of piercings, and an armful of books on Dali sidled up to Grantaire. He forced himself to nod and smile politely at what was clearly a fellow art major-solidarity and all that. You never knew when you might have to rely on someone for a group project in the future.

She started out talking about the internship she was doing over the summer, but then she started hitting on him. Grantaire was a little slow on the uptake about it, not honestly used to people flirting with him, but he figured it out when she sat down on the arm of his chair and leaned over to whisper something in his ear, giving him a clear look down her tight purple tank top. Hell, that was bold enough that even Enjolras got it. He set his books aside in favor of giving the girl one of his more impressive glares.

Grantaire was stunned. He was trying to get out the words ‘flattered but spoken for’, all the while amazed that Enjolras was sitting right there and she’d picked him. He had to look more approachable. That had to be the only reason. Or maybe she only dated other art majors. He did have some paint on his clothes, and according to Courfeyrac he gave off an art-kid vibe.

“Excuse me, miss. Would you mind getting your breasts out of my boyfriend’s face?” Enjolras finally snapped. He couldn’t have sounded more threatening.

The girl’s face turned bright red. “I’m so sorry! I, that is, I didn’t think…shit, I’m sorry.” She almost fell over in her haste to get off the chair, and she left half her books on a nearby table when she quite literally fled from them.

And then Enjolras’ glare was fixed on him. “Just when were you planning on getting around to telling her about her mistake?” He said it like a threat.

It probably was a threat, come to think of it.

“I’m sorry, Enj. That’s never happened to me before. I was caught off guard.”

Enjolras scowled. “Please. You expect me to believe that no one’s ever hit on your before?”

“People flirted back with me, though not nearly as often as they threw their drinks in my face, but still. It’s not the same thing. Enj, I was the messy drunk kid calling everyone stupid, idealistic sacks of shit, remember? I know I tried to convince you I had moves, but you must have realized I was lying.”

“Oh. Wait, really? People hit on me all the time. It doesn’t happen to you too?”

Grantaire smirked and shook his head. “I’m just not as pretty as you.”

“That’s crap. You just must not have noticed,” Enjolras insisted. “You know, like how that girl had
to practically flash you for you to even look uncomfortable. I mean seriously, ‘Taire. She was _throwing_ herself at you for nearly ten minutes before that.”

“You were listening to us? I thought she was just chatting about figure drawing classes.”

“With a lot of unnecessary emphasis on nude modeling.”

Grantaire smiled stupidly, trying not to be overly pleased by Enjolras’ jealousy.

The second time it happened Grantaire caught on quicker, but he still couldn’t quite believe it. He was sitting on the curb in front of the café, waiting for Enjolras and Marius to get out of work. He’d been waiting inside, but he’d already been hanging around for over an hour of the shift, and he just couldn’t take any more pretentious beats and hipsters at the moment (but at least the flocks of high school kids were, for the most part, absent).

The last time he’d poked his head in, it looked like the smug bastards were getting to Enjolras too. The guy had a short fuse when it came to bullshit, and he spiraled into “educational” rants easier than was wise for someone in a customer service oriented job. Frankly, sometimes Grantaire was surprised Enjolras got the tips he did, pretty or not.

This time it was a bespectacled boy in plaid skinny jeans that approached Grantaire, asking if he had a light. Grantaire mumbled an apology, and informed the kid that was trying to quit smoking. The stranger stowed his unlit cigarette behind his ear and sat down next to Grantaire. The two of them chatted for a bit, the stranger expressed admiration at Grantaire’s willpower, wished he could quit, and rattled off a few other mindless platitudes. And then once the ice was broken he started flirting.

Grantaire grabbed his hand when the kid tried to place it on his knee. “Sorry dude. Not interested.”

“Oh, uh…that’s cool. Sorry I bugged you.” The guy got up and went on his way.

Grantaire watched him go, shaking his head incredulously. The kid had walked outside from the café. He must have seen the super sexy baristas working that night but he’d picked _Grantaire_? He figured he must look like an easier pick-up than Marius or Enjolras.

But it kept happening. When he and Enjolras were picking up their meager groceries for the week, splitting a cup of tea as table rent so they could see Jehan’s latest feature (Grantaire kind of wished he’d stayed home-Jehan’s break up poetry was good, but it was uncomfortable as hell for those acquainted with his source of inspiration), mooching more free AC from the library or the mall. Strangers, male, female, and a few times individuals rejecting gender binary, of a spectrum of ages and levels of physical attractiveness, kept approaching Grantaire. Sometimes he let Enjolras chase them off, as seeing his boyfriend’s protective streak come to the fore made him warm and tingly inside, but usually he politely declined their offers without Enjolras noticing.

And then there was that drunk guy who tried to pull him onto an empty seat on the train. Grantaire had to drag Enjolras into a different compartment, legitimately frightened for a few minutes that Enjolras might actually kill the grabby stranger.

Still surprised, and definitely amused by the odd occurrences, Grantaire brought up his spate of recent admirers when he and Courfeyrac were playing Mario with Eponine and Marius. He expected them to find it as baffling and humorous as he did, and figured any amusement he could offer could only help Courfeyrac. Eponine rolled her eyes and Courfeyrac openly laughed.

“What?” Marius asked, clearly concerned he had missed something. For once, Grantaire was in agreement with the puppy.
“Sweetie, you got hot,” Eponine explained, as though it were obvious. “Now quit fishing for compliments.”


“Since you quit drinking and cutting, generally don’t smell like an ash tray anymore, started caring about personal hygiene, and started eating regular meals,” Courfeyrac explained. He playfully thumped Eponine over the back of the head. “And he’s not fishing. The poor boy honestly has no idea.”

“I can’t be the only person in the room who’s aware of the fact that I’m pretty. Come on!” Eponine said with a laugh. “I’m the only girl. I’m supposed to be the most insecure of us about this shit.”

Grantaire shrugged. “I’ve always been ugly.”

“Happiness makes people prettier. You got pretty when you started dating Enjolras,” Courfeyrac said.

Eponine nodded her agreement. “I didn’t think you were ugly before, but you’re out and out hot now.”

“Huh.” Grantaire thought about that for a minute. “It’s still fucking weird though. I mean, people have been hitting on me, not Enjolras. He said he can’t remember the last time he had to glare a stranger away from him, and he said it used to happen to him all the time. Y’know, from people other than me.”

“Well…the statue’s not looking his best these days,” Eponine said, looking a bit reluctant to do so and watching Grantaire carefully to gauge his reaction. “And with an attitude like his, it was only him being superhumanly pretty that had people after him to begin with. You can kind of sense the ‘go fuck yourself’ coming before you talk to a guy like Enjy.”

“What do you mean Enjolras isn’t looking his best these days?” Grantaire asked defensively. “He’s as beautiful as he’s ever been…isn’t he?”

His friends all kind of started to speak, but no one said anything close to an intelligible sentence. Marius got up suddenly to use the bathroom. Finally, Courfeyrac broke the awkward silence.

“’Taire, you’re a bit blinded by your love for him. I mean, Enjolras is still a good looking guy. It’d take a lot to change that. But he hasn’t been adjusting well to poverty.”

“He really needs a haircut. And with the way the humidity is hitting him without his hair care products…” Eponine trailed off with a wince.

“And his skin’s getting kind of oily,” Courfeyrac added.

“Plus he’s lost weight,” Grantaire murmured. And he had shadows under his eyes from sleepless nights. He’d lost a lot of his muscle tone, and more days than not the blazing passion that Grantaire had always been so drawn to was more of a dull simmer, tamped by exhaustion and world weariness.

Now that it had been pointed out to him, Grantaire wondered how he hadn’t noticed the change on his own. “You guys are right. He doesn’t look as ridiculously pretty as he used to. And it started pretty much after we started dating-”

“’Taire,” Courfeyrac started in a warning tone. Eponine slid off the couch and joined Grantaire on the floor, looking ready to knock some sense into him if she had to.
“Well you guys just said that being happy makes people prettier. And Enjolras stopped being pretty when he started dating me. Ergo, I sucked the happiness out of him. That’s actually the opposite of what I’ve been aiming for, being his boyfriend and all.”

“Grantaire, you’re such an idiot. Will you get your head out of your pessimistic ass and think about this for a minute?” Eponine snapped. “For starters, not too long after you started dating, Enjolras was violently attacked. You might have forgotten about the importance of that, but believe me, I only wish I could. That took a toll on him right fucking away. Then, shortly thereafter, you almost died and he went through hell worrying for you. Then he had the showdown of all showdowns with his parents and got cut off. Since then he’s been struggling to adjust to having his life basically turned on its head. He happened to start dating you right before a whole bunch of awful shit happened to him right in a row. Try to imagine how awful he’d look if he didn’t have you in his life.”

Grantaire must not have looked convinced, because Courfeyrac chimed in. “You gave him a place to live the night he lost his apartment. You taught him how to live off of forty dollars a month for groceries. You helped him job hunt. You taught him how to get the financial aid he needed to stay in school. And you’ve been emotionally supporting him through everything. Dude, you’re the reason he’s doing as well as he is.”

He wasn’t sure what to say to that, so Grantaire changed the subject. No doubt taking pity on how flustered he was, his friends let him.

Combeferre sat on the curb in front of the café while he waited for Enjolras to finish his closing duties. He was working with one of the few baristas not from their clique, so thankfully Combeferre didn’t have to chauffeur anyone else home with Enjolras. It was both a source of amusement and frustration to their friends that only the ones who couldn’t drive or didn’t own a car ended up working at the café two towns over from where they all lived.

Combeferre also felt thankful that it was a stranger closing with Enjolras and not Jehan. It had been days since their fight, they’d worked together twice, and they still hadn’t smoothed it over. Poor Marius had worked mid-shift for one of those days, and he’d looked close to tears by the end of it. They weren’t being overtly bitchy to each other, but so cold and impersonal as to be somehow even more caustic than if they’d been engaging in open hostility.

Combeferre nodded politely at the girl that had closed with Enjolras as she locked up, then he stood up and walked with Enjolras to his car. Enjolras immediately slouched down in the passenger seat and rubbed at his tired eyes. “What’s up now?” he murmured.

Despite Enjolras’ prompting, Combeferre decided the best strategy wasn’t to get right to the point, but to gradually lead into it. “I was thinking earlier…we never asked you and Grantaire how your vacation went. Between the Pride, and the engagement, and Courf and Jehan, everyone got really distracted.”

“Oh.” Enjolras smiled distantly. “It was lovely, actually. Very restful, and…I had a bit of a breakthrough with Grantaire.”

“Oh?”

“Mm. His self-esteem’s improved enough for me to tell him I love him whenever I want to now, and I don’t have to be careful how I phrase it. I can just say how I feel. It’s so wonderful, ‘Ferre. I don’t think he’s as damaged as he used to be. And that’s a good thing.”

“It is,” Combeferre agreed, because if Jehan’s petty slights got Enjolras questioning that then their
cynic was going to be in a lot of trouble.

He let the conversation hang for a few minutes while Enjolras fiddled with the music and he got on the highway, then Combeferre picked the thread back up. “So the break must have been refreshing, right? You had some time away from the stress and malnourishment and whatnot to build your equanimity back up?”

Enjolras smirked. “Quit handling me, ‘Ferre. Whatever it is you want to ask me, just ask.”

“All right then. I think you and Grantaire should move in with me.”

Whatever Enjolras might have been expecting, that clearly wasn’t it. “What?”

“I wanted to wait until after we got that trip together for you guys, because I didn’t think you and ‘Taire were in a place to really consider this before you went. Look…I’m basically living in a two bedroom. The study has an open doorway, but if you hang a curtain over it, it becomes a second bedroom. You and ‘Taire can take the real bedroom, so you can have a door to shut the cats out, and I’ll take the more open room. If you guys split rent and utilities with me you’ll have more spending money and the burden on you will be eased. Plus I don’t have any bugs.”

Enjolras took a moment trying to figure out what he wanted to say. “I…I don’t know. I mean, that sounds fantastic, really it does…and I’d like to live with you…but do you think you and Grantaire would be okay as roommates?”

Taken by surprise by the source of Enjolras’ hesitation almost as much as Enjolras had been by the suggestion, Combeferre laughed. “Yeah, of course. Otherwise I wouldn’t have pitched it.”

“But…you two were having issues.”

“Mm, and we talked through them,” Combeferre assured him. “Enj, I’m friends with him, I promise. We hang out without you sometimes.”

“Really?” Enjolras looked adorably puzzled. “I can’t picture that, somehow. What do you guys do? You’re so different.”

Honestly, the answer was mostly ‘talk about you’, but they did other things too. Combeferre liked talking about pop culture and artwork with Grantaire. They weren’t subjects he usually devoted a lot of his own time and attention to studying, which made Grantaire’s almost encyclopedic knowledge on movies, video games, music, and fine art fascinating.

“You’re pretty different from Grantaire too, and yet you find things to do with him when you’re alone together,” Combeferre pointed out. “I don’t sleep with him though.”

Enjolras snorted. “I should hope not.”

“So will you think about it? I’m really starting to worry about you guys, and I think this could help with your financial burdens.”

“It would. I’ll talk about it with Grantaire tonight.”

Combeferre grinned, hopeful about the prospect of helping his friends while also dealing with his own loneliness.
So I thought I might need to explain the dig I had at PETA during the pride festival scene. I actually care an awful lot about animal rights, but I can't get behind PETA’s methods or ideologies. I think their methods are too extreme, to the point where they alienate people they could sway to their side, and their stance on euthanasia appalls me. This article by the Huffington Post sums up that issue well enough, so I'll just drop it here (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nathan-j-winograd/peta-kills-puppies-kittens_b_2979220.html) Even though I'm generally against trigger warnings I want you guys to know going in that this article will probably ruin your day if you read it, and it's got some disturbing visuals, so, y'know, be warned. It's trigger-y.

In happier news, fic rec time! For a much better take on Eponine cutting Feuilly's hair, check out Get Over Your Hill and See by goldfishtobleroneandamitie (http://archiveofourown.org/works/774210). You will not regret it.
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

Combeferre gets ready for his new roommates.

Enjolras and Jehan smooth things over...kind of.

Chapter Notes

I'm back from vacation and short on time again, but I will have updates along as quickly as I can. And I'm sorry for failing miserably at answering comments. I still love getting them, I swear! And I will respond eventually.

Grantaire knocked on Combeferre’s door and was met with a hurried shout of “don’t come in!” Taken a bit aback, as that was very much not like Combeferre, he knocked much more hesitantly. “’Ferre? Is something wrong?”

“Everything’s fine, but I need you to stay out there for another five-sorry, maybe more like ten minutes!”

Grantaire glanced behind him at the stairwell landing, which looked thoroughly unappealing as far as spots to loiter went. It wasn’t a bad stairwell by any stretch of the imagination, just dusty and a bit narrow, so if one of Combeferre’s neighbors showed up there was no way Grantaire wouldn’t be in their way. He muttered under his breath and sat down on the steps.

He was fresh from a shift at the comic book store, so Grantaire had a bag of reading material with him. Not accepting his poverty as an excuse for falling behind the major story arcs, his boss was letting him borrow issues from the store as long as he returned them in sellable condition (Bahorel was ecstatic). Grantaire cracked open the new all girl X-book and got about halfway through when one of Combeferre’s neighbors happened by and gave him a funny look. He decided he was done waiting for his friend to finish whatever the fuck he was doing.

“’Ferre, whatever it is I don’t care. I’m coming in.”

“Wait, Grantaire-”

He barged into the living room and found Combeferre shirtless, covered in cat hair, and trying to shove balls and balls of it into a plastic bag while the cats growled and hissed (except Raoul, who was rubbing against a brush). Combeferre’s abandoned shirt, whose original color was impossible to determine underneath the orange and black fur, was lying on the ground by Grantaire’s feet. Grantaire stopped, and for a moment he and Combeferre just stood there staring at each other, then Grantaire slowly pulled his t-shirt up over his nose.

“I was-um, the shedding blade…it just…please go back out into the hall until I can clean this up.”
“Yeah. Sure.”

It took ‘Ferre closer to twenty minutes before he deemed the room safe for Grantaire and his allergies, and by then he was fully clothed again, wearing cat hair-free sweats. “I’m sorry,” Combeferre said, sounding breathless. “I started reading and I lost track of time. I was going to have the cats groomed and the place all vacuumed before you got out of work so you wouldn’t…uh…sorry.”

Grantaire laughed. “It’s okay. My allergies are usually pretty mild, but this little shit kicked it up.” He nudged Raoul with his toe and the cat took a swipe at him. “I think it was because I couldn’t keep him off my damn pillow. Y’know, that and we’ve been living in a shit box. Uh…when me and Enj move in…you won’t have to do this crazy obsessive level grooming.”

“Honestly, I meant to do it anyway. It’s good to groom them with the shedding blade every now and then, especially now that the weather’s getting hotter.” He threw a resentful look at Gladiator, who was still hissing. “Hear that you little jerk? It’s good for you.”

Gladiator looked less than convinced. He let out a low yowl before slinking off into the other room.

Grantaire set his bag down on the floor and sat on the couch while Combeferre picked up Logan and apologetically scratched his ears. “So Enjolras is convinced we’re going to be terrible roommates,” Grantaire said.

“He said that to you too?” Combeferre asked, smirking. “I told him we’re actually friends.”

“Yeah, me too. Good. My paranoia was kicking up again. I thought you had some sort of problem with me still that I didn’t know about.”

Combeferre shook his head. “Nope. We’re good. Actually, I’m rather looking forward to ganging up on Enjolras with you. When school starts back up again, how much easier will it be to make him go to bed when he tries to read past the point of a study headache with two of us laying into him?”

“Actually, I’ve never had a problem there.”

“Oh?” Combeferre set the cat down and sat on the coffee table, looking intrigued. “What the hell do you do? Because I’ve been fighting that bad habit since middle school.”

Grantaire sighed, looking a bit embarrassed, and scrubbed a hand through his hair. “Don’t you dare tell him, but…” He looked down at his slightly shaky hands, then slowly looked back up, keeping his eyes wide and wounded looking. “Enj, please…can you just sit with me for just a little bit? I’m having a hard time tonight and I just, I could really use…I mean, just for a little while. I don’t want to get in the way of your studies. I know how important your work is to you, but if I could just steal you for like a minute…?”

Combeferre bit back a snort. “Sorry. I shouldn’t laugh but…damn.”

“It’s only a little evil, right? I mean, I know I’m taking advantage of how much he worries about me, but it gets him to put his books away and go to bed. I trick him into agreeing to cuddle for fifteen minutes, and he’s so exhausted that he’s out cold in under five.”

“I have no issues with any behavior that makes Enjolras take care of himself.”

Grantaire grinned. “Living with you’s going to be fucking awesome. You’re still sure you’re okay with it?”
Combeferre rolled his eyes. “Yes, for the billionth time. So shall we figure out what we need to do to the place to get ready for you guys to move in? Thanks to the Thenardiers staying with me so long, I don’t think I’ll have to condense my things very much to fit you guys in here. But you must have some things that we’ll be putting in the common areas.”

“I think you already have half of Enjolras’ books.” Grantaire rubbed at his neck. “We have some kitchen stuff too. I dunno. It shouldn’t be too bad.” He climbed to his feet and followed Combeferre into the kitchen.

They were clearing out a couple of cabinets for the couple’s dishes and smaller appliances when Grantaire got a call from Courfeyrac. He hopped down from the counter he’d been sitting on and answered it. “Hey dude. What’s up?”

“I just got a call from Mom. She wants to do the family trip thing next week and I folded, or rather, I was outvoted. We’re going to hit up New York, just like you wanted. Are you gonna be able to come?”

Grantaire frowned. “I doubt it. Some notice would have helped.”

“Well we do it at the same time every year…”

“Yeah, but you guys just sent me and Enj away for a week. I can’t get another week off from work, and besides, we need the money. I’m sorry dude, but I can’t come this year.” Which sucked on a variety of levels. Grantaire had been tagging along on Courfeyrac’s family vacations since he was sixteen, and considered his week of continuous mothering from Bridget one of the highlights of his year.

He could hear the frustration in Courfeyrac’s voice. “Shit. I’m going to go fucking nuts if I have to spend an entire week alone with my parents.”

“I’d trade.”

“Then see if one of your coworkers can cover your shifts,” Courfeyrac wheedled.

“Fucking no! Enjolras and I need the money. I don’t get paid time off at a fucking part time summer job, Courf, and we just took time off.”

“Oh, fine. Be that way.”

“What, responsible?” Grantaire asked, rolling his eyes.

Courfeyrac seemed to brighten at that. “Yeah. You be as responsible as you want. I’ll just whine someone irresponsible into coming with me.” With that he hung up.

Combeferre was looking at Grantaire with a mildly puzzled expression. Grantaire quickly surmised the situation for him. “Betcha anything Bahorel’s getting a call right now.”

Combeferre grinned. “I’d say that’s a pretty fair bet.”

In theory Feuilly was in his room reading through one of the books he’d agreed to store for Enjolras when he’d moved out of his old place (now that Enjolras was moving in with Combeferre he was going to be able to take them back, and Feuilly had only managed to read through six of them so far). In reality, he was listening to the noises of the apartment while periodically looking up and peering through the one inch gap he’d left his door open. He wasn’t even sure what he was waiting for;
really, his reaction was almost instinctual. He just knew somehow that when Eponine got back from visiting Peter Parker she was going to need him.

He could hear the other Thenardiers in the living room already. Azelma was watching her brothers, so therefore they were watching a movie. Really, Feuilly supposed he couldn’t call it a lazy choice of Azelma’s. Picking out a movie that was gory or risqué enough to hold Gavroche’s attention without disturbing Little R was actually quite the challenge. It still wasn’t as involved an activity as what Eponine did with her brothers though.

He’d only chewed through the first chapter of Enjolras’ annotated Heart of Darkness before Eponine got back. As Feuilly expected, there was something not quite right in her tone of voice when she greeted her brothers and sisters, something just a tad too cheerful that didn’t fully mask her emotions. Before he fully realized what he was doing Feuilly had crossed the room and thrown his door open. He looked out into the living room and watched for a moment as she anxiously fiddled with her messy ponytail.

Then, without warning, she grabbed Gavroche and pulled him into a tight hug he most definitely resented. “What the fucking fuck are you doing?”

“Gav, don’t swear,” Eponine snapped, her voice thick with unshed tears. “Just be a good kid for once and hug me back, okay?”

That voice unsettled Gavroche as much as everyone else, because he went limp and let her hug him.

Feuilly snuck up behind them and gently patted Eponine’s shoulder. She dropped her brother, but she kept her head down, not looking at any of them. Feuilly shot a look Azelma’s way. “Do you mind watching them a little longer?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I can do that.”

“You’ll probably have to put Little R to bed,” Feuilly said.

“Hey, he’s not the problem child. Just get back in time to wrestle Gav into bed for the night for me and you guys can totes take a drive.”

Little R nodded his agreement. “I’ll go to bed right at eight o’clock. But if you wanted to get me a McFluffy and leave it in the freezer for me, that’d be okay too. I’ll even go to bed at seven thirty if you do that.”

Eponine laughed, a little desperately and with none of the bite they were used to. “Sure kiddo. We can get you a McFlurry-and you too,” she said, cutting off Gavroche who was clearly about to negotiate for his own treat.

“Right then. I suppose I’ll be good for Zelma.”

“Thanks kiddo.” Eponine smirked at him, then scooped Little R up for his goodnight hug and kiss, since she wouldn’t be home to do his bedtime routine. Feuilly ruffled his hair, and then he wrapped an arm around Eponine and steered her outside.

They climbed into his car, Feuilly handed her the cable so she could plug in her mp3 player, and he started off for the beach, figuring it was best to grab their McFlurries on the way home if they had to get some for the boys. “So what happened?” he asked, once Eponine had settled in with an Adele heavy playlist.

“Enjolras was right. About everything. Mrs. Lawrence is a horrible bitch-”
“I thought we knew that already,” Feuilly said with a frown.

At first, their dealings with the Lawrences had been…not pleasant, exactly, but polite on the surface. That had gone out the window when Enjolras had sat down with Eponine and Feuilly and told them just why Gavroche and Little R were living with them again.

Eponine had had a good few conversations with Little R since then, wanting to make absolutely certain, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that he knew he was safe with Grantaire. She felt hurt on her friend’s behalf, and angry, and powerless because she couldn’t keep her brothers from being exposed to that awful woman. Feuilly asked Little R a few leading questions of his own, just to see what the kid had made of the situation, and he ultimately decided that the damage wasn’t too bad. Mrs. Lawrence hadn’t been graphic; Little R had no idea what sorts of actions ‘men like Grantaire’ supposedly wanted to engage in with little boys. He’d been frightened by the vagueness of the accusations as much as anything.

Now that respect had been lost on Eponine and Feuilly’s end, the claws were coming out in equal measure on the Lawrences’ end. The woman was taking shots at Eponine’s lifestyle—spending so much time with strange young men, living with one even. Working a low income job, taking government assistance, not even being able to drive. The barbs didn’t do much, as Eponine was steadily crawling up from much worse. So the bitch wanted to take shots at her for hanging out with men like Combeferre and Grantaire and Courfeyrac, and for living with Feuilly? She was proud of the friends she had now. They were a damn sight better than Montparnasse and Brujon.

“So what is getting to you?” Feuilly asked, once Eponine vented about the catty little shots that she insisted weren’t actually bothering her.

She chewed her lip and gazed out the window. “Peter Parker doesn’t want to come home. He doesn’t even want me to try to get custody of him. He wants to get adopted by the Lawrences.”

Feuilly had expected that, but he still didn’t like hearing it. “I’m sorry, Eponine.”

She let out a bitter laugh. “He’s letting them call him Michel. Well, they call him Mike so it won’t sound like a girl’s name, but…yeah. We’ve lost him. He’s turned into a little yuppy bastard. He cares more about having his own bedroom, and lots of useless toys and a fucking fat little dog than living with his brothers and sisters. He’s going to be a spoiled little shit with money. That horrible woman’s going to ruin him.”

They’d just pulled into the parking lot outside the beach. Feuilly shut off the car, turned in his seat, and gently grasped Eponine’s shoulder. “Try to be positive, okay? He’s safe. He’ll be cared for. He’s spent enough time with you that you’ve been able to make an impression on him, so if they do want to turn him into a yuppy it’s going to be an uphill battle, and so far the Lawrences aren’t trying to cut off contact, and they’re still going to try to help you get custody of Little R and Gavroche, right?”

Eponine nodded. “They don’t want Little R and Gavroche anymore. Assholes. Y’know Feuilly, I don’t get people who just give up on kids.”

“I don’t either, but I’ve certainly seen a lot of it. None of my foster parents ever tried to adopt me. Really, Peter Parker’s lucky. He’s going to be okay.” He put as much faith as he could into the words, and even though her eyes were welling with tears, Eponine started to smile.

“Y-you’re right. Really, you’re right. No matter how this mess turns out, even if we get split up, it’s still better than how we were living. He’s away from my parents and their sketchy friends, and as long as I keep things nice with Lizzie, she’ll let me see him. I’ll be able to try to help him grow into a decent man.”
“It’s all you can do. He loves you, Eponine. You’re his sister. You’ll still be able to guide him even if he’s not living with you.”

She wiped at her eyes, and the tears threatening to spill were held at bay. “Thanks, hon. You know, you always know exactly what I need to hear. And what’s even better is that I believe you when you say it. You’re too good a person to bullshit me just to make me feel better.”

“It wouldn’t help in the long run,” Feuilly said. “Plus, you’re too smart to bullshit.”

“I like to think so.”

For a moment something tense and uncomfortable hovered between them. For some god awful reason, Feuilly was tempted to move in for the kiss. They were in a parked car under a streetlamp and her eyes were still a little wet from unshed tears: bad movie logic said that this was the time.

Feuilly still couldn’t do it. It didn’t seem fair to force her to deal with him too, not when she was already upset. What if Bahorel was wrong? If Eponine didn’t like him like that then she needed a friend way too much for him to deprive her of that.

So the hand on her shoulder remained friendly, and when she’d calmed down he put on a playlist of 90s chick rock she’d made for him, keeping in mind the car rides he’d taken with his mother when he was a child. They drove aimlessly, singing along with Jewel, the Cranberries, Edie Brickell, Alanis Morrisette, Concrete Blonde, and Sarah McLachlan.

And by the time they purchased the promised McFlurries, Feuilly could just hear Bahorel’s voice in his head calling him out on being a coward.

Marius was slumped down in his seat on the bus with his earbuds in, trying to relax at least a little before what promised to be a miserable shift at Brammer Street. Up until fairly recently he’d absolutely loved the job. It was easy, fast paced enough for his shifts to fly by, and he got to meet really interesting, quirky people. He loved working with Eponine and having his other friends come by to hang out during his shifts, and that pleasantness had only increased when they’d hired Enjolras and Jehan.

That had all changed when Enjolras and Jehan had gotten into their fight. Marius was enough on the periphery to not know exactly what it was about, but he figured it had something to do with Jehan and Courfeyrac’s break up, and therefore he was inclined to sympathize with Jehan. He figured Enjolras, with his straightforward and frankly somewhat insensitive manner, had said something he shouldn’t have. However, he was not involved, he had no desire to be involved, and Enjolras scared him a little.

He accepted that until they made up, the shifts he worked with the two of them were going to suck. Cosette was on standby, ready to comfort him with a phone call as soon as he got out of work.

Marius stowed his earbuds as soon as he got off the bus, as it was only a short walk to the café from the bus stop. He sighed when he saw Jehan’s bike chained up out back by the dumpsters, and he sighed again when he noticed all the SUVs, convertibles, and bugs indicative of their more feminine teenage customer base.

Enjolras and Jehan were both behind the counter, somehow managing to do their work while keeping as much distance as possible between them. They were serving a long line of teens, but the atmosphere in the place was pretty subdued. The kids had picked up on the tension between the two pretty boy baristas, and they didn’t seem to know what to make of it.
Marius went out back, put his bag away, and tied on his apron. He punched in, took a deep breath, and went out front for what promised to be an awkward, uncomfortable five hours.

Business had died down substantially by the time Jehan’s shift crawled to its close. The pretty boy barista fan club had generally gotten their drinks to-go, not feeling quite comfortable staying in the café amid the tension. Jehan supposed the fact that he and Marius weren’t being very flirty hadn’t helped.

“I suppose you’ll have no problem closing up just the two of you?” Jehan murmured. He stayed late sometimes, if they were busy enough to need three people at the end of the night.

Enjolras didn’t say anything, didn’t look at Jehan even, but he gave a slight nod. Marius forced himself to smile. “I think we’ve got it, Jehan.”

“Do you want me to clean the bathrooms before I go?”

“Actually, if you want to be really helpful…” Marius looked around the café, satisfied himself that it was free of customers, then came out from behind the counter and hopped up on a table. “I think we should talk.”


“I’ve left it. I’ve given you guys a week, and you haven’t done jack shit to get over this thing between you. And don’t try to tell me it’s not my business. I work with you both, I have to deal with being miserable at work when we’re scheduled together, and besides that, you’re supposed to be friends. Can we try talking? Please?” The kid took out the big guns, and threw them both the puppy eyes.

Jehan chewed his lip and looked away. He’d accepted that he’d have to talk to Enjolras about this eventually, but he was hoping to do so in private. However, Marius could be pretty convincing when he wanted to be. Thankfully, Enjolras continued to be immune to the puppy’s charms.

Enjolras shook his head. “I’ve got nothing to say.”

Jehan blinked back some highly irrational tears that he really could have done without. “I…I’m going to punch out and get my things.”

“Guys, come on!” Marius insisted. “This is getting ridiculous. You’ve been good friends for, what, three years? And you’ve got too many friends in common to go on like this. You’ve got to fix it sometime and it might as well be now.”

Jehan rushed out back, put on his scarf with shaking hands, and slipped his bag on. He almost forgot to punch out, but he doubled back to do it, and then resolutely charged back out into the main room. Marius was right; they needed to fix this. And as far as audiences went, the puppy really wasn’t so bad.

He was definitely capable of admitting when he’d behaved badly, and Enjolras deserved an apology.

Jehan was just in time to hear Marius begging Enjolras to take back whatever hurtful thing he’d said. Rather than round on Marius and inform him of his mistake, Enjolras was disturbingly quiet. He’d slouched down a bit against the counter, head down. The poor thing presented quite the pathetic sight, what with his diminished weight and the shadows under his eyes.

“Marius,” Jehan said, speaking softly but firmly. “Enjolras wasn’t in the wrong.”
“Oh. Wait, really? Oh, Enjolras, I’m sorry. I-I just assumed…”

Enjolras turned a bemused look Marius’ way. “It’s okay Marius. Besides, it does take two to have a conflict. I shouldn’t have spoken to you about Courfeyrac when it was fairly obvious you weren’t ready for the conversation.”

“But the things I said about you and Grantaire were terrible,” Jehan said, disliking the little waver his voice gave. “Really, Enjolras, I’ve been feeling terribly guilty about it, I just didn’t know how to get started apologizing. It was stupid, and petty. And even if it was true, so what? Grantaire’s happy and healthy now. Who cares if you’re changing him?”

“I care,” Enjolras snapped. He closed his eyes and took a quick breath. “Sorry. It’s a bit of a sensitive subject for me.”

“I know. I know, so it was cruel of me to jab at you about it. I’m really sorry, dear. Can you forgive me? I was just lashing out blindly. I’m so sorry.”

Enjolras gave a stiff nod, and even let Jehan hug him, which was really how he knew he was forgiven.

Marius was wide eyed, with very little idea of what had just happened, but as was his habit he didn’t let that get to him.

Jehan and Enjolras jumped apart when the door opened, the bells hanging on it announcing a new customer. Marius was all smiles when he greeted the kid, and by the time they’d made the nervous twenty something wannabe poet his latte and gotten him out the door, Jehan was also gone.

Enjolras let out a relieved sigh and pushed his bangs out of his face. Marius gave him a funny look. “Enjolras…is everything okay?”

Enjolras shook his head. “Not in the least.”

“But…he apologized. And you forgave him. Everything’s back to normal now, right?”

“No, Marius. He wounded me a little too deeply for a simple apology to suffice. I had no idea Jehan could wound like that. He’d always seemed so sensitive, so gentle…I’m going to have to be guarded around him from now on, and I suggest you do the same. When he wants to turn on someone…”

He left the comment hanging in the air and Marius, too disturbed by what he’d heard, left it hanging as well.

He didn’t mention Jehan again for the rest of the night.

“So what, pray tell, does taking a trip out with your family entail?” Bahorel asked.

Courfeyrac shrugged. “We’ll have to go out to dinner with them at least a few times, and guide them through some tourist traps. Take Mom’s arm while she’s getting on and off the bus, hold her purse so she can take pictures, that sort of thing.”

“Uh huh.” He looked less than enthused. Luckily, Courfeyrac had accosted him with the vacation invite while the guy was at work, so there was no escape aside from zoning out. Bahorel was quite literally trapped behind the sales counter (although it was a little distracting talking to the guy while he was dressed up like a pirate).
“But the nights are ours,” Courfeyrac assured him quickly. “And my folks always give me a good amount of spending money, and as long as we stumble back to the hotel before one in the morning she won’t ask any questions.”

He perked up at that description. “Do I have to escort you to any fruity plays?”

Courfeyrac frowned. “As I’m a theater major, I would like to go to at least one show. And y’know, considering I have sex with women from time to time and you’re a flaming drag queen, it’s a bit rich of you to criticize one of my passions for being fruity.”

“The irony didn’t escape me. You didn’t answer my question, Courf. If I go with you, can I skip out on the fruity play?”

Courfeyrac scowled. Grantaire would have sat through a play with him. Possibly just to get under Courfeyrac’s skin bitching about it later, but he still wouldn’t have made Courfeyrac go alone. Still though, he didn’t have a lot of options. Joly, Legle, and Musichetta were busy planning the wedding, Marius and Cosette were spending every bit of the summer they could together in anticipation of Cosette leaving for school in the fall, Grantaire and Enjolras were too poor to go, Eponine and Feuilly were in the exact same boat, and Combeferre, in addition to being a shitty bar crawler, was busy helping Enjolras and Grantaire move into his place. Bahorel wasn’t just the best choice; he was the only choice.

“Yes, you can skip out on the fruity play.”

“Cool. Then I’m in.”

Combeferre, helpful individual that he was, had taken an incredibly active role in settling Enjolras and Grantaire into his apartment. As soon as they’d both agreed to move in, he started moving his furniture around, clearing space for them. Well before the end of the month, when the lease on Grantaire’s studio expired and they’d be able to move in, Combeferre switched his room from the actual bedroom into the study.

His mother happened to be a magically talented yard-saler, so he told her to keep an eye out for a bedframe. Not only did she find them a bedframe, but she also got a box spring and a mattress. So, towards the end of June, when Enjolras and Grantaire had already begun moving in some of their possessions but were still living in their shithole of a studio, Combeferre bullied his brother into helping him bring in a real, actual bed supported by a frame. He hadn’t said anything to them, and wasn’t planning on it either, figuring it would make a pretty good surprise for the couple the next time they came over with boxes.

Gerard was the one who found ‘the box of depravity’ as he’d called it. They’d had to shift around some of Enjolras and Grantaire’s boxes in order to get the mattress and the box spring in, and Gerard bumped into a stack of cardboard boxes, spilling the contents of the one on top all over the floor.

“Holy shit!” Gerard yelled.

“What are you—” Combeferre started to whine, but no, he had to agree with his little brother on this. “Holy shit!”

Apparently even though the couple couldn’t afford food, Grantaire and Enjolras had somehow accrued an entire box of designer lingerie, three different sets of handcuffs, a selection of silk scarves, a few pairs of stiletto heels, makeup, flavored lubes, blindfolds, and body oils.

Gerard held up one of the corsets, looking extraordinarily confused. “Isn’t Enjolras gay? I thought
you said he was living with a boyfriend?”

“Yeah…Grantaire’s definitely a man. Apparently they’re a bit kinkier than I thought.”

“I guess.” Gerard’s face was bright red. Combeferre figured he must be just as flustered looking.

“Who do you think wears the lady stuff?”

“Y’know, I’m not going to think about it.” Because if he thought about it too much, he’d remember all those days when he’d noticed both of his friends looking suspiciously clean shaven and well groomed. Hell, he’d caught Enjolras wearing nail polish once. “Just put everything back.”

To Combeferre’s horror as a big brother, his seventeen year old baby brother couldn’t seem to put the sexual paraphernalia away without giving each item a personal inspection. Eventually, Combeferre shooed him away and shoved the last of the lingerie back into the box. He bullied Gerard into finishing their task, and the two of them set up the bed.

When they were finished, Gerard eyed the other unmarked boxes of miscellaneous possessions. “Do you think they have any porn?”

Considering the fact that Grantaire had been drawing naughty pictures of Enjolras even before they’d started dating (not that anyone but Enjolras was supposed to know about those), Combeferre figured there was a good chance. However, damned if his brother was going to lay eyes on it. “If you go looking around for porn in Enjolras’ things and he catches you, I’m absolutely certain he’ll kill you.”

Gerard rolled his eyes, but he dutifully followed Combeferre out of the bedroom and into the kitchen to split the pizza he’d been bribed over with.

Chapter End Notes

The box of lingerie didn't come out of nowhere. Those of you who've read Pinup Boy have probably been waiting for something like that to happen, right? ;)

By the by, Gerard's a brand new OC. I'm debating how little or how much to use him. I've got at least one fun story idea for him so far...
Enjolras was in the process of cleaning out the bake case for the night, and thankfully hadn’t gotten to the point where he bagged sandwiches for himself and Grantaire because the owner of the café walked in just as he was about to pick out his meals for the next three days. Feeling a deep sense of regret he’d never have appreciated before his descent into poverty, Enjolras dutifully started throwing them out.

“Hey Enjolras. Can I talk to you for a second?” Jacques asked. He leaned against the counter, wearing a cheerful smile.

“Sure.” Enjolras straightened up, trying his best not to count out how many expired sandwiches were left in the case. He probably wouldn’t be able to grab them anyhow, as he couldn’t see Jacques leaving before he finished the task. Although he could fish them back out of the barrel after his boss left if he was careful about where he threw them…

“First off, I haven’t really checked in with you since you started working here. How are you liking it so far? Did the girls do a good job training you?”

Enjolras nodded. “I think everything’s going great.”

“Mm. Me too. I thought business was picking up just from Marius, but now that you and Jehan are here I can’t get over the numbers I’m seeing. Eponine’s got a good eye for staffing, it seems. And as long as all of you kids are comfortable working the counter, I’ve got to assume she’s good at training too.”

“She is.”

Jacques nodded. “So do you think it’d be fair to say she’s responsible for the increase in business?”

“Definitely,” Enjolras said, without hesitation.

“And you don’t mind taking direction from a teenage girl, right?”

“Not at all,” Enjolras said, feeling a bit offended on Eponine’s behalf. “She’s competent and professional.” Well… mostly professional. Jacques didn’t need to know about her insistence on flirting with the customers, thus preying on vulnerable or delusional teenagers, as the case may be. “Eponine’s age and gender are hardly a factor. She’s got a talent for what she’s doing, and that’s all I care about.”

“That’s all I care about too. But you kids must’ve noticed I’m not actually in the café very much
anymore these days. I used to be here all the time though. Anyway, I just wanted to get your
thoughts. Thanks, Enjolras.” He pushed back from the counter and started for the door.

Enjolras eyed his retreating back in confusion. “Jacques? Do you mind if I ask what that was about?”

Jacques turned back to him and smiled. “As of the next pay period, Eponine’s going to be your new
manager. But keep it to yourself. I want to tell her in person tomorrow.”

Enjolras just managed to bite back an excited squeal that was much more characteristic of someone
like Jehan or Marius, and toned his enthusiasm down to a wide smile. “Jacques, that’s fantastic! That
promotion is going to make a real difference for her.”

Jacques shrugged. “I don’t know about that. The girl’s got a drive, and now that she’s graduated
high school, well, I figured a promotion was probably the only way I was going to hold onto her.
Anyway, I’ll let you finish up the close. See you later.”

“Good night.” Still smiling, Enjolras finished cleaning out the case and went about the other night
time closing procedures.

He was in such a good mood, lost in cheerful fantasies about Eponine’s promotion and how good it
would look to the social workers involved in her brothers’ case, that he forgot to fish the sandwiches
back out of the trash.

He remembered when he was sitting on the bus on his way home. For one irrational moment,
Enjolras thought about getting off at the next stop, running back to the café, digging through the
dumpsters, and checking to see if the sandwiches were still edible. Then he realized what a bad idea
all of that was and started worrying that Grantaire was going to be mad at him again.

Enjolras took a deep breath, and then had to smirk a little even though he really wasn’t amused in the
slightest. But this was how Grantaire felt more often than not; like he’d fucking up and deserved to be
chewed out for it. When their situations were reversed, which was the norm, Enjolras usually
reminded Grantaire that he cared about him more than whatever the mistake in question was.
Accordingly, Enjolras took out his phone, texted Grantaire, and apologized for throwing out their
supper, mentally chanting that he was more important to Grantaire than sandwiches the entire time.

He was almost home before he got a return text. Grantaire informed him that he’d just gotten out of
work, and that he’d hit up the convenience store on the way home and make them a cheap supper to
replace the sandwiches. Enjolras felt a surge of relief. He could feel tension leaving his body as he
read back the text, which was again, just ridiculous. They were sandwiches.

And sandwiches were also the first thing Grantaire had freaked out on him over since they’d started
dating. He hadn’t even been that angry when Enjolras repeatedly reinjured himself during his
hospitalization.

Enjolras shook his head. “God, R. You’ve given me the most bizarre new phobia I could have
imagined.”

He beat Grantaire home, and so busied himself with some packing while he waited for his boyfriend.
Their possessions were mostly boxed up, and many of them even transferred over to Combeferre’s
already, but as Grantaire wasn’t the most organized person in the world, Enjolras found himself
repacking and reorganizing a lot of the boxes Grantaire had done when the surly artist wasn’t home.

Grantaire nudged the door open with his shoulder about twenty minutes later, earbuds in and laden
with a few plastic shopping bags. Enjolras rolled his eyes. “Before you say jack shit about the
Enjolras smiled warmly. He took the bags from Grantaire, set them on the counter, and was promptly blocked in for a kiss. He reached up and took out Grantaire’s headphones, then gave him another quick peck. “How was work?”

“Oh, getting real sick of hearing assholes pontificate about the Man of Steel movie though. What about you? Other than getting distracted into throwing out our meals for the next couple of days, how’d it go?”

Enjolras frowned and let out a nervous breath. “I really am sorry about the sandwi—”

“Enjolras, I don’t care. I only freaked out last time because of stress. This clearly was not a malicious action.” Grantaire grinned and poked at Enjolras’ still worryingly concave stomach. “But, y’know, you kinda need those sandwiches, so just try not to make a habit of it, okay?”

“Eponine said if I don’t put on at least five pounds she’s going to start force feeding me the leftover cookie dough. Apparently my tips are suffering.”

Grantaire ran a hand through Enjolras’ hair, toying with the lank golden curls. “You know I didn’t even notice you’d been losing weight. Or how drawn you’ve been looking. Ponine and Courf had to point it out to me. Apparently I’m that fucking blind to the possibility of you looking under the weather.”

“Oh good. I guess I can let myself go then,” Enjolras teased. “Bring on the cookie dough. I think I’ll shoot for sixty pounds instead of five.”

“Okay, that I would notice.”

“I think we need to test that hypothesis before we draw any conclusions.”

Grantaire pulled away, shaking his head, and Enjolras leaned away from the counter and started unpacking the bags of groceries. “So what did you get? I was expecting ramen and frozen vegetables.”

“Well, since we’re about to move in with ‘Ferre and therefore have a little more money for the food budget, I thought I’d get all fancy and treat us to quesadillas.”

Enjolras frowned at the ingredients he’d just emptied from the shopping bags and turned a confused look to his lover. “Don’t you need cheese for those?”

It was Grantaire’s turn to frown. “I did get cheese. It’s right there.”

Enjolras picked up the block of individually wrapped and hideously orange store-brand slices and gave it a skeptical look. “Actually, I believe there was a lawsuit that prevented companies from labeling this stuff as cheese. It doesn’t actually have enough cheese in it for the word to apply. See? It’s right there on the packaging. ‘Cheese food product.’”

“Y’know, I never noticed that.”

“No, I don’t expect you would have,” Enjolras said, not sure if he was amused or horrified that he was going to be consuming this stuff. Because he was really, truly hungry and whatever concoction Grantaire cooked up for him would be going into his stomach, no matter how terrible it was or how sick it was going to make him.
Grantaire took their congealed vegetable oil out of the fridge (he called it margarine) and started buttering flour tortillas. “Y’know, I almost sprang for sour cream for you. Kinda glad I didn’t bother, if this is how you’re going to treat my cheese food product.” He stuck his tongue out at Enjolras, who was reading the ingredients to the store brand salsa with a frown.

“Do they really need corn syrup in salsa?”

“Probably not. Insert activist rant about corn subsidies here.”

“Oh shut up.”

Grantaire cooked up three of the mini quesadillas for each of them, plated them, and then they sat cross legged on the mattress with their “food” and a glass of tap water each. Enjolras bit into the first quesadilla, made a memorable face, and managed to swallow it down. He took a long swig of tap water after finishing though, as spitting the quesadilla back onto the plate had been a very near thing.

“Y’know, the bland ass salsa almost makes up for the plasticy texture of the cheese food product,” Grantaire said, then cringed. “I’m sorry. I did try, really.”

“I appreciate that. Grantaire…I’ve been meaning to ask you about this, and please don’t take it the wrong way. I’m just curious. How did you feed yourself before we started dating?”

Far from offended, Grantaire laughed. “It’s cool. I can totally see why you’d be curious. During the semester I get a student meal plan, and during breaks I eat a lot of ramen and pizza. Plus I usually spend a week with Courf’s family, and Bridget sends me off with tubs and tubs of home cooking that I keep in the freezer and zap as needed.”

“Ah.” He was curious about something else too, but he wasn’t sure he wanted to bring it up.

Grantaire seemed to sense that there was something more to the inquiry. “I scammed a lot of booze off of our friends.”

“I wasn’t going to…it’s just…it’s so expensive, and you used to drink so much…”

Grantaire nodded. “I did. For future reference, Bahorel’s a wicked enabler. He used to buy me drinks all the time when we hit up bars, or we’d hit up a liquor store and crash at his place or something. I probably couldn’t have quit if he and Courf hadn’t done their sympathy dry period when I first started. I’m cool with them drinking now, but at first…that helped a lot. Helped me break patterns. And, y’know, realize that my friends would still hang out with me even if I was sober.”

“‘Taile, I think everyone prefers you sober,” Enjolras corrected. “I know I do.” He let out an exaggerated sigh, pretending to look disappointed. “Even if you do grope me less this way, but we all have to make sacrifices.”

“Hey, I only grope you less in public,” Grantaire said. “And it’s not like you responded all that enthusiastically to the old-me’s drunk groping.”

Enjolras, who had had enough of his awful-tastic quesadilla and was interested in getting a new flavor in his mouth to drown it out, set his plate aside and leaned back against the mattress. Grantaire waggled his eyebrows. “I feel somewhat differently on the subject now,” Enjolras said.

Enjolras was on him in a second, kissing him passionately with the taste of sickly sweet salsa on his tongue. Enjolras fisted his hands in thick raven hair and groaned into his lover’s touch.

Enjolras felt a pang of inadequacy that was thoroughly foreign to him when he pushed Grantaire
down against the mattress and straddled his lap. Grantaire looked absolutely stunning. His beautiful eyes were more striking than ever now that the skin around them was only marred by the crinkle of a smile, as opposed to the heavy greyish shadows he’d carried before. His skin was flushed and healthy. He looked radiant, really.

And Enjolras was skeletal, his usually golden skin was grey tinged from his pallor, and his hair was lank and stringy.

Grantaire found him just as arousing as ever though, if the stirring in his cargo pants was any indication, so Enjolras wasted no more time on brooding thoughts, divested his lover of his clothes, and turned his attention to giving head. His goal had been to drown out the flavor of that horrendous quesadilla, after all.

Combeferre was vacuuming cat hair off the scratching posts when Enjolras came by to move in a few more boxes, and so didn’t hear him and missed his reaction to the bed. He figured it must have been favorable though, because when he poked his head into the bedroom later that afternoon his bestie looked like he was in heaven.

Enjolras had changed into comfy clothes, set up a fan by the bedside, and was reading through a book on the Bread and Roses strike while wearing an expression that could most accurately be described as rapturous.

Combeferre grinned. “I just made some tea. Would you like a mug?”

“Yes please. Hey ‘Ferre, have you ever read up on the Bread and Roses strike before?”

Combeferre sat down on the edge of the bed and leaned over Enjolras’ shoulder to scan the title and author of the book. “Oh, Bruce Watson. We read snatches of that in Historic Heritage of the North Shore class. I really liked it.”

“Yeah, it’s a pretty fantastic read so far.” Enjolras closed the book and indulged in a deep sigh. “It’s really unfortunate. Just over a hundred years ago, the working class was accomplishing so much. Then politicians cooked up the red scare, pushed everyone into a fevered fear of some sinister other that was going to destroy the fabric of American society with policies in working peoples’ favor, and now average people won’t even consider socialism as a viable economic alternative to capitalism.”

“Sorry Enj, but you’re kind of preaching to the choir here.”

“I know. That’s part of the reason we’re friends.”

“Can I talk to you about something else for a minute?”

Enjolras quirked an eyebrow. “You’ve got a concern already? That was quick. We haven’t even officially moved in yet.” As it was a joke he expected Combeferre to smile and shake his head, but when his friend started fidgeting with a rubber bracelet he was wearing Enjolras frowned, surprised that a genuine concern about their new living arrangement was being brought up already.

“Look…I had Gerard over to help me move in the bed for you guys and he, uh, he knocked over one of your boxes and…saw what was inside.”

Enjolras’ face went white. He sat up, dropping his book in the process. It was pretty obvious, what with how visibly discomfited Combeferre was, which box they’d seen. Enjolras buried his face in his hands. “Oh god. I am so sorry, ‘Ferre.”
“Hey, it’s cool. I just figured the only decent thing to do was warn you.” Combeferre gave him a reassuring if slightly awkward pat on the arm. “Gerard’s kind of an idiot right now, what with being a teenager. He’s still intimidated by you, but the brat might say something stupid so I thought it was best to tip you off.”

“If he tells your parents I’ll kill him.”

“I won’t hold it against you. Hell, I’ll help you hide the body.”

Enjolras smirked. “You’re a good friend, ‘Ferre.”

“If it helps, I can’t see him wanting to talk about kinky sex with my folks to begin with.”

Enjolras laughed. His face lost that deathly pallor and switched to more of a humiliated fuchsia. “Um…the, um, discovery doesn’t bother you…does it?”

Combeferre shook his head. “It’s certainly not what I expected. I mean, the last time we talked about sex you were still feeling prudish and uncomfortable. I take it that’s changed.”

Still blushing, Enjolras nodded. “Not entirely. I’m still painfully awkward about a lot of things. But as it turns out, I really enjoy being tied up while wearing feminine undergarments.”

“Ah.” Combeferre looked unsure of how to respond to that. “Um, good for you…I guess.” Good for Grantaire, come to think of it. “Warn me if you guys need the place to yourselves though. You’re, er, a bit more adventurous than I’d expected, from the looks of it anyway. This doesn’t seem like the kind of thing I’d want to overhear.”

Enjolras’ laugh was so uncomfortable it sounded painful. “Will do. And please let us know if you ever want us to clear out for one of your dates.”

Combeferre’s answering smile was a bit strained. “I’d better go check on that tea. It’s going to over-steep.”

“Ferre, is everything-”

“Fine, it’s fine.”

Except he hadn’t brought a date home in over a year, but really, everything was fine.

And Combeferre totally wasn’t thinking of calling Courfeyrac up to see if he still remembered that he’d said he was going to set him up. Because he didn’t actually want a blind date arranged by Courfeyrac…not really. That kind of date wasn’t going to solve his loneliness in the long run…

However, it would get him out of the apartment and away from the cats for a little while, and Combeferre privately admitted that that in and of itself was an admirable goal.

Eponine worked a four hour midshift the next day, during which Jacques dropped by with some new signs for their summer beverages, a few boxes of supplies, and the news that she was being promoted, given a title, a new full time schedule that would have her home in time for the school bus come September, and a two dollar pay raise.

She came remarkably close to fainting, which surprised her almost as much as the promotion, because Eponine wasn’t the sort of girl to faint.

Given the smile Enjolras was wearing while he covertly snapped a few pics of her with his phone,
Eponine rightly concluded he’d been aware of her promotion in advance, but she couldn’t be annoyed with him (though it would have been nice to be tipped off in advance so that she could appear more composed in front of her boss). She jumped over the counter and pulled him into a strangle-hug, much to Jacques’ amusement based on his laughter.

When Marius showed up for the closing he looked with some interest at Eponine’s new nametag (also dropped off by Jacques). “That’s not going to be required for all of us now, is it?”

So far they hadn’t been wearing nametags. All of their regulars seemed to know their names anyhow, but Marius liked the fact that at least a few of the demanding, infatuated teenagers he waited on didn’t know it and thus were more obvious when they feigned familiarity with him.

It was sad, really, how often it worked when the ditzy fangirls pretended they knew him already and therefore had a right to extended private conversations with him.

“Marius, read the new nametag,” Enjolras instructed.

“Doesn’t it just say Eponine?” But he peered over to read it anyway, and ended up gaping like a fish. Then he let out an inhuman sounding squeal and pulled Eponine into a hug that lifted her into the air. “Manager?! You’re the manager now?! Oh Ponine, that’s fantastic!”

“Put me down you jackass!” As Eponine’s laughter was ringing through the small space, Marius had to assume she didn’t mean the insult, but he carefully lowered her to the floor anyway.

“I’m so happy for you.”

“Yeah, I got that impression.”

“Have you told anyone yet?” Marius asked.

“I’ve been working. Feuilly’s picking me up in a half hour. I’ll tell him, and then Enjolras and I were thinking we’d do a round of drinks at the Corinth to celebrate. They’ll still be open when the two of you get out.”

Marius’ smile looked almost painful. “I’m definitely in. I haven’t punched in yet. Let me step outside and text Cosette the good news.”

He missed Eponine’s eye roll in his giddy eagerness to make sure his girlfriend could come along for the celebratory drinks, but the eye roll was good natured. “That boy. Like I would forget to invite Cosette. Honestly, after Feuilly, she and Musichetta are the next on my call list.”

“I still haven’t spent much time with Musichetta,” Enjolras commented in a not-quite-as-idly as he thought it was sort of tone. Eponine smirked, but turned her attention to wiping down vacant tables so he wouldn’t see it. She’d noticed, along with nearly everyone else, that the strict and disciplined social activist didn’t seem to like the dreamy and emotional fortune teller. There didn’t appear to be any kind of ill-will between them; their personalities just clashed. Well, that and Enjolras seemed to be slow to warm up to girls.

“She’s pretty awesome at ladies’ nights,” Eponine said. “So yeah, I guess you wouldn’t really have a reason to know ‘Chetta yet. We could bring you into the girls’ nights though. You’re almost pretty enough to count, and you probably satisfy the role in the relationship.”

“If you’re referring to sexual positions, Grantaire and I take turns.”

Eponine banged her hip against a table and the force of it knocked a chair over. “Ow! God dammit
Enjy, I didn’t expect—you did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

Enjolras’ evil grin was answer enough. He innocently began cleaning out the coffee maker.

As it turned out, Enjolras’ concerns about Combeferre and Grantaire living together had been unfortunately valid. The very first night Grantaire and Enjolras slept in the apartment, Grantaire felt ganged up on.

He didn’t think it was his fault though.

He’d spent a good chunk of the day at Courfeyrac’s reading comics, playing video games, goofing off, and generally not thinking about Jean Prouvaire or the fact that Courfeyrac was leaving Friday for the first family vacation he’d taken without his best friend at his side since he was sixteen. It was a nice enough day, but a little emotionally draining, and by the time Grantaire got to his new apartment he wanted to do one of two things: cuddle with his boyfriend or draw.

He walked into the living room and found Enjolras sitting on the floor, lap occupied by his computer and his brain damaged cat. As shedding season was in full swing, cuddles were decidedly out of the question, and besides that, Enjolras was clearly in the throes of some kind of activist passion.

They had a couch now. Grantaire could be relegated to sleeping on it, if Enjolras really insisted on it.

Grantaire made his way to their bedroom instead of engaging his boyfriend in a conversation that could easily turn volatile, grabbed the sketchbook Courfeyrac had forced on him a little too angrily for it to be considered a proper gift, and started doodling with a box of prismacolors Bahorel had bestowed on him in a much friendlier fashion.

After a couple hours of this, Grantaire poked his head out to the living room to see just what Enjolras was doing. Combeferre had joined him at that point. They were splitting some kind of takeout that couldn’t really be considered junk food, as it had far too many vegetables and tofu to count. They both had their laptops open, which seemed rather stupid as they were watching the same thing: some overly put together blond woman in what appeared to be a courthouse.

“Um…Enjolras, are you going to be out here all night?”

Enjolras waved his hand angrily, keeping his gaze fixed on the laptop screen even though he’d been laughing about something with Combeferre while reaching for more tofu a moment ago. “Most likely. There’s still another three hours to the filibuster.”

“…so you’re not going to bed until midnight? Don’t you have to open in the morning?”

“I called Marius and asked him to take my shift.”

“You what?” Grantaire yelped.

“Grantaire, please. We’re trying to watch this,” Combeferre said, in a tone of voice that was awfully close to a whine for such a dignified young man.

Grantaire flopped onto the couch behind Enjolras and crossed his arms over his chest. “I can’t believe you gave away a shift!”

“Ferre said he’d spot me cash if it negatively affects our budget. C’mon ‘Taire, tomorrow’s decision day. I want to be around for it.”
Again, Grantaire was at a loss. Combeferre turned around, regarding him with incredulity when he realized Grantaire had no idea what they were talking about.

“Grantaire, decision day? For the Prop 8 and DOMA rulings?” Combeferre prompted.

“Oh.” He shrugged. “I still don’t see why Enjolras needs to skip work, but whatevs. He doesn’t get why I want to skip out for a concert next month. So wait, is this filibuster related to that?”

“No, this is something else,” Enjolras said.

“Women’s reproductive rights in Texas,” Combeferre explained, explaining nothing as far as Grantaire was concerned, because he honestly could not understand why Enjolras gave enough of a fuck about abortions in Texas to be glued to his computer like that. Or to have turned watching speeches about Texan abortions into some kind of bonding activity with his bestie.

Scowling, Grantaire took out his phone and texted his boss, asking if he needed any help at the store in the morning. At least Enjolras’ activist bullshit was going down on a Wednesday; the store always needed help on new comic book day.

“‘Taire, what are you doing?” Enjolras asked.

“Seeing if they need help at the store tomorrow.”

“But tomorrow’s your day off.”

“Uh huh.”

Enjolras frowned. “We’re saving a significant amount of money by living with ’Ferre now. I think I can afford to miss one scheduled shift.”

“Not if you want to be able to buy text books in the fall.”

“Grantaire, I said I could spot you guys if you need it,” Combeferre said. “Are you sure the reason you’re feeling so surly right now is strictly related to money?”

Grantaire was tempted to heap all kinds of verbal abuse on Combeferre just for being right. His bad mood had very little to do with money. He’d had a long day that should have been recreational, but just felt off because his best friend was still so unhappy. And he couldn’t even hug his boyfriend, because at the moment Enjolras was wearing enough cat hair to give Grantaire hives.

Instead of saying any of this, however, Grantaire simply got up and stormed back into their bedroom. He fell asleep pouting alone in bed and ended up crumpling his new drawing. When he’d fallen asleep he’d been fully dressed and the light had still been on, so he started awake when it was switched off.

“Ssh.” Warm, cat hair free hands gently started undressing him and, sleepy and stupid, Grantaire leaned into the touch. He murmured something vaguely pleased when Enjolras kissed his temple, and happily settled into his arms, completely forgetting how much his earlier behavior had resembled a five year old’s.

“Mm…you smell good. S’that your old body wash?” Grantaire whispered. He hadn’t realized how much he’d missed the old brand, but he’d definitely noticed it when Enjolras switched to a dollar store brand. “You smell like you again.”
“I just showered, so hopefully I’m allergen free. By happy coincidence, Combeferre and I favor the same company for our hygiene products. We made an agreement to share our products and just alternate who buys them. Is that going to be okay?” Enjolras giggled and squirmed a little as Grantaire buried his face against his neck and took an exaggeratedly deep breath. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

“What time s’it?”

“One o’clock. The filibuster appears to have worked, if you were curious. The Republicans tried to cut her off, but then the people raised their voices in their own filibuster. It was beautiful, really. I can’t imagine Perry will let it go unchallenged. He’ll likely call another special session and try to push this monstrous bill through again, but if the people keep making their wills heard, even Texas conservatives will have to listen.”

Grantaire’s cynical nature was far too placated with sleep fog and soft, good smelling skin to pick apart Enjolras’ warm enthusiasm for a cause that literally had nothing to do with him, so he simply smiled, pleased that the man he loved was pleased.

“’Taire, are you still awake?” Enjolras asked.

“Mm…barely. What is it?”

“I…I would like it if you were here tomorrow when the decision was announced. I know…I know politics aren’t really your thing, but this is so much more than politics. This affects us. I’d like to have you by my side when the decision is announced.”

Grantaire leaned up on his elbows just enough so that he could look at Enjolras’ face. It was hard to see him, but there was just enough light coming through the window from a streetlamp for him to tell how serious Enjolras was, and to see that uncharacteristic vulnerability in his typically fierce gaze. “What time do they expect the decision?”

“Early afternoon, I think.”

“Okay…I said I’d come in early and help them reshel the new books. I’ll help for a couple of hours and then take off.”

Enjolras’ face lit up. “Really?”

“Enj, if you want me here then I’m here.”

Enjolras pulled him close for a passionate kiss Grantaire was far too groggy to return properly. He melted against Enjolras, and when his love released him he was breathless and even a little light headed.

“I love you,” Enjolras whispered, with a seriousness that made Grantaire wonder just what was going on in that pretty head.

And meanwhile, nervous, excited, and a whole host of other emotions as well owing to the gravely important court ruling he both dreaded and longed to hear the next day, Enjolras wondered how it was his lover could be so calm and placid as they lay together in bed. He held Grantaire in his arms, comforted by his weight and the sound of breathing that quickly evened out as his lover slipped back into sleep, and tried to follow his example and still his own racing heart.

One day more, and a battle he’d been fighting for ten years might finally be over.
“Oh what the fuck?” Grantaire yelped.

It was decision day. He’d worked three hours, which didn’t sound like a lot until you took into account all the work he’d had to do to get out of there in enough time to keep his promise to Enjolras. Grantaire had busted his ass clearing the ‘This Week’s Comics’ shelves, wiping them down, and getting the boxes of new merchandise stacked and organized for his coworkers to put out. His supervisor had snapped at him that he shouldn’t bother volunteering to come in if he was just going to whine until he got to leave early.

So yeah, his mood was less than stellar. He’d been dangling the hope of sympathetic cuddles and a kiss from his boyfriend over his head to get through the physically and emotionally exhausting three hours. This was apparently not to be, however, as the living room was crowded with friends, cats, snacks, and open laptops, and therefore not at its most hospitable for the allergy-stricken cynic.

“Didn’t that Texas anti-abortion bill get killed?” Grantaire snapped. “Perry didn’t call another special session already, did he?”

Enjolras’ face lit up. “You do listen when I talk!”

“Of course I do. Just because I don’t care doesn’t mean I don’t listen. Seriously guys, what the fuck is all this?”

“They’re all here for the Prop 8 and DOMA decisions too,” Enjolras said.

Combeferre frowned in puzzlement. “Why wouldn’t we be watching it together?”

Grantaire just managed to stop himself from grumbling about how he’d thought he was going to be spending the next hour or so alone with his boyfriend, realizing how petulant that would sound, and slunk off to his room to kick off his shoes, throw his bag on the bed, and pop an allergy pill. When he got back he sat down behind Enjolras, relieved to see that he’d kept his cat hair exposure minimal enough so that Grantaire could snake his arms around him without much danger.

Joly and Legle were in a similar position just in front of the love seat, though Joly looked sickly, even for him. Bahorel was draped across the couch cushions looking at his phone as opposed to a laptop, and Courfeyrac was sitting on his legs with his computer. Combeferre was sitting next to Enjolras with Logan on his lap, and every time one of the cats ventured too near Grantaire and Enjolras he threw a toy across the room to get their attention away from the couple.

Such a thoughtful guy, that Combeferre.

“So this is kind of a lame party,” Grantaire couldn’t help but observe. Everyone was just so tense.

Courfeyrac smirked in a way that was almost a grimace. “We’re a bit nervous, ‘Taire. I mean, everyone in this room knows that legally anti-marriage equality assholes don’t have a leg to stand on, but legality’s never really deterred the most devoted of bigots before. And considering how the courts handled the affirmative action and voting rights cases we’re feeling a little jumpy about our fates.”

“You’ll notice, other than ‘Ferre, that it’s all the gay kids clinging together for comfort right now,” Legle added.

“Yes. ‘Ferre’s just goodly enough to host us and let us make use of his air conditioning,” Bahorel said with a wink.

“Well, I had a shit shift and I promised myself some couple time with Enj, so if that bothers any of
you, you can kindly fuck off to the Musain to watch for the ruling with the other flag wavers,”
Grantaire said. He shifted his embrace so that Enjolras was molded against him, giving him as much
physical contact as possible while still allowing Enjolras use of his open laptop.

“I don’t think any of our friends are bothered by seeing us cuddling, ‘Taire,” Enjolras said, sounding
amused. As they all assured him they weren’t (almost seriously and with minimal sarcasm, from
Bahorel and Courfeyrac), Grantaire relaxed and started to feel a little better. “Thank you,” Enjolras
whispered, quietly enough for the others not to hear. “I really appreciate you being here for this.”

“Hey, as far as your activist shit goes, I’ve actually got an investment in this one. I haven’t forgotten
what you said before that rally.”

Enjolras’ posture stiffened ever so slightly. There was a possibility that he might have.

“Come on, you bastards!” Joly yelped, surprising the room at large as he threw his laptop across the
floor. He covered his face with his hands and Legle, looking heartsick, gathered him in his arms.

“I’m sorry,” Joly whimpered. “I just want to know if my marriage is going to count or not. I can’t
take this waiting anymore. I’ve been waiting all month, and they did this on purpose! They left ours
for last because they want to drive us insane!”

“Joly, hey, c’mon babe, don’t be like that,” Legle said soothingly. “No matter what, our marriage is
going to count in all the most important ways. Those old ghosts in robes don’t get to dictate thing one
about my feelings for you.”

“Marriage equality would be a tremendous symbolic victory,” Combeferre added. “But it being a
symbolic victory cuts both ways. You’re getting married no matter how this decision goes down,
aren’t you? And that’s because your love is real and worth celebrating, and that’s true with or
without government sanction. On a purely symbolic level, they can’t touch you.”

Joly nodded weakly and leaned into Legle’s embrace. His pale face was streaked with tears that his
devoted fiancé tenderly wiped away.

“I’m so sick of everything,” Joly muttered. “I just want the people who have nothing to do with it to
butt out and leave us alone. I don’t want to be a symbol or an activist anymore. I just want this
feeling of persecution to go away.”

Grantaire kept his mouth shut. Good though it would be to get a favorable Supreme Court ruling, it
wouldn’t fix all of Joly’s issues regarding society’s treatment of LGBTs. However, having that
pointed out was not the way to get his friend to stop crying either.

Legle rocked Joly in his arms while Combeferre and Enjolras threw more logic at him, and
eventually he calmed down.

Marius and Cosette showed up shortly after Grantaire (apparently it had been dead in the cafe, so
Eponine exercised her new managerial powers to send him home), carrying pizzas and soda that
were much appreciated. Bahorel cracked a joke about the heteros crashing the party, and Cosette
haughtily reminded him of her place in the LGBT rainbow. Then, even though Joly had calmed
down significantly by then, Cosette seemed to sense where her magic touch was needed and
stationed herself by him and Legle. She periodically reached over and soothingly rubbed the shaky
looking nursing major’s back, and on cue, his nervous expression faded to be replaced by a hopeful
smile.

“So does Scalia scare the shit out of everyone else?” Bahorel asked, kicking off a long round of
discussion that Grantaire, who didn’t make a habit of following Supreme Court cases, didn’t really understand. It was weird to be reminded that even a spoiled, raucous slacker like Bahorel was politically savvy and actively trying to change the world for the better. It wasn’t just about picking fights to him; it was about picking the best and most worthwhile of all fights.

“Grantaire, can I speak with you in private?” Enjolras asked, once his friends had wound down from verbally abusing the notoriously conservative judge.

“Hm? Oh, sure.” Grantaire unwound himself from Enjolras so that they could stand up and make their way to the bedroom. Enjolras started pacing immediately after shutting the door behind them.

“Enj, you’re making me nervous just watching you. What is it?”

Enjolras stopped mid-step, but switched over to nervously fiddling with his hair. “Do you still want to marry me?”

“Yes,” Grantaire said immediately, not pausing for breath or thought. “Wait, you didn’t change your mind, did you?”

“Yes. I mean no. I-I mean…look. Watching Joly and Bossuet just now got me thinking…the conditions I placed on our union aren’t fair. Outside forces shouldn’t get a say in how we define our love and devotion, especially not bigoted ones. Whatever the judges say today…I want to marry you. If you’ll have me.”

“Fuck, Enj…that’s not even a question.”

Despite the physical toll the recent weeks had taken on him, despite the fact that he was gaunt and troubled and shifting back and forth with anxious energy, Enjolras had never looked more beautiful to Grantaire than at that moment, when their eyes locked on each other and Enjolras beamed at him with a smile that stole his breath.

Grantaire wasn’t sure how long they remained that way, just stupidly staring at each other and basking in the realization that this was something they were going to do. They were really going to get married. Then Enjolras was in his arms, or Grantaire was in Enjolras’, it was all really the same in the confusion of tightly wound arms and clashing lips and a warmth that had nothing to do with the soft skin pressing against him and everything to do with a fuzzy feeling in his gut that Grantaire hadn’t believed in until he’d first heard his beautiful slab of marble speak.

As though from a great distance, Grantaire heard raised voices from the living room, but his world had been reduced to Enjolras and he didn’t care to figure out if the yelling was good or bad.

Then the door was flung open and his friends were rushing at him.

“It’s gone! It’s fucking dead!”

“DOMA’s dead, guys! It’s been defeated, five to four!”

“We did it! We did it!”

“Fucking yeah! God fucking bless America!”

Enjolras turned away from Grantaire and smiled ecstatically at the group of them, and something about his expression silenced their mirth. Well, Enjolras did have a way of controlling crowds with the barest bit of effort on his part.
“You guys, Grantaire and I are going to get married.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh my god you guys. I have been involved in the struggle for marriage equality in the United States for ten years now, and even in my most simple-minded idealistic adolescent phase I didn't actually think I'd get to see DOMA struck down so soon. I thought it was going to come for my kids or my grandkids, not in time for me to get married (not that there's a Mrs. defying reason in mind just yet, but I'm hoping someday...) This was gratifying on so many levels. I have had the most amazing day, and I rushed this chapter out in an attempt to share at least some of that emotion with you guys.

I know there's still a lot of work left to do. The Grantaire in me is being very quick to point out that the Prop 8 ruling didn't go quite as wonderfully as it might have, and that marriage discrimination is still kosher in thirty plus states. And marriage equality doesn't solve all of the issues faced by LGBT Americans. However, today was a big fucking step in the right direction, so today is for celebration and we'll get back to work after we enjoy the moment.

Okay, in less overly emotional notes, I'm still wicked behind on comment responses. I'm planning on taking some me-time at a cafe tomorrow after work, during which I should be able to respond to everyone. So please don't get the wrong idea by my seeming-silence. I like to take my time writing back to you guys, so I won't sit down to write responses until I have time to write good ones.

Also, I had some big plans for this chapter that got put on the back burner in favor of current events. I'll be picking up with Eponine and Feuilly next chapter, so sorry for those of you who have been patiently waiting for their story to be advanced. I'll deliver the goods soon, I promise!

Happy marriage equality to my fellow Americans <3

EDIT: Answering comments has been derailed by my cat. She's got an open wound on her neck and is infested with fleas because, y'know, we're just lucky like that. So I'm having a fabulous night __;
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

The Thenardier siblings come to an agreement.

The group attends Northshore Pride.

Chapter Notes

I has another fan art! This one is from Erin:  
http://stillbeneaththesky.tumblr.com/post/53498275034/mercenary-that-girl-based-on

I am so in love with Eponine’s conniving practices. So yeah, the cafe's cleaning supplies are going to be moved to a high shelf from now on XP

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Feuilly, does this look casual or painfully posed?” Eponine asked, yanking her roommate by the arm.

As he didn’t have much choice, Feuilly studied the scattered contents of the side table he and Eponine had put by the front door. It had a little dish with their keys in it, a framed photo of Gavroche and Little R, some spare change, a buttercup Little R had picked while playing outside, and Eponine’s new work nametag, proudly proclaiming her as manager.

Ah. That was probably the one concerning her.

“I need the tag to be prominent enough that the social worker sees it when she visits next week, but not so obvious that it looks like I’m trying to shove my promotion in her face, you see.”

Feuilly smirked. “I think you can find a way to bring it up naturally in conversation. It’s pretty relevant, after all.”

“I’m just not used to showing off my accomplishments. It’s really all right then, to tell them I’ve been promoted?”

“Yes, Ponine. It’s fine.” Feuilly touched her shoulders, smiling in a way that might have been condescending if it wasn’t for all the warmth his expression held.

Eponine returned the smile, feeling a flutter of something that wasn’t quite nerves. Her skin felt too warm where his hands were resting on her. Suddenly her lips felt incredibly dry, and she noticed his eyes following her tongue when she went to wet them.

“Hey you two, we’re out of milk and I ain’t running to the store to get any, as you’ve kindly moved us into the middle of boring old nowhere! How am I supposed to have my cereal?” Gavroche yelled from the kitchen, breaking the spell.
Eponine turned towards Gavroche and yelled at him to have a pop-tart for now, as she was going to hit up the store on her way home from work. When she turned back to stutter our an apology to Feuilly he was already gone.

His bedroom door closed a moment later, and Eponine scowled.

Gavroche waltzed up to her, munching on a pop-tart and chewing with his mouth open. “Did he kiss you yet?”

“He might have, if you hadn’t interrupted about the stupid milk. Wait a minute, do you think Feuilly wants to kiss me?” Eponine asked, rounding on her little brother.

“Well yeah. I mean he looks at you almost the way Marius looks at the Lark.”

“Does he?”

Little R, who was sitting nearby pushing toy cars along the carpet, looked up just long enough to nod. “He does, Ponine. I think… I think he likes you, but he doesn’t want… doesn’t want to get in the way. You know, since you’re takin’ care of us.”

Azelma was lounging on the couch, and even she turned the TV off to participate into what had become an impromptu Thenardier conference on Eponine’s love life. “He’d definitely have said something by now if it weren’t for us. Sorry for cock blocking you, sis.”

“Azelma, don’t talk that way in front of the boys.”

“Like they haven’t heard it before. I bet Gav knew what it meant before I did.”

Eponine frowned and started fiddling with one of her bracelets. “Would you guys… would you mind if I were dating Feuilly?”

“Why would we mind?” Gavroche asked. “The Lark’s plenty happy with the way Marius looks at her, isn’t she? And you deserve to be happy too.”

“Yeah,” Little R chimed in.

Azelma grinned. “I think Feuilly’d make a pretty kick ass brother in law, if it got that far.”

“And it’d keep Combeferre on the market,” Gavroche teased.

“Hey, not that it’s my primary motivation or anything, but it’s certainly not a problem,” she said, sticking her tongue out at her brother.

Eponine pressed her lips together and nodded. “Right. Okay, the next time he looks like he wants to kiss me, I’ll just shut up and not deflect or change the subject or-”

“Ponine?”

“Yeah buddy?” she asked, stepping into the room a little more and hunching over so she could see Little R’s face.

He looked up at her with innocent confusion. “Why don’t you just kiss Feuilly?”

Azelmthrew a skinny hand over her mouth to cover a snort, while Gavroche laughed. “Lookit that, Little R’s smarter than all the rest of us. Ponine, go on and kiss him. We’ll stay out here and be quiet and good so you don’t have to worry.”
“No cock blocking,” Little R added, giving a firm nod.

Eponine winced, sure she was going to hell for letting the four year old hear that term. Still though. “You guys are right. Excuse me.”

After the near miss by the side table, Feuilly had retreated to his room to calm down and hopefully keep from pestering his friend with unwanted sexual advances. As such, he’d put on a pair of headphones and started listening to one of his favorite songs, and hadn’t heard a word of the Thenardier conference even though his bedroom was just off the living room. He was filled in on it after the fact.

Under the circumstances, he was pretty surprised when Eponine threw his door open, marched over to where he was sitting on the end of his bed, sat down on his lap, and pulled him into a hungry, possessive kiss.

Really, there was only one way to respond to something like that.

He grabbed her hip with one hand to help her keep her balance, tangled the other in her hair, and kissed back until he had to come up for air.

The younger Thenardiers were watching and giggling from the doorway, but Feuilly didn’t mind in the least. And that’s partly how Eponine could tell that this was going to work out perfectly.

Eponine was still smiling ridiculously when she got to work, and the smile continued for the entirety of the shift. Marius was fresh from a lunch date with Cosette himself, so really he wasn’t in any better a state. Between them, it was a wonder they didn’t burn the café to the ground.

Courfeyrac showed up just before they locked the door. As it was a Jehan-free night, he’d agreed to give Marius rides to and from work, thus saving him from having to take the bus. He dismissed Marius’ ditzy glow as rather normal for his hopelessly lovesick roommate (even if it really should have cleared up after this many months of dating), but he zeroed right in on Eponine’s unusually bright smile.

“Hey Ponine…you’re looking…chipper. Is this the latest manifestation of promotion glee?” Courfeyrac asked, looking a bit skeptical.

Eponine laughed and shook her head. She was bursting to tell Marius and Courfeyrac the good news, but she and Feuilly had decided to wait until they could tell their friends together. They both wanted to see everyone’s reactions, and really it was only a matter of time before everyone was meeting up at the Musain, the Corinth, or Brammer Street anyway.

“Fine, be mysterious. Look, is it cool if I walk you out when you guys do the trash? I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Oh. Well we can do that now. Marius, get away from the register!” Eponine thundered. “I will count it when I get back from taking out the trash. You wipe down the tables and put up all the chairs.”

“Okay…” Marius stepped away from the register, looking a little miffed. “You know, I only screwed up counting it out a few times.”

“Yes. All three times we let you do it. And remember what I said?”

“Never again.”
“Very good, sweetie. Never fucking again.” She tossed him a playful grin so that he knew she was (mostly) teasing, then grabbed the bags out of the barrels and went out back with Courfeyrac. He helped her swing them into the dumpsters and then she turned to face him. “So what’s up?”

“You really are something tonight, Ponine. I don’t think that smile’s left your face once since I’ve been here.”

Eponine shrugged her shoulders. She couldn’t deny how giddy she felt. Making out with someone she’d grown to care very much for would do that to you.

“You know, you look really beautiful when you smile like that.”

Eponine felt the metaphorical red flag go up. She just managed to sidestep Courfeyrac as he went in for the kiss.

“Oh shit. Oh, sweetie, I’m sorry-”

“Just what in the hell are you doing?” she snapped. “First off, I am on the clock! Secondly, just what the fuck? You think just because you’re single now that I’ll automatically want to date you? Newsflash, Courf, you rejected me! I got over you. You don’t get a do-over just because the one you did pick decided he didn’t want you anymore. Oh my God. I can’t believe you!”

She immediately stopped ranting when she saw the hurt look on his face. “Oh shit. Oh, sweetie, I’m sorry-”

“No, you’re right. That was pretty stupid of me. I just thought… I mean, when we did have our thing going it was pretty… pretty nice. But you’re right. I shouldn’t have just assumed you’d still want me.”

Hating that defeated look that amiable, flirtatious Courfeyrac should never have to wear, Eponine reached over and squeezed his shoulder. “I might have, Courfeyrac. I still think you’re a great guy… but the reason I’ve been smiling all night is because right before I left for work I asked Feuilly out, and he said yes.”

“O-oh. So… I just tried to kiss Feuilly’s girlfriend.”

Smirking, Eponine nodded.

“That joke was so much like Courfeyrac that she couldn’t help but laugh. She also didn’t mind when he lifted her up and twirled her around in circles to show his congratulations.

Later, when Courfeyrac drove off with Marius and she and Feuilly headed off for the convenience store to grab a gallon milk, Eponine gave Feuilly the gist of what happened, leaving out the part where Courfeyrac had tried to kiss her.

“He really thought you were going to go out with him just because he was single again?” Feuilly asked, face twisted up in a scowl. “Nervy bastard.”

“Hey, you could do with a smidge of that confidence. We could have been dating ages ago if you’d asked me out.”

“You didn’t ask me out-”

“I just did tonight!”
“I meant any of those other times,” Feuilly grumbled. He let out a sigh. “Okay, so Courf knows we’re dating. Because otherwise apparently he’d be sexually harassing you.”

“Your girl is desired. How does that make you feel sweetie?”

Feuilly arched a brow and she laughed. “I suppose we can go facebook official then. Because with Courf’s big mouth, everyone’s going to know before the night is out.”

Eponine frowned thoughtfully. “There’s one person who deserves to be told before we make it facebook official.”

Feuilly winced, and nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. Um…do you want me to…?”

“No, sweetie, I should make this call.” Eponine reached into her purse, took out her cell, and pulled up a contact. “Hey, ‘Ferre? How are you, sweetie? …oh, fine. Work was good…yeah, I have something I need to talk to you about…”

“Is something wrong with Combeferre?” Grantaire asked.

Enjolras shrugged. “I don’t think so. Why?”

The two of them were sitting in the living room splitting a box of insta-macaroni and cheese. Whereas Grantaire really couldn’t blame Combeferre for refusing to join them for their awful meal, he’d been surprised when the guy had disappeared into his bedroom without a word. He usually liked joining them just to be social.

“He looked a little uncomfortable. Are you sure he’s not upset about something?”

“Oh, um…” Enjolras’ face reddened, and Grantaire regarded him in some confusion and a good deal of interest. “That’s nothing.”

“Your blush implies otherwise, sir.”

“Well, okay it’s not a big deal, and really it’s your fault-”

“My fault?”

Enjolras set his bowl of vibrantly yellow macaroni on the coffee table and crossed his arms over his chest. “Yes, your abhorrent packing skills are completely to blame. Combeferre stumbled upon some of our more private things while he and his brother were setting up our bed.”

“Oh,” Grantaire set his own bowl down as he’d suddenly lost his appetite. “Oh fuck.”

“Uh huh. He didn’t seem upset…but that might be why he’s so uncomfortable. It’s can’t have been fun to find a box of sexual paraphernalia with your baby brother present.”

“No, I suppose not.”

That explanation sufficed for the next few hours, but when Grantaire was getting ready for bed he decided that something definitely wasn’t quite right.

He walked over to Combeferre’s curtain and knocked on the wall just beside the archway. “‘Ferre? You okay in there?”

“Fine.”
There was nothing fine about that tone of voice.

Grantaire walked into the room, and found Combeferre lying on his back on his bed, staring at the ceiling and trying not to cry. He sat down beside his friend and gently touched his shoulder.

He didn’t ask any questions. He just sat there and held Combeferre’s hand when he started crying, and he stayed and sat with him until he’d calmed down again.

The next morning, when Enjolras was checking his email and facebook before work, and casually commented that Eponine and Feuilly were dating, Grantaire gave a distant nod. “Hey Enj, I know you’re not much of a hugger, but give Combeferre a hug today when he wakes up.”

“Why…oh. He still likes her?”

Grantaire steepled his fingers together and rested his chin on them. “Yeah.”

“Ah…well, I probably won’t hug him, but, hm. Excuse me.” Enjolras walked out of the kitchen.

When Grantaire passed by Combeferre’s curtain on his way back to his own room, he heard a hushed conversation taking place between the two best friends.

Satisfied with his level of interference, Grantaire started getting ready for work.

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Enjolras went to the Musain Friday evening expecting to find his friends ready to discuss the North Shore Pride festival. After all, their college was marching in it, and several of them had volunteered to man a booth on domestic violence in the LGBT community. Most of the details had been ironed out, but they still had a few things to talk over, and he wanted to run through their basic talking points again for Bahorel’s benefit. Sure though he was that the aggressively charismatic and attention getting drag queen would serve their table well, he was equally sure that Bahorel was style over substance and he wanted to make sure the guy remembered to disseminate information white he flirted and “read” (whatever that was).

To his surprise, when he arrived at the café it was to find a good chunk of his friends already engaged in a meeting without him. Jehan and Musichetta were sitting in the center of two pushed together tables with a bag full of fabric and pins, layering swatches of cloth over each other and giving commentary. Grantaire sat nearby with a sketchbook open, sketching from a book of sewing patterns. Almost every inch of available table space was taken up by magazines, open notebooks, binders, and business cards. Legle was making notes from an array of address books, while Joly gave his input to Jehan and Musichetta, who seemed to be ignoring him for the most part.

Cosette had set up a table for herself just behind them, and it looked infinitely more appealing to Enjolras than the ordered chaos the rest of his friends were parked at. She had a solo pot of tea, a scone, her laptop, a small sketchbook, and a manageable and organized looking stack of magazines and printouts on flower arranging.

“What is all this?” Enjolras asked.

Grantaire looked up at him with a smirk. “What does it look like?”

“I’m sorry, Enjolras,” Joly said, before Enjolras could snap something sarcastic at his boyfriend. “I know we’re supposed to be planning for Pride tomorrow, but Bossuet and I thought we might take advantage of having the group gathered to talk about our wedding a little. We’ve got a lot to get done if we want to stick to the date we set.”

“You guys have a date?” Enjolras asked, feeling a bit of pressure about his own rash commitment.
He was planning on a long engagement and had figured his friends were doing the same.

Then again, they’d already been together for six years. Enjolras supposed they didn’t really need a long engagement in light of the length of their relationship.

“We’re shooting for the end of next month,” Legle said.

“Turns out he’s been hiding money from me,” Joly said, pretending to be annoyed but radiating too much fluffy mirth to quite pull it off. “He’s got the funds for a simple wedding and a quiet honeymoon, and I requested some time off from work for the first week of August anyway so…”

“Ah.” Enjolras glanced at his phone to check the time. “It looks like we’ve still got a good twenty minutes before everyone else is supposed to get here. Is there anything I can do to help?”

Musichetta and Jehan both possessively crowded their fabric, so Enjolras rightly concluded that additional input was not needed on fashion. He looked at Cosette’s quiet table, feeling a tug of longing, but was ultimately pulled over to Legle to help him organize the guest list.

“Are you…making the list with post-it notes?” Enjolras asked, trying to make some sense of the array of papers Legle had surrounded himself with.

“I thought…I’m trying to do table settings at the same time, and y’know, this way I can move them around?”

Enjolras took his computer out of his bag and opened up a new spreadsheet file. He saved it as ‘J&B Wedding’ and started filling in cells with his friends’ names, figuring it wasn’t too presumptive to assume their usual circle was all expected at the wedding.

Legle leaned over his shoulder. “Okay, put all of you guys in the same table. You’re all in the wedding party, so you’ll be at the head table.”

“Oh. Hey Enjolras, will you be a groomsman at my wedding?” Legle asked cheekily. Enjolras rolled his eyes. “Actually, we do need to subdivide this a little. Okay, so what we were thinking…” He reached for one of his papers, and took out a chart of stick figures messily labeled with their names. The figures were stationed in front of a long rectangle. “Is that we’re going to have me and Jol in the center, obviously, and then you guys are going to be divided into two groups. One group’d be bridesmaids and one group’d be groomsmen if we were a guy and girl, but as we’re us it’s going to be my groomsmen and Best Maid of Honor, and Joly’s groomsmen and bridesmaid.”

“That makes sense.” Enjolras headed two columns, one labeled Bossuet and the other labeled Joly. “How did you divide us?”

“Feuilly’s going to be Joly’s Best Man, and Musichetta’s my Best Maid of Honor,” Legle said, then turned to the chart to read off the rest while Enjolras filled them in. “You’re with Joly, Grantaire’s with me-”

“So we won’t be sitting together then?” Enjolras asked, feeling a stab of annoyance. He hated formal functions, and was sure that that would be one of the rare traits he and Grantaire had in common. He was hoping they could make the most of the dinner part of the reception by snarking under their
breath at each other.

“This way you’ll be going down the aisle together. We figured you’d appreciate that,” Legle explained. “I can change it if you want.”

“No, it’s fine.”

“Kay…so then it’s…oh. We’ll have to fix that. It was supposed to be Courfeyrac with me and Jehan with Joly, but I suppose we don’t want them walking down the aisle together.”

Enjolras involuntarily glanced at Jehan, who stiffened ever so slightly before bursting into a loud and enthusiastic commentary on a piece of gold toned satin. “Put Jehan with Combeferre.”

“Kay.” Legle scribbled over his little diagram. “So Jehan with Joly and ‘Ferre with me. Bahorel’s with me, so put Courfeyrac with Joly, and Marius is with me, Cosette with Joly.”

“What about Eponine?” Enjolras asked.

Legle frowned. “Hey, Joly. We’ve got a spare bridesmaid.”

“No we don’t.” Joly said, giving up on giving input about their outfits and sitting down at the end of the table with them. “Eponine’s going to walk with Little R, remember? He’s going to be our flower throwing ring bearer, but we’re pretty sure he’s too shy to go down the aisle alone.”

“Ah. Should I put them at the head table too?” Enjolras asked.

“Sure,” Joly answered. “It’s just going to be some picnic tables shoved together in Valjean’s backyard, so really the more the merrier.”

Enjolras breathed a quiet sigh of relief. So when they’d said simple wedding, they really did mean it. Enjolras put Little R on Legle’s side, assuming he’d want to sit next to Grantaire, and stuck Eponine on Joly’s. He set up a new column and looked at the couple expectantly. “So what’s the rest of the guest list looking like?”

“A few of my coworkers said they want to come,” Joly said. He sifted through the papers until he found a notebook page with his coworkers’ full names and contact information scrawled on it. Enjolras sat them together and found that, with the tables they were using, they could still fit at least four more people.

“Let’s see…I’ve got some friends from anime club at school,” Legle said. “There are only three of them though, so maybe we should save them for another table?”

“We were going to ask Marguerite.”

“The lady from the Brammer Street open mics?” Enjolras asked. He could see Jehan inviting her to…no, come to think of it, he really couldn’t see Jehan inviting the old poet to his own wedding. They only ever talked to her on open mic nights, and none of them knew her that well.

Joly’s face colored. “We don’t have a lot of guests, Enjolras. I don’t have any family members obligated to go.”

“I’ve got an aunt and some cousins I can invite, but they probably won’t show up. And I know for a fact that my homophobic grandmother is not going to make the two hour commute to see me marry a guy,” Legle added. “You can put Auntie Sandrine and her kids at that table. That’s an even four. Y’know, assuming they do go.”
“Alright.” Enjolras filled them in. With their school friends, a few more painfully casual acquaintances, Gavroche, Mike, and Valjean, they managed to fill a total of three tables.

By the time he’d finished up Combeferre and Feuilly had trickled in (Eponine was home with her brothers, and Courfeyrac and Bahorel were packing for New York, as they were going to leave almost directly from Pride the next afternoon). Everyone else was starting to pack their materials away.

Enjolras found himself a little distant during the meeting. His mind kept drifting to what the arrangements for his own wedding might look like. Grantaire had close, living family that Enjolras had never met. He couldn’t help but wonder if they’d be coming to the wedding, and what they might think of him if they did. And then there was his own family…there was no way he was inviting his parents, but he had a few cousins he infrequently spoke to, and one of his grandmothers might be interested in attending.

Having his attention wander in such a saccharine direction was a new experience for him, but as his eyes kept resting on his fiancé, Enjolras felt a rush of warmth and wasn’t troubled by his distraction in the least.

Joly took a deep breath, shook his hands out, and then knocked on Jehan’s door.

Jehan smiled pleasantly when he opened it, looking for all intents and purposes just as he always had. He was wearing a ridiculous teal headscarf patterned with salmon Om symbols over his hair, his light green slacks were clearly dated from sometime in the early 90s, and his lime green t-shirt came nowhere close to fitting him (or matching the dated slacks), but the thrift store environmentalist was always a fashion disaster.

To Joly’s continued annoyance, Jehan looked unchanged, even though he’d changed everything in their group for the worse. His insistence on being calm and pleasant felt like an additional insult, like a denial of the pain he’d caused.

Still, Joly returned the smile and asked if he could come inside. He was fresh from a dinner out with Legle, something they’d decided to do on a whim after the Musain meeting had wrapped up, and while they’d dined Legle had expressed a concern about their wedding that was also bothering Joly. Before his nerve gave out on him, he’d decided to head over to Jehan’s apartment and address it.

“Oh, come right in. I was just going through the sketches Grantaire made for us this afternoon. Musichetta and I narrowed it down to three different waistcoats, so if you can give us a decision tonight then we can start sewing in the morning. It’s going to take us a bit longer on Cosette and Eponine’s gowns though. As it turns out, we don’t agree at all on female fashion.”

Joly laughed. “That’s alright. I really appreciate the two of you taking on all our formal wear, by the way. I don’t know what we’d be doing otherwise.”

They sat down on the sofa in the living room. Jehan handed Joly some pages torn from Grantaire’s sketchbook. “Wow. He did these all today?”

“Apparently Grantaire doesn’t find realistic figure drawing challenging, which is why he rarely does it,” Jehan said. “I guess he’s good at speed sketching. I watched him do that one of Enjolras there. Five minutes.”

“Oh, is anyone surprised that Grantaire can draw a photographic quality sketch of Enjolras in five minutes?” Joly asked with a grin.
“He made that one of Combeferre in fifteen.”

“Alright, that’s impressive.”

Each page contained four of their friends in different styles of waistcoats and cravats. He’d used colored pencil to fill in details of the materials based on Jehan and Musichetta’s potential fabrics. Whereas Grantaire had tried to use as many of them as possible for models, Joly was amused to note that Grantaire himself was not present on any of the pages, and Enjolras was represented once in every set of sketches.

“Which three did you like?” Joly asked. Jehan pointed out the three front runners, and Joly, not wanting to offend his friends, picked from one of those. “Just go with it. Bossuet won’t care what you’re all wearing.”

“Okay. Now, for fabrics I like this light lilac colored one here…but ‘Chetta thinks it’ll look terrible on at least half of us, and she seems to think Bossuet will object to one of his main colors being purple. But it’s not purple, it’s lilac.”

“Uh huh,” Joly said, smiling indulgently as he looked at what was very much a light shade of purple fabric. “I like this spring green and this champagne colored one here. Can we use those?”

Jehan grumbled something about how those had been the colors Musichetta thought they’d go for.

“Well, at least that’s settled.” Jehan set the drawings aside and rested his hands on his knees. “I was thinking of making some iced tea. Would you like a glass?”

“I figured you had a reason for being here, dear. Now, as I’m pretty sure it’s about Courfeyrac, will you please tell me about it while I’m making our iced tea and therefore have a convenient excuse to turn my face away from you should I need it?”

Joly cringed. “I’m sorry. There’s not really a good way to say this. It’s just…the break up isn’t going well for either of you. There’s no sense in trying to deny that.”

“No, there certainly isn’t,” Jehan said, and as he’d implied he would, he turned his back to Joly while he added sugar to their teas.

“It kind of seems like you’ll need more than a month to resolve things. Y’know, if you’re ever going to. Um…are you guys going to be okay at our wedding? I don’t want either of you to be uncomfortable, but Bossuet and I really want both of you to be there. I just, I don’t know how to manage things.”

“Oh. Oh Joly, sweetheart, I would never let my drama spoil your special day!” Jehan promptly abandoned their drinks, rushed around to the other side of the counter, and enveloped his friend in a hug. “Don’t you and Bossuet trouble yourselves over us. You have far better and pleasanter things to concern yourselves with. I can behave myself, and I expect the same of Courfeyrac. Immature though he can be, he isn’t cruel.”

“No, he’s not.” Joly bit his lower lip, lest he say more than he meant to.

A pained look made the briefest of appearances on Jehan’s sensitive face, as though he had guessed at Joly’s thoughts, but he made no comment. Instead, he turned back to his tea things and a moment later returned with a glass of iced rose hip and jasmine tea.
The Nothshore Pride parade and festival was the first occasion during which Courfeyrac and Jehan had been forced together since their breakup. Each of them had found excuses to avoid their group of friends in turns, almost as though they were actually communicating enough to coordinate their schedules. In truth, the former lovers just knew each other well enough to guess when an event would be more important to their ex than themselves, and thus decline. So Courfeyrac had bowed out of the poetry open mics and the women’s reproductive rights gatherings, and Jehan had avoided drinking nights at the Corinth and the decision day gathering at Combeferre’s.

The very real and very much uncomfortable tension between the two was so unsettling that their group fractioned before the parade even started. Bahorel, Grantaire, Feuilly, Eponine, Little R, and Gavroche remained with Courfeyrac on one end of Hawthorne Boulevard while the rest of the group wandered closer to the commons with Jehan. Enjolras surprised a few people by going with Courfeyrac’s cluster instead of Jehan’s, but then, that also kept him with Grantaire, so his friends supposed that that made sense.

Even if Enjolras and Grantaire had spent most of Boston Pride wandering around alone.

Courfeyrac had made a commitment to man the domestic violence table, but he tactfully bowed out of that obligation and walked around the festival with Grantaire and Little R instead, leaving Jehan free to flash his doe eyes while he signed people up for mailing lists.

Courfeyrac bought Little R a miniature rainbow flag to wave from where he was perched on Grantaire’s shoulders, got his face painted, and bought him a cookie.

Grantaire looked like he wanted to say something about Courfeyrac’s compulsive spending, but thankfully he kept his mouth shut. Little R certainly didn’t seem to mind the attention, and considering the poor kid was usually so shy he couldn’t look Courfeyrac in the eye, he didn’t see any harm in doting on their young friend a little if it helped bring him out of his shell, even if it only lasted long enough for him to mumble a thank you.

“Taire, there’s a playground over there,” Little R said, tugging on Grantaire’s t-shirt collar with one hand while he pointed to the edge of the commons with the other. “Can I go and play?”

“Yeah, of course. Are you coming with us, Courf?”

Courfeyrac glanced back towards the festival, which didn’t look as fun as it had last year, shrugged his shoulders, and followed them over to the playground.

Most of the kids running around on the playground equipment were decked out in rainbow stickers, and there were a couple of little girls in adorable sparkling rainbow tutus. Little R ignored them all in favor of going down the slides repeatedly, keeping his eyes averted from any and all other children, no matter how friendly they were when they tried to say hi. A little boy in a Mickey Mouse t-shirt (who appeared to be completely oblivious about the rainbow sticker on his forehead) said hi three times while Little R shyly turned away from him, then shrugged it off and cut him in line for the slide.

Grantaire, who was sitting on a bench beside a large cluster of gossiping lesbian moms, let out a sigh. “We gotta figure out how to socialize that kid or he’s going to go through kindergarten the same way I did.”

“Were you a shy five year old?” Courfeyrac asked, unable to picture it. He’d known Grantaire from first grade on, when they’d started attending the same school, and whereas he’d never been anything close to popular, he’d also never been anything close to quiet.
“Yeah, it didn’t last long. You saw what happened when I gave up on getting kids to like me. I just gave them reasons I controlled for them to hate me. It’d be nice if Little R figured out how to make friends before he was in high school.”

Courfeyrac plopped onto the bench next to him, not quite sure how to respond to that uncomfortable statement. He was fully aware he’d been Grantaire’s first friend, and that if he hadn’t had his head up his ass about the weird loner, their friendship might stretch back as long as Enjolras and Combeferre’s. “Sorry. I should have reached out to you earlier.”

“Dude, that was aimed at me, not you. Don’t worry about it. You think I should get on the jungle gym and play with him, or does he look like he’s doing okay?”

It was hard to say, really. Little R’s facial expression relaxed into sadness when he wasn’t thinking about his emotions, as such, unless he was especially happy he tended to look especially sad. Courfeyrac studied him for a moment, and watched the default frown turn into a squeal of joy when he scooted down the slide. “Nah, I think he’s okay.”

“Okay. So…how are you doing?”

Courfeyrac let out an exasperated sigh and rolled his eyes. “Fine. I’m here and I’m not sulking. That’s about as good as I could have hoped for.”

“You could be out flirting, you know. If you walk around with me and the four year old all day, people are going to assume we’re married and Little R’s our kid. That’s what happened with me and Enjolras at Boston Pride.”

“I remember,” Courfeyrac said, grinning. He’d found Enjolras’ confusion about that precious. “I don’t know. Jehan’s here too, and even though he’s being quiet to everyone I don’t think he’s handling the break up any better than I am. He cried almost as much as I did when he dumped me.”

“He did? Dude, maybe that fucking means he shouldn’t have dumped you,” Grantaire near-snarled, prompting a few of the nearby parents to glare at him for swearing around so many kids.

Courfeyrac lowered his voice when he spoke next, mindful of little ears. “Obviously I don’t think he should have dumped me either, but it honestly it would have sucked more if he hadn’t cried. At least this way I can believe him when he says he loved me. I know I mean something to him. So yeah, I’m definitely not going to flirt it up with some stranger in front of him. Doing that in the past probably had something to do with why I lost him. Me being such a god damn flirt…I guess it made him insecure.”

“Courf, I’m insecure. That doesn’t mean you throw away a perfectly good relationship when you luck into one.”

Courfeyrac chewed on his lower lip, and admitted something he’d been trying to avoid thinking about. “’Taire…it really wasn’t a very good relationship.”

“But…you guys love each other.”

“I know. It wasn’t enough though.”

Grantaire’s brow furrowed. “Of course it’s enough.”

“Okay, you know what, I really don’t need the cynic lecturing me on how love can conquer all if you believe in it enough. My love for Jehan is plenty strong and plenty real, but it didn’t make him happy, and struggling to get him to relax and open up when he couldn’t was just driving me insane.
Maybe it was a good thing he had the strength to break it off, because I would have just hurt for him forever. And you’d do the same for Enjolras, I know. Maybe that’s not love. Maybe it’s just being stupid.”

“Courf…”

Courfeyrac stood up and shoved his hands into his pockets. “I’m gonna take a walk around the booths and tables. I’ll catch up with you guys later, all right?”

“Yes. Uh…see you.”

Courfeyrac gazed disinterestedly at the various pamphlets, petitions, merchandise, and advertising set up in the narrow pathways for the festival, trying to think about anything other than Jehan. Because if his thoughts rested there too long then he’d just start going in circles with plans to fix a relationship that couldn’t be fixed. Jehan had given up. He wouldn’t take Courfeyrac back. It didn’t matter how many clever plans to change Courfeyrac came up with; it was all out of his hands and fixating on the failed relationship wouldn’t do him any good.

He needed to get over Jehan. He needed to get to a place where he could look at the man he loved so much it made him ache without feeling any of that beautiful pain, but only friendship. They needed to be friends again, not only because of the group, but because Courfeyrac needed the gentle poet in his life in at least some capacity.

Running mostly on autopilot, Courfeyrac entered a drawing for free tickets from the Northshore Music Theater, and when he turned around he almost walked right into his ex-boyfriend. Jehan almost fell over, but a strange blond in a tie dyed tank top grabbed his arm and helped him recover balance. “This setup is terrible. All the walkways are too damn narrow. Makes everything more crowded than it needs to be,” the stranger said. He kept his hand on Jehan’s arm in a manner that was way too familiar for Courfeyrac’s taste.

Jehan looked corpse white, other than his sunburned cheeks. “Yeah…uh, sorry for walking into you, Courfeyrac.”

“Oh, do you guys know each other?” Blondie asked.

Courfeyrac bit his lip hard enough to bleed, then pushed his way back into the crowd, almost knocking a faux hawked teenage girl to the ground in his haste to get away from his ex. He didn’t stop walking until he found the domestic violence table his friends were running.

Bahorel was sitting on the edge of the table, wearing one of his almost naked drag costumes with a metallic crimson wig, stripper heels, and sparkling gold makeup. He was holding a clipboard out to a bemused looking couple, who promised to sign if they could get a picture with him.

Courfeyrac ignored Bahorel and rounded on Enjolras and Feuilly, who were sitting behind the table being thoroughly ignored in the wake of Bahorel’s attention grabbing attire. Enjolras jumped to his feet when he saw Courfeyrac’s face, and Feuilly quickly followed suit. “Courf, is everything okay?”

“Yes. No. Um…do you guys-does Jehan have a new boyfriend? Already? Did he say anything about, I mean, he didn’t break up with me so he’d be free to date someone else, right? He didn’t…that guy who’s touching him is not a new boyfriend, right?”

Bahorel slid off the table, set the clipboard down, and strode over to Courfeyrac. His body language was entirely brawler with just a hint of drag queen fierceness. “Did I hear that right? Some asshole’s touching Jehan in front of you? Where is he? Point him out to me, Courf.”
“Down, boy,” Feuilly said dryly. “You’ll just get yourself arrested and the rest of us kicked out. Besides, tactless though it may be…Jehan does have a right to flirt if he wants to.”

“I know he does,” Courferac said, deflating a bit as he spoke. “I just wish he wouldn’t. I don’t want to fucking see it.”

Enjolras helped Courfeyrac climb over the table so that he was off the overcrowded pathway, and he guided him into a folding chair. “If it helps, he most definitely did not break up with you to pursue other men. And keep in mind, Jehan’s never been good at getting rid of unwanted admirers. We’ve had to help him with that on more than one occasion, remember?”

Dully, Courfeyrac nodded. “You’re right, Enjolras. It’s probably nothing. It’s just, the way the guy was holding his arm…it looked intimate.”

“Enjolras, what if I just hit him a little and-”

“No, Bahorel.”

“But if I don’t even bruise him-”

“No, Bahorel!”

“Fine. But you’re not being a very good friend to Courfeyrac.” Bahorel pouted and crossed his arms over his (impossibly) padded chest.

Just when Courfeyrac was sure he couldn’t get any more uncomfortable two things happened to challenge that. He got a text from his mother informing him that she’d messed up the train times, and if they wanted to make it to South Station in time to catch their bus for New York then they needed to leave as soon as possible. As such, she was making her way through the Salem commons looking for him and Bahorel.

And, before Courfeyrac could text his mother back informing her that he would find her (sometime after Bahorel had de-dragged, though he didn’t mention that), Enjolras let out a surprised gasp and pointed to a merch booth where Blondie was buying Jehan a necklace. “Is that the man you were talking about? Courfeyrac, that’s my cousin. I…I just introduced them like twenty minutes ago. I didn’t know Hugh was gay.”

“He’s at a gay pride festival,” Feuilly said.

“So are you,” Enjolras snapped.

Feuilly shrugged. “All right, you’ve got me there.”

Courfeyrac’s stomach twisted. He’d never felt anything close to Grantaire’s consuming passion for Enjolras, but there was no denying that the man was freakishly good looking (even malnourished, exhausted, and gaunt he still rated an eight; everyone was only concerned because he wasn’t his usual perfect ten). He definitely would have preferred Jehan’s new suitor to share no genetic traits at all in common with his gorgeous and captivating friend.

“Maybe Hugh thought you were trying to hook them up when you introduced them?” Feuilly offered.

Enjolras scowled. “I introduced him to you and Bahorel as well. Although he is pretty dim. I could see him getting that impression. Courfeyrac, it’s all right. You don’t need to look so dejected. I honestly can’t see Jehan taking an interest in Hugh. He’s a nice enough guy, but he’s not intelligent
enough to interest Jehan. And actually, I rescind my comment. He would be nice if he wasn’t so self-centered.”

Courfeyrac slouched down a little further. “It’s fine. Jehan broke up with me, ergo he can date whoever he wants now. I…it’s none of my business.” It just hurt like hell. “I’ve got to go.” He weakly held up his phone. “My mom’s here. Bahorel, de-drag. We’ve got to get to the train station or we’ll miss our bus.”

“What, like right this second?”

“Yeah, right this second. I don’t want you walking around in a spangly not-quite-bikini in front of my-“

“There you are!”

“…mother.” Courfeyrac smacked a hand over his face.

Bahorel tried to edge out of view, which was just ridiculous because he was almost a full head taller than everyone else around, even if he hadn’t been wearing five inch heels.

“Hello dear!” Bridget greeted, pushing her way through the crowd to join them at their table. She was laden with bags, but she set them down, reached over the table, and pulled Courfeyrac into a hug. “Did you get my text? Are you just about ready to go? Where’s your friend? Oh, hello Enjolras. It’s been too long since we’ve…dear me, are you eating well? Here, I’ve got some containers for you and my little Picasso. You won’t be able to eat this first one, as it’s meat balls, but the second one is a nice green bean casserole, and the third is-”

“Mom, will you stop?” Courfeyrac pleaded. “I thought you said we have to get going!”

“We do, but look at this boy! He’s skin and bones. Enjolras, if you and Grantaire want to come over for dinner sometime, you know Charles and I would love to have you.”

Feuilly was staring at Bridget as though he’d never seen anything like her before. He mouthed a ‘wow’ at Courfeyrac, and Courfeyrac felt like groaning again. He grabbed his mother’s arm. “Okay, you’ve doted on Enjolras. Can we just go now?”

“But where’s your friend? The one coming with us? And where’s Grantaire? I know the dear can’t come on the trip, but I was still hoping I’d get a chance to say hello to him and give him a hug. Oh, who’s this? One of your other friends? My, but you’re such a popular boy, sweetheart. Hello, I’m Courfeyrac’s mother. You can call me Bridget.”

“Feuilly.” Feuilly shook her hand, smiling bemusedly. “It’s nice to meet you, ma’am.”

“Oh, well aren’t you sweet? It’s nice to meet you too, dear. Wait, I think I see Grantaire now. I’ll just nip over and say hello real quick, and you see if you can track down your other friend, alright Courfeyrac?”

“Uh huh.”

Bridget left her bags at the table and took off into the crowd, making her way easily through the mess of people despite her petite size.

Courfeyrac glared at Bahorel. “For the love of god, put on pants now.”

“Okay, okay.” Bahorel crawled under the table, grabbed his bag, sat down in the grass, and started
Enjolras started going through the bag Bridget had made up for him and Grantaire (she’d stuck a note that said ‘for R <3’ on it), examining the containers of food with interest. “She even put a can of tuna in here for Raoul. Courfeyrac, your mother is the most thoughtful woman I’ve ever met.”

“Yeah, she’s a fucking saint. Bahorel, don’t forget to take off the makeup!”

“You know Courf, your mother met up with us at a gay pride festival. She might not find the news that I’m a drag queen all that shocking.”

“I don’t think she’d even care that you do drag, but she’ll definitely have something to say about you looking like a loose woman while you do it.”

“Dude, does she understand the point of drag?” Feuilly muttered.

“No!” Courfeyrac exclaimed. “I don’t know-stop picking on me!”

They left him alone after that.

Bahorel managed to de-drag by the time Bridget, Grantaire, and Little R joined them at the table, though there were still traces of gold liner around his eyes. He was given a bag lunch for the bus ride as well as a travel pillow and a miniature photo album so he could collect his mementos from the trip.

“Wow,” Bahorel said, looking at his loot in some surprise. “Thanks, Bridget.”

“Don’t worry about it, dude. She gets those things in bulk from the dollar store,” Courfeyrac said.

Bahorel frowned at him. “It’s still thoughtful.”

Courfeyrac arched a brow, because honestly, was that Bahorel complaining about him being rude?

“Oh, a little bird told me that a certain someone is planning on making an honest man of my boy,” Bridget said, with a wide smile and a laugh in her eyes as she edged over to Enjolras. She let out an excited squeal and pulled him into a hug that he didn’t even try to fight. “Darling, it’s the best news I’ve ever gotten!”

“Hey,” Courfeyrac whined, feeling that the best news his mother had ever heard should have been somehow related to him, not his friends.

“Oh, sorry dear, second best. Finding out I was pregnant was the best. Anyways, I’m so glad to hear that the two of you are getting married! I know you’ll make each other fantastically happy, and really all the best.”

“Thank you,” Enjolras said, extracting himself from the embrace, but still holding onto Bridget’s hand. “We’re still a ways off from setting a date or anything like that, but I hope you’ll come to it?”

“Oh, you couldn’t keep me away!” She babbled a bit longer about how happy she was, and then pulled Enjolras and Grantaire into a group hug, and would have gone on even longer if Courfeyrac hadn’t reminded her that the whole reason she’d shown up and completely derailed their domestic violence table was because they had a train to catch.

“Oh, and your father’s waiting in the car! Alright, Courfeyrac, Bahorel, with me. Would you mind getting those bags for me-oh, thank you Bahorel, you’re an absolute sweetheart. Take care boys! It was very nice meeting you Feuilly! And you too, Little R!”
Courfeyrac grabbed his mother’s arm and gave her a not-quite-gentlemanly yank towards the street. It never ceased to amaze him how all his friends always fell under his mother’s spell. He just didn’t get it. She was a talkative, prying nag.

And yet, Bahorel was trailing behind Bridget, carrying all her bags and her purse.

Magic, that woman.

Chapter End Notes

My sister can speed sketch at the same rate I gave Grantaire. It really is fascinating to watch.

I know I promised some Jehan POV for the near future. I didn't get a chance to stick it in this chapter, so I'll prioritize it for the next update.

As usual, I'm incredibly interested in hearing your thoughts on where the story is going. Thanks for reading, guys <3
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Enjolras unburdens himself to Grantaire.

Courfeyrac and Jehan pine for each other, and deal with their emotions in their own ways.

Chapter Notes

My kitties are doing much better, though I'm still struggling to contain the flea problem. My frustration with the damn blood suckers is going to make an appearance or two in the fic. Because there are few things in life that suck more than bathing cats.

And to my sister, when she gets around to reading this, there's a paragraph that I expect you to skip, as you're still not allowed to read my porn (even when it's short). Love you! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Not only was Enjolras tossing and turning, but Grantaire’s phone kept lighting up with texts. He would have shut the damn thing off and rid himself of one sleep-depriving annoyance, but he needed the alarm to get up in the morning for work. Besides, he’d still be getting elbowed in the back with or without the fucking phone.

Grantaire rolled over, facing away from the bedside table and thus the glowing telephone, but was just in time for his chin to connect with Enjolras’ bony shoulder.

And of course, Enjolras was the one to cry out as though he’d been wronged. “Fuh-fucking hell, ‘Taire, did you just punch me in the back?”

“Ow…that was my face, you…” He trailed off, rather than ascribing a description to his lover while he was sleepy and pissy.

Enjolras sat up, letting the sheets fall and pool around his hips (it was too hot for a real blanket, especially since Enjolras and Combeferre refused to use air conditioners, insisting fans were much more environmentally friendly. Grantaire was pretty sure it all depended upon the air conditioner in question, and that a lot had changed since they’d gotten their environmentalist propaganda in elementary school, but he’d been outvoted without having his arguments fairly listened to). He pushed his overlong bangs out of his eyes and sighed. “I’m sorry. I can’t sleep.”

“I got that impression.” As he clearly wasn’t falling asleep any time soon, Grantaire reached over to check his phone. As he expected, it was Courfeyrac. From the looks of it he was quite drunk. His texts were barely legible, but every fifth button mash or autocorrected nonsensical mess Grantaire was able to make out a real word or two, such as 'lonely soul', 'pathetic', 'heartless poet', 'misery', 'dukkha', 'alone forever', or Grantaire's favorite, 'Bahorel sucks'.
Grantaire frowned and set the phone back down. It made him a lousy friend, but he decided to deal with that mess in the morning (besides, whereas Courfeyrac had been pretty good about supporting Grantaire when he was a drunken mess, there had been a few nights where he’d tossed him on the bathroom floor, told him not to choke on his own vomit, and gone off to bed. More than a few nights, actually).

“So what’s wrong?” Grantaire asked.

Enjolras’ brow furrowed. “It’s stupid. Really, it’s nothing.”

“Except you can’t sleep…” Grantaire prompted. “So it can’t be entirely stupid. That’s one of the things you’re always saying to me.”

That got a small smile out of him. “You’re right.” He leaned over and kissed Grantaire’s cheek. “Alright, I’ll tell you about it. But you can’t get upset.”

“And I totally can’t guarantee that,” Grantaire said, frowning.

Enjolras leaned on his side, propping himself up with an elbow. “You’re being very difficult. Are you doing this on purpose? It’s nearly two in the morning. I don’t even know how you’re as coherent as you are.”

Grantaire shrugged. He curled up on his side facing Enjolras and gave him his best innocent look. They’d left the curtains and the blinds open, hoping to tempt in a breeze to go with the table fan. So far they weren’t having much luck with the breeze, but the light from the streetlamps made conversation much more pleasant than it might have been. The soft lighting hid how tired Enjolras always looked these days, and if Grantaire let his eyes unfocus a little then he could pretend it was like the old days, when his lover was the physical manifestation of strength, confidence, and, one of Grantaire’s personal favorites, the epitome of masculine beauty.

“Enj, I can’t promise not be upset. You know me. I’m a big ball of emotions and instability sometimes. I’ll do my best though. If it helps, I’m too sleepy to have a really strong reaction to anything.”

Enjolras let out a small sigh, then reached out and flung an arm over Grantaire, not quite holding him, but clearly needing the comfort of a touch. Grantaire returned it by stroking his fingers through Enjolras’ hair. Enjolras’ eyes slid shut, and Grantaire busied himself playing with his hair and counting his eyelashes while he waited for him to speak. Because yes, some of his doodles of Enjolras had nearly accurate counts on details as minute as eyelashes, eyebrow hairs, freckles, and fingernail length.

“I had a fight with Jehan a little while ago…we made up, but something he said really got under my skin.”

“I’d noticed things were a little off between you,” Grantaire said. He tucked the strand of hair he’d been playing with behind Enjolras’ ear and switched to stroking his fingers down Enjolras’ arm instead. “It was after Jehan dumped Courf, right?”

“Mm hm. I was trying to convince him to give Courfeyrac another chance. I told him that Courfeyrac wanted to fix things, and that he’d change whatever he needed to change to make Jehan happy. And then he lashed out at me. He said he didn’t want to fundamentally change who his partner was at his core, unlike me…and that he wouldn’t take advice from me, since I was confusing worship and love.”
Grantaire’s lazily roaming fingers turned into a tight grip on Enjolras’ bicep. The next thing he knew, he had an armful of distraught activist, clinging to him with his face pressed against Grantaire’s neck. “I love you,” Enjolras said, in a voice that was pretty close to pleading. “As you are. The only reason I’ve insisted on you making changes was because you were hurting yourself and I was scared you were going to die. I want you to be free in your choices, but not if the end result is me losing you. You know that, right? I’m not trying to turn you into anyone else. I swear it.”

Six and a half months ago, when they’d started dating, Grantaire probably would have rambled something off about how he’d needed to change to be worthy of Enjolras, so really Enjolras shouldn’t worry. But now that he was sober and stronger and starting to like who he was, Grantaire knew that that was entirely the wrong thing to say, and he could even understand why Enjolras was freaking out over this.

“I love you too. There’s an element of worship to it, but fuck Jehan for turning that into an insult. Enj, you’re my salvation. I was killing myself. Your friendship kept me alive, and your love made me turn my life around. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that.”

Enjolras nodded, but he still looked close to tears. “I love who you are. You just…you weren’t happy. You still get depressed sometimes, but you’re better. I don’t think I’ve manipulated you. I try not to, anyway. You actually don’t make that terribly easy.”

Grantaire gently tilted Enjolras’ face up until they were looking eye to eye. “Every change I’ve made has bettered me, and every change I’ve made I wanted to do on my own but I didn’t have the strength. You’re my strength, Enjolras, and a little bit my motivation. Let’s think carefully here. What have I been doing differently since we started dating? Have I started attending your protests or handing out petitions or calling legislators? Have I started acting like I gave a rat’s ass about politics?”

“You’ve gone to a couple of Pride parades with me.”

“Those are fucking parades, Enj. They’re like parties. I went to them last year too.”

“Oh, right. I’d forgotten.” Enjolras started to smile, though it was a weak thing. “So I haven’t made you political.”

“No, you haven’t. I’m still a miserable student, even with your help. I still care way too much about comic books and pinup artists and not enough about my portfolio. I make stupid jokes and I go on senseless, unstructured rants. I haven’t become a vegetarian, and I didn’t even manage to quit smoking even though you really wanted me to, and I am actually a little bit afraid of getting lung cancer like my grandfather. And I most certainly have not become a cat person.”

“So you’re still you,” Enjolras finished. He grasped Grantaire’s hand in his and twined their fingers together.

“Yes. Only I’m happy now.” Grantaire squeezed his hand back, feeling momentarily uncertain, because he wasn’t sure Enjolras could say the same. His life had definitely gone down the shitter since they’d started dating, though Grantaire’s self-esteem was no longer awful enough that he believed it was really his fault (unless he was having one of his bad days).

Enjolras bit his lower lip nervously, then leaned forward and kissed Grantaire sweetly on the mouth. “I’m happy too. I’m sorry we started dating right before my life turned unstable, but someday I’ll get myself together and I’ll give you everything you deserve.”

Grantaire wrapped Enjolras in his arms and tugged him so that he was draped over his chest. “I
already have more than I deserve. But go on. What are you going to do for me once you’ve made
your way in the world and freed the working class from the tyranny of the one percent? Because I
imagine that’d come first.”

Enjolras laughed, and the sound was magical. “I want to get us a house with at least two spare
bedrooms. One will be a playroom for the cat so that he can keep all his fur and his dander in there-”

“Of course priority one is to give the cat his own fucking bedroom-”

“And the other will be an art studio,” Enjolras said firmly, speaking over Grantaire’s disparagement
of what he believed to be a thoughtful and practical solution to Grantaire’s allergies. “We’ll fill it
with mirrors and those wooden hand models and pose books and mountains of art supplies. You’ll
have an entire row of easels and as many canvases as you need. And then you can fill the rest of the
house with your artwork, so I can admire your brilliance wherever I happen to settle in with my
laptop and my books.”

Grantaire grinned. “I like the sound of that. We’ll need a nice settee and some good lighting in that
studio, so you won’t get uncomfortable when you model for me.”

“And how often will I be doing that?” Enjolras asked playfully.

“Daily,” Grantaire said. He ran his hands up and down Enjolras’ back, then skimmed his long
fingers under Enjolras’ t-shirt, lightly padding them over bare skin. “My progress on any piece with
you in it is going to be unbearably slow, since we’ll have to stop every fifteen minutes or so when I
get overwhelmed looking at you. Then we’ll have to make out.”

“Mm. You get so passionate when you’re lost in your art.” Enjolras traced his fingers over the edge
of Grantaire’s forehead, sliding down by his cheekbones, and then tracing up again to tangle in his
hair. “I think I like watching you draw almost as much as you like watching me.”

“So this sounds like a solid arrangement then. We’ll have an art studio that doubles as a sexy-times
room.” He closed his eyes and started kissing along Enjolras’ neck.

In his mind’s eye, Grantaire could just barely see that pleasant future Enjolras was cooking up for
them. There was a nice house, nothing as large and pretentious as the ones his family owned, but
something manageable like Charles and Bridget’s place. Enjolras would have some respectable job
and probably a few charity projects on the side, and Grantaire would be his kept man. He’d cook and
maybe clean a little (if he felt like it) and even begrudgingly take care of the damn cat, and he’d have
his art, though he’d never make any money at it, and they’d be happy.

Enjolras pulled Grantaire away from the hickey he was leaving and attacked his mouth instead. They
kissed messily as their hips ground against each other. They were too tired and worn down for
anything particularly finessed or involved (and besides that, ‘Ferre’s room wasn’t all that far away,
and his fan wasn’t all that loud), so they just moved against each other and messily kissed, until
Grantaire got a hand between them and jerked Enjolras to his climax. Enjolras slid down Grantaire’s
body, took him in his mouth, and with a few uncoordinated thrusts Grantaire spent into his warmth.

“So anyway,” Grantaire said weakly, while Enjolras fixed his boxers and dropped a kiss against his
hip bone. “To get back on track. I love you, and you didn’t turn me into someone different. You just
made me less fucked up, and I appreciate it. It’s a good thing.”

“It is,” Enjolras agreed. He cuddled up against Grantaire and let his eyes drift shut. Within minutes
his breathing had evened out, and he slept peacefully until morning.
“Good morning, boys!” Bridget’s cheerful greeting was answered with two quiet groans, which turned into loud exclamations when she threw back the heavy curtains and flooded the hotel room with sunshine.

In his attempt to roll away from the window and get a pillow over his head, Bahorel fell off the twin bed and landed with a loud thud on the floor.

Bridget didn’t appear at all concerned about that. The somewhat prudish and definitely proper woman didn’t even flinch when she realized her friend’s son was sleeping mostly naked, wearing only a flimsy pair of boxers that barely covered any of his long, muscular legs. Instead, Bridget continued over to Courfeyrac’s bed without giving the boy sprawled on the floor a second look. She calmly yanked the blankets off of her son, whipped the pillow off of his head, and tossed it on the floor next to Bahorel. She gave his boxers-clad ass a light smack that had him yelping something incoherent about decency, and then informed him that if he wasn’t up in fifteen minutes she’d be returning with a bucket of water.

The door clicked closed behind her a moment later.

Reluctantly, Courfeyrac sat up and pushed his bangs out of his face. Yawning, he peered at the alarm clock on the nightstand set up between the two beds. “Wow. It’s eleven thirty. I can’t believe Mom let us sleep this late.”

Bahorel was hugging Courfeyrac’s pillow to his chest, curled into an almost fetal position where he’d landed on the floor. He had his eyes squeezed tightly shut. “Turn’off th’light.”

“It’s the sun, dude.”

“Fuckin’ killit.”

“Bahorel, Mom wasn’t joking about the bucket of water. She’s done that to me and ‘Taire before. C’mon, get up.” Courfeyrac nudged him with his foot, and Bahorel tried to slap him. Thankfully, he was too groggy to land the hit, because even a half-asleep slap from Bahorel was enough to take Courfeyrac out.

Courfeyrac climbed out of bed, shuffled to the next room down the hall, where his parents were staying, and informed his mother that he’d get Bahorel up and meet them for breakfast in the hotel restaurant in an hour. Bridget somewhat coldly informed him it’d be lunch by that point, but she agreed all the same.

Courfeyrac showered, dressed, snuck down to the shops in the lobby to get a couple of coffees, and Bahorel was still on the floor when he returned. He was snoring loudly, despite the fact that the curtains were still open, and the room was glowing almost as though it had a spotlight on it. Courfeyrac sat down on the bed next to Bahorel and took a slow sip of coffee. “I bought you some extra time, but you still have to get up. Mom likes it when we take our meals together. It’s one of the only obligations she has for our trips.”

Bahorel made a weird choking noise as a snore died in his throat, then sat up and snagged his coffee as though he hadn’t just been snoring on the floor in his underpants and was made of dignity, thank you very much. It had been awhile since Courfeyrac had seen quite this much of Bahorel’s body (at least, without distracting feminine alterations). He couldn’t help staring a little. Bahorel’s abs were really impressive.

Of course, Courfeyrac’s type was a little more lean in its musculature, but he wasn’t going to let himself think about that.
Come to think of it, checking out Bahorel was a bad idea too (even though the muscle head put himself on display). Courfeyrac knew full well that he was still in rebound-with-anything mode, and he didn’t want that pesky trait of his to strain any of his friendships. Or, not any of the important ones, anyway.

Bahorel tugged his boxers a little higher, lightly scratched at his stomach with glittery painted nails, and basically inhaled his coffee. “You could’ve warned me your mom expects us to be conscious in the morning.”

“It’s almost noon. But for future reference, she likes us to be up and about around ten.”

“Yeah, that’s the kind of thing I need to plan for. So what’s on the agenda today?”

“Well…first we’ve gotta hit up some tourist crap with Mom and Dad. Dad wants to go to Ellis Island, and Mom wants to go to MoMA and get a souvenir for Grantaire.”

“What’s with your Mom and Grantaire?” Bahorel interrupted suddenly. He sat down next to Courfeyrac on the bed, swiped his mostly full coffee out of his hand, and drained that. “Dude, you put way too much sugar in this thing.”

Courfeyrac rolled his eyes. “Go figure. Look, Mom sort of unofficially adopted Grantaire when we were in high school. He’s like her second son. So, y’know, watch what you say about him in front of her. She’s only got a vague idea of how bad his alcoholism and depression were, and she likes to think the best of him.”

“Got it. Okay, so boring ass tour on immigration and then fruity ass art museum. What are we going to do to have fun after that?”

“Well…I know you said you didn’t want to see any plays with me-”

“Yep.”

Courfeyrac frowned. “But there’s this play I thought you might like anyway-”

“No.”

“Oh come on! It’s about drag queens!”

“Oh, therefore I’ll automatically love it?” Bahorel asked with a sneer. “ Fucking no. Dude, I don’t do plays. That was my condition for coming out here with you.”

Courfeyrac pouted. “But I really want to see Kinky Boots. I liked the movie it’s based on.”

“So go see Kinky Boots. I’ll hit up a bar or something.”

“You did that last night.” While Courfeyrac sat in their hotel room alone, going through the mini bar and creeping Hugh Scarlett’s facebook page because he had no one more sensible than himself present to stop him stewing in his heartache. He was pretty sure he’d also drunk dialed Combeferre with a message to pass along to Jehan, and sincerely hoped that part was a dream, because he may or may not have crooned the bridge from On Bended Knees by Boyz II Men when he did so.

“Right, so we’ll both be entertained. I see no problem with this,” Bahorel said. He threw out the two empty coffee cups, stood, stretched, and went into the bathroom.

Courfeyrac slumped back against the pillows and texted Grantaire.
Don’t read anything overly sentimental into this, but I fucking miss you dude. Bahorel sucks.

Jean Prouvaire had always been a morning person. The trait had annoyed his ex-boyfriend, who slept till noon unless he was obliged to be up earlier owing to forces beyond his control (meaning his mother, class, or Enjolras). The trait had worked in Marius’ favor though, as Jehan had always busied himself cooking a big breakfast while he’d waited for Courfeyrac to wake up. Of course, Jehan’s routine when he slept over his lover’s apartment was different from the routine he kept when he was home.

The day began with Jehan switching off his alarm clock, which he only set because of habit, as he always woke naturally before it went off. He then took up one of the myriad journals he kept on his bedside table and recorded anything of interest his slumbering mind had come up with. Next he tied on his hideous bathrobe, fixed himself tea and breakfast, and sat by the living room window. He checked his facebook as he ate, as he usually had messages from his friends waiting for him. Chores came later; he never left his apartment before he tidied it, but the mornings always began leisurely so that his quiet privacy could be savored. Sometimes he meditated or jotted a new poem before he bothered with the dishes or making the bed.

The morning after the Pride festival was quite a different beast from Jehan’s neat little routine. For starters, he woke to his alarm blaring next to his ear. He then proceeded to hit the snooze button for four repetitions before reluctantly crawling out of bed to face another day.

Jehan left his smurf-robe in an ever growing pile of dirty laundry on the floor. He padded into the kitchen, rubbed at his eyes with the heel of his hand, and complained about the heat under his breath. Making breakfast was a bit of a challenge, as most of his dishes were crusting in the sink, so Jehan settled for bread and Nutella with a bottle of iced green tea. He ate his pathetic breakfast in the kitchen while leaning against the counter, deciding there was little point in checking his facebook feed.

None of his friends wanted to talk to him. They all stiffened and forced smiles when he showed up, because they were judging him (well, maybe not Combeferre, but it was possible he was just better at hiding his judgment than everyone else). All of his friends had sided with Courfeyrac, who hurt publicly and whose very nature screamed out for sympathy and comfort. Everyone forgot that Jehan was shy, and kept his hurts to himself in public unless he was dressing up the message in metaphor.

It occurred to Jehan though, that Joly or Musichetta might have a concern about the wedding, and that he ought to check his online correspondence just in case anyone could bear interacting with him long enough to make use of his talents. In addition to sewing waistcoats and cravats, he was also supposed to be designing the programs and invitations. So Jehan wearily heaved himself away from the counter, leaving his half-eaten breakfast where it was.

None of his friends had messaged him, but Bahorel had filled his feed with pictures of him and Courfeyrac travelling to New York and having dinner with Bridget and Charles. Jehan had unfriended Courfeyrac, partly so he wouldn’t have to see pictures of how much better his ex was doing without him. He knew Courfeyrac would be happier in the long run. That was the whole reason he’d broken up with him, because he needed Courfeyrac to be happy and he knew he wasn’t the one to do it. But it hurt so much to see that he was right.

Courfeyrac had a beautiful smile.

For one wild minute, Jehan almost unfriended Bahorel. Then he got a new friend request, and it distracted him from doing something he’d undoubtedly regret later.
The request was from Hugh Scarlett. Jehan hesitated about accepting it. Even though he’d spent a good chunk of the day with Hugh, he wasn’t sure he really liked him. The boy was handsome, elegant, and generous, but there was also something insincere about his elegance, and flippant in his generosity. Plus, when he’d looked at Jehan there had been a hunger in his eyes tinged with a pressing desperation. Hugh unsettled him, and Jehan was at a bit of a loss about the reasons why.

Then, shaking himself for being so melancholy and attributing his dramatic sense of foreboding to the early hour (even though it was past ten and he usually got up at seven), he accepted the friend request.

Jehan spent a few minutes looking through Hugh’s profile. His profession was listed as idler, but the profile also said that Hugh was going to Harvard. Jehan liked to think he couldn’t be completely lazy if he’d gotten into an Ivy. Like Courfeyrac, Hugh had an improbable number of facebook friends. Their only friend in common was Enjolras, and Jehan belatedly remembered that Hugh and Enjolras were cousins.

“Hm. I wonder if he has any pictures with Enjolras,” Jehan murmured. He was just starting to go through Hugh’s pictures, thinking he might find an old family photo good for a shared laugh at the Musain, when Hugh messaged him.

Hey. Thanks for adding me.

Jehan frowned at his keyboard. Answering with ‘you’re welcome’ seemed a little trite. He sent a happy face instead, which though equally trite was at least relaxed and friendly. A verbalized pleasantry seemed like a good touch.

I had fun yesterday.

Me too, came the immediate reply. I liked talking to you. You’re a wonderful listener. I was hoping I might make you my friend and keep you as a confidante.

That’s a little bold, Jehan answered, even though he was smiling. I hope you’ll keep the burdens of your confidence light. I’ve got a fair few of my own issues weighing on my mind at the moment.

Ah. That guy you walked into yesterday…he wouldn’t perchance be responsible for any of the weight, would he?

Jehan sighed, and typed out a yes.

He didn’t look like anything to be burdened over, but I suppose I don’t know him. Does his personality outweigh the helmet of frizzy mud colored hair?

That startled a laugh out of him. Feeling as though he ought to defend Courfeyrac (who was actually rather vain when it came to what he referred to as his ‘emo-fro’), Jehan chewed on his lip for a moment and then wrote out a response. Courfeyrac’s one of the loveliest people I’ve ever known.

Okay. He’s still not much of a looker.

I think he’s gorgeous.

*you’re* gorgeous. He’s a bit too dumpy for my tastes. I think he’d do well with that upright walking oaf my cousin’s shackled himself to. They seem well suited for one another, and from what I hear they’re rather close friends already.

Jehan frowned, and was tempted to ex out of the conversation right then and there. Hands shaking a
little, he decided to address Hugh’s slight against his friends instead. *I assure you, Grantaire is *not* an oaf. He and Enjolras are pure magic together."

*Are they?*

*Yes they are.***

*Oh. It doesn’t look that way from his family’s POV, but I’m guessing you’re seeing much more than we are. Enjolras doesn’t talk to us very much anymore.*

That was intriguing. And to be fair, Jehan supposed Grantaire wouldn’t shine well from the distance Enjolras’ family saw him from. You had to be close to him to appreciate his good qualities. *What are you seeing?*

*Since Enjolras started going out with this delinquent street artist, he’s been stabbed in a common brawl, he was involved in a kidnapping and attempted murder, he turned his back on his parents, and now we suspect he might be on drugs. He looks awful.*

*Oh. Those observations were all depressingly logical, given appearances. He could see how Enjolras’ family had come to the conclusions they had. Well I assure you, Enjolras is most definitely not on drugs. Would you believe me if I said none of those incidents were Grantaire’s fault? He’s actually been Enjolras’ support. They’re a beautiful couple, and beautifully in love. I aspire to such a relationship someday myself.*

*I’ve never seen them together, so I’ve been reserving most of my judgments until then. From what I’ve seen, this urchin seems just the sort of troubled ‘bad boy’ Enjy’s always been drawn to. He likes to mend broken wings on poor little broken birds.*

*That he does. Can we talk about something besides your cousin?*

*Sure. I’d prefer it, actually. I only got on this because Enjolras is the only common thread between us at the moment. If you’re open to it though, I’d like to change that.*

There it was. Jehan took a deep breath, and sent Hugh a trio of question marks. He fully expected the reply he got, as he’d been anticipating it since Hugh had gently grasped his arm and asked if he wanted to take a stroll through the festival grounds with him the previous day.

*I want to get to know you, Jean Prouvaire. Would you like to have dinner with me tonight?*

*No. No, he didn’t want to have dinner with a handsome, snobbish stranger who belittled his friends for being middle class or poor (but not to their faces). He didn’t trust Hugh’s easy grace, or his biting sense of humor.*

He wanted to have dinner with a graceless, reckless, relaxed boy whose good looks were much more approachable. He wanted Courfeyrac, and he wanted things to be natural and easy between them. He so wanted something that just wouldn’t happen for him, no matter how hard he tried to will it into being, or how many tears he shed for it in private.

Jehan’s eyes filled with tears once more. He wiped them away, then asked Hugh what time he wanted to meet up.

*Because, despite all his misgivings about Hugh Scarlett, the thing Jehan wanted least was to spend another evening alone.*
Grantaire stomped into the kitchen wearing a scowl that was directed at the phone in his hand. With his attention thus diverted, he almost missed the sight of Enjolras’ ass sticking up in the air as he crawled across the kitchen floor making kissy noises at his cat.

However, Enjolras’ ass happened to be Grantaire’s favorite ass, and he was oddly attuned to when it was going to be on display. He put his phone away and watched as Enjolras continued across the floor on his hands and knees, calling out to Raoul, who was hiding under the kitchen table and looking less than inclined to come out. “Damnit,” Enjolras finally muttered, sitting up and letting his arms fall limply to his sides. “Taire, you didn’t use that can of tuna Bridget left us, did you? I think I might need to open it to get Raoul out.”

“You’re much more likely to have Logan and Gladiator yowling at your ankles than your scrawny little cat. Haven’t you noticed the way Combeferre’s cats push Raoul around? He’s scared of them,” Grantaire pointed out.

Enjolras stood up and walked over to Combeferre’s curtain. He knocked on the wall next to it. “Ferre, do you have your cats in there with you?”

“Yes. Logan is sitting on my knees and Gladiator’s at the foot of the bed.”

“Can you lock them in another room for a minute? I really need to get Raoul out so I can have a look at him.”

They heard the sound of a whiny meow, and a moment later Combeferre pulled back the curtain and walked into the kitchen. “What’s up?”

“He’s got a funny dark spot by his tail. I was trying to get a better look at it, but he swiped at me and then ran under the table. I haven’t been able to get him out since.” Enjolras held up his arm and showed off a row of My Little Pony band-aids as evidence.

Grantaire let out a painful snorting noise when he saw the band-aids. “Why do you have My Little Pony band-aids, Enjolras?”

“The questions should be why does Ferre have My Little Pony band-aids. And it doesn’t matter either way. I find them serviceable.”

Combeferre was down on his knees, holding his hand out to Raoul and making soft cooing noises. He took a break from the cooing noises to smirk at Enjolras. “The answer is Courfeyrac, if you were wondering.”

“I should have figured,” Grantaire said. Courfeyrac had been trying to turn him into a Brony for at least a year. It didn’t really surprise him that he’d been working on his other friends as well. “Speaking of, that kid is driving me nuts right now.”

“He’s in another state, so that’s a bit of a feat. Honestly ‘Ferre, I tried that. He’s not coming out,” Enjolras snapped. He pulled out a chair and sat down, huffily crossing his arms over his chest.

Combeferre inched a little closer to the cat without the chair in his way, and continued making his soft noises. Hesitantly, Raoul inched a little closer and gave his finger a sniff.

“Courf’s been texting me on and off all day trying to get me to grill you about your stupid cousin,” Grantaire continued, as though Enjolras and Combeferre weren’t more invested in the cat than their roommate. “I keep telling him to fuck off.”

“And by fuck off, you do mean enjoy your vacation, right?” Enjolras asked, a hint of warning in his
Combeferre successfully grabbed Raoul by the scruff and yanked him out from under the table. The cat looked positively betrayed, and he made Combeferre aware of his feelings by yowling and kicking out at him with his back legs. However, far too used to wrangling cats at this point, Combeferre managed to get him in a more comfortable hold without sustaining a single scratch. “Shouldn’t Bahorel be distracting him from worrying about Jehan?” Combeferre asked, appearing completely unfazed by the angry cat in his arms.

Enjolras dove out of his seat and immediately started prodding at the cat. “Of course he is, but we all know Bahorel can be a selfish tool when he feels like it. He ditched Courf last night to go bar crawling, and he’s ditching him again today since Courf was planning on taking in a show and Bahorel refuses to go to ‘some fruity ass play.’ From the sounds of it, Courf’s going to skip the show too. It looks like his new program for the day consists of staring at the hotel ceiling and sending me paranoid texts. Maybe I should have skipped out on work and gone on the trip with him. It doesn’t sound like Bahorel’s being a very good trip companion.”

“No, it doesn’t sound like it at-see, that’s what I was looking at,” Enjolras snapped, pushing back some of the fur at the base of Raoul’s tail. “Ferre, what the hell are all those little black dots by his tail?”

“I don’t see…little black dots? Oh no. Here, hold him for a sec.” Combeferre shifted the cat into Enjolras’ arms, jumped to his feet, and ran over to the sink.

Grantaire was tempted to smack the both of them. “Will you forget about the damn cat for half a minute and help me figure out what to do about Courfeyrac?”

“I’m not going to let you grill me about Hugh so that Courfeyrac can better stalk him, so I don’t know what you expect me to do to help. Combeferre, what is it? What do you think’s wrong with my cat?”

Combeferre wet a paper towel, crouched down next to Enjolras, and started rubbing Raoul’s fur. When he pulled the paper towel away it had tiny little red stains on it. “Is that blood?” Enjolras asked, voice shaking slightly.

Combeferre nodded grimly. “Yes. Because your fucking cat has fucking fleas. Did you honestly not give him a flea treatment? Enjolras?”

Grantaire took a step closer to the doorway. He’d never seen Combeferre look angry before. It was a little terrifying. Not Enjolras-angry-terrifying, although Combeferre’s rage hit Grantaire harder for some reason. Right. He found Enjolras’ anger arousing and certainly didn’t have that reaction to Combeferre.

Whatever. Grantaire figured it was best to make himself scarce.

“Those drop things cost an entire paycheck. I didn’t think there was much risk-”

“You lived in a rat hole shack infested with bugs!” Combeferre screeched. “How could you not give your pet a flea treatment? Do you know what this means? This means there are fleas in this house now and that they’re probably on my cats too! Do you know what that means? That means we have to bathe the fucking cats and flea bomb the house! Have you ever bathed a cat before? Have you, Enjolras?”
Deciding that that was not a conversation he wanted to be a part of, Grantaire raced into the bedroom, snagged his keys and his wallet, and quietly made his way out of the apartment. He’d deal with Courfeyrac’s texts on his own. It sounded like Enjolras was going to have his hands full.

Enjolras was in a less than stellar mood when he showed up for work. Eponine was tempted to say something to him about bringing his problems to the job with him, but when he quite literally growled at her she decided to talk to him about it later.

Really, Enjolras was professional to a fault. He’d get over his irritation any minute, and behave in his typical cold and indifferent manner towards the customers. And wasn’t it a pathetic thing that cold and indifferent was her preference…

“Eponine, I can’t find the red bucket,” Jehan said, approaching the counter with his ridiculous floral print rubber gloves and a kerchief over his hair. “It’s my turn to clean the bathrooms, and I was going to do that during the lull. Did you move the supplies?”

“Yeah. They’re on the shelf by the fridge now,” Eponine answered. “Enjolras, can you watch the register for a sec so I can show Jehan where the supplies are?”

Enjolras leaned against the counter and narrowed his eyes at her. “You know, seeing as we’ve got a momentary lull, perhaps you can explain this one for me. What possessed you to move the cleaning supplies to such an inconvenient location?”

“I needed the cabinet under the register for office supplies,” Eponine lied. Really, she’d noticed that Marius getting up on tip toe to grab a roll of receipt paper showed off his spectacular ass, to the delight of their drooling fan girls and to the benefit of their tip jar. Switching the office supplies out for something they used a little more often, like cleaning supplies, had been one of her better ideas, or so she thought. And really, having rolls of paper, spare pens, and calculators closer to the register wasn’t exactly a bad thing.

Enjolras looked like he suspected her motivations. “Marius said something about White T-shirt Wednesdays. Please tell me that’s not actually going to be a thing.”

“Oh, that. I was reading up on managerial stuff, and one thing I bumped into over and over again was team building activities,” Eponine said, smiling as charmingly as possible for Enjolras and Jehan’s benefit. “Themed dress down days are supposed to be really good for morale, and for helping us bond.”

“We’re already friends outside of work. We don’t need team building exercises,” Enjolras snapped.

“I’m the manager, sweetie. I kind of get to decide these things.”

Enjolras took a step forward, looking positively menacing. “If a pitcher of water comes anywhere near me while I’m wearing a white t-shirt I will make sure you regret it. Is that clear?”

“Enjolras, what do you think of me?” Eponine asked, feigning innocence. “You wouldn’t really think I’d try to arrange anything that even vaguely resembled a wet t-shirt contest, do you?”

Jehan took down the bucket he needed, a thoughtful frown on his face. “I think I’ll keep a change of clothes with me on Wednesdays from now on. Er, guys, if you need me I’ll be scrubbing down the bathrooms.”

“You do that,” Enjolras said, terrible stare still fixed on Eponine. “I think I’ll make it a habit to bring the most unflattering change of clothes I can find for my spare outfit on Wednesdays.”
Eponine rolled her eyes, but didn’t say anything else about her plan being shot to hell. At least she didn’t have to come up with three separate ways to convincingly “accidentally” spill pitchers of water on her friends (well…actually, she could still probably get away with drenching Marius).

A rush of teenagers compelled Eponine to fetch Jehan from the bathrooms, and for the next three hours the baristas were too busy to snark at each other over “sexual harassment” (really, Eponine thought the boys were just being oversensitive) or “prostitution” (and that was Enjolras being melodramatic). Gradually Enjolras’ mood started to improve as he got lost in his work, though there was a frightening moment when one of the bleach blond twits told Enjolras he was looking much better, and was blatantly about to ask him if he was getting over that horrible girl who’d jerked him around.

Eponine loudly insisted that Enjolras restock the bake case right that minute, even though there was no way they were going to go through all the sandwiches, wraps, and pastries they had on hand before the end of the shift. Enjolras very politely pointed that out to her. “Wouldn’t my time be more effectively spent helping you and Jehan with the line?”

“Are you questioning me because you don’t think an eighteen year old girl should be your manager?” Eponine demanded, feeling a bit desperate. “That’s it, isn’t it? You think you should be the manager, that Jacques made a mistake, because how could a stupid ditz like me possibly run this café all on my own?”

“What? No, of course not…I’ll just…I’m sure you have your reasons for restocking the case. I’m on it.” Looking flustered, Enjolras took off for the walk-in fridge out back, and Eponine took his place in front of the register.

The girl Enjolras had been waiting on looked shell shocked. “Oh man. Have people really been giving you shit for being the manager when you’re a girl?”

“Yeah, actually,” Eponine said, which wasn’t a total lie. She’d gotten a surprising amount of attitude from some of their morning-rush customers, who resented having a teenager trotted out when they asked to speak to a supervisor. “But not from Enjolras,” she quickly assured the girl. “I’ll apologize to him later. I’ve just gotten a bit sensitive about it, so I overreacted.”

“I get it. It really pisses me off when people assume I suck at my job just because I’m sixteen,” the girl said. She dropped a five in the tip jar when she paid for her latte. “Tell Enjolras I said bye.”

“Will do,” Eponine said, though she had no intention of facilitating communication between her baristas and their admirers.

The crowds died down around seven, with the exception of some small clusters lingering at tables with their laptops and e-readers. By eight thirty the last of those had gone their way and the place was pretty much dead. Enjolras and Jehan were efficient workers, so there weren’t really any tasks to be done.

Eponine hopped up on a table and started texting Feuilly.

“What a fine managerial example you’re setting there,” Enjolras commented.

Eponine shot him the bird. “But darling, feel free to copy my example and send your own boyfriend a few texts if it’ll help you get the stick out.”

Enjolras rolled his eyes and pointedly starting wiping down the tables, even though Jehan had just done that less than fifteen minutes ago, and they hadn’t had any customers in the meantime.
Jehan was nervously fiddling with the string of his apron. He opened his mouth to say something, but stalled at the last minute, and ended up behind the counter sorting their ceramic coffee mugs by color. When that completely unnecessary task was finished, he started lining up the register pens by size and ink color.

“Guys, Feuilly’s going to swing by and grab me in ten minutes. I assume you can handle closing by yourselves?”

“However will we deal with the multitudes of customers without you?” Enjolras asked dryly.

Again, Eponine shot him the bird. She hopped down from the table, went out back, and snagged her purse. She took up a post behind the counter, but rather than uselessly sorting their already tidily arranged supplies, she took out a makeup mirror and started checking her hair.

“Eponine, you look as beautiful as ever,” Jehan quietly reassured her, startling her a bit as she hadn’t been aware of how close he was standing to her.

Eponine’s face colored a little, but she snapped the makeup mirror shut. “I’ve been working all day. I just wanted to make sure I didn’t look like a total sticky nightmare.”

“Oh, well, I can understand your concern,” Jehan said with a smile. “Since Feuilly wasn’t here when Bossuet tripped over the mop and drenched you with a bucket of dirty water. He’s clearly never been exposed to you in anything but pristine condition. Clearly he’s very shallow, and you should make sure to always look your best for him.”

Eponine lightly punched his arm. “Jerk. I suppose you’re right though. This is definitely the best part of dating a friend: getting to relax and be myself around him.” She let out a giddy little squeal, then her phone vibrated with a text. “Oh, he’s here. See you later, boys. Have a good rest-of-shift.” She kissed Jehan’s cheek and all-but danced out of the café without noticing the wounded look on the gentle poet’s face.

He moodily went back to reorganizing their already reorganized mugs, and Enjolras wondered if it was worth asking Jehan if he was bothered by Eponine’s innocent comment for the reasons Enjolras suspected. Then he decided he’d rather not risk another fight with Jehan by bringing up Courfeyrac, so he sat down at one of their tables with a copy of one of Marguerite’s books of poetry instead.

Chapter End Notes

Hello my wonderful readers! I'm sure you're all a bit curious about who Hugh Scarlett is at this point (and if you aren't then I haven't been doing my job right). He's actually not an OC, despite appearances. He's one of the main characters in one of my favorite novels (if not my favorite, sorry Hugo), Red Pottage, by Mary Cholmondeley (available free online http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14885/14885-h/14885-h.htm). I made a half-assed plan at one point to include some other literary figures as background characters in the fic, and generally let that plan fall by the wayside. Feuilly's awesome coworkers, Jo and Meg, are two of the March sisters from the Little Women trilogy. Originally I was going to do something with Jo and Combeferre, but I came up with something else instead so the literary figures plan got ditched, but Hugh revived it.
It's been a little while since I read Red Pottage, so I may have conflated his physical appearance with another Cholmondeley character, Charles Danvers, but anyway, in my head he looks a lot like Enjolras so I thought it would be fun to make them relatives. Hugh Scarlett is one of my literary crushes and fits a certain type that I tend to fall for—the scrapegrace struggling to better himself. I know I haven't done him any favors, introducing him as the big rival for Jehan's affections, but I hope you guys will give him a fair shake anyway.

It's not like my plans for him are all that nice and fluffy, after all ;)}
Chapter Summary

We learn a little more about Hugh Scarlett.

Bahorel has an insight regarding Courfeyrac...finally.

Hugh Scarlett had actually been playmates with his cousin when they were little. He was only three months older than Enjolras, and as their mothers were close they insisted on having their boys play together as often as possible, hoping the two would become friends. The boys actually looked a lot alike. They both had thick blond hair, rather pretty faces for boys, and slight builds. Strangers always thought they were brothers, something they enjoyed when they were children. They started calling each other brother-cousin, and then brousin, which seemed infinitely cleverer when you were five.

Enjolras was the undisputed leader in their playtime. He created imagination games so spectacular that one hour of play could amuse Hugh for weeks after the fact, as he went over each and every intricate little plot twist Enjolras came up with. Enjolras was daring, and outspoken, while Hugh tended to get lazy and insolent if his own stunning talents weren’t directed properly. As Enjolras thrived off of an audience, Hugh suited him as a playmate. He followed him around, asking questions, giving just enough input of his own to make the games more interesting, but ultimately going wherever Enjolras lead (as long as it wasn’t up the big tree in the garden-Hugh hated that tree because he’d gotten stung by a bee while climbing it once and he’d never trusted it again after that).

Then one day during spring vacation while they were in second grade, Hugh found his place usurped by an intruder. He was dropped off at Enjolras’, and the very first thing Hugh did was race into the garden in the backyard to play X-Men or pirates or something, but he stopped short when he found his cousin sitting in the grass by the bird bath with a lanky red haired boy. They were looking through a stack of Zoo Books together.

Hugh hadn’t developed a taste for reading yet, he wasn’t overly fond of animals, and right then and there he decided he didn’t like lanky redheaded boys very much either.

“Hugh! When did you get here?” Enjolras asked. He tossed his magazine aside and stood up. “Come over here and meet Combeferre. Combeferre, this is my brousin Hugh. Hugh, this is my best friend.”

Hugh frowned. He’d thought that brousins were supposed to be best friends.

Combeferre seemed satisfied with the way the titles were distributed. He held out a dirty hand for a shake, but Hugh stared at it in disgust until he nervously dropped it back to his side. It looked like he’d bitten off at least half his fingernails, and the ones that remained had dirt and gunk underneath them. There was no way Hugh was going to touch a hand that dirty.

“Hi,” Hugh said, making his voice as cold as possible.

Enjolras narrowed his eyes. “Don’t be a jerk, Hugh. I’ve been telling Combeferre how awesome you are for weeks now. You’re going to make me look like a liar.”

“Sorry. So are we going to be pirates today? We were pirates last time, but I don’t think we finished
our story.’’

“Actually, when Combeferre and I play at recess lately we’ve been playing history,” Enjolras informed him, voice going a bit lofty for that. “Last time we played he was Abraham Lincoln and I was Frederick Douglass, but instead of trying to negotiate we just freed the slaves and let the Confederate states go.”

“We decided that they’d come crawling back once they realized they didn’t have a good government or anything, and that they needed the Industrial Revolution too. We’re turning the game into Utopia now,” Combeferre said. His voice was quiet, but still full of the same kind of enthusiasm Enjolras conveyed in a louder, flashier manner. And Combeferre was just as interested in dorky things as Enjolras. Really, they were very well suited for each other.

Hugh, not entirely grasping what it was to be jealous, reacted in the only way that seemed logical to a seven year old boy. He pushed Combeferre into one of the rosebushes that ringed that particular patch of grass, stomped on his stupid magazines with his muddy sneakers, and then ran away crying.

Enjolras caught up to him easily, tackled him to the ground, and started punching him. Hugh kneed him in the stomach and started tugging on his hair.

Fifteen minutes later, he was sitting on the front porch with strands of Enjolras’ spun-gold hair between his fingers, waiting for his horrified mother to pick him up.

Hugh and Enjolras drifted apart after that. Enjolras was slow to forgive an injury like an unprovoked assault on a close friend, and besides that, Hugh’s mother had started to develop concerns about letting him spend so much time with his aunt and uncle. She’d picked Hugh up from a sleepover and found Marie displaying signs of an obvious hangover one too many times for her comfort. When Enjolras ‘fell down some stairs’ and broke his wrist, she distanced herself more firmly than ever from her sister, and consequently, Hugh and Enjolras only really saw each other at big family events after that even though they only lived one town apart.

Eponine flung the door open to the apartment, struggling with an armload of boxes. She was fresh from a trip to Bridget's house, made possible by Grantaire and Combeferre’s borrowed car. The kindly Irish woman had been collecting little trinkets for Eponine's apartment since Courfeyrac had made the mistake of casually bringing up her predicament in conversation, and now Eponine had even more of the fixings to make their impersonal little space into a home. Much as she appreciated the photo frames, the scented candles, the wicker baskets and other such knick knacks, the best thing Eponine had found when rooting through the donations was a little wooden box stuffed with hand written recipe cards.

Apparently Courfeyrac had the greatest mother in the universe.

Eponine’s triumphal return with goodies was too noisy for Feuilly’s tastes, which he demonstrated by violently shushing her. He was perched on the couch, facing the wrong way and attempting to take a cellphone video of Little R where he was sprawled out on the floor coloring, despite the fact that he had a really low quality, cheap phone, and that Little R colored all the time and there was nothing remarkable or film-worthy about it at all.

Eponine shot her boyfriend a suspicious look, but quieted down and dropped the box on the table. She was about to head out to the car to get the other one, when she noticed that Little R wasn’t actually coloring with his crayons. Intrigued, she edged over to where her baby brother was playing.

Little R was holding a red Crayola in one chubby fist and a green Roseart in the other. He was
bobbing them up and down, and once she was close enough, Eponine was able to discern that he was making them talk to each other. Little R spoke in a voice close to a whisper, so she had to be silent herself to hear what the crayons were supposed to be saying to each other.

“‘No, no, no. You’ve gotta go to the-the produst. It’s about you too, R. Why don’t you care?’ ‘But I don’-I don’t wanna go to the produst. It won’t change anything anyway.’”

Eponine almost died laughing, but at a look from Feuilly she clapped a hand over her mouth and slowly edged her way over to join him from the safe distance of the couch.

Little R momentarily lowered his crayons to stare at them. “Is something wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, buddy,” Feuilly assured him. “Just keep playing.”

“Okay…” He reached for another crayon, and picked up a small green stub that had its paper torn off. “‘Hi Big R. Can you color with me?’ ‘Sure Little R. Because you are the bestest and I like spending time with you.’ ‘Oh good.’” He made some humming noises as the two crayons pretended to color together, and even though it was still cute as hell Eponine started to get bored with the imagination game. The real Big R was still sitting outside in the illegally parked car waiting for her to get the last box. She really ought to go and get that from him.

Then Little R grabbed another crayon. This one was a dusty rose color, and he had it descending on the green stubby one in a very threatening looking manner. “‘You’re going to come away with me and I’m going to cut your hair and make you wear itchy clothes and eat your vegetables and not see your friends.’ ‘Oh no, oh no, oh no! Someone save me!’” He made the red crayon whoosh over to the others, and the pink crayon ran away screaming. “‘Thanks for safe-ing me Statue!’ ‘You’re welcome. Now I’m going to stop talking, but it’s not cuz I’m bad. I’m just grumpy. Mwah.’” The red crayon kissed the big green crayon, then Little R tossed them both aside in favor of a purple crayon and a fuchsia one that represented Eponine and Azelma.

Feuilly was shaking with the effort to hold in his laughter. Little R noticed, and he put his crayons down. “I think I liked it better playing when you weren’t watching me.”

“I’m sorry,” Feuilly said immediately. He shut his phone off and stowed it in his pocket (no doubt to resurface at the Musain so everyone could see the crayon game). “We’ll give you some privacy.”

“Thanks.” Little R picked up a couple of crayons and spoke in a low, indecipherable tone until Eponine and Feuilly had moved far enough away that they couldn’t hear him.

“He’s got quite the imagination,” Feuilly said. “When I first noticed him playing, the crayons were kids he’d made up. I think they were supposed to be in a classroom. Then they were penguins settling the frontier, and then they turned into us.”

“Did he do us-us as well? Is there a Feuilly crayon?” Eponine asked.

He smirked. “The dark blue one. Same shade as my Red Sox cap. Y’know, the one that mysteriously disappeared shortly after we started living together.”

Eponine reached up and carded her hand through his curls. “Mm…shame your girlfriend gets to see so much of your handsome face now, isn’t it?”

“I want my hat back, Eponine.”

“I thought you liked it when I played with your hair. I certainly got that impression when I cut it and you got all flustered…”
“Eponine.”

“There’s a really simple cure for that kind of sexual frustration you know.”

“Mm. And it’s totally resolvable with small children in a house with thin walls,” Feuilly returned dryly.

Eponine’s phone rang, and really the timing couldn’t have been better. It was Grantaire, sounding more than a little annoyed as he asked her if she was planning on ever coming back out for that last box. “Hey, ‘Taire? Would you want to have the kids over your place sometime this week so Feuilly and I can have a date night?”

“No, I most certainly do not want to sacrifice one of my own date nights with Enjolras chasing after Gavroche when he disappears the first time I turn my back on him. Y’know, again.”

Eponine rolled her eyes. “I’ll pay you. But you have to take Azelma too.”

“…how much will you pay me?”

Feuilly took his wallet out of his pocket and started counting out bills. He held up a twenty. Eponine had thirty she could spare, but she didn’t want to open with the full amount. “Fifteen.”

“For looking after Gavroche? Plus I’ve gotta convince Combeferre and Enjolras to have them over, and I assume this is a sleepover. That’s two meals, Eponine.”

Drat. “Twenty five.”

“Keep going.”

“Thirty and I’ll throw in a pizza.”

“Done. I’ve got Friday off. I’ll take them then.”

“Okay. I’ll be right out to get that last box.” Eponine hung up the phone and turned to Feuilly. “Okay darling, it looks like we’ll get to consummate the relationship on Friday.”

Before Feuilly could respond, Little R’s squeaky voice reached them. “What’s consummating a relationship? Is that something I should do with my, my friends?”

Eponine’s face turned red, while Feuilly smacked a hand over his to hide his grimace.

Bahorel stumbled his way back to the hotel room just before one, mindful of what Courfeyrac had said about his mom’s unofficial curfew. He was in a pretty good mood, having met a fantastic crowd of drinking buddies that only made him a little homesick for Feuilly, Bossuet, Grantaire, and the Corinth. He was hoping to drag Courfeyrac out to meet them the following night.

To his great surprise, Courfeyrac was still awake when he finally managed to unlock their hotel room door with the keycard. The kid was sitting in a corner of the dark room scrolling through pictures on his phone and chugging from a vodka bottle like it was spring water. His eyes were red rimmed. Really, the entire scene was reminiscent of Grantaire in the old days. Only Grantaire in the old days went through jovial fits that made his habit of drinking away his feelings somewhat less frightening.

Bahorel, swaying where he stood, remembered suddenly that though Courfeyrac was quite adept at masking his emotions, he was in fact still suffering from his painful breakup. Though undoubtedly shitfaced, Bahorel still had the sense and the empathy to feel guilty about his behavior. He’d been a
bad friend, leaving Courfeyrac like that and thinking that their banter was just banter.

He didn’t really have the coordination to make up for his actions, however. Bahorel almost fell on Courfeyrac when he went over to sit with him, and he ended up leaning more weight than he meant to on his much smaller friend when he “comfortingly” leaned on his shoulder. “You look lonely, and sad, and not like a Courf. Let’s cuddle. I like cuddles when I’m lonely and sad.”

“You like to hit things when you’re lonely and sad,” Courfeyrac corrected. His voice was raspy. Shit. He even sounded like Grantaire in the old days.

“But I’m not the sad one,” Bahorel continued, trying not to be deterred. “Besides, I already hit things tonight. And you’re…tactile. Tha’s the word, right?”

“Dude, you smell like beer and sweat. Get off of me.”

With a long suffering sigh, Bahorel heaved himself off of Courfeyrac, possibly lightly bruising the kid in the process, and leaned against the wall instead. He clapped one large hand on Courfeyrac’s thigh and gave a squeeze that, in his state of intoxication, Bahorel believed to be gentle. “You’re a good guy, Courf. You don’t need some stuck up little bitch of a poet.”

“Bahorel, I will hit you. And then you’ll probably break my nose, because you actually know how to hit, and we’ll both feel like assholes, and I’ll be in pain, so can we just skip all that by you keeping your god damn mouth shut about Jehan? Even if he did rip my heart out, I love him. So watch what you fucking say.”

“Fuck, Courf. You’re as bad as ‘Taire.”

Courfeyrac sighed. “I suppose I am.”

Bahorel gave his thigh another squeeze, this time succeeding in being gentle. “I’m sorry, bro. What can I do to help?”

“I…I don’t know. It’s not like you can make him love me again. I fucked that up pretty badly. I tried to fix it, but…he’s not even my friend anymore. And now he’s going to date Enjolras’ cousin, and Enjolras’ cousin is gorgeous and rich and successful and he hangs out with published authors. I’ll never win Jehan back.”

Bahorel snatched Courfeyrac’s phone away from him. “That’s enough of mister Facebook for tonight. You need to quit being a creeper, Courf. Stop obsessing over Jehan and try to get over him. Go out and party with me tomorrow. You need to get out of the room.”

“I’ve been getting out of the room.”

“Without your parents. I mean, sightseeing and shit’d be great if you were in your sixties too. But as you’re twenty three, maybe you’d consider going to a club with me instead?”

Courfeyrac shook his head, then lowered his gaze to the floor.

Bahorel scowled, because he really, really didn’t want to give in on this.

However, he also really wanted to see Courfeyrac smile. His face just didn’t look right when he sulked (in a way that wasn’t playful, anyway). “Fine. I’ll go to the fucking fruity ass play with you.”

Courfeyrac’s face lit up, and he dropped an unexpected kiss on Bahorel’s cheek. "You're the best!"
"I am pretty awesome," Bahorel slurred, hoping it was too dark for Courfeyrac to see his blush.

It wasn’t quite a meeting, what with Courfeyrac and Bahorel being in New York, and Feuilly and the Thenardiers scrubbing down their house for the impending first social worker visit (Friday date-night would either be celebration or consolation, from the looks of it), but a good amount of the group had met up at Joly and Legle’s. They were splitting a pizza and helping Enjolras compose a newsletter entry for the LGBT domestic violence organization they’d represented at the Pride festival. Even though they hadn’t done as well as Enjolras had hoped, they’d still gotten quite a few email addresses and he wanted to get information disseminated to the new signups in a timely manner.

Unfortunately, everyone was pretty distracted, first by the pizza, and then by some amusing work anecdote of Musichetta’s. When Musichetta finished her story about confused Texan tourists and then proceeded to take out some sewing for the wedding, Enjolras mentally declared all his friends’ attention lost. He took up a post leaning against a wall in the corner of the room, keeping a safe distance from the couch, coffee table, and pizza remnants, and started composing the email on his own, leaving the others to their socializing.

“Which waistcoat are you working on now?” Cosette asked.

“This one’s going to be Feuilly’s. His is champagne colored with green trim, and the other groomsmen are going to be reverse.”

“Are you using a different pattern for Joly and Bossuet or are you guys just going to vary the fabric on theirs?”

“Pale silver with green details,” Musichetta answered. “It’s all going to be ridiculously classy, which was actually rather difficult to pull off. For all his enthusiasm, Jehan had some absolutely horrid suggestions for how to clothe you guys.”

“Yeah, surprising no one,” Grantaire chimed in. “Have you seen the way that kid dresses? Speaking of which, where is he?”

Enjolras looked up from his computer, losing the thread of what he was writing at the turn in conversation. He hadn’t even noticed that Jehan had skipped the get together. “Ferre, you did remember to invite him, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did,” Combeferre snapped.

For whatever reason, Combeferre was still a little pissy about the cat thing, even though Enjolras had promised to bathe the three of them first thing Sunday morning. He wanted to wait until he had a day off from work in case grooming the cats turned out to be as difficult as Combeferre was making it out to be.

From the looks of it, he was going to be snapped at until Sunday.

“You don’t think he’s ditching us on purpose, do you?” Marius asked.

“I think he was…but why would he ditch now? Courfeyrac’s in New York,” Legle pointed out. “He must be up to something else.” They shrugged it off and went back to discussing the outfits Musichetta and Jehan were sewing for the wedding, and then the wedding more generally. Enjolras tuned out when Cosette gave an update on how the floral arrangements were going.

He took a break from composing the email to scroll through his facebook feed, and let out a yelp
when he saw Hugh’s status update. “What the hell?! Jehan’s on a date!”

“A date?” Marius repeated, sounding comically scandalized. “He can’t be on a date already! That would be completely insensitive to Courfeyrac.”

“Guys, they were only going out for four months,” Combeferre reminded them, jumping in as a voice of reason before anyone could build up too much steam complaining about Jehan. “And if you accept the convention that for every month you dated, you wait one week before you start dating someone else, then Jehan going out on a date is perfectly acceptable.”

“Oh come on, ‘Ferre. Yes, they only dated for four months, but they weren’t strangers when they started dating,” Grantaire snapped. “That was a deep relationship. The grieving period should last a little longer.”

“That’s a matter of opinion,” Combeferre said, an undercurrent of anger in his tone. For the second time in two days, Enjolras watched his fiancé back down when Combeferre showed signs of aggression. It was…odd, to say the least.

Grantaire didn’t behave anything like that when Enjolras spoke firmly to him. If anything, he challenged him even more.

“What I’m surprised about is that Jehan would post about his date on facebook,” Cosette said. “That seems insensitive. What if Courfeyrac saw the status update?”

“He wouldn’t. Jehan unfriended him, the jerk,” Grantaire said bitterly. Combeferre scowled in response.

“Jehan didn’t post the status update,” Enjolras said.

“Although there’s no reason any of us should judge him for it if he had-” Combeferre started.

“Wait, so who did?” Musichetta interrupted. “Who’s dating our little poet now?”

Enjolras winced. “My cousin, Hugh Scarlett.”

“Wait, Jehan is dating who?” Combeferre’s complete one eighty on the situation took more than a few of their friends by surprise. “I can’t have heard that right. Enjolras, please tell me you said a name that made sense, and not Hugh fucking Scarlett.”

“I’m not sure they’re committed to any kind of relationship…but Hugh posted three hours ago that he was on his way to get Jehan for dinner. And they were getting pretty friendly at North Shore pride.”

Combeferre gaped at him. “This is in fact the cousin Hugh who pushed me into a rose bush the first time I met him, right?”

The others had all gone silent, gazes bouncing between Combeferre, who looked horrified, and Enjolras who was intensely uncomfortable and wished he’d kept his damn mouth shut about the stupid facebook status. He’d just been so surprised he couldn’t help vocalizing it. Yes, he’d seen Hugh and Jehan walking together, and he’d thought Hugh looked a bit smitten with his friend, but for them to be dating…

And whatever Combeferre had tried to say before, it still felt a little too soon to Enjolras.

“I do only have one cousin with that name,” Enjolras said in a careful tone. “You’re, er, not going to
hold that against him now, are you? Since we were seven at the time?"

Combeferre rubbed his forearm, even though the scratches from Marie’s rosebushes had long since healed. The experience of having someone lash out at him like that for no good reason may not have, from the looks of it.

Enjolras’ family had really done a number on Combeferre over the years. He decided not to dwell on that thought.

“Has Hugh changed substantially since we were children and he was a violent, jealous prick?”

Enjolras sighed and rubbed tiredly at his eyes. “I don’t really know. I drifted apart from him shortly after your fight. But if he’s going to become Jehan’s new boyfriend we’re probably going to have to be friendly with him. Believe it or not ‘Ferre, I don’t like this arrangement any more than you do.”

Combeferre scoffed at that.

“So, who wants to go back to talking about the wedding?” Marius asked loudly.

“We could talk about the e-letter we’re supposed to be sending out to victims of domestic assault.”

Enjolras tried.

“Right, the wedding!” Grantaire all-but shouted. “Better yet, we could talk about the bachelor party.”

“Parties! There are two of us,” Joly reminded them.

“I was thinking we should do lazer tag for mine,” Legle said.

Enjolras rolled his eyes and went back to work on the newsletter. Eventually he found his rhythm and managed to get the thing typed up and sent out. Consequently, he failed once more to notice how withdrawn and sullen Combeferre had gotten.

He noticed when the jerk made another crack about bathing the cats though.

The group’s sneaking suspicion that, despite his assurances to the contrary, Jehan was avoiding their larger gatherings was confirmed during the two weeks of Courfeyrac’s vacation. Jehan walked into the Musain one night, sat down at a table with Feuilly and Joly, opened a notebook, and began scribbling poetry just like everything was completely normal and he hadn’t thrown a big mess of drama into their whole dynamic.

Shrugging it off, Joly went with the ruse, but Feuilly was a little cold to him.

The next night, when Jehan met up with his friends at the Corinth, Grantaire turned on his heel and walked right back out of the bar again when he caught sight of the poet. Enjolras stayed, but he looked unnerved for the rest of the night, and he covertly texted under the table. It was a pretty fair assumption he was texting Grantaire.

At this point everyone knew that Jehan had been out to dinner with Enjolras’ cousin.

The next morning when Enjolras showed up for work he found Jehan curled up behind the counter hugging his knees to his chest. Jehan gave a start and rubbed at his face, which though not tear stained, was uncomfortably red. “Enjolras…I didn’t hear you come in.”

Enjolras turned the lights back off, walked over to the door, and locked it again. Then he joined Jehan behind the counter. “Are you okay?” With the café darkened, it would be impossible for
 anyone to see them from the sidewalk.

“Yes. Yes, of course I’m…” But he was finding it harder and harder to repeat the same hollow assertions.

Enjolras rested a hand on Jehan’s shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze. For once, the eloquent pillar of righteousness was lost for words. Jehan appreciated the touch though, especially since a comforting touch from Enjolras was somewhat rare (for anyone who wasn’t Grantaire, anyway).

“I’m sorry,” Jehan murmured. “I know we need to open. I’ll get myself together in a minute.”

“If you want to sit out back until you feel more composed, I can handle opening by myself,” Enjolras offered. “I would appreciate it if you’d let me know what’s got you so rattled though. It’s not anything Hugh did, is it?”

Jehan regarded Enjolras in blatant confusion. “No…Hugh’s a perfect gentleman. He brought me flowers, made his intentions quite plain, and was thoroughly understanding and sympathetic even when I was a thoroughly unsympathetic mess. We’ve agreed to go out again, but there’s no definition attached.”

“Oh.”

“Did you expect your cousin to do something vile to me?” Jehan asked, lips quirking into the slightest grin. “Because really dear, if you did I would have thought some kind of warning to be only polite. Despite my recent bad behavior towards you, we do have some years of friendship to consider in the balance.”

Enjolras shifted so that he was sitting with his knees in front of him. He started tapping his palms against his knees with a restless energy. “Hugh’s…complicated. He’s made some bad choices, but I do think there’s a lot of goodness in him. He needs to be helped along a little, is the thing.”

“He recognizes that.”

“Ah. Well, I don’t want you to have to suffer for helping him.”

Jehan lowered his gaze. “So your misgivings have nothing to do with Courfeyrac?”

“I’d be lying if I said no…let’s just say there’s a certain variety to my misgivings, and I’d rather warn you about Hugh’s inconsistent character than bring up things you must already know about Courfeyrac.”

“That’s fair. But you know, he’s probably dating again by now too.”

“He’s rebounding, Jehan. There’s a difference.”

Jehan felt himself turn cold, which was dangerous. The last time he’d felt that sort of coldness a fury had accompanied it, and the results had created a sizable chasm between him and Enjolras. They were filling that chasm now, and he certainly didn’t want to add to it.

But it was like he’d lost control of his words.

“So if I accompany one man to dinner I’m intentionally wounding Courfeyrac, but if he throws himself at anything with a pulse then it’s a perfectly acceptable and natural reaction?”

“I didn’t say I approved of Courfeyrac’s actions, but I think you should label it for what it is. He’s
not looking to replace you,” Enjolras said firmly, and the strength in his voice was reassuring. It felt like they were still friends.

Jehan worried at his lower lip. He could feel tears beading at his eyelashes, but so far they’d refrained from spilling down his cheeks. He really didn’t want to cry at work, even if there weren’t any customers around.

“Enjolras, does Grantaire hate me?”

Enjolras was slow to answer. “I think…you might have to ask him, actually.”

Jehan curled his knees to his chest and hid his face. He tried to get control of his breathing, but it was coming fast. He could feel the tears sliding down his cheeks even as he tried to follow his breath, tried to accept that his breath was quick…tried to accept the fear and anger and shame warring within him so that the transitory state could pass. But it wouldn’t fucking pass.

He’d been miserable for months. Emotional states weren’t supposed to cling like this.

“Jehan?”

“Everyone hates me,” Jehan whimpered. “I know they do. If I weren’t fucking sewing for the wedding I don’t think Joly and Legle would even be talking to me. And you’re still mad at me even though I apologized. I know it’s not sensitive to go out with Hugh, but he’s been so nice to me and I just-I don’t want to be a villain anymore. It was so good to have someone smile at me, Enjolras. I’m so sick of being alone with everything.”

Enjolras grasped his shoulder. “Jehan, we do not hate you.”

“Then why does everyone freeze up or glare at me when I walk into a room? I knew everyone was going to have more sympathy for Courfeyrac than for me when I ended it, but I didn’t expect I’d have to lose all of you.”

“You haven’t lost us, Jehan. Okay, yes, some of the others are being insensitive. But it would help if you were a little less withdrawn. Combeferre thinks you’re actively pushing him away. He’s been trying to call you, you know.”

“And I was so hurtful towards you…”

“I forgave you for that.”

“But you’re still hurt. I can tell. I’m so sorry, Enjolras. I feel like I haven’t been myself in ages. I don’t know how to fix it anymore. Everything I’ve tried just makes it worse.”

Enjolras stood up, and Jehan cried all the harder, sure that he’d done something once more to alienate his friend. But then Enjolras was urging him to sit up straight so he could wipe at his face with a damp paper towel. He pressed a few tissues into Jehan’s hands, briefly left once more, and returned with a mug of chamomile tea.

“I’ll talk to the others.”

“Enjolras, please don’t-”

“This isn’t right.” He spoke with the ringing conviction that had drawn the group to him and cemented him as their unofficial leader. Not only was Jehan powerless to argue with Enjolras when he took on this form, he felt himself compelled to agree with him. “We’re supposed to be friends, all
of us. And it’s beyond juvenile to take sides in a dispute of this nature, especially considering most of us have only heard from Courfeyrac. I won’t sit back and let you be shunned like this.”

Jehan sipped at his tea, and the indecision and despair that had been choking him started to lessen. He set the mug down, wiped at his eyes once more, and let out a breath that was slow and easy. “Thank you, Enjolras.”

“You’re welcome. Please go sit in the office and drink the tea while I open the café. You don’t have to come out until you feel ready, okay?”

Jehan nodded, and did as instructed.

He was only out back for ten minutes, maybe a little less, but when he stepped out front with his empty mug not only had Enjolras gotten everything ready by himself, but he’d already served enough customers to fill just about every table in the building. Jehan blinked a few times, processed what he saw, and then fixed his work smile into place. He joined Enjolras at the counter and offered a warm smile to his first customer of the day.

The shift passed in a remarkably pleasant manner.

Owing to the fact that he wasn’t terribly invested in the dates he was going on, Jehan accidentally looked really nice every time he met up with Hugh. When he didn’t fuss over his clothing choices, he managed to match colors surprisingly well, to the point that he would have surprised his friends if they saw him.

Hugh, of course, looked dashing every time they got together. He greeted Jehan with flowers on their first two dates, but switched to potted plants when he noticed that Jehan had them all around the apartment and was clearly a fan of living flowers. Their first date was dinner at a nice restaurant, but after that Hugh took him to the Emily Dickinson house, an old fashioned tea room, the Museum of Fine Arts, and the symphony.

Jehan supposed he would have been quite in love by now if his heart were still whole.

He’d gotten to know Hugh a bit better, and whereas there was cause for his initial misgivings, Hugh had also confessed all of the faults in his character. Or, he’d owned up to a startling amount, something Jehan found admirable given how rare it was to find someone willing to dissect themselves like that. Hugh was trying to make a fresh start, to improve himself and to keep better company than he had in the past (he made vague illusions to some scandal with a married woman and a psychotic husband, but Jehan didn’t ask any prying questions and Hugh was only too happy to let the unhappy subject drop). Hugh wanted to mature the good in his soul, and he believed it was that instinct that had drawn him to Jehan the day they’d met at the Pride festival.

Jehan wasn’t sure how he felt about all that, but it was nice to get potted plants, and to have a handsome young man keep him company. He liked Hugh well enough, so he kept agreeing to more dates.

Before leaving the house for their fifth date, a picnic lunch at the rose garden by the ocean in Enjolras and Combeferre’s hometown, Jehan gave his reflection a cursory inspection and decided that he looked fairly decent in his neon pink Walt Whitman shirt and his black jeans. It was a picnic lunch, nothing formal. Really, it wasn’t even worth changing for.

He slipped his messenger bag over his shoulder, and by the time he locked up and walked downstairs Hugh was just pulling up to the curb. He smiled at Jehan, looking radiant and lovely, and
worth at least a few lines of poetry. Unfortunately, every time Jehan set pen to paper he saw a forest of brown curls and a mischievous smile, not spun gold silken hair and a hesitant expression of hope.

Hugh fiddled with the radio while Jehan shoved his bag in the backseat. Hugh always changed the music to something he knew Jehan liked whenever he got into the car. The gesture would have struck Jehan as thoughtful, if the abundance of similar small gestures Hugh threw at him didn’t come across as somewhat rehearsed when taken together.

“Hello darling,” Hugh greeted with a warm affection that was reassuringly genuine.

“Hello dear,” Jehan returned. He couldn’t tell if Hugh had noticed that he used those endearments with everyone. He himself had noticed that he was Hugh’s only darling though, and it made Jehan uneasy.

Hugh put on a playlist heavy with Joni Mitchell and Andrew Bird, and the two of them set off for the public garden. Jehan had never been to this particular park before, but he knew the general area. Combeferre and Enjolras were Beverly kids, so when the group got together for beach outings they typically went to Dane Street or Independence Park, which were along the shore of Combeferre and Enjolras’ hometown. Jehan guessed that Lynch Park and its rose garden must be in a similar vein to the other two beaches; nice enough, but crowded and not terribly far from the street.

He was wrong, as it turned out. Lynch Park was further up the shore from Dane Street, but had a completely different feel as far as beaches went. A sharp hill separated the park from the street, which was surrounded by beautiful New England homes, many of which were mansions. The parking lot ended in a massive lawn and outdoor stage, and from there the park was divided into the garden, a children’s play area, and a long expanse of beach.

There were a lot of people milling around, but there was so much space that the beach didn’t come across as crowded at all. And besides that, the beautiful little rose garden was set apart just enough and encircled by just enough walls and hedges that it had an air of privacy, despite the abundance of children playing nearby.

Hugh guided Jehan to a shady nook, set down their blanket, and urged Jehan to stretch out while he set out containers of fresh fruit and trail mix. It was more a series of snacks than a picnic, but it was thoughtfully prepared and there was a certain niceness to having a sexy blond feeding you strawberries.

Jehan’s favorite part of spending time with Hugh was the quiet they shared. Much of the afternoon was spent in companionable silence. Jehan leaned against Hugh, who wrapped one arm around him protectively, and they read together, or didn’t, and just enjoyed the time spent together. After weeks and weeks of tiresome effort, Jehan had given up the hope of ever teaching Courfeyrac to enjoy moments like this.

And damn it all, Jehan had to go and ruin things again by thinking of his ex. Somehow sensing the fluctuation in Jehan’s mood (or just noticing the way he tensed; their bodies were pressed together, after all), Hugh twined their fingers together with one hand and used the other to trace a gentle caress over Jehan's hip. “Is everything alright? Would you like to get going?”

“No, not just yet. I just…never mind.”

“Jehan…I think we should get going. There’s a conversation I think we need to have, and a public park really isn’t the place to have it.”

Jehan didn’t say anything. He extracted himself from Hugh’s arms, helped him clean up the
containers, and walked back to the car with him.

During the ensuing drive Hugh touched on everything Jehan expected anyone with any amount of perception and empathy to say in his situation. He understood that Jehan was still hurting over his failed relationship, and Hugh was willing to back off and remain friends if need be, but he was hopelessly enamored and needed to make his feelings known, even if there was no chance of Jehan returning them.

Jehan let him talk, half-listening because he already knew everything Hugh was going to say, and he didn’t want to dwell on it. Before Jehan realized it Hugh was parking in front of his building. It was time to give the boy an answer.

Jehan still didn’t know what to say, so he did the only thing he could think of. He pressed a tender kiss to Hugh’s lips, their first, smiled at the deliriously giddy and gob smacked young man, and climbed out of the car.

None of the kisses he’d ever shared with Courfeyrac had left him feeling so cruel.
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

The Thenardiers have their first visit with a social worker.

Combeferre has a chat with his roommates.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys. This chapter was supposed to be much longer, but I haven't had the time, energy, or ability to work on the fic much this week. I also have comments hanging from last chapter again (sorry-sorry-sorry) so yeah, all kinds of author-fail all over the place. I'm not doing well in RL, but I wanted to get an update done anyway, because working on the fic and interacting with you guys really boosts my mood when I'm having a rough time.

So anywho, short chapter is short, and I'm sorry for that. I will have the follow up done as soon as I can. If you're feeling the need for a Les Mis fic fix, consider checking out goldfishstoberoneandamitie's work with Eponine/Feuilly, or the sweet biker R/bartender Enjolras AU, or the swim team AU featuring Courfeyrac in a speedo. Seriously, all excellent works. And Mad_Max writes a Grantaire rant like you would not believe. Their fics are amazing and deserve more attention. All of the attention, really.

Karen, the social worker assigned to the Thenardier case, left a voicemail with Eponine informing her that she was going to swing by for her first visit Thursday afternoon.

Naturally, Wednesday night Eponine was a total mess. Feuilly and Azelma thought they’d surprise her by cleaning the apartment while she was at work, figuring that was one thing they could take off her to do list. They’d done laundry, vacuumed, scrubbed every surface they could think of (including walls and ceilings), tidied their few possessions, and done all the dishes.

Eponine didn’t seem to notice this, as she started vacuuming the couch as soon as she walked through the door.

Azelma quirked an eyebrow at Feuilly and mouthed ‘your girlfriend is crazy.’

He stuck his tongue out at her in response.

“Seriously though, have you got this?” Azelma asked. Feuilly nodded, so she retreated to her and Eponine’s bedroom. Moments later, what Eponine had dubbed Azelma’s ‘Creeper Pandora Station’ started blaring; the Pandora station consisted of every musician Azelma had caught Combeferre listening to or taken note of while scrolling through his mp3 player. She’d designed it with the intention of having “common” interests to sneak into conversation (never mind the fact that their shared musical tastes were going to be the result of careful orchestration on her part).
Feuilly switched off the vacuum and forced it out of Eponine’s hands. “What are you doing?” she snapped.

“The apartment is clean. We cleaned it, and we kept Gavroche from sabotaging us. Stop and take a look.”

Eponine blinked a few times, then tried to reach for the vacuum again.

“No,” Feuilly said sternly, batting her hand away. “You’re going to take off your work stuff, head into the bathroom, and take a relaxing bubble bath while I put the boys to bed. Azelma already laid everything out for you. Then you’re eating the leftover baked mac and cheese we had for supper, I’m doing the dishes, and we’re going to sit up in bed for at least twenty minutes and chat. You are going to bed at a reasonable hour and you are not going to be a crazy bundle of nerves in the morning.”

Eponine still looked like she wanted to argue, so he flicked her ponytail. “Fine! But you’re being a bossy dick!” She stomped off for the bathroom and, smirking, he went to check how the boys were doing.

Little R was already changed into pajamas and curled up in the bottom bunk, surrounded by an army of stuffed animals he’d acquired under somewhat mysterious circumstances. Feuilly was pretty sure the eco-friendly teddy bear came from Musichetta, and that Combeferre had gotten him the sea turtle and the penguin from some fancy mom and pop shop downtown, but he couldn’t explain the giraffe, the dragon, or the rabbits. Somehow the kid had acquired six different stuffed rabbits.

Feuilly crouched down next to the bed, ruffled Little R’s hair, and wished him goodnight.

“Night Fooy,” he murmured sleepily, looking utterly angelic.

To contrast, Gavroche was laying on top of the covers on the top bunk, still wearing jeans, a t-shirt, and sneakers coated with dried mud. He was looking through a comic book called the Goon, which seemed to be way above his age bracket as far as the content went.

Feuilly sighed. “Kiddo, we need to talk for a few minutes.”

“Okay Curly. Does that mean I can stay up then?”

“Just for a few minutes,” Feuilly said, trying to look stern (and probably failing terribly—he always felt like a little kid playing dress up when he tried to be a responsible adult around Gavroche).

“Right.” Gavroche tucked the comic book under his pillow, hopped off the bunk, and followed Feuilly outside to the parking lot. Feuilly sat down on the hood of his car, so Gavroche followed suit. The kid gazed up at the sky, managing to look utterly carefree while somehow still being far more careworn than any ten year old ought to be.

With their perch on the hill they actually had a pretty good view of the stars, for a suburb anyway. It was a small detail, but something Feuilly was grateful for. He laid back against the windshield and copied Gavroche, staring up at the sky and letting the nice view soothe him.

“So…you know how important tomorrow is for you and your brother and sisters, right?”

“I do,” Gavroche said simply. “I’m not an idiot, Curly. I like to create a bit of chaos here and there, but not for chaos’ own sake.”

“Is that you promising to behave?”
“Ponine’s no Blisterbutt. I’ll mind my manners and do whatever it takes for her to get to keep us. It’s nicer than I thought, having a real home.” Gavroche kicked his feet out. His expression was a bit pensive. “Little R’s certainly happy. I wouldn’t want to mess that up for the nipper.”

“Good. Eponine’s really freaking out, so your word that you’re going to be on your best behavior will be really reassuring.” He felt like he ought to have more to say than that, but Feuilly couldn’t for the life of him think of another way to nail the point home. He wanted Gavroche to behave, and the kid had promised to behave. There didn’t seem to be anything more to say.

Apparently Gavroche had other ideas though. He turned onto his side and propped his head up on his elbow. “Hey, Curly… I’ve actually been wanting to talk to you too. Where are you fitting into all of this, exactly?”

Feuilly frowned. “What do you mean?”

Gavroche pulled himself into a sitting position and hugged his knees. “I mean how am I supposed to see you? Eponine’s my sister, but she’s trying to take over and be a mom. But I don’t really need one, so she’s something in between. She’s going to be all mom for Little R though, since he’s small, and she’s all sister for Azelma, since Zelma doesn’t realize she needs help. And you’re in love with Ponine, so what’s that make you? You’re not going to try to be our dad, are you?”

Ah. So apparently they were doing the big conversation too. At least Feuilly had been preparing for this one, though he’d still rather have had more time to figure out how to word it.

“I was thinking I’d just be your friend, if that works. I don’t know Gav. I like you guys a lot. I don’t want to overstep my bounds though.” Feuilly had been trying to puzzle out his exact place in the Thenardier family for some time. Since well before he and Eponine had discussed their feelings for each other, even. He felt a pull towards the entire brood, and he wanted to help them. Not just because he was in love with Eponine, but because when he spent time with them they did feel something like a family. And Feuilly had been wanting a family pretty much since he’d lost his first one.

“So far you’ve been doing a good job,” Gavroche said, trying to sound encouraging but unintentionally coming off a bit comical in his youthful sincerity. “I’m glad Ponine picked you. I was really scared she was going to pick that tall ginger, and then I’d have been screwed. He’s so quiet and serious and he has too many cats. Combeferre’s nice and all, but I like hanging out with you.”

“Gavroche, I think that’s the highest praise I’ve ever heard you give anyone,” Feuilly said, feeling oddly pleased.

The ten year old grinned at him, looking as cocksure as ever. “Well that’s because it is. Should I go to bed now, or did you want to, like, threaten me about tomorrow?”

“Nah, you know causing a scene would work against your own best interest.”

“That’s why I like you, Feuilly. You know me and Little R are still kids, but you don’t think we’re stupid. This is a beautiful little arrangement we’ve got going here. G’night.”

“Night.” Feuilly watched as Gavroche jumped off of the car and strolled into the house. He remained outside for a few extra minutes, enjoying the warm night, then went back into the apartment and peeked into the boys’ room.

Gavroche was in bed, even trying to fall asleep despite the fact that it was a reasonable hour. Little R was out cold, one arm flung over his sea turtle.
Feuilly carefully closed the door, then went into his bedroom to wait for his girlfriend.

Eponine, being spectacularly nervous about Karen’s visit, spent half the night confiding her worries to Feuilly. They were still settling into being a romantic couple instead of just a couple of besties, and as such their relationship dynamic fluctuated between flirty or obviously smitten behavior and their usual almost completely platonic hanging out vibe. That night leaned heavily towards the latter, though Feuilly gave her a back massage that was more than friendly, and she ended up falling asleep in his arms.

Her bedroom was still the one she shared with Azelma, however, which meant that all of her things, including her cell phone and her alarm clock, were in the other room. Eponine overslept Thursday morning precisely because she’d fallen asleep in Feuilly’s bed and not her own.

She woke up when Gavroche knocked on Feuilly’s bedroom door. “Um…Ponine? The social worker’s here.”

“What?!” Eponine yelped. “Oh my fucking God Gavroche, do not joke about something like that!”

“I’m not joking! She just got here and she’s sitting in the living room…and she can probably hear you, so tone down the swearing. Jesus fucking Christ, sis, you’re supposed to be my role model.”

With that he shut the door, leaving Eponine and Feuilly to leap out of bed and do their best to make themselves presentable.

“Oh my God. OhmyGodohmyGodohmyGod, Feuilly, I’m wearing booty shorts and a tank top with no bra. I cannot go out there like this,” Éponine moaned.

Feuilly tossed her his hairbrush, then started looking through his dresser for something she could borrow that wouldn’t look overly suspicious. Because walking out of her male roommate’s bedroom in his clothes probably wouldn’t look much better than walking out in a state of undress.

He finally found a pink cotton button down shirt that looked feminine if you ignored the shape. Feuilly tossed it to her with a pair of gender neutral grey sweatpants. “I’m sorry. It’s the best I’ve got,” he said, in response to a vaguely horrified look.

“Actually, I was just wondering why you had the pink work shirt.”

“Oh. I’m pretty sure it’s Jehan’s. Remember, he swung by to do laundry a few weeks ago when his dryer broke?”

“Right, right. Okay. Okay, well I’ll still look like a frumpy hobo but it’s better than nothing.” Eponine pulled the borrowed clothes on, brushed out her hair, and strode as confidently as possible into the living room.

The social worker was sitting on the couch, looking enviably put together in a Barbie doll pink skirt with matching blazer, tan heels, and thick rimmed black glasses. She smiled brightly as soon as she caught sight of Eponine, rose to her feet, and held out her dainty hand for a shake. “Hi Eponine. It’s so nice to finally meet you. I’m Karen.”

“Hello,” Eponine greeted, doing her best to smile confidently in return. The woman was much younger than she expected, thirty five at the absolute oldest, and everything about her was disarming. Which was a great way to get information out of someone that they didn’t necessarily want to divulge. She’d have to be careful to stay on guard.
Feuilly edged out of the room, still wearing the jeans and rumpled band shirt he’d fallen asleep in. To Eponine’s disappointment, he’d jammed his ancient Red Sox cap over his unbrushed hair (it didn’t matter that she’d cut it short—he still needed to brush it). Not wanting to be an interfering or controlling girlfriend, Eponine had stopped short at destroying the hat, but she’d honestly thought hiding it with the cleaning supplies would keep Feuilly from ever finding it again.

She wasn’t used to living with a man who cleaned and cooked. Under normal circumstances, those traits worked for her, but at the moment she was irritated.

“Hey ladies. I was going to put on a pot of coffee…?”

“Ooo, if that’s an invitation then I’d love a cup. I take it black,” Karen said, flashing her suspiciously sincere smile Feuilly’s way. He looked like he was grimacing more than smiling back, but he did his best before fleeing for the kitchen.

Karen picked up her massive phone and scrolled through some notes she’d clearly taken with it. “So that’d be your roommate then? Feuilly?”

“Yep.”

“From what my boss wrote, it says he works as an activities assistant at a nursing home. That’s a pretty good job. Should be some room for growth too.” She turned towards the kitchen area and addressed her next comment to Feuilly directly. “Is that something you’re thinking of staying with? Working with the elderly?”

“Not really,” Feuilly answered.

“Oh. Do you mind if I ask what you’re planning on doing then?”

Eponine minded. She would have much rather fielded questions herself, but it seemed like a bad idea to tell Karen that she was being a prying bitch (especially since it was part of her job to pry).

“Um, actually I’m going to school for social work. I started a few years ago, but I had to drop out for financial hardship. I’m going to start taking classes online in a couple of weeks though.”

“Really?” Eponine barked before she could stop herself.

She was so going to kill him later. It should have been an unspoken rule that her boyfriend was not to drop bombshells like re-enrolling in college in front of the social worker.

It worked out in their favor though, as Karen was delighted to hear that Feuilly was majoring in social work. She kept up a constant stream of chatter with him while he made their coffees, offering all kinds of advice on classes he’d be taking, how to build a resume, and where to look for his first jobs.

By that point Gavroche and Little R were staring at them from a crack in the bedroom door, and Feuilly excused himself from the conversation so he could make them breakfast. The boys sat at the table while they waited, and true to his promise, Gavroche remained on his best behavior. He played tic-tac-toe and hangman with Little R while they waited for their scrambled eggs and toast.

“So he seems nice. Helpful too. Have you and Feuilly been friends long?”

“Yeah. He’s been one of the regulars at my café for as long as I’ve worked there,” Eponine answered, offering a mild spin on the truth. Feuilly had been one of the regulars she’d barely spoken to, but mentally disparaged for being cheap (he only bought small black coffees or teas, the least
expensive drinks on the menu, clearly for the purpose of table rent alone). Then she’d befriended
Grantaire, Courfeyrac, and Marius, and gotten to known Feuilly better in consequence. They’d
clicked almost right away, but they really hadn’t been friends for that long.

“I assume you and Feuilly are working opposite hours right now?”

“Mm hm. Azelma’s helping look after Gavroche and Little R too. Also, I just got promoted to
management and I have regular, full time hours. My boss is totally cool with having me work around
school hours when the boys go back in September.”

“Oh honey, that’s great! So did you get a nice pay bump when he made you a manager?”

“Yes. I’m making fourteen an hour now, and I still get to take a cut of the tips.”

The rest of the interview went on in a similar vein. Karen was encouraging and friendly, seemingly
happy for any good news Eponine shared with her. She sat down with the boys once they were
finished with breakfast and asked them a few questions, but didn’t linger long. Even Little R came
out of his shell a little to talk to her, though he wouldn’t make eye contact.

Karen had Eponine walk her out to her car, and even though she’d been trying not to mention it all
during the visit, Eponine suddenly caught a case of verbal diarrhea regarding the first impression
she’d presented. “I am so, so sorry about how I was sleeping in and dressed like a scrub and all that.
I mean, I swear, I was going to wake up early and have the coffee ready to go, and I picked out a
really mature outfit. Seriously, I looked like such an adult when I tried it on. It was perfect. This was
a total fluke, and it won’t happen again.”

God. No one would ever recognize her as the offspring of professional con artists, which granted
might have been a plus.

Karen didn’t seem off put in the least. “Oh honey, don’t worry about it. Working full time and
looking after two little boys is exhausting. Frankly, I’d have been more worried if you’d met me
looking like some kind of soccer mom fashion model. First impressions are important, granted, but
you weren’t meeting me for a job interview. I think sweatpants are completely appropriate attire for
childcare.”

Eponine let out a nervous laugh. “So… I made an okay impression?”

“You did. You seem like a very capable young woman. We’re still really early into the process, of
course, so I can’t promise anything, but I do like what I’m seeing so far. Keep up the good work,
Eponine. I’ll do my part to help you out, and you just do your best not to disappoint me. Sound
good?”

Too good to be true, really. Still though, after eighteen years of being failed by the system Eponine
figured she’d earn a break. She nodded vehemently, trying to restrain herself lest she destroy the
favorable impression she’d miraculously presented to Karen with a crazy-person rant and an
embarrassingly enthusiastic hug.

Karen gave her a card with her contact information on it, said she’d be in touch about their next
meeting, got into her car and took off.

Feeling slightly dazed, Eponine walked back into the apartment.

Even Azelma had emerged at this point. Feuilly and her siblings were waiting for her in the dining
area, varying shades of anxiety on her faces.
Eponine let out a breath she hadn’t been aware of holding, and held her arms out. “It’s okay. We did okay. We passed the first hurdle, guys! I think the social worker likes us.”

Gavroche let out an excited whoop and jumped into the air, kicking over a chair in the process and sending Little R scrambling behind Feuilly’s legs in panic. Azelma ran over to Eponine for a hug, and Feuilly scooped Little R up into a hug. “Good work, kids. Ice cream to celebrate?”

“Fuck yeah!” Gavroche yelled. Azelma thumped him over the back of the head. “Hey, you’re not the mother stand-in.”

“Oh, sorry.” Eponine thumped him. “Don’t fucking swear!”

“Yeah, I’m fucking listening,” Little R said, sticking his tongue out at his big brother.

“Okay, I’m definitely toning down the swearing after that. That was just wrong,” Gavroche grumbled.

While the household scrambled for matching shoes, purses, and other such trappings necessary for a trip out, Feuilly settled Little R on his hip and kissed the top of his head. “I think you just shamed your brother out of casual swearing. Was that a plan?”

“I heard it’s bad to mani-maniplate people. So no. It was a accident.”

“If it was a plan I’m totally okay with it.”

“Okay, then I did maybe do it a little bit on purpose.”

Feuilly grinned. “I think we should get you a sundae with a mountain of whipped cream and a whole mess of hot fudge.”

Little R’s face lit up. “With a cherry? Like the ones in commercials?”

Feuilly’s smile faltered. “Have you never had a sundae before?”

“I got a ice cream cone once with ‘Ferre and Jean. It was back when we were living between all of your houses. Oh, and Bucket took us for ice cream once too. It’s good. I like ice cream, and whipped cream looks fun.”

“Yeah, it is. C’mon, let’s get you that sundae.” Feuilly helped him with his sneakers, and then the Thenardiers all piled into his car. He took a look around at the deceptively youthful faces, and decided he didn’t care how expensive the celebratory ice creams got. The Thenardiers were going to get whatever they wanted at the ice cream parlor.

Because seriously, at the risk of being overly sentimental, there was something quietly heartbreaking about being four years old, almost five, and never having had whipped cream with a cherry on top.

Combeferre took a deep breath and resolutely walked into the living room, where Grantaire and Enjolras were unwinding after finishing up shifts at their respective jobs. Enjolras was still wearing his work clothes. The poor kid looked utterly exhausted. He was trying to read a book, but his eyes weren’t moving along the page. Combeferre wondered when he’d just give up and settle into the cuddle he had going with his boyfriend.

Oddly enough, Grantaire was the productive one. He was sitting up straight on the couch (Enjolras was leaning against him), sketchpad open and pencil flying over the page. He was clearly in the
throes of inspiration, which made Combeferre feel even guiltier about having to intrude.

“Hey guys,” he started, shifting awkwardly from foot to foot.

“Hey,” Grantaire said without looking up from his artwork. “How goes it?”

“I need to run a couple of things by you guys, if you have a minute.”

“Sure.” Grantaire set the sketchpad aside, and after a dazed moment Enjolras did the same with his book. He rubbed at his eyes, and was given worried glances by both his best friend and his fiancé.

There seemed little point in calling attention to Enjolras’ state of exhaustion though. He’d just dismiss it as the natural result of an eight hour shift at the café, which by all accounts was demanding work.

Combeferre sat down on the coffee table and rested his hands on his knees. “So, item one. My parents are going on vacation for their anniversary next week and they don’t trust my brother alone at the house. Do you mind if Gerard crashes with us while they’re away?”

“As long as he keeps his mouth shut regarding what he saw in our room, I’m fine with it,” Enjolras replied in a low, threatening voice.

Combeferre smirked. “He’s as frightened of you as ever, Enj. I can’t see him bringing it up.”

“Good.”

“What about you, ‘Taire? Any objections to losing the couch for a week?”

Grantaire shook his head. “Dude, I barely understand why you’re asking. Why would I object to giving your brother a place to stay?”

“Allright, cool.” Combeferre frowned, because he really didn’t want to address the second thing he had to say. “Um…the second thing’s really more for Enjolras.”

“Oh. Do you want me to leave?” Grantaire asked.

Combeferre considered, but ultimately shook his head. He’d gotten closer to Grantaire lately, and not just because they were living together. There seemed little point in hiding things from him anymore. And besides that, Enjolras would probably benefit from the physical presence of his lover for what was going to be an incredibly uncomfortable conversation.

Enjolras’ concern was already showing on his features. “Combeferre, what’s wrong?”

“Um…okay, I’m really sorry about this. I hate to have to ask you to…um, but, it’s Marie.”

Combeferre nervously pushed his hair out of his face and took a deep, steadying breath.

He reminded himself that Marie did not make him nervous. She wasn’t an important factor in his life, she held no power over him, and he didn’t feel nauseated when he mentioned her name. He didn’t feel anything.

No power, right.

Combeferre swallowed around a suddenly constricted throat, not missing the way Grantaire’s arm protectively snaked around Enjolras. “Right, um, so Marie found out you guys had gotten engaged somehow, and she’s been calling me obsessively. She’s trying to get information out of me. I thought I could wait it out, but I can’t. I’m getting this horrible feeling every time I check my voicemail, and I just need it to stop. I’m sorry to ask you to do this, but can you please make her stop?”
“Yes. Of course, yes,” Enjolras said firmly. “God, ‘Ferre, you should have told me right away. Of course I’ll put a stop to it.”

“Thanks.”

“Um, Combeferre, not for nothing but…” Grantaire started hesitantly. “Couldn’t you block her number? That’s what me and Enjolras did.”

“I’ve done that more times than I can count,” Combeferre said with a bitter smirk. “She just gets a new phone and starts calling again. Y’know, disposable income and all that.”

Enjolras pressed his lips into a thin line. “Okay, so first of all, I am most definitely going to yell at my mother on your behalf. And then the three of us are going to get a cell phone plan together with a new provider. That will get you a different number my mother won’t know, and we’ll tell everyone we did it to save money. No one will find that explanation for your new number odd.”

Combeferre took a shaky breath and wiped at his eyes. “Thanks. I-I really am so-“

“Quit apologizing,” Grantaire said. “You still haven’t done anything wrong, dude.”

“He’s absolutely right.”

“I know, I know. But, I just…I know you didn’t want to talk to her anymore either.”

Enjolras smiled grimly. “Believe me, she’s going to regret luring me into breaking my silence.”

The atmosphere in the room had become unbearably tense. Combeferre cast about wildly for a lighter conversation topic, but he couldn’t think of anything. He’d been occupied by far too much anxiety over Marie and the fleas for lighter conversation topics to filter into his mind.

Before anything came to him, Grantaire hesitantly spoke up. “So…while we’re getting things into the open…I may or may not have volunteered to have the Thenardiers over for a sleepover so that Eponine can get some Feuilly-booty.”

“What?” Enjolras yelped. “I thought we were done looking after small children! Why would you do this to me again?”

“When is this supposed to be happening?” Combeferre asked.

“Tomorrow night.”

“Oh my god, ‘Taire,” Enjolras groaned. “When were you planning on telling us?”

“When the moment was right. Now seemed like as good a time as any.”

“Does this include Azelma?” Combeferre asked.

“Uh…I didn’t ask, but probably. I don’t think they want her overhearing the sounds of their sweet loving any more than they want Gav and Little R to hear it.”

Combeferre stood up and stalked over towards his bedroom. “Well I need to do laundry then. I don’t have any clean pajamas, and I refuse to have my stalker over for a sleepover when I only have boxers for PJs.”

“Did you tell Eponine we have fleas?” Enjolras asked.
“Nope. I don’t think that’ll make a difference though. Enj, it’s been months since she’s been laid. The poor kid really needs this. And think about Feuilly! It’s probably been over a year for him.”

“Seven and a half months,” Combeferre called from behind his curtain. He was already sorting his laundry into piles.

“How did you know that?” Enjolras and Grantaire both yelled together.

Combeferre peeked from around the curtain. “You don’t remember that thing he had with that bank teller?”

“Oh yeah,” Grantaire said, while Enjolras continued to stare at them blankly. “They only dated for like a week. Are you sure they had sex?”

“Positive.” Though Combeferre wasn’t at liberty to say why he was so certain the act had taken place, as his knowledge of it sprang from being the one to drive Feuilly to have his blood tested and sitting with him when he got the results. That scare had ended Feuilly’s one foray into the realm of casual sex Courfeyrac, Bahorel, and Grantaire had pursued for so long, loneliness be damned.

Enjolras shook his head. “I don’t know how you guys can pay so much attention to these things. Really, when our friends date outside the group I can’t keep any of the romantic partners straight.”

"Enjolras, babe, no one finds that in the least bit surprising," Grantaire said with a smirk.

"Oh shut up."
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

In case the readers had any lingering doubts whatsoever on this topic, the author makes it abundantly clear that she is a crazy cat lady.

Also, the younger Thenardiers sleep over Combeferre, Enjolras, and Grantaire's place.

Chapter Notes

Hello all my wonderful, patient, and beautiful readers :)

RL is still hectic and stressful and generally not conducive to a pleasant headspace, so my writing is still being fucked with. I've been feeling blocked on this fic, which is frustrating as all hell because it's my principal creative outlet and escape at the moment. Grr...the point of this whining is to give some background on why I'm not exactly happy with this chapter but am posting it anyway.

I wanted some scenes with Courfeyrac and Bahorel here, and a lengthy scene with Eponine and Feuilly, but I couldn't get them written. Considering the state of my life right now, I didn't think writing fasts or letting the content sit was going to rectify the problem, so in the interest of being able to continue with the story, I'm going to post Courfeyrac and Bahorel's adventure in New York as a separate fic within the universe Gift and an Escape/Pinup Boy/Getting Stuck in the Closet-style. I might do the same for Eponine and Feuilly, but I'm also thinking that their date night might work better being kept vague but being expounded on in conversations between the characters. So we'll see how that goes.

In the meantime, have a crap-ton of Enjolras, Grantaire, and Combeferre, because apparently that's all I want to write right now. Also, sorry for the whining.

When Enjolras got back from working mid-shift at Brammer Street and saw the scene in his living room he let out a loud huff. It’s not that he was at all surprised by what everyone was doing, or that any of it was bad per se, but he’d hoped to come home and find Grantaire hard at work on his table prep for Boston Comic Con, which was getting close.

 Nope. Instead he was sprawled on the floor with Little R and a set of finger paints. Gavroche was playing some kind of violent video game, Combeferre was sitting on the couch with his laptop open and Azelma, wearing indecently skimpy pajamas even considering the heat, was leaning over his shoulder to watch a youtube video with him (though it was fairly obvious to everyone in the room she was watching her companion more than his computer screen).

“Hey Enjolras,” Combeferre greeted. He paused the video and set his laptop aside. Azelma made no move whatsoever to stop crowding his personal space. “How was work?”
“Eponine manipulated my stalkers into thinking that I’m recovering from some horrible heartbreak to milk better tips out of them.”

“…that good, huh?” Combeferre said with a grin. Enjolras near-growled in response, making Little R jump and edge closer to Grantaire.

“How did you find out about, uh…I mean…fuck.” Grantaire shrank under the strength of the glare Enjolras turned on him.

“You knew about it?”

“I, um, I mean I wasn’t thrilled with the idea when she pitched it—”

“Get up,” Enjolras snarled.

“Enjolras…” Combeferre climbed to his feet and started towards him. “Calm down. You’re scaring the kids.”

Enjolras forced himself to take a deep breath, found it didn’t help any, and moved to stand menacingly over Grantaire, who was still sitting on the floor in front of his finger paints. “We need to talk, and if you and ‘Ferre don’t want me to continue scaring Little R we’re best doing so in private. Bedroom. Now.”

“Kay.” Grantaire ruffled Little R’s hair. “Don’t worry, kiddo. Statue Man likes me. He won’t really kill me, even if it does look like he’s thinking about it pretty hard right now.”

Little R let out a small whimper, then raced over to Azelma and hugged her legs. She shot Enjolras an irritated look, but he out-glared her easily. Enjolras turned on his heel and stormed into the bedroom, coming alarmingly close to slamming the door on his boyfriend, who obediently and near-silently followed after him.

Grantaire gently closed the door and wrung his hands together, smearing finger paint over them in the process. He opened his mouth a few times to try to say something, but nothing came out except a few awkward noises.

Enjolras’ second deep breath of the night was actually somewhat calming, though the lime green finger paint streaking Grantaire’s messy hair might have been responsible for the shift in his mood as well. He didn’t seem to be aware of either the finger paint in his hair or the smudge of purple paint on his cheek.

Still, this had to be addressed. He couldn’t let all of his irritation go just yet. “Grantaire, you knew I was uncomfortable with Eponine’s attempts to get me to flirt with the customers, most of which are underage teenage girls, I might add. Why would you go along with something like this?”

“I didn’t like the idea either,” Grantaire choked out. His gaze shifted down to his bare feet, then his fidgety hands. “But she said it would help your tips, and she offered to give me a cut of her tips… and we were so fucking broke at the time, Enj.”

“Wait, how long has she been…” He trailed off as he remembered how long it had been since Eponine prodded him to flirt with a fifteen year old girl. “Son of a bitch! Grantaire, how could you betray me like this?”

“I’m sorry. I was trying to help, and, I mean, it’s not like you weren’t going to have admirers no matter what. It seemed pretty harmless. I—I’m sorry.”
Enjolras walked over to him, and at the risk of coating his hand with slimy paint he gave Grantaire’s a gentle squeeze. “I’ll accept your apology, but if you’re ever complicit in something you know I wouldn’t approve of we will have words. I’m not okay with this, so we’re clear.”

“Uh…uh huh.”

“‘Taire, will you look at me?”

Grantaire let out a relieved breath and immediately snapped his eyes up to Enjolras’; such was the effect of the nickname. “I really am sorry. I wasn’t actually cool with it either, but, y’know, poverty. I didn’t like seeing you suffer because I couldn’t provide us with basic necessities.”

“Yes, well, poverty has a way of making people make choices they wouldn’t under better circumstances. But if you’re truly interested in bettering our financial position, how come you’re out there finger painting instead of working on your comic con table? I thought the convention was getting close.”

“It is. I’ll be fine. It’s not like I’m going to move much merchandise anyway. There’s too much competition at the big cons for a nobody like me to get much notice.”

Enjolras scowled. “I’m sure we could change that if you’d put some effort in.”

“I put effort in,” Grantaire said in a tone of voice that was very near a whine. “I made a couple of facebook posts about my table.”

“You only have seventy five friends on facebook,” Enjolras said dryly. “Make a professional page for your artwork, put up an album of your finished commissions and some pages from your comics, a list of prices, and when you’ll be at the con. I’ll share it with my followers.”

“Oh, well, thank you for your show of benevolence, o mighty Enjo-”

“I have nearly three thousand facebook friends, Grantaire. Granted, they mostly follow me for my rants on social politics, but I’m sure they won’t mind if I give my fiancé’s artwork a shout out. Seriously, put that page together. If you put enough work on it, I might even give it a Tumblr plug.”

“Allright, fine.”

They went back into the living room. Grantaire tried to sit down near the finger paints again, but Enjolras tapped his shoulder and pointed to the love seat. Scowling, he flopped down and crossed his arms over his chest. Enjolras dropped his laptop onto Grantaire’s lap, seemed to think better of it, and went to get him a wet paper towel to wipe off the finger pain first. He then hovered over Grantaire to make sure he got to work.

“Oh, wait. Courf made me one already, I just never use it so I forgot about it.”

Enjolras pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m going to take a shower. I smell like coffee and finger paint right now.”

“Think you could wash off some of that bad temper with the coffee, Statue?” Gavroche asked.

“Hot water only does so much,” Azelma teased.

Enjolras ignored them, though the shower did seem to have a good effect on his temper. He was mellower when he returned, dressed in a thin pair of pajama pants he’d stolen from Grantaire and an old Walk for Hawc t-shirt. He sat on the loveseat next to Grantaire, dropped his head on his lover’s
shoulder, and checked his progress on his professional facebook page. “We’ll need to scan more of your work into the computer so we can put it on the page.”

“I don’t have a scanner.”

“The school library’s got a few. I can swing by on my next day off. Just leave the drawings you want to use on the table.”

“Um…Statue?” Enjolras gave a small start, as he hadn’t noticed Little R standing in front of them. The boy was uncannily quiet. “I cleaned up the finger paints so it wouldn’t be smelly in here anymore. Are you happy yet?”

Enjolras just managed to stop himself from wincing. Little R had a way of making him feel guilty for how abrasive he got when he sank into a bad mood that no one else could match. “I feel much better now, yes. You didn’t have to clean up the paints if you weren’t finished though.”

“But you stole Big R. I was still playing with him, you know. That wasn’t very nice.”

Grantaire snorted. “He’s got you there.”

Enjolras sat up and nudged Grantaire’s side. “I don’t want him anymore. You can have him back.”

“I know you’re joking, Statue Man, but you shouldn’t say it like that.” The four year old looked at him sternly, then turned his usual innocent-if-slightly-sad expression on Grantaire. “It’s too late to play anymore. I’m a’posed to be in bed soon. Can you read me a story? Ponine normally does, but she’s consuh-matting her relationship with Fooy.”

Enjolras, Grantaire, Combeferre, and Azelma all stared at Little R in varying shades of discomfort while Gavroche grabbed his side and came alarmingly close to falling off the couch as he laughed. Little R scrunched his face up in confusion.

Grantaire put the laptop to sleep, set it aside, and stood up. “C’mon, let’s just read that bedtime story. Did you bring The Stinky Cheese Man with you?”

Little R ran off to check his backpack for his stash of picture books, and Grantaire traded horrified looks with Enjolras and Combeferre. “We’re not explaining what that means to him, are we?”

“I can do it if you-” Gavroche started, but everyone assembled shot him down. He crossed his arms over his chest. “Prudes, all of you.”

The night progressed smoothly enough for the Thenardiers and their hosts. Enjolras and Combeferre surprised their friends by constructing an elaborate blanket fort in the living room, a skill they’d perfected during their shared childhood of constant sleepovers. They made an impromptu nightlight out of Christmas decorations for Little R when they discovered he was afraid of the dark, and they managed to get Gavroche to go to bed before midnight (by five minutes, but Grantaire still declared that a victory).

As all of the furniture had been conscripted for the blanket fort, which was really more of a blanket palace at this point, Enjolras had to sit in the corner with his back leaning against the wall when he found himself unable to drift off to sleep. His cat curled up on his feet to keep him company, so he contented himself by giving Raoul scritches while he observed the pleasant scene in front of him.

He could just see Grantaire’s Batman sock-clad feet sticking out of the fort (the socks were a gift from Bahorel in anticipation of con-crawling with him). He was jammed between Little R and
Gavroche, the three of them sharing the largest “room” of the fort along with Combeferre’s ancient Power Ranger sheets. Combeferre was in the neighboring compartment with his cats, and Azelma was sleeping on the loveseat, which had a sleeping bag canopy hung over it.

Enjolras let out a small sigh and addressed a whispered thought to Raoul. “I still can’t believe how good he is with kids. Can you blame me though? Look at his people skills with adults…”

The cat slowly blinked at him, wearing his usual confused expression. It seemed remarkably appropriate to the situation though. Enjolras returned the cat’s dazed stare unflinchingly. “He’d be a good father.”

The cat yawned, then bumped his face against Enjolras’ calf. “Sorry, sorry.” He renewed his skritches, and Raoul resumed purring. “It’s just…you’re the closest thing I ever want to a kid. I think this is going to be a problem at some point down the line.”

Enjolras ended up falling asleep while he was still leaning against the wall. Raoul was perfectly comfortable, but Enjolras’ back and neck were in agony when Gavroche woke the room in general by tripping and accidentally taking out half the blanket fort in one go.

The morning turned a bit hectic from there. Putting the living room back in order was decidedly less fun than tearing it apart, sharing the bathroom six ways out and out sucked, and coming up with a breakfast plan that suited all of their tastes proved impossible.

Grantaire came up behind Enjolras while he was doing the dishes and started rubbing his neck. “Feeling any better?”

“Mm…keep doing that though.”

“Seriously Enj, why the fuck did you sleep against the damn wall?”

Enjolras scowled. “I didn’t do it on purpose.”

Grantaire leaned close and placed a soft kiss on his jawline. Enjolras smiled, but tensed a bit at Grantaire’s words. “Combeferre and Azelma have been chatting in his room for over an hour.”

“Why didn’t you rescue him?” Enjolras asked in a low tone, hoping her brothers wouldn’t hear their conversation. Really, he was more bothered by the fact that he hadn’t noticed.

“He didn’t seem to need rescuing,” Grantaire said. “I think they’re having fun. They’re talking about the Newport Jazz Festival. You should hear the way he’s geeking out. It’s almost cute.”

“So you were eavesdropping?”

“I wanted to make sure he needed rescuing before I barged in there.” Grantaire stopped his massage and stepped aside to lean on the counter instead. “Ponine’s on her way over to get the kiddos.”

“Good. Did she say anything about how the date night went?”

“Not a word. I found that a little ominous.”

Enjolras frowned. “Do you often talk about your love lives together?” Then he remembered that conversation he’d had with her back when he’d first started dating Grantaire. Eponine had actually been the only friend who’d cornered Enjolras and threatened him on Grantaire’s behalf. “Never mind.”
“I can’t imagine it went bad…but I dunno. Never thought Courf and Jehan’d break up either, so maybe I’m no good at reading these situations. Speaking of which…how’s Jehan doing?”

Enjolras shrugged, and set a serving platter in the strainer with a little more gusto than he meant. “Jehan’s being aggravatingly distant with me and Combeferre, the same as everyone else. Hugh’s on cloud nine though. I suppose that means they’re doing well.”

“Your cousin…really likes Jehan?”

Enjolras chewed his lip, then nodded. “I’ve never seen him like this before. He’s head over heels. If it were with anyone else I’d be happy for him…but he’s fallen in love with a man who loves someone else. I don’t see this ending well.”

Grantaire’s gut feeling regarding Eponine’s silence seemed to check out. She seemed distant when she got her siblings, and it set a somber mood over the group of them. Grantaire opened his mouth to say something, but she preempted him with a promise to text him later.

The apartment seemed a bit too quiet once the children were gone. Combeferre did his part to rectify this by putting on some Herbie Hancock in the living room, but he had to stop when Raoul started “singing” along (Grantaire and Combeferre didn’t agree with Enjolras’ cheerful reckoning of the yowls).

Enjolras rolled his eyes. “I’ve read three articles on cat bathing so far, and from the looks of it, if you take the proper precautions you won’t get scratched. In fact, from what I’ve read some cats can even grow fond of being bathed.”

Combeferre gaped at him incredulously while Grantaire burst into loud laughter. “Oh man! I knew you were an idealist, but really Enjolras, that’s too much!”

“Enjolras, these cats will not enjoy being bathed. I promise you. I’ve never been surer of anything in my life.” Combeferre actually looked a bit scared for his friend. “You’re…going to take those precautions you mentioned, right?”

“Of course I am,” Enjolras snapped, irritated by the fact that Grantaire was still laughing at him. He shut his laptop with a loud snap and stalked towards the bedroom. “I’m going to get ready for work. I don’t need to listen to this negativity.”

“I’m not being negative this time Enjolras, just realistic!” Grantaire yelled to the slamming door.

Enjolras woke up Sunday morning with a peculiar feeling of dread he couldn’t quite explain. He just knew in his gut that today was going to be a very bad day, which was weird because he wasn’t usually prone to that kind of melodrama. Instinctually, he reached his arm out and felt along the bed for Grantaire, but all he found was a warm spot.
Frowning, Enjolras sat up and rubbed at his eyes. He squinted around the darkened bedroom (Jehan had suggested blackout curtains, and they made a wonderful difference in keeping the room cool and quiet), and finally picked out Grantaire standing in front of the dresser. He was dressed, had made a vague attempt at brushing his hair, and was going through the rubber bracelets, rolls of ace bandages, clunky watches, and other such implements he’d collected for covering his wrists during the summer months, when wearing long sleeved shirts wasn’t really an option.

Enjolras thought of the measly forty dollars he’d managed to set aside for the secret tattoo fund, and decided to go without a few of his work coffees next week so he could sneak some more tip money into the fund. He’d been saving for weeks now. He really should have had more than forty dollars (meanwhile, any of his friends would have been impressed with that amount, considering the state of the couple’s finances and the fact that Enjolras had kept the money hidden from Grantaire).

“You’re heading out already?” Enjolras asked, voice a little raspy from sleep.

“They’re having a Magic tournament at the store today. The boss yanked me in to help set up.”

“Are you still closing?”

“Mm hm. Double shift. Think of all that beautiful extra cash.”

Enjolras stretched his arms over his head and cracked his back. As usual, Grantaire’s eyes lingered on his movements. “Mm. Conveniently keeps you out of the house while I have to bathe the cats too.”

“Y’know, even if I was going to be around, you so were not going to talk me into helping you. I am too fucking allergic to bathe one of those little hell spawned assholes.”

Enjolras gave a stretch that was completely unnecessary and let out a tiny groan. Grantaire licked his lips, and Enjolras smirked. “Please. We both know how strong my powers of persuasion are when they come to you.”

“Strong though they may be, they stop short when it comes to felines. However, being late for work owing to morning sex is well within the realm of your influence.”

Enjolras threw a pillow at him. “Get going. I’m not going to make you late, especially not when I’ve got commitments of my own. Combeferre seems to think it’s going to take me all day to bomb the house and groom the cats, so I’m going to get started at it right after breakfast.”

“I left you scrambled eggs, and Combeferre said we could swipe some of that chopped cantaloupe he has in the fridge. You’re on your own for coffee though.” Grantaire ultimately went with a bandage on his left arm, the more conspicuously scarred one. This particular bandage had been graffitied with sharpie in anticipation of the tattoos he one day wanted to cover his scars with. For his right arm, he threw on a watch and a couple of bracelets.

Enjolras met him at the door for a goodbye kiss, one which Grantaire tried to deepen, but Enjolras shrugged out of his embrace and lightly swatted at his arm. “Grantaire, no. Now hurry up or you really will be late.”

“You don’t even know what time I said I’d be there.”

“I know you never leave yourself more than fifteen minutes of wiggle room to get to the store once you’ve started getting dressed,” Enjolras returned.

Grantaire rolled his eyes, kissed him again, and then took off for work.
Combeferre stumbled out of his room while Enjolras was eating his breakfast. The atmosphere in the kitchen was incredibly peaceful up until then; Enjolras was eating real food off of a real plate, as opposed to the meals he’d been suffering through recently, his coffee came from a bag he’d purchased at work with his employee discount and so was excellent, and he had his laptop open so he could skim his facebook feed. Raoul was rubbing against his legs while making his confused purrs.

Combeferre’s hair was sticking up in a terrible cowlick he may or may not have been aware of. He nodded at Enjolras, then went to the counter and poured himself a cup of coffee. “So what time are you bathing the cats?”

Enjolras shrugged. “I’ve got to go to the store to get the shampoo first. Do you know how much it costs?”

Combeferre’s face scrunched up a bit as he thought it over. “I haven’t had to do a flea bath since middle school. I’m not really sure. I don’t think the shampoo’s that expensive, but when you throw in the bombs, the carpet stuff, and the drops then it all adds up.”

Enjolras frowned. He’d been planning on stealing from the tattoo fund to buy the flea treatment supplies, but he didn’t want to empty it. “What do you think it’s going to add up to?”

“I don’t know. Look, I’ll just come with you. I’ll get the drops, at least. Two of the cats are mine, and I should’ve been putting the drops on them anyway. I just didn’t think I’d need to since indoor cats are low risk.” There was a hint of judgment in his tone, but he didn’t actually say the ‘and I didn’t think you were stupid enough to live in an insect infested hellhole without giving your cat a single treatment’ part, which Enjolras appreciated.

Flea treatments, it turned out, were *fucking expensive*. Enjolras had to tap into the secret tattoo fund and then some to buy enough bombs to hit the whole apartment, powder to treat the sofas, bedding, cat towers, and then the actual flea shampoo. Even with Combeferre covering the drops, which were the most expensive purchase by far, Enjolras still had to borrow another forty dollars from him to get everything they needed.

He felt close to tears by the time they left the pet supply store. Combeferre must have noticed, because he was giving him a funny look. “Is everything alright? You know, the money’s not that important. You don’t have to pay it back if-”

“That money was important to me,” Enjolras snapped before he could stop himself. It had taken him over a month to squirrel that forty dollars away, and now he was back to square one. Not only that, but he *was* going to pay Combeferre the other forty back somehow. He was already taking more help than his dignity was comfortable with from his friend.

Maybe Eponine could give him some more hours now that she was the manager…

Combeferre kept quiet for the trip back to the apartment, and Enjolras was mostly composed by the time they got back, though he was still feeling irritable. No doubt taking pity on him, Combeferre helped him set up for the flea baths in the bathroom. He laid out a few towels and some facecloths, cleared off the sink, filled it with lukewarm water, then handed him the shampoo and wished him luck.

“Oh, you’ll want to put on a long sleeved shirt.”

“It’s supposed to reach the nineties today. Why in the hell would I want to wear a long sleeved
Combeferre laughed and shook his head. “Right, I keep forgetting you’re new to being a pet owner. Did you clip Raoul’s nails?”

“No.”

“Oh Enjolras…” Combeferre disappeared, and a moment later he returned with a rather fancy cat brush, a flea comb, and claw clippers. “Call your cat.”

“Oh…Raoul…” The cat came running, something he only did for Enjolras, and let out his high pitched, wavery meow. Combeferre scooped him up, sat down on the toilet, and neatly clipped all of his nails even though he struggled and flailed the entire time. He made it look so easy. “Are you sure you don’t want to do this yourself? You seem to-”

“Absolutely not. Please don’t confuse the pity I’m taking on you for more than what it is,” Combeferre answered. “And please go get that long sleeved shirt. You’ll need it when the cats try to tear your skin off.”

“Raoul wouldn’t try to scratch me.”

Combeferre snorted. “I think I’m going to post that one on facebook.”

“Oh shut up! My cat loves me. He will not try to scratch me.”

“Okay, Enjolras. Whatever you say.”

Fifteen minutes later, Enjolras squeezed his way out of the bathroom with the sounds of spitting and hissing thick in the air. He was freely bleeding from cuts on his arms, face, and neck.

Combeferre was sitting in the living room, possibly reading the book open on his lap, but suspiciously sitting in the armchair that afforded a view of the bathroom doorway. He smiled and threw a cheeky wave at Enjolras, and looked just as annoyingly smug when he watched Enjolras slink back into the bathroom with a long sleeved shirt thrown over his arm.

Twenty minutes later the hissing and spitting was interspersed with splashes, shrieks of pain, and then broken sobbing and begging. “Please, please just let me wash it off! We’re almost done! I promise, Raoul, we’re almost done! Ow, you fucking brute! I’m doing this for you!”

Combeferre looked at his own cats, who were warily watching the bathroom doorway from perches on the cat towers. Gladiator’s tail was flicking nervously. “Oh dear,” Combeferre murmured. “He can’t even handle his own cat. There’s no way he’s going to be able to bathe either of you.”

Combeferre walked over to the bathroom door and gave it a gentle knock. “Enjolras? How are you doing in there?”

He didn’t get an answer.

“Enjolras…?”

“Leave me the fuck alone! Seriously, ‘Ferre, the last thing I need right now is to have you gloat about how fucking right you are about everything! Just go away!”

Combeferre jumped backwards a bit. He’d never heard Enjolras freak out like that before. Then again, Enjolras had also never tried to bathe a cat before either.
Combeferre took a deep, steadying breath and opened the door a crack.

Raoul came barreling out of the room, shrieking angry meows and leaving a wake of chemically smelling suds behind him. Enjolras crawled after him on all fours clutching a wet face cloth. The cat wasn’t as wet as he probably should have been, considering you needed to get them really saturated to get all the flea dirt (and thus the flea eggs) off their skin, but Enjolras looked like he’d jumped in a swimming pool. Therefore, it was difficult to tell if Enjolras’ cheeks were wet from bathwater or tears.

Combeferre wanted to say bathwater, but he wasn’t terribly sure of that.

Together they managed to wrestle Raoul back into the bathroom. Neither of them said anything, but with Combeferre holding the cat down Enjolras finally managed to soak him, scrub him, and rinse him. Then they had to wrestle the cat again to get a towel around him, and once he wasn’t dripping anymore Enjolras was able to sit with him in the living room and brush his fur out. Raoul didn’t seem to mind being brushed, and after a few minutes he even seemed to forgive the injury of the bath.

He licked a couple of the wounds he’d given Enjolras, and Enjolras shakily smiled while he rubbed a towel over the cat’s head.

Combeferre placed a bracing hand on Enjolras’ shoulder, then felt a twinge of guilt when he flinched. Right. There was probably a bloody claw mark there. He dropped his hand and settled for a bracing smile instead. “Why don’t we bathe the other cats together?”

Enjolras didn’t say anything, just nodded.

Grantaire wasn’t sure what to expect when he got out of work. He only knew that Enjolras had severely underestimated the ease of flea bombing the apartment and bathing three angry cats (because even the most even tempered cat was angry when you came at it with a spray of water and flea shampoo). He’d borrowed some money from Courfeyrac and was therefore armed with fancy tofu and vegetable takeout and the good green tea that Enjolras never splurged on anymore, thinking his fiancé might need something to lift his spirits after a grueling day.

The apartment looked normal enough when Grantaire let himself in. Combeferre was waiting for him in the living room. Judging by the My Little Pony band-aid over his right eyebrow, Combeferre had assisted Enjolras in bathing the cats, despite his initial assurances that he would be doing no such thing.

“How’d it go?” Grantaire asked.

“Your lover is currently curled into a fetal position on your bed. But it’s done. The cats are groomed, they’ve got drops on the backs of their necks, and the house has been bombed.”

Well that was good. “How much did it set us back?”

“Eighty.”

“Jesus Christ. Enjolras had eighty on him?”

Combeferre shook his head. “Don’t worry about it, ‘Taire. I covered the rest.”

“Well thanks. And, y’know, sorry for infesting your cats in the first place.”

Combeferre rattled off some platitude that Grantaire didn’t quite hear. He went into the kitchen to put
the take out on a plate and get the tea in a mug, added a little honey he swiped from Combeferre’s stash of condiments, then went into their bedroom.

Combeferre hadn’t been exaggerating. Enjolras was indeed lying on the bed in a fetal position with a pillow clutched to his chest.

Raoul was sitting at the foot of the bed, curled up in a little black and white ball, looking thoroughly unconcerned about his master’s present mental health. His fur looked very shiny and neat, though it did smell a little chemically.

Grantaire set the food on the nightstand, then got into bed with Enjolras and wrapped his arms around him. He almost pulled away, as Enjolras winced when he touched him, but then Enjolras grabbed his hands and forced him to keep the embrace going. “Combeferre told me the cat bathing didn’t go as smoothly as you’d hoped. I’m sorry.”

“No you’re not. You knew it was going to suck, and now you’re laughing at me just like he is.”

“Babe, we’re most definitely not laughing. I brought you noms to cheer you up.”

“You did?”

Grantaire sat up a little, not sure if he should be alarmed or not. “Your favorite tofu and veggies is sitting right next to your head. Can you not smell it?”

“Everything smells like artificial coconut and chemicals right now. I think I may have accidentally snorted some of that flea shampoo.”

“That can’t be good for you.”

“Tell that to Gladiator.”

Enjolras slowly sat up, and Grantaire finally got a good look at him. “ Fucking hell. It looks like you lost a fight with a lawn mower.”

“Fuck off.”

“At least cat scratches tend to be light. That one on your jaw might scar though.”

“I said fuck off,” Enjolras growled. “But I’ll take the tofu.”

Grantaire left the room again, and returned a moment later with the first aid kit and an extra box of band-aids. Spending the night cleaning Enjolras’ cuts and feeding him tofu was a bit odd: definitely not the kind of thing he pictured any of the times he’d fantasized about dating Enjolras back before they’d started going out, but he was surprisingly okay with it.

Enjolras was pretty cute when he was surly, after all.
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

Enjolras goes to confront Marie on Combeferre's behalf.

Grantaire takes a shot at matchmaking.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! I know I've been whining about RL a bit recently so I thought it worth sharing that things have improved recently. I'd been having a particularly difficult time at work, but my boss started sticking up for me, and I have an awesome new coworker now. So things are looking up, and hopefully they'll stay that way :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The flea baths hadn’t been the most pleasant form of procrastination Enjolras had ever employed (the scratch on his jaw did end up scarring, and now Courfeyrac kept teasing him, saying it made him look rugged), but they did allow him to put off a particularly unpleasant duty for almost a full week. He had to wait until his next day off to set out to his parents’ house for the confrontation he’d promised to make on Combeferre’s behalf, as taking care of the fleas really had taken an entire day.

The morning before he set off for Marie and Paul’s, Enjolras was a bit clingier than usual. Grantaire definitely noticed, but he didn’t comment on it. Adept as ever at reading his boyfriend, Grantaire returned the physical affection and trusted that Enjolras would tell him what was going on when he was ready.

When Grantaire left for work Enjolras borrowed Combeferre’s car and left for the house in Beverly.

He sat in the parked car for a good ten minutes, brooding about the upcoming conversation and trying to figure out what he was going to say. He couldn’t really anticipate the counter-arguments though; he had no idea how Marie was going to respond to this.

He really didn’t want to have this conversation. He wanted to be anywhere else in the world doing anything else. But he’d promised Combeferre, and Combeferre deserved all the help Enjolras could give him.

Enjolras forced himself to get out of the car and make the lengthy walk up the drive. He took note of his parents’ lighter, sportier summer cars parked ahead of him. Then he frowned when he spotted the Prius. It had been covered with bumper stickers sporting slogans that were most definitely not in line with his parents’ views, even if they had been the kind of people to use bumper stickers.

Then he heard running feet, and Yvette’s daughter was standing breathlessly in front of him. Felicia was wearing scruffy clothes, had her long red hair tied back with a kerchief, and was carrying a bucket of cleaning supplies.
“Hi Felicia. You’re helping your mother again this summer?”

“This used to be the best summer gig ever, okay?” Felicia returned. “And hey you! It’s really nice to see you again, Enjolras. This place sucks without your snark making the adults look ridiculous.”

Enjolras smiled, feeling some unexpected warmth for the girl that had been one of his childhood playmates, but that he’d mostly forgotten by his teen years. Not only had Enjolras been thoroughly invested in detaching himself from his family as completely as possible, but they’d begun to drift when adolescence hit and Enjolras realized that Felicia had a crush on him. She had to be over it by now though. It had been years.

“So Mom and Dad gave you my car?” Enjolras observed, as that was the only explanation he could think of for the bumper stickers.

Felicia’s face reddened. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t really in a place to say no though.”

“Don’t feel guilty, Felicia. I gave it back to them. I’m glad they passed it on to someone deserving. You and your mother have always been good to us, and my parents never appreciated it the way they should. The car’s a step in the right direction.”

There was something sad in Felicia’s eyes when she smiled at him. “Well, it still sucks to gain from your loss.”

“I chose to walk away from all this.”

“Yeah, speaking of…why are you back?”

Enjolras sighed. “I’ve got to tell Mom to stop harassing one of my friends. Then I’m really gone for good. She’s been trying to get information on me out of him and it needs to stop.”

“Ah.” Felicia faltered for a second. “Could we still be friends? I mean, I thought we used to get along well enough. And you’re a really cool guy.”

“Thanks. Yeah, we did used to be pretty good friends. Felicia, I have nothing against you or your mother—”

“Mom’s got a few things against you.”

Enjolras wasn’t quite able to keep the disquiet those words gave him to himself. Yvette was much more of a mother to him than Marie had ever been. Granted, there was still a lot of distance there (the relationship was nothing like Grantaire and Bridget’s, for example), but it had been comforting to have one adult from his childhood that he’d felt he could turn to for sympathy. Whatever explanation Felicia was about to give him, Enjolras was pretty sure he didn’t actually want to hear it.

“Why is Yvette mad at me?”

Felicia set her bucket on the porch and leaned back on the railing. She was fidgeting with her rubber gloves. “Um…well, see, when she heard that you were marrying that art kid she kinda lost it—”

“Oh,” Enjolras said, feeling some relief. So it was a simple misunderstanding, not anything truly significant. “I should have told her in person instead of letting her hear about it through gossip. That was insensitive of me.”

“No, Enjolras…Mom wanted you to marry me.”
Enjolras felt something dark settle in the pit of his stomach. “I’m gay,” he blurted out.

“I know,” Felicia rushed to assure him. “I figured that out way before Mom did, and she never accepted it. She was always planning on us getting married. And then I’d move in with you and we’d build her an in-law apartment, and she’d have wealth and security in her old age and she wouldn’t have to clean rich peoples’ houses anymore. She was grooming me for you since we were in preschool.”

“Ah. So she wasn’t ever looking out for me. What I misconstrued as affection was calculated interest.” That actually didn’t hurt as much as he’d expected. Possibly it was because he’d experienced so much genuine affection from his friends and his lover that he was starting to be able to see the notes of artificiality in Yvette’s carefully rehearsed actions. At least he had all that genuine affection to fall back on.

He didn’t need anyone in this damn place. Not his parents, not Yvette, and not the unjustly accrued riches and the obligations that went with them. He had everything he needed in his modest apartment with his closest friend, his lover, and their freshly bathed cats.

Felicia bit her lip, then rushed forward and gave Enjolras a hug. “I’m sorry. I should have told you ages ago, I just, I didn’t think it would do anything but hurt you. But you shouldn’t go in there and hear the things they’re going to say as a complete shock. Our moms have been drinking buddies pretty much since they heard about the engagement, and they’ve been saying the most awful things about your fiancé. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. Felicia, I’m fine.” Enjolras extracted himself from the girl’s distraught embrace. The shock had already mostly worn off.

It didn’t really surprise him that someone connected so intimately to his parents as their housekeeper of over twenty years was as poisonous as they were. He had plenty of important people in his life who actually cared about him, and he was only going back into this unhappy nightmare to help one of the most important.

Right. He could do this.

“I’d better get this over with.”

Felicia let him into the house, gave him another bracing hug, and then they parted ways.

Grantaire started talking as soon as he got into the apartment. He banged the front door open, kicked off his sneakers, and was halfway through an anecdote about an annoying customer from his shift at the comic book store before he realized it was a stranger lounging on the couch and not Enjolras or Combeferre. “Who the hell are you?”

The kid arched an eyebrow. “Gerard. Are you Enjolras’ boyfriend?”

Grantaire nodded.

“Huh. Not what I was expecting.” Gerard sat up a little straighter, and Grantaire got a better look at him. He was tempted to say the same thing.

When Combeferre mentioned having a younger brother, Grantaire had stupidly expected to meet a younger version of Combeferre. But if he’d stopped and examined that impulse, he’d have remembered how little he had in common with his own sister.
Gerard looked almost nothing like his older brother. He was short and scrawny with a kind of sleepy, doughy face and dirty light brown hair mostly hidden by a baseball cap. He was dressed like a privileged white kid suburban thugga. His hazel eyes were very similar to Combeferre’s, but they lacked the intelligent spark characteristic of the group philosopher.

“You’re staying with us this week, right?” Grantaire asked, vaguely recalling an earlier conversation with his roommate.

“Yeah.”

“Out of curiosity, what were you expecting?”

Gerard shrugged. “I figured Enjolras would date another stuck up pretty boy with a hard on for social justice. Y’know, someone else with a stick shoved way up. But you look pretty cool.”

“Uh…thanks?” He wasn’t sure how to take that. Grantaire knew he wasn’t a pretty boy, but it wasn’t obvious from looking at him that he didn’t give a rat’s ass about social justice…was it?

Gerard laughed. “Sorry. I don’t, like, not like your boyfriend or anything. But he’s pretty intense and he scares me sometimes.”

“Ah. Yeah, what terrifies people about Enjolras tends to turn me on, so, y’know, it works. I’m a little fucked up.”

“Hey, no one’s perfect.” Gerard slid back down against the arm of the couch and picked up the Blu-Ray remote. “I’m guessing the Venture Brothers DVDs I’m watching are yours. Wanna join me?”

“Hells yes.” Grantaire dropped the rest of his stuff on the floor and plopped down on the couch next to Gerard.

He had a feeling he was going to like Combeferre’s little brother.

Enjolras found his father first. He was surprised Paul was at home at two in the afternoon on a weekday, but it wasn’t completely unprecedented.

Paul was sitting in the study, working at home from the looks of it. His entire demeanor changed when he spotted his son lurking in the doorway. For one brief moment his typically impassive face shone nakedly with affection and concern, but then he got control of himself. The stony façade of indifference was back in place, his body language seething with an undercurrent of anger. “What are you doing here?”

“I need to speak with Mom. Have you seen her?” Enjolras took pains to keep his voice cool, though inwardly he was a bit shaken. That was the tone of voice Paul used to use before he got violent. Enjolras involuntarily tensed in readiness for a hit that wasn’t likely to come (he hoped).

At least Paul was sober.

“Your mother’s out getting her nails done with the housekeeper. Is it anything I can help you with?”

“No.”

Paul softened slightly. He crossed the room to stand nearer Enjolras, just a touch of his worry showing on his face. “Enjolras, if you need money.”

“It’s not about that.” Enjolras recoiled. He stepped back, putting some distance between them.
Paul hardened once more. “Well what is it? Because you look like hell, and you’re wearing thrift store castoffs. You look no better than that mongrel you brought to dinner.”

Enjolras tried to ignore the flare of anger that came with those words, but they’d hit their mark. Some emotion tinged his voice, despite the measured coldness he strove for. “Please don’t speak of Grantaire like that. In a few years he’s going to be your son in law.”

Paul sighed. “You’re sure of this then? That you want to needlessly make your life that much more difficult than it should be?”

“You think marrying Grantaire will make my life harder?” Enjolras asked. “Dad, the one thing you taught me about marriage was the importance of marrying for love. I refuse to make the same mistake you did.”

Paul’s eyes narrowed. “Fair point.” His voice was nearly a growl. “And you love that boy?”

“I do.”

“Hm. Well, all the best for you. You’ve always been a wiser man than me, Enjolras. Maybe you’ll figure out how to be happy.”

That appeared to be a sincere offer of well wishes. Enjolras wasn’t sure how to respond to that.

“Ah. Um, shall I wait for Mom in the den?”

“Go right ahead. I’ll send her your way when she gets home. Enjolras…I know you’re not asking for it, but do you need some money? Would it help anything?”

Enjolras thought of the forty dollars he owed Combeferre, how much of Combeferre’s groceries he and Grantaire were using, how much he could use a new pair of shoes, the secret tattoo fund, how he wanted to get Grantaire a tablet so that he could more easily work on his web comics, how Raoul could probably use a trip to the vet…

“I’m okay, Dad. But thanks.”

Paul sighed again, but nodded in resignation. “I’ll set something aside for your wedding present. The, um, the family is supposed to be involved with throwing those things. Will you accept some help from me then?”

Enjolras closed the study door and went to sit in the armchair by his father’s desk, as they were clearly having their own conversation as well. “What’s going on, Dad? Are you trying to buy forgiveness?” It was an old tactic, and frankly one that Enjolras had grown weary of.

Paul started to speak, but stopped. So Enjolras took the conversation up.

“If you want me to forgive you, you could start by apologizing. You do have some things you could say to me, you know.”

“I know,” he murmured. “You grew up so fast, son. Much faster than you should have. I’m sorry. I could have done a better job protecting you. I probably should have divorced your mother years ago, I just—”

“Wait, are you…?”

Paul realized what he’d let slip, and he abruptly moved to stand nearer Enjolras. “We’re seeing a
marriage counselor, but so far it isn’t going anywhere. So yes. Your mother and I will be getting a divorce.”

“Oh.” Enjolras didn’t know what to say, because all he could think was ‘fucking finally.’ He’d given up on his mother as a lost cause sometime during elementary school, but Enjolras had always thought his father might have been a better man if he were happier.

Paul looked incredibly uncomfortable as he tried to gauge Enjolras’ response to his announcement. “Are you…alright? Son?”

“Yes. I think this will be good for both of you.”

Paul nodded stiffly. “Will you accept my apology?”

“First I want you to finally acknowledge that you hurt me, and I want to hear you admit to what you did. I hate the dishonesty and the silences in this house. Mom is an alcoholic and you left me alone with her. And when you drank too much you got violent and you hurt me. You put me in the hospital—”

“Enjolras—”

“When I was a child. You hit me and I fell and you put me in a cast because you couldn’t control yourself.” Now that he’d started, Enjolras couldn’t have stopped if he wanted to. “And when Mom hurt my friend, when she violated him, you helped her cover it up. Mom should have been arrested.”

“Enjolras, please calm down—”

“She raped my best friend, Dad. She raped him. And you blamed Combeferre. You blamed the drugged sixteen year old. You’re both sick. I can’t—I can’t do this. Never mind. No apology could ever make that okay.”

Paul grabbed his shoulder and forced him to stay in the chair. He looked terrified, and even more so when his son flinched at his touch. “Enjolras, I’m sorry. You’re right about everything. Just please don’t storm out again and leave us here to worry for you. A fool could tell you’re struggling. Let me help you, please. And Grantaire and Combeferre too, if that’s what it takes.”

“Dad, let go of me.”

“En—”

“I won’t fucking leave, just stop touching me!”

Paul jumped back and held his hands up in front of him. “Okay. I won’t touch you.”

“Mom’s still harassing Combeferre. That needs to stop.”

“It does. I’ll talk to her.”

After having such an emotional discussion with his father, Enjolras wasn’t sure he was in any state to face his mother as well, so he decided to leave that unpleasant duty to Paul.

“Do you even understand why I don’t want your money?”

“You wouldn’t owe us anything, Enjolras. I owe you. I want to take care of you now, however I can, to make up for some of my failures. Frankly, I think all I can offer you is financial assistance. I seem incapable of handling anything else. I think that’s the only thing I’ve learned so far in this
marriage counseling; what a sham I am as a partner and father.”

Wow. That was actually one of Marie’s tactics, baiting Enjolras with insults she didn’t really believe to get him to comfort her. It had stopped working on him when he was ten, and Paul wasn’t as good at it as Marie anyway.

“If I were to even think of taking money from you again, you’d have to promise not to interfere in my life.”

Paul took a deep breath. “If that’s what you want. I think you should rethink this engagement though. You’ve been together less than a year, and life will be difficult for you if you’re an open homosexual.”

Enjolras openly scoffed, then remembered how little he shared with his father. When it came to the things about himself that Enjolras considered truly important, Paul knew about as much as a passing stranger. “Dad, that’s not changing whether I’m married to the man I love or not. I’m gay. I accepted that ages ago. You damn well should have by now too.”

Paul nodded unthinkingly, showing an odd desperation that didn’t suit him. Enjolras was pretty sure he could have gotten the man to agree to just about anything at that moment. “Of course, Enjolras. Of course. And I have accepted that you won’t be following in my footsteps in, well, anything. But is it too much to ask for you to be safe while rebelling against my wishes?”

“I am safe-”

“You’ve lost at least ten pounds since I last saw you, and you were never that large to begin with. You look ill. It’s fairly obvious that poverty doesn’t suit you, and besides that, it could be dangerous for you, living among the desperately poor.”

Enjolras crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m happier with the changes I’ve made to my life. I’m happier without all the obligations that came with this family.”

“You don’t have to have them,” Paul said. “I won’t ask you to do anything, I won’t tell your mother I’m sending you money. Please, Enjolras. I love you. You’re my only son, and worrying for you has been killing me.”

There was a fair bit more grey in Paul’s hair than Enjolras remembered, and he looked a little drawn himself.

Grantaire would probably kill him for walking away from no-strings-attached money, but it still didn’t feel right.

“I…I don’t know. I’ll think about it.” Enjolras stood up and started walking towards the door.

Paul followed after him. “Are you still going to wait for your mother?”

“Can you talk to her for me? I think I’ve had enough for one day.”

“Of course.” Paul walked him to the main entrance. Enjolras hesitated. He had no idea what to say to Paul, and it was pretty clear that he didn’t know what to do either.

“Well…goodbye.”

“Goodbye, son. Make sure you think about my offer.”
Enjolras nodded again and walked out to Combeferre’s car. He could feel Paul’s heavy gaze following him.

Grantaire and Gerard were still sitting on the couch watching cartoons when Enjolras got back from his parents’ house, but they’d moved on to season seven of the Simpsons. They were cracking up at something when Enjolras came slouching into the room, but Grantaire paused the DVD at his first glimpse of his lover and climbed to his feet.

“What’s wrong?”

Enjolras blinked a few times and shook his head. “Not ready to talk about it yet.”

Gerard made a whipping noise, and Enjolras turned one of his stronger glares the teen’s way. “When did you get here?”

Gerard shrugged. “Noon-ish? I think? But seriously dude, he jumped right up as soon as he saw you. Tell me that isn’t whipped.”

“Enjolras, there are small children that call me Whippy. He’s not wrong.”

“I was under the impression you didn’t like having it pointed out,” Enjolras said with a smirk. He turned back to Gerard. “Is your brother home?”

“Nah. ‘Ferre’s hitting up some stupid museum thing with that curly haired guy.”

“That curly haired guy really doesn’t narrow it down much in our group of friends,” Enjolras said.

“Well we know he’s not talking about Bossuet.” Grantaire thought for a second. “I think he’s out with Feuilly. They said they wanted to check out the Faberge exhibit at the PEM.”

“They went without me?” Enjolras yelped. “God dammit. You know what? This day is just a complete fucking loss. I’ll be in the room and I’m bringing my cat. I’ll vacuum for you later.”

“Kay. Feel better.”

The door slammed shut behind Enjolras a moment later, making Grantaire jump as he reached for the remote to turn the DVD back on. “I wonder what the hell he was up to.”

Grantaire hung out with Gerard for another disc and a half, but he was pretty bored with lounging around and watching cartoons at that point. He didn’t want to get up until he heard the sound of a vacuum though.

That happy moment arrived just as Combeferre got back in. He looked a little uncomfortable, but Grantaire figured taking a daytrip out with the friend that had become your successful romantic rival might be a bit tense.

It was pretty relieving to see that there was no bad blood between Combeferre and Feuilly over Eponine’s choice though. Jehan’s drama was making group gatherings uncomfortable enough as it was; they seriously did not need any more of that kind of awkwardness.

Raoul ran over to Combeferre and let out a whiny shriek of a meow as soon as he saw him. “I don’t know why you’re coming to me for comfort over the vacuum cleaner,” Combeferre said to the cat. “I’m not yours and you don’t like it when I touch you.”

He then proceeded to go into the kitchen and give the cat a handful of treats.
Grantaire shook his head while he walked over to his bedroom. “That brain damaged cat actually has Combeferre trained.” He opened the door a crack and peered in.

Enjolras was lying on his stomach on the bed. Grantaire sat down beside his head and started stroking his hair. “Will you talk to me yet?”

“Mm. I went to see Mom and Dad today.”

“Oh.” Well that explained a hell of a lot. “I take it it didn’t go well?”

“It…actually didn’t go…I don’t know, Taire. I don’t know how I feel. I didn’t end up talking to Mom at all. She was out at the time and I had a hell of a conversation with Dad. He promised to talk to her about Combeferre.”

“Oh. So is everything sorted out then?”

Enjolras pulled himself into a sitting position and sat so that he was facing Grantaire. “He wants to give me money. He said he’s worrying about me, and that there wouldn’t be any obligations to go along with it. He said he wouldn’t tell Mom about it either. I…I believe him when he says he’s worried about me, even if his reasons are stupid and bigoted, but…I don’t know if it’d be right to take his money. I know we need it, but I don’t want him in my life. At all. He said he loved me and I seized up inside. Grantaire, I don’t love my parents. All I feel for them is this consuming hatred, and I don’t…I can’t…I just want to be away from them.”

“Okay.” Grantaire grasped one of Enjolras’ hands and gently rubbed the back of it. “That’s okay. We’re getting by, aren’t we? We’ll be fine.”

“We’re not though.” Enjolras’ face contracted into a pained grimace. “There are so many things we could use his money for. Raoul hasn’t been to the vet once since I’ve had him, and we owe Combeferre money. I hate being in debt to my friends. And your art career—”

“I don’t have an art career. I dick around with comic strips and I sell tacky ass commissions of fan art online. That’s not a career, Enjolras.”

“That’s only because you’re unmotivated. You have so much potential, Taire, and some start-up capital could really help. Besides…” Enjolras’ gaze fell, and Grantaire realized he was looking at his wrists. “There are other things I want to be able to give you.”

Grantaire nervously fidgeted with a rubber bracelet he was wearing. “It’s fine. That’s just a…I don’t need…tattoos aren’t a necessity, okay? I mean, we haven’t even figured out how we’re buying textbooks for next semester.”

Enjolras nodded. “I should take the money.”

“Enjolras, you shouldn’t do anything you don’t want to do. Especially not for me. Okay? This is your choice and I’ll respect you whatever you want to do, but don’t fucking think you’re depriving me of anything if you stick to your guns.” Grantaire framed Enjolras’ face in his hands and forced him to look at his eyes instead of his scars. “You’re already giving me everything I need. You have nothing to feel guilty about.”

Enjolras’ expression finally softened as the tension left him. He closed his eyes and leaned into Grantaire’s touch. “Thank you. That was exactly what I…you’re perfect, you know that?”

“Hm. Never thought I’d be hearing that from you instead of the other way around.”
Enjolras let out a startled laugh and lightly swatted at his arm. They cuddled up together by the pillows, Enjolras with his head resting on Grantaire’s chest. “So how was your day? Better than mine? Less conflicted, I would think.”

“Mm. I just kinda hung out with Combeferre’s little brother all day once I got out of work. The kid’s pretty cool. A bit dumb, but that’s kind of refreshing considering I usually hang with brains all the time.”

“Gerard’s…pretty different from Combeferre, yeah.”

“Plus he’s still all little. What is he, eighteen?”

Enjolras’ face scrunched up as he thought about it. “No…I think he’s closer to Azelma’s age than Eponine’s. I’m pretty sure he’s still in high school.”

“Wait. Wait just a minute…you guys have been complaining about Azelma’s creepy attachment to Combeferre for months now, and all this time he’s had a little brother her age?”

“Yeah…” Enjolras clearly wasn’t following.

Maybe Grantaire wasn’t spending as much free time with brains as he’d thought. “Why don’t you set them up on a date?”

Enjolras leaned up on his elbows. “Just because Azelma likes Combeferre, it doesn’t necessarily mean she’ll like Gerard. In fact, I’m pretty sure her attraction to Combeferre indicates that she won’t find Gerard attractive at all. They’re really quite different.”

“Yeah, but if she can’t date the guy she wants she’ll probably at least give his brother a shot. Come on, this will work. If nothing else, it’ll distract her from pining for ‘Ferre. We could at least pitch it.”

“I guess…”

“Oh hell no.”

“Eponine, you didn’t even consider-”

“And I don’t have to!” Eponine exploded. “You are not allowed to play matchmaker for my love addled ditz of a baby sister. She doesn’t need to be dating right now, okay? She needs therapy, and lots of it, before she’s even allowed to consider dating.”

Grantaire turned to Combeferre and Enjolras, who were not being nearly as helpful as he’d hoped. Enjolras was tying his work apron on in preparation to join Eponine behind the counter (Grantaire had tagged along with Combeferre to give Enjolras a ride to work, figuring it would be the ideal time to pitch the date idea to Eponine) and Combeferre was still standing by the door to the mostly empty café.

“You’re dating without therapy,” Grantaire pointed out. Based on the look on Eponine’s face, that was the wrong tactic. “Okay, look…” He turned towards Combeferre. “Are you still uncomfortable with Azelma’s crush on you?”

Combeferre shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, then went over to join them at the counter. After a long moment he slowly nodded.

“But you have a little brother Azelma’s age. Which is totally appropriate, and really serendipitous, I
might add. We throw them together, Azelma gets distracted and boom! No more creepy jailbait crush. It’s a win-win all around. I really don’t see why you guys are objecting to this.”

“Because if Azelma likes me then she won’t have chemistry with Gerard,” Combeferre insisted. “We’re very different people. Also, I just have a bad feeling about putting Gerard in the company of an emotionally vulnerable teenage girl. He will not behave like a gentleman.”

Eponine scowled. “And Azelma’s definitely not a lady. I’m inclined to agree with ‘Ferre and Enj on this. I’m not ready to be an auntie.”

Combeferre let out a relieved breath. “Good, because I’d rather not be an uncle just yet either.”

Grantaire scowled. “So what, are your siblings too dumb to practice safe sex or something? Just send ‘em out with a box of condoms. I’m telling you; this is the way to get Azelma off of Combeferre’s back. She needs to be distracted, and if she’s crushing as stupidly as we all know she is, she’ll be intrigued enough for one date with a close relative. Who knows? They might even hit it off.”

Eponine shrugged. “Stranger things have happened. Stranger things have happened to us, even. I could at least pitch it to her, I suppose.”

“Gerard will be interested. He’ll go out with anyone once,” Combeferre said. “I don’t know though. I don’t think they’re going to click.” No one commented on it, but it kind of looked like he didn’t want them to click.

“If they go on a few dates Zelma will give up on you,” Eponine said suddenly, smiling widely at the realization. “We have this thing about siblings. Kind of a side effect of us both being Montparnasse’s girlfriend for a little while. Anyway, we decided that if a guy dates one of us then that’s it, he’s not allowed to try the other sister. I’m sure the same thing’d hold for her when it comes to the guys she’s dating. Only wanting to be with one brother, I mean.”

“So you’re doing this then?” Enjolras asked, looking distinctly displeased.

Eponine and Combeferre traded a long look, then Combeferre shrugged. “I guess,” Eponine said. “It’s worth at least bringing up to them.”

Grantaire pumped his fist and hissed out a quick, “yes!”

Enjolras crossed his arms over his chest. “Let me pitch it to Gerard.”

“Why?” Eponine asked, intrigued.

“He’s still afraid of me. I think that’ll work in Azelma’s favor.”

Eponine giggled. “Are you looking out for my sister’s virtue, Enjy? You’re at least a couple of years too late, but thanks anyway. It’s very sweet.”

He wasn’t quite sure how he’d managed it, but somehow Jehan had stumbled into a tableau he’d fantasized about from the time of his adolescence on.

He was resting in the arms of a classically handsome man who was absolutely enthralled with him. This elegant, well-spoken, intelligent lover was idly stroking Jehan’s knee while they reclined on a sofa together. Their charming literary friends reclined opposite, also cuddling, as a prize winning young author read pieces of a draft of her current work in progress to them (Jehan loved his friends dearly, but it was so nice to be among other writers for once). Tea was set out on the table, a chubby
calico cat was purring away on top of Rachel’s piano, and Rachel and Hester’s houseplants and fresh flowers were contributing a nicely delicate fragrance to the room.

And to think, Jehan had been nervous about meeting Hugh’s friends, but now that he was here he felt completely at home. It scared him a little, even, how comfortable he felt with Rachel and Hester.

Their tastes were perfectly in line with Jehan’s (if a bit classier and with fewer clashing colors). No one would mock him, however gently, for staying in like an old prude, reading poetry aloud, and generally living like a ninety year old when he was in fact twenty two.

To his great surprise, in the face of getting everything he’d thought he wanted, Jehan felt rather restless. He couldn’t get himself to focus on Hester’s writing, though he knew he liked it, and Hugh’s reverent caresses seemed tepid.

They’d been dating (he’d accepted that that’s what it was, as going out with anyone else would feel like a slight against Hugh, and dishonest to boot) for almost a month, and Hugh’s touches were all like that. Reverent, tender, and utterly devoid of heat. Jehan found himself in the same situation he’d been in with Courfeyrac, and he had even less patience for it this time. Just what was it about him that made by all accounts lusty young men turn into blushing prudes?

It took Jehan a beat longer than it should have to notice that Hester had finished reading her draft. Hugh and Rachel jumped in, offering praise and a bit of kindly worded constructive criticism. Jehan had no idea what to say, having lost the thread of the story scarcely three paragraphs in, but seeming to sense this and feeling no ill-will about it, Hester didn’t solicit his opinion.

“Jehan, are you feeling alright? You look a little dazed,” she inquired instead.

“I’ve been in an off mood all day,” Jehan confessed.

“Perhaps you’ll write something magnificent tonight. That’s often how it goes for me, which is fortunate because I do think writers deserve some reward for our intolerably heavy moods.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Hugh asked, voice gentle against Jehan’s ear.

“I don’t think so, but thank you for offering.”

Hugh’s hand moved from Jehan’s knee, and his arms encircled Jehan’s waist instead. He placed a kiss on his jaw and was even more attentive for the rest of the visit.

Rachel and Hester were apparently Hugh’s oldest friends, which didn’t say a lot as he’d only known them for a year. He’d tried to woo Rachel and had accidentally taken her out on what he’d perceived as five dates and she’d considered fun outings with a new friend. On the fifth date she’d mentioned wanting to introduce him to her girlfriend, and, mortified, Hugh had avoided her for two weeks.

Hugh spent that time in introspection he’d carefully avoided for many years, and when he’d sought Rachel out again, this time in friendship, he’d had a fair few questions for the first lesbian he’d developed a bond with. Rachel and Hester both had guided Hugh into accepting his own homosexuality, and now he was even out to his mother and sister. Hugh privately informed Jehan that if it hadn’t been for the support of his friends, he’d never have found the strength to act on his feelings and ask Jehan out.

After they left Hester and Rachel’s apartment Hugh drove Jehan home, walked him to his door, and kissed him goodbye just like a perfect gentleman. The next morning Jehan found a bouquet of red roses and jasmine on his welcome mat with a card expressing the hope that flowers might chase away any further melancholic moods.
Jehan brought the flowers inside, but tucked a sprig of the jasmine behind his ear for the smell.

He just didn’t understand. When he’d been a dreamy adolescent and had fantasized about his first great romance, he’d actually designed a few fictional men quite similar to Hugh. Twelve year old Jehan, who’d devoured the complete works of Jane Austen in one week of a family vacation, couldn’t have asked for a better boyfriend. He’d never dated anyone so well-mannered before, and his looks...But try as he might, Jehan couldn’t feel any passion for the lovely young man.

He still hadn’t written a single line of poetry about Hugh, and he’d tried, dammit. The man was impossibly gorgeous. His features lent themselves to poetry as easily as his cousin’s features inspired Grantaire’s artwork. Jehan just didn’t have it in him.

Jehan sat down by the large window in his living area and thoughtfully tapped a pen against his cheek. He tried to think of a novel description of Hugh’s hair. It was a pretty dazzling shade of blond. There had to be some way to play with the language, something…

With a resigned sigh, Jehan set his notebook aside and fished out his cellphone. He needed to unburden himself to a friend, get another take on this.

But when he scrolled through his contacts list he couldn’t say he was tempted to talk to any of them. Most of his friends had shut down on him, and he’d talked to Combeferre about this several times without having any kind of breakthrough. He needed to talk to someone who would think only of him and Hugh, and not of him and Courfeyrac.

He wondered if it would be weird to reach out to Hester. They’d just met, and she was Hugh’s friend, not his…but Jehan had really clicked with her. And no doubt she understood writer’s block.

It couldn’t hurt to give her a call.

Chapter End Notes

So you guys might have noticed that I've made some changes to the tags for the story and...figured out how many chapters I have left to write. The end is in sight people. I mean, it's still a ways off, but I know where I'm going now.

Ending this fic is going to feel so weird. It's been such a wonderful experience for me. Again, we're still quite a ways off, but I wanted to throw this out there. I hope some of you guys will still follow my writing even when this fic is finished. I've got lots of other Les Mis ideas to explore (and I might even try writing something set in the canon time period again) and I'd love to keep seeing your responses. You guys have been wonderful to write for <3

Next chapter will be about Boston Comic Con :(
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

Boston Comic Con!!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Grantaire felt jittery when he left work Friday night. He was tempted to chain smoke for the walk home, but he limited himself to two cigarettes (which really was almost chain smoking, considering how close Combeferre’s building was to the comic book store).

He had a shit done of things to do before he was allowed to sleep, because he’d procrastinated most of his con-prep until the very last minute. And, as he had to get to Boston and get his table set up before the con opened at ten, he had to be up pretty much at the ass crack of dawn. Grantaire was kicking himself, and wishing he’d listened to Enjolras and Combeferre when they’d tried to goad him into taking care of some of his tasks in advance.

He still hadn’t asked anyone if he could borrow a car to haul in his stuff. Dragging boxes with him on the train and the subway was going to suck beyond words.

Grantaire rounded the corner and stopped in his tracks. The Volvo was parked in front of the building just behind Combeferre’s station wagon. Bahorel was loading a box into the trunk of the Volvo, Enjolras the station wagon, and Courfeyrac was carrying another box down. When Courfeyrac saw Grantaire gaping from the end of the street he set the box down on the steps and waved at him. “Get your ass over here and help! It’s your stuff!”

Grantaire quickly put out his cigarette and jogged over to them. “What are you doing?”

Enjolras roughly finished shoving the box into place and walked over to him. “I got Marius to cover my shift tonight so I could design and print your new business cards, which you were supposed to do Tuesday. Then I picked up the new prints from the store, sorted them, gathered up the pins, key chains, and magnets and sorted those, made you a backdrop and some banners, found an extra folding chair, and reorganized your portfolio so that it only has the available prints in it.”

“He also got t-shirts made,” Courfeyrac added.

“Yes, that’s why there are so many boxes.”

Grantaire was fully aware his mouth was hanging open, but he couldn’t seem to close it. “Y-you think people will buy t-shirts? The prints are expensive enough…I don’t think I can turn a profit on a t-shirt.”

“Taire, your art is good. People will buy shirts,” Courfeyrac said.

“I already bought one,” Bahorel added. “That one you did of Deadpool kicking Deathstroke in the nuts? Genius, man.”

“I don’t know if genius is the right word for that,” Grantaire said. “Besides, you don’t count. You
know me.” Then he turned to Enjolras. “How much did you charge him?”

“We’re selling the shirts for twenty dollars each or two for thirty. Combeferre’s upstairs working on your facebook, setting up an Etsy, and updating your deviantart.” Enjolras put his hands on his hips, as though he were challenging Grantaire and his low self-esteem (which really he pretty much was).

“Um…did you pack my art supplies too? I’ve got to take those with me. I’m-I made the most last year doing commissions for people.”

“Yes, Courfeyrac just brought down the things you pointed out to me when I asked you what you were packing earlier in the week. That was my way of trying to get you to pack, by the way.”

“Your markers looked a little old and dried out, so we hit up the store and got you some new ones,” Courfeyrac said.

Grantaire ran over to the abandoned box on the steps to investigate. “Hey, these aren’t my brand. I use Pris-you got me Copics!” He almost fell over, but when Grantaire recovered his center of gravity he ran over to Courfeyrac, gave him a tight squeeze, and came alarmingly close to kissing him. “Oh my fucking god, I haven’t had Copics since Jackie moved away!”

“You said you liked them better. Prismas have too much bleed, right?” Courfeyrac freed himself from Grantaire’s hug and took a careful step back.

“I mean, I like the bleed. I’ve learned how to work with it for blending. But oh my fucking god, Copics! Thank you.”

“It wasn’t just me,” Courfeyrac said. “We pooled cash together. Everyone wants to see you have a good con, dude.”

Bahorel clapped a hand on his shoulder. “We believe in you.” He said it with comical sincerity, and it was just the right touch to lighten the moment. Grantaire wasn’t sure how well he could handle all the good feeling and support, and the joke allowed him the opportunity to slink into the background while they finished packing up.

Feeling much less jittery, Grantaire joined in on loading his supplies into the cars. Then they went upstairs to check on Combeferre’s progress, and Grantaire was once again blown away by the way his friends were supporting what he’d considered to be an idle hobby. Maybe his doodles and his comics were better than he’d thought…

“I’ve gotta get going.” Bahorel said, once he’d previewed the etsy store with everyone else. “I’ve still got a little bit of prep to do for my costume tomorrow.”

“Oh. When should I meet you for that?” Enjolras asked. Grantaire raised an eyebrow, but his lover and his friend were ignoring him.

Bahorel shrugged. “You’ll be at the con before me helping him set up, y’know, since they let the dealers in first. I’ll probably be in line for a while. I’ll text you when I get inside and we can meet up at a bathroom or something.”

“Allright. Good night Bahorel.”

Bahorel waved at them and took off. Grantaire turned towards Enjolras. “What was that about? Are you costuming?”

Enjolras’ cheeks turned faintly red. “Bahorel talked me into it.”
“He’s talked just about all of us into it at this point,” Courfeyrac added. “I’d better head out too. I’ve got to pick Marius up in…I’m already going to be late. Okay, see you in the morning guys.”

“By the way Grantaire, you just reminded everyone to hit up your table in the morning and plugged your new t-shirts,” Combeferre said. He held out his laptop and showed Grantaire his facebook post.

“Did Enjolras give all of you guys my password?”

“Just me, Courfeyrac, and Cosette so far,” Combeferre said with a smirk. “We’ve already gotten you up over a hundred followers.”

“What, really?” Grantaire peered at the screen and saw that he was now at one hundred and seven friends. “That’s pretty good. I was at seventy five when you started, right?”

“Mm hm. I told you a plug from me would be helpful.” Enjolras looked a little smug, but he was also right. People were starting to care about his art. The new status update already had three likes, and one of them was from someone he’d never met.

Well. Now he was jittery for different reasons.

Grantaire wanted to stay up and creep on his new facebook following, but Enjolras and Combeferre bullied him into going to bed, reminding him that he was getting up at five to get to the con and get everything ready.

He probably would have slipped out of bed again and stolen a laptop, but Enjolras slid in next to him almost as soon as he climbed in. Curious though he was about the facebook friends, it wasn’t enough of a lure to get him out of a bed with Enjolras in it.

And, y’know, the arm clamped tightly around his torso was a little restrictive.

Enjolras, it turned out, had diagrams for setting up the con table.

Really, Grantaire figured the only thing about that that should have surprised him was that he was surprised, but it was inarguably odd to see. The other tables seemed to be just laying things out and checking how it looked, then making a few tweaks. Either that or they’d already done this enough times to have a rhythm.

Enjolras threw a black cloth over the table first thing, then weighted it in place with standing displays. “Where did those come from?” Grantaire asked.

“Bahorel and Musichetta.”

“So they stole them from that store they work at?”

Enjolras threw him an exasperated look. “They borrowed them. Their boss isn’t in this weekend, so she won’t notice.”

“Ah. Well that makes it perfectly ethical.”

Enjolras balled up a flier and threw it at Grantaire’s head. He caught it and threw it back at him. Enjolras irritably tossed it in the trash, then grabbed one of his diagrams and looked it over with that fiery determination usually exhibited when he was working on a speech or a thesis or something. “If it bothers you that much we can always get rid of them.”

“Okay-”
“Don’t you dare touch them! You’ll ruin the entire design!” Enjolras yelped, and whacked Grantaire with a rolled up diagram. “I need them to hold down the cloth so I can hang the metal sheet with the magnets on the front.”

Grantaire smirked and let Enjolras go back to setting up his table. After a few minutes of spying on his neighbors he started to get bored. “Is there anything I can do to help? You’re kind of bogarting the plans.”

Enjolras handed him a folder. “I want you to make the price signs. They need to be large, legible, and in catchy colors.”

“Kay.”

By the end of the hour Grantaire’s table looked amazing. The banners Enjolras had ordered were professional quality, and he had a real cash box loaded up with small bills and rolls of quarters, and the merch was arranged and displayed perfectly. “Wow. It looks like a real…” he broke off, but Grantaire couldn’t stop thinking that he looked like a real artist. His table was almost as nice as Don Rosa’s, or Neal Adams’ (it was way better than George Perez’s, but George Perez also didn’t need a flashy set up because he was George fucking Perez).

Enjolras joined him behind the table and squeezed his hand. “I believe in you. I want you to believe in yourself though. Does this help?”

Grantaire nodded. “Helps loads. Thanks. Thank you so much, Enj. You really are the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Enjolras smiled at him, kissed his cheek, and then sat down behind the table with a bottle of water.

The con started shortly thereafter. Grantaire settled in with his sketchpad and started doodling while he waited for customers. He couldn’t tell if their placement was going to help or hurt; his table was by some big draws, like the 501st New England Garrison and the Ghost Busters of New Hampshire. He couldn’t tell if the big attractions were going to suck up all the attention, or if he’d get their overflow.

They were also achingly close to Billy West. Grantaire had a Ren and Stimpy trading card in his bag he wanted to get signed.

Enjolras started greeting people as they walked past. Grantaire quirked an eyebrow. In his experience they came to you if they were interested. He’d thought it was better to hang back and draw (what most of the artists did) until someone was ready to buy something.

Then Enjolras sold pins to a group of Ninja Turtle cosplayers and Grantaire rethought his strategy.

Enjolras didn’t seem to mind that Grantaire was drawing instead of schmoozing, so he kept at it. He also kept one eye on his boyfriend, and had to wonder what Eponine had been bitching about.

Enjolras had customer service down. True, he wasn’t flirting with any of the customers, but he also didn’t need to. He was professional, but also courteous and respectful, with a good sense of who he could engage, who he could really sell to, and who needed to be left alone to browse.

“I can’t believe how much of my shit you’re selling.”

“Would you mind not calling it shit? Honestly Grantaire, how do you expect to get other people interested in your work when you look down on it?”

Grantaire shrugged apathetically and went back to sketching what Enjolras looked like wearing one
of his new t-shirts…and nothing else.

Bahorel showed up a half hour into the con. He was wearing normal clothes, but he had two massive duffel bags with him and was sporting a base coat of makeup. “Let’s do this,” he said with a grin.

Enjolras gave Grantaire a peck on the cheek and slipped away from the table to go get changed. His sales promptly fell to shit, but Grantaire had a fairly decent conversation with the guys the next table over about the new Star Wars movies while he waited for Enjolras to get back.

He started getting texts from Courfeyrac and Musichetta after a little while too. Apparently they’d ignored Bahorel’s advice regarding the lines and bought their tickets in advance. The line situation had turned into a confusing mess with all the added attendees (there had been extra press in light of the terrorist attack induced delay). Courfeyrac and Musichetta had been waiting for over an hour. For some reason, those who didn’t buy tickets in advance had a shorter wait, as Bahorel had gotten in within a half hour.

Grantaire spotted Legle and Joly well before he saw Courfeyrac and Musichetta, and the two of them had only decided to go to the con at the very last minute. They were doing a lazy cosplay to appease Bahorel, in that they were both wearing Power Ranger t-shirts with jeans and carrying plastic masks with elastic string. Legle was going as the Red Ranger and Joly the Blue.

Legle tried to buy the two newest books Grantaire had thrown together since the last time he’d swung by Staples to print up his comics, but he refused to take his friend’s money.

“Dude, I’m not charging you guys. The only reason Bahorel paid for a t-shirt last night was because Enjolras handled it.”

“You have shirts now? I want a shirt!” Joly said, surprising Grantaire with his enthusiasm.

“Wait for Enjolras,” Legle said. “He’ll actually take our money.”

Grantaire grumbled something about how he was trying to be a good friend, and Joly gave him a condescending head-pat.

Legle started flipping through the new issue. “Y’know, you should really post these online as you finish ’em. I’ve been dying to see the new one, and waiting for you to get your shit together enough to print it up sucked.”

Grantaire quirked an eyebrow. “You don’t have to humor me.”

“No, really dude. I like your book. Besides, I was curious about how you and Enjolras dating would affect the story.”

Grantaire looked at him blankly, and Legle started laughing. “Wait, did you not notice that the book is autobiographical? Oh man, that’s too funny. Grantaire, you’re the main characters, you and Enjolras.”

Grantaire snatched a copy of one of his comics and studied his characters. Being art focused, he only looked at the characters’ physical appearances, and as they were abstracted humanoid figures of solid colors in most panels, he saw nothing of him and his lover in the protagonists. “I don’t see it.”

Legle shook his head. “Wow.” He flipped through the book until he found a splash page where the main characters, Red and Black, were rendered in detail instead of super deformed cartoon style. “You’re Black, and Enjolras is Red.”
In this particular splash they were sitting on a crumbling brick wall out in a field. Red, an androgynous and beautiful figure with sinuously twisted flames for hair, was the focal point of the composition. Grantaire had drawn him in the middle of a rant, so he was gesturing excitedly with his hands, and his eyes were gazing off into the distance, caught up in some idealized fantasy for the future.

Black, on the other hand, was off to the side and lower than Red as his section of the wall was particulary decrepit. His hair resembled storm clouds. He looked shriveled and gaunt, like one good push would send him to the ground. The only strength in him shone in his eyes, which were trained on his companion with a sickeningly familiar naked longing that Grantaire was surprised he’d never recognized in the figure before.

He grabbed the book from Legle and flipped through to all the other pages where Red and Black were depicted in detail, and once he’d analyzed those pictures he started investigating his merchandise. “Huh. I never noticed.”

“Grantaire, you’ve transcribed entire conversations you and Enjolras have had at the Musain into these books,” Joly pointed out.

Grantaire blinked a few times, then started looking through the comics again. “Holy shit.”

Legle had another laugh at his friend’s expense, then he started gathering up all the merchandise he planned on buying. He set aside the two newest comics, a refrigerator magnet, two pins, and a t-shirt for Joly.

“Guys, that’s way more than you want to spend,” Grantaire said, starting to feel uncomfortable.

“Oh, get that print too! He has fan art of the Power Rangers and this is my first cosplay,” Joly said, completely ignoring Grantaire.

“Kay. We want that print of the Power Rangers fighting Rita with Play-Do too.”

“Guys, you’re spending like sixty bucks.”

“Yeah. We brought money for the con, dude. That still leaves us with enough money to get something signed by Billy West,” Legle assured him. “We’re probably gonna skip Fili and Kili though. Those guys are expensive.”

“Well they can get away with it right now,” Joly said with a shrug. “Grantaire, you said it was sixty?” He reached for his wallet, but Legle smacked his hand away.

Grantaire was feeling exceptionally uncomfortable about taking that much money from his friends, and was trying to stutter out another refusal, when a strange hand shot out and snatched Legle’s money. Grantaire watched in some surprise as a stranger doing an Emma Frost cosplay sauntered behind the table for the cash box and made change for Legle and Joly.

“Actually, the total was fifty eight.” The cosplayer handed Legle two singles, and Grantaire almost had a heart attack when he realized it was Enjolras.

“You-You’re…huh?”

It was a damn good cosplay, but then, it was one of Bahorel’s so that was to be expected. What wasn’t to be expected was seeing Enjolras walking around in public in such an overtly sexual outfit. The costume was based on the Frank Quitely design, which entailed plasticy white hot pants, a downward pointing collar, and two flimsy triangles over the chest, forming an X with Enjolras’
revealed skin. Emma Frost had rather sizable breasts that were just barely covered by the skimpy bits of fabric in this outfit, but Enjolras had refrained from faking any imitation of female anatomy. Somehow the costume was even more erotic for his obvious maleness.

To finish off, he had fingerless white elbow gloves, thigh high hooker boots, and an elaborate hair and makeup job. Bahorel had straightened his hair, which was part of the reason Grantaire hadn’t recognized his lover right away. His lips had been coated in some kind of stain or gloss or something so that they were pearly white and wet looking, which was also all kinds of indecent…and yeah, Grantaire was going to have to sit down with a drawing pad over his lap for a little while.

A faint blush tinged Enjolras’ cheeks when he noticed the way Grantaire was looking at him, momentarily killing his characterization of Emma Frost. Otherwise, he was quite good at approximating her cold sass.

Legle let out a low whistle. “Nicely done, Enjolras. You’ve just made our cosplays look even lamer than they already were.”

“Bahorel did all the work. He’s on his way out too, if you wanted to stick around. He was just having some issues with his wig.” Enjolras turned to Grantaire, and Grantaire flung himself into his seat and reached for his sketch pad.

Grabbing the sexy cosplayer and throwing him down on the table to debauch him would probably give them a lot of attention, but that wouldn’t necessarily translate into sales. He was best off controlling those urges.

“You didn’t sell a single thing while I was gone, did you?” Enjolras asked accusingly.

“I did. I sold sixty dollars worth of shit to Joly and Bossuet.”

“No, I did. When I walked over here you were trying not to take their money.” He turned over to their friends, who were giggling at the exchange. “By the way, thanks for buying so much stuff despite him. I, for one, really appreciate it.”

“Not a problem, Enj. I really and truly have been dying to read these comic books. I think I might have been Grantaire’s first fan,” Legle said.

“Naw, Courfeyrac gets that distinction,” Grantaire mumbled. He reached for a pencil and dropped his eyes to the sketchpad, very uncomfortable with a conversation about his talents, even more uncomfortable having it when his lover was walking around like a kinky nerd fantasy, and wanting to get that kinky nerd fantasy immortalized on paper before Enjolras returned to his senses and put on characteristically modest clothing.

They saw Bahorel coming well before he was able to squeeze his way to the table. He was dressed as the Dark Phoenix, complete with contacts that whited out his eyes. His entire outfit was hand-sewn, and he was quick to point out the ways in which it was more accurate to the source material than the store bought Phoenix costumes several women were wearing.

His wig was also phenomenal. It was thick and fire engine red, and definitely brought destructive flames to mind.

Bahorel cleaned a small bit of space on the table, hopped up, and struck a seductive pose. “Hey dude. How goes the selling?”

“Uh…it goes.” Grantaire blinked a few times, then started up a mental mantra for his sanity. ‘Don’t-ask-him-how-he-did-the-boobs-don’t-ask-him-how-he-did-the-boobs-don’t-ask-him-how-he-did-the-
When Bahorel hopped back down from the table and sauntered behind it to look through some of the prints, Grantaire had to modify his mantra to include Bahorel’s ass. He had to be padding back there. There was no way Bahorel’s actual ass looked that perky and round.

“Wow…guys look at the rule sixty three Emma Frost!” An excited trio of X-Men cosplayers, including a Gambit, a Rogue, and a Wolverine, asked for a picture. Enjolras posed with them, chatted for a few minutes, and each of them left with a copy of Grantaire’s first comic book and prints of his X-Men fan art.

Then Bahorel started flirting with potential customers, sold a couple of t-shirts, and Grantaire realized that he had booth babes.

No…Enjolras would never…he probably just thought wearing a costume would be appropriate, and then all Bahorel would have would be sexy ones, so he wasn’t doing it on purpose…

And then Enjolras tossed his hair over his shoulder and threw Grantaire a smoldering smirk before turning back to some teenagers he’d been talking to. “He’s been drawing for years. His art really is incredible, and clever to boot. There are prints based on a variety of fandoms, if you wanted to look through the portfolio.”

Yeah, he was doing it on purpose.

Grantaire choked back a laugh when he pictured Eponine’s reaction.

The first day of comic con was exhausting. Grantaire never would have gotten through it without all of his friends, something he was very much aware of and completely thankful for. Enjolras and Bahorel had to be wiped too, considering all the selling they did and the fact that they couldn’t seem to go more than five minutes without being approached for a picture.

Bahorel kept wandering off for short periods to enjoy the con and do a little shopping, but Enjolras generally remained by Grantaire’s side. The only thing that successfully tempted him away was a pair of girls with a camera doing interviews about sexism in the cosplay community. When Enjolras saw a sign reading ‘Cosplay does not equal Consent’ his interest pretty obviously wandered, and Grantaire shooed him away to go talk social politics. Other than that though, he even forgot to eat. Grantaire waved Joly down and gave him some cash to go get snacks and coffee for them about halfway through the day.

Enjolras started showing some signs of strain around six o’clock. He looked tired, and he was sitting down more. “I think I might go get changed. These shoes are killing me, and the shorts keep riding up.”

Grantaire let out a little whimper before he got his voice to work properly. “Are you sure you couldn’t wear the costume for just…a bit longer? Like, just until we can have a minute in priva-ow!”

Bahorel’s whap across the back of his head was way harder than it needed to be. “Dude, that’s a borrowed costume. You guys are not fucking around in my clothes, you got that?”

Enjolras considered Grantaire’s crestfallen expression, then cast a glance at their very full cashbox. “How much would a costume like this cost?”

“Hm…I got a deal on the boots, and there’s no wig so-no! Enjolras, you can’t have my costume,” Bahorel snapped. “I use those boots for my Mystique too. And the elbow gloves for Ice. Just no.
You’re *borrowing* it. Besides, you know he’s gonna get all hot and bothered for tomorrow’s costume too. You’re not allowed to spend all your profits buying up my cosplays.”

“Fine.” Enjolras crossed his arms huffily over his chest.

Meanwhile, Grantaire was seriously considering getting on ebay and price scouting for Emma Frost costumes.

Enjolras left to get changed, and Grantaire finished off his last commission of the day. As they broke down the table, Grantaire couldn’t help but wonder what tomorrow’s costume was going to be.

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The next costume was Black Canary. Grantaire already knew from personal experience how amazing Enjolras’ legs looked in fishnets, but the heeled boots and the skimpy leotard did something incredible to Enjolras’ ass. He’d never seen it look so perky before.

“Grantaire, will you please stop ogling me and work on your commissions?”

“Will you stop bending over the table like that then? You’re really distracting.”

Enjolras rolled his eyes, but he straightened his posture. After Grantaire finished the line work on the commission he walked over to Enjolras and leaned over to whisper in his ear. “I don’t care what promises you made to Bahorel about his costumes. I say today we get someone to watch the table for a few minutes and sneak over to the bathroom together.”

Enjolras turned around and pressed up against him indecently. He teasingly ran his fingers through Grantaire’s hair and leaned close to also whisper seductively in his ear. “I still draw the line at public bathroom sex.”

The noise Grantaire made in response to that was embarrassing, to say the least, and drew more than a few stares their way. “You are such a god damn tease.”

“Oh come on, ‘Taire. Do you know how many children are here today? Children do use the bathroom. Besides, it’s not like we don’t already have fishnets and heels at home. That other costume though…the one from yesterday. I’d like to try that one out. From what I understand, it would be in character for me to be…firm with you.”

Grantaire sat down in his folding chair and put his sweatshirt and his sketchpad over his crotch. “Well I’m not standing up again anytime soon.”

Enjolras laughed, then got pulled away to take a picture with a Batgirl cosplayer.

Bahorel joined them on and off throughout the day, this time as Wonder Woman, but generally he was there to join in on convention antics. He had lunch with some of his cosplay buddies and was missing for a good chunk of the day so he could participate in the costume contest.

Grantaire took a brief break from working his table to get his Ren and Stimpy card signed (one of the highlights of his life-Billy West did voices while he signed the autographs!), and then he hit up Mike Mignola’s table, Neal Adams’, George Perez’s, Don Rosa’s, Tim Sale’s, and he bought a few prints from some of the other smaller artists.

When he got back to the table he found Eponine having a hissy fit. “So you’ll prance around here in fishnets and hooker heels but I can’t get you to call a few girls ‘sweetheart?’ Enjolras, what the actual fuck?”
“What does that even mean?” Enjolras asked irritably. “Are there some non-actual fucks someone can give?”

“Don’t change the subject! You’ve accused me of being a pimp, but here you are actually whoring yourself out for Grantaire. This, right here, is disgusting.”

“Eponine, it’s a costume. It’s what people do at these things.”

“And lighthearted flirtation is what baristas do at coffee shops. I can’t believe you. Also, Bahorel mislead you if you think all cosplay costumes are that over-sexed.”

“He’s not over-sexed,” Grantaire snapped, amusement giving way to actual anger, as Enjolras was starting to look unsure of himself and a bit embarrassed. “He just looks like Black Canary. This is the result of having your costume done by a drag queen, Eponine. He’s only got girl costumes available and this is the state of the industry right now. Superhero chicks dress in skimpy outfits. But Black Canary and Emma Frost are usually empowered while they do it. Maybe Black Canary wasn’t always empowered, but she’s been pretty well defined by Gail Simone in recent years and, well, Gail fucking Simone. I rest my case. Canary and Emma Frost own their sexuality instead of merely being acted on by male characters, or creators for that matter. You don’t know what you’re fucking talking about, so calm it the eff down and leave him alone. Also, your Princess Leia sucks. Seriously, before you start criticizing someone else, at least come up with something better than a white nightgown and two side-buns.”

“Grantaire-” Eponine started, but he wasn’t done.

“And don’t you fucking get on his back for supporting me. Okay? He’s doing this for me, not because he’s magically become comfortable prancing around in skimpy clothes and wants this kind of attention. He’s going outside his comfort zone to try to adopt the norms of a really fucking different environment, and that’s for me and it has nothing to do with you so take your bad attitude and get lost.”

Eponine bit her lip, and for one horrible second Grantaire thought he glimpsed tears in her eyes. “Fine! I just don’t understand feminine sexuality, okay? I don’t get the difference between empowered and exploited. Everyone make fun of the stupid little ditz who went and got herself exploited, I guess, for protection and now she doesn’t know what healthy people do! Go ahead! Rip me to shreds. You assholes suck.” She turned on her heel and stomped back into the crowd.

More than a few people were staring at them. Grantaire was shaking.

And then Enjolras was there, guiding him into a seat and rubbing his shoulders. “I don’t think that blow up had anything to do with us, really. Just calm down, ‘Taire. We can talk to Eponine later and smooth it out.”

“Uh…uh huh.” Shit. “Um…s-sorry. I don’t even know where any of that came from.”

Enjolras tenderly stroked the side of Grantaire’s face, pushing a strand of unruly hair behind his ear. “Don’t apologize. I’m really glad you stuck up for me, ‘Taire. I’ve never been in a situation like this before, but I’m pretty sure Eponine was trying to slut-shame me. That was interesting…I think that might have been your first productive social activist rant.”

Grantaire thought back on what he’d been saying. He realized he’d participated in a dialogue (if a bit too heatedly to be entirely appropriate for a social activist) related to feminism, and he’d done so constructively instead of cynically. He glanced up at Enjolras, with a façade of troubled bafflement. “What are you doing to me?”
Enjolras laughed. “Don’t worry, I won’t ask you to write any blog posts or run group talks on feminine sexuality. Though doing it from the pop culture perspective of superheroes, considering the movies that are being made right now, might be a really good angle to attack…”

Grantaire groaned and sank down in his seat. He decided to see if he could hunt up some Gail Simone trades for Enjolras though. He’d probably really like her work.

Feuilly was in the bathroom with Gavroche and Little R when Eponine and Grantaire had their confrontation. He got tipped off by a text from Bahorel and, scowling, he wrangled the boys and went over to Grantaire’s table.

“Where’d my girlfriend go?”

Grantaire was back to sketching. He glanced up at Feuilly, features hardening in a very specific way that indicated he already felt like a douchebag, and then looked down at his artwork.

Enjolras was sitting on the edge of the table with his legs crossed, and Feuilly couldn’t say he blamed him. It clearly wasn’t for the seductiveness of the pose; those heels must have been a nightmare, and there was no way Enjolras was used to walking around in them for lengthy stretches. “She just sort of ran off after the fight. I think she went for the doorway though.”

“She might be upstairs. There’s a walkway outside. A bunch of people have been going up there for breaks from the crowds, or photo shoots or something,” Bahorel offered.

“Kay. Can you guys look after the boys while I go talk to her?”

“Sure.”

Gavroche scowled. “I don’t need to be looked after. Starting next month I’ll be a sixth grader. That’s middle school.”

“So does that mean you guys don’t want to go to the Newbury Comics table and pick out souvenirs with me?” Bahorel asked.

“That is not at all what I said. Lead the way, o mighty Amazon.”

Bahorel lifted up Little R, who was dressed in a store bought Robin costume that Bahorel had modified for him. Gavroche, rather fittingly, was dressed as the Red Hood. Bahorel had made a crack earlier in the day that Gavroche should do that again next year, and he’d be Nightwing and Little R could be Tim Drake (because he was much too nice to be Damian Wayne).

The little clique of DC characters moved away, and Feuilly started shifting from foot to foot. “I guess I’d better start looking for her.”

“Feuilly, will you apologize for us?” Enjolras asked. “We didn’t mean to upset her.”

Feuilly nodded. “Sure. What the hell happened anyway?” Enjolras gave him a quick summary of the fight, turning ridiculously giddy when he got to Grantaire’s rant on feminine empowerment in sexual expression, but ending with remorse for Eponine feeling ganged up on and attacked for her past.

“Ah. So essentially you guys didn’t really do anything wrong. It’s my fault. We should have addressed this already, we’ve just been so busy and I’m still not sure what to say.”

“What happened?” Enjolras asked.
“I, well…when we tried to…to have sex…” He leaned closer, not wanting any of the many passersby to hear what they were saying. “She, uh, she tried to do stuff that…well, Enj you know me. I’ve never been very good at dating. I’ve only been with three girls and everything I’ve done’s been traditional and boring. And nothing that she’s done has been anything like that. I’m, um, I’m not going to go into detail, but…we’re having some issues there. I dunno. I think we just rushed into making the relationship sexual.”

“That appears to be the case. Well, good luck. I’m sorry if we made anything worse.”

Feuilly nodded distantly, then went off to search for Eponine. He didn’t find her in the main lobby, but it was quieter enough out there that he could use his phone.

She was indeed on the upper level that Bahorel had mentioned. Feuilly found her sitting in a corner with her side-buns taken down, combing through her hair with her fingers. He sat down next to her and stowed his phone back in his pocket. “I know the cosplays were lazy and last minute, but I kind of liked being your Han Solo.” He was wearing black jeans and a white t-shirt with a vest he’d borrowed from Enjolras and a toy gun belt Gavroche supplied for him.

Eponine smiled sadly and leaned against him. “I feel like such a bitch. I just lost my shit on Enjolras and Grantaire for no real reason, and I was doing it in front of kids. Do you know how many kids are down there today?”

“Yeah, there certainly are a lot. Little R took a picture with the most charming Merida cosplayer. I think he’s half convinced he met the real Merida.”

“Babe, I’m a miserable friend. I’m too screwed up to be a good person. You should take this opportunity to run far, far away.”

Feuilly kissed the top of her head. “Nope,” he said simply.

“No flashy speech to work on my damaged self-esteem?”

“You don’t need one. You’re already taking care of that yourself, and you’re doing a great job without my interference. Eponine, you know how strong you are, which is by the way one of my favorite things about you. And don’t worry about the sex issues. We’ll tackle that too. In the meantime, I’m plenty patient. I’m actually rather used to lengthy dry spells, and this time at least there are cuddles.”

“You know, that is something I don’t get,” Eponine said, sitting up a little. “You’re nice, and sane, and responsible and fucking drop dead sexy. How the hell have you had problems getting laid?”

Feuilly was pretty sure his face was turning red. He wasn’t sure about the drop dead sexy part, but he did rather like his personality. “Uh…I think working myself to death kind of got in the way of meeting people. You know, then there’s the really demanding group of friends.”

“Yeah, no wonder everyone’s dating within the group. Having friends this demanding on your free time is like the ultimate cock block.”

“Do you feel better?”

“I do.” Eponine kissed his cheek. “Who did you leave the boys with?”

“Bahorel. He’s bribing them at the Newbury Comics table. It’s been awhile since I’ve seen Azelma though.”
“Last I saw, she was with Courfeyrac and Musichetta. She’s trying to say her complete lack of costume is her being Gwen Stacy. Because if a blonde girl walks around with Spider Man…”

Feuilly laughed. “Did Courf tell you why he was cosplaying Spider Man?” She shook her head. “Because most of his costumes are uncomfortably warm for August, but since he’s got the messy brown hair he can drop his cowl whenever he overheats and still look like Peter Parker.”

“Brilliant. We should…we should take a picture and send it to my other brother.”

Feuilly gave her shoulder a squeeze. “We should. Let’s go find the boys and do that.”

“Can you help me fix my hair first?” Eponine laughed when she caught the frightened look on his face. “Never mind. Let’s go find Bahorel and make him do it.”

Chapter End Notes

In essence, Comic Con was FABULOUS. Attendance was way, way up, the new venue worked really well, and the cosplays and shopping were fantastic. The Merida I mentioned was one of my friends. Walking around with her on Sunday was like asking to die of cuteness overload. Her costume is spot-on, she’s starting to do the accent, and she’s a kindergarten teacher so she’s just amazing with kids. Every minute or so, a shy little girl or boy would walk up to her with an adult encouraging them and they’d stutter out a request for a picture. On Saturday we did a group Birds of Prey that got tweeted to Gail Simone, which was also rad. So yeah, if you’re ever in the Boston area, we throw a good geek party :)}
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

Some character development for Azelma.

And a bit more for Combeferre as well.

Chapter Notes

Okay guys, the last time I tried to touch on the subject of rape culture my big fat mouth got me in some trouble. I'm trying again here, and again I'm being a bit provocative in an attempt to stimulate thought and what I feel to be necessary discussion. But I also don't want to cause any undue emotional duress or get myself cyber-bullied again, so consider yourselves warned. This chapter gets a bit heavy at the end. Also, just because one of the characters says something it does not mean they're espousing my personal views (though oftentimes throughout this fic they very much have been)

Also, wow character developments for Azelma! Seriously, I didn't expect most of what she does in this chapter, even though it all totally works with what I've been planning for her.

And please don't panic about Joly and Bossuet's wedding. I'm going to write it out and show it "on-screen", as it were, but I thought in fairness to the two of them that I'd be best off writing it as a one-shot. That way they get to have the spotlight all to themselves for however many chapters the wedding ends up needing.

Combeferre and Gerard skipped out on comic con due to lack of interest (Gerard) and the Newport Jazz Festival (Combeferre) respectively. On Saturday night they were both still out when Grantaire and Enjolras trudged in, but they were in the living room splitting a pizza on Sunday.

Gerard’s eyebrows shot up and his face turned red when he saw Enjolras walk through the room in partial-Canary garb. He’d switched out the hooker heels for a pair of sneakers and he’d thrown on a pair of cargo shorts, but he was still wearing the fishnets, the leotard, the flirty half-jacket, and he was wearing some pretty substantial makeup.

“What were you guys…I thought this was a comic book thing?”

“It is. People dress up like the characters,” Combeferre said.

“Dude, how do you not know how cons work?” Grantaire asked.

Enjolras power walked through the room on his way to the bathroom. “I’m taking a shower. If anyone needs to use the toilet they’re going to have to hold it.” He slammed the door shut behind him, and a moment later the pipes rattled as the water turned on.
Grantaire rolled his eyes, then went to their bedroom to grab some comfy clothes for Enjolras to change into. He dropped them on the closed toilet lid, then stalked back into the living room and flopped onto the couch. “For the record kid, Eponine already said some nasty things about how Enjolras was dressed—”

“Hey, I meant no harm! I just, I mean, that’s the shit you guys wear for your kink, so…I was confused.”

Combeferre rubbed at his eyes. “You promised you wouldn’t bring that up.”

“I didn’t mean to, but I also didn’t expect to see Enjolras in fishnets either. By the way, he has freakishly nice legs for a dude.”

“You should have seen the outfit without the cargo shorts. I don’t know if Bahorel, like, taped his ass cheeks or something—” Grantaire cut himself off as Combeferre made an odd strangled sound that definitely indicated discomfort with the conversation. “Uh, so anyway, comic con went really well.”

“Except for an issue with Eponine?” Combeferre prodded, looking concerned.

“I don’t wanna get into that again. She just, she had some issues with Enjolras being a booth babe for me when she’s been trying to make him flirt with the customers for weeks and he refuses to on principle. She thought he was being a hypocrite, and she got nasty about it.”

“Ah. But other than that, you guys had a good time?”

Grantaire reached into his bag and pulled out his signed Ren and Stimpy card. “Yeah, it was fucking great. Saw a lot of costumes, sold a bunch of shit, handed out almost all of those business cards… ooh. I should check how many likes I’m up to on facebook. Can I borrow your laptop?”

“Of course. And help yourself to the pizza.”

“Thanks.” Grantaire took the laptop first, signed in, and let out a loud squeak when he saw how many friend requests he had. “Dude! Forty people want to friend me. I got like twenty yesterday. Holy shit.”

“Well friend them,” Combeferre said with a smirk. “By the way, I signed on for you a few times throughout the day and added some pics that Courfeyrac texted me. You’ve actually had another, like, fifteen or so friends added already.”

“Oh my fucking god. Someone messaged me for a commission. Holy shit. People took pics in front of the table and they’re tagging me in them.”

Gerard leaned over Grantaire’s shoulder to look at the pictures. “Damn. Who’s that hottie with the red hair?”

“That’s a wig, and that’s our friend Bahorel.”

“Oh. I was hoping it was that Azelma chick you’re setting me up with. Well that girl’s really hot too. Is she single?”

Combeferre snorted. “He’s single if you’re that interested.”

“That’s a dude?! Sick…I mean that in a good way though. Like, not like…damn. How’d he do the boobs?”
“I went to great lengths not to ask him about that.”

“Holy fuck, is that Enjolras? Damn…even without boobs he looks hot. Oh shit, don’t tell him I said that.”

Grantaire got a little uncomfortable with the way Gerard was staring at the picture of Enjolras in the Emma Frost costume (not that he blamed him), so he exed out of that picture and went back to checking his messages and notifications. There was a ridiculous amount of interest in his artwork, and not just the fan art. People were asking questions about his comic. “Guys, five different people asked when the next issue of Red and Black is coming out. Another guy wants me to make it a web comic.”

“You should make it a web comic,” Combeferre said, sounding almost bored as he said it, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Grantaire frowned. “I’m thinking about it. But I don’t have a scanner, and really I’d be better off with a tablet anyway. I’m already pretty decent at digital art from some classes I took.”

“So use some of your convention profits to invest in the equipment you need to improve your product. Grantaire, this can be your business. It’s making you money. Really, it’s okay to buy the tools you need.”

Grantaire chewed his lip, and threw Combeferre a sideways look. “Spending money on my art stuff always feels so damn frivolous. Besides, we’re in debt.”

“Talk to Enjolras about it, but I think you should go for it.”

Grantaire wrote a little response about how he didn’t have the equipment for a web comic just yet, and not five seconds later there was a reply suggesting he do a kickstarter. He laughed and shook his head. “Guys, some random dude thinks I should do a kickstart…wait, people are liking his comment. Three people just liked his comment and some chick in Connecticut offered to toss fifty bucks in the pot.”

Gerard looked intrigued. “So what is this comic book thing you’re selling anyway? What’s it about?”

“According to Bossuet it’s about me and Enjolras, but really it’s just these two characters I started doodling in the margins of my notebooks when I got bored during lectures. They make fun of philosophers and historians and stuff and rub each other the wrong way. It’s not really anything special, but I guess I hit some kind of chord with…okay, that chick from Connecticut is sending me links about scanners and tablets she particularly likes, and she found me some online coupon codes.”

“That’s a hint, Grantaire, and not a particularly subtle one,” Combeferre said with a smirk.

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

Azelma agreed to the date, but immediately after doing so she became moody and quiet, even by her standards. After dinner was finished, she shut herself in her and Eponine’s room and wouldn’t acknowledge anyone.

After a half hour Feuilly walked in and tapped her on the shoulder. She took her headphones off without turning the music off, and he was pretty sure he caught the distinctive vocals of Sam Cooke, which didn’t strike him as a particularly Azelma-ish choice.

Great. She was listening to her creeper Pandora station again. Feuilly didn’t consider that a great
“Zelma, I need to give Eponine a ride to work. Can you keep an ear on your brothers for me?”

“Can’t she just borrow your car?”

“She could, but we’d prefer to keep it here in case anything happens and we need to run out, say, to the hospital or to hunt for Gavroche…”

Azéma sighed and got up. “Fine. But you know, Gav is almost eleven. He’s perfectly capable of watching Little R on his own.” She stomped out to the living room and huffily flung herself down on the couch.

The boys were sitting on the carpet in front of her with a plate of apple slices and some juice boxes. Combeferre had recently gifted his collection of Magic cards to Gavroche, so he was trying to teach his brother how to play. Feuilly wasn’t sure the four year old was going to be able to pick it up, but he hoped the kid managed. Gavroche really wanted an opponent he lived with, and Feuilly wasn’t emotionally prepared to sink into that habit again.

“Be good for your sister,” Feuilly instructed. Gavroche rolled his eyes, but Little R meekly promised that he would.

They were quiet for most of the drive to the café. Feuilly put on the radio and sang softly under his breath, and Eponine watched him with a peculiar expression on her pretty face. It wasn’t anything bad, just unusually contemplative, and far more open than he was used to seeing her.

She leaned in for a goodbye kiss, but then she hesitated and didn’t get out of the car. “Okay, so is it just me or do even the kisses feel weird now?”

Feuilly sighed. “Look, clearly there’s still a lot to talk about here, but I don’t think now is the best time. You’ve got a coworker waiting for you in there.”

“Well fucking when, Feuilly? We’re always going to be crazy busy. I can be five minutes late for a shift. It’s Marius closing with me tonight.”

Feuilly shut the car off and turned in his seat towards her. “Okay.”

“So…uh…how the fuck do we fix this?”

“Patience, I think.”

“Patience?” Eponine shook her head. “I really don’t see how that will help. I mean, we’ve been doing the whole not having sex thing up until now, and then we tried having sex and it was pretty much the worst thing ever, so I don’t see how more nothing will fix that.”

Feuilly knew the words weren’t meant in the spirit he was taking them, but it still made him cringe, hearing their disastrous attempt at physical intimacy referred to as ‘the worst thing ever.’ “I’m really sorry, Eponine.”

“What? Why are you apologizing? I’m the fucked up one. Seriously, everything you wanted to do was normal.”

“I’d call it bland, actually.” Feuilly felt his face heat up. “I’m not…not really that experienced.”

“Well my experiences are fucking abysmal, so I’m happy to trade. Seriously, I think this is worth
working on.” She grabbed his hand and squeezed it tightly. “I want to feel comfortable touching you. I don’t want this to turn into a big thing. So can you please keep trying? Please? And just, don’t freak out if I…say something weird. I honestly don’t know what I’m doing yet, but I want you to teach me how you do it. I like the way you make me feel.”

“You really trust me that much?”

Her face lit up. “That’s exactly what it is. I trust you.”

He smiled, some of the tension the conversation had stirred loosening at her words. It was such a rare thing to see Eponine Thenardier like this, unguarded, candid. Feuilly treasured it. “I won’t disappoint you.”

“Cool. So instead of total abstinence while we’re being patient, can we start it slow?”

“What’s your idea of slow?” Feuilly asked. He was thinking they could go back to kissing. Eponine suggested oral. Because apparently they weren’t on the same page about anything. But when he pitched his version of slow, Eponine happily agreed and enthused about cuddling on the sofa during movie nights and other physical shows of affection she deemed safe.

She had a bounce in her step when she walked into the café, and for the first time since their disastrous date Feuilly started to feel really good about his relationship. He’d worried she might run away the first time things got difficult, but apparently he hadn’t scared her off. She didn’t want to stick him back in the Friend Zone.

Thank everything holy and decent, because he was pretty sure he couldn’t go back to being just friends with Eponine now that he’d gotten a taste of intimate acquaintance with her fire and passion. If he had anything to say about it, they were going to be together for a very long time.

Despite her gloomy mood, Azelma managed to have her brothers in pajamas with brushed teeth and hair by the time Feuilly got home. For all her bratty words and rolled eyes and haughty sniffs, she really was invested in the little family. It only came out from time to time in subtle ways, but whenever her concern reared its head it was very much appreciated.

Feuilly wasn’t sure how to show that appreciation without spooking her though.

They watched a few episodes from a Batman DVD Bahorel had loaned the boys (“Loaned. Loaned. I expect this back, and if there’s a single scratch you’re buying me a new one, and-” “Okay, dude, I get it.” “I’m not like Combeferre. You take my shit for the kids and I get it back.” “Okay.”) then Feuilly carried a zonked out Little R to his bed.

He searched Gavroche’s bed for adult comic books and flashlights, turning up two more issues of the Goon, a superhero book called the X-Statix, and the first issue of Red and Black. He tucked the professional comics under his arm, but he stuck Red and Black back under Gavroche’s pillow and left him a flashlight.

Azelma was flicking through channels when he got back to the living room. “Hey.”

“Hey. Feeling any better?”

Azelma shrugged. “Not really.”

“Wanna talk?”
“Not really.”

“Is it okay if I talk just a little?”

She turned the TV off and gave another listless shrug.

“Azelma, you don’t have to go on this date if you don’t want to.”

“I know that, Feuilly.” She rolled her eyes. “God, I get that no one’s forcing me to go.”

“Well, it looks like you don’t want to.” Unless he was completely misreading the kid, it was pretty obvious what had tanked her mood for the night.

“Everyone wants me to. So I might as well meet this kid. I mean, it’s not his fault the guy I like thinks I’m like, a baby or something. For all I know Gerard’s a cool kid. I mean, it’s not fucking likely. I never get along with guys my age, but, y’know…apparently I’m not interesting enough for older guys.”

“Azelma, that’s totally not it,” Feuilly said, upset but at least starting to see why she was in such a pissy mood. “You’re a great kid, but there’s an age difference-”

“It’s the same age difference as the one between you and Eponine.”

Feuilly blinked a few times and shook his head. “No it’s not.”

“I’m less than a year younger than Eponine and you’re Bossuet’s age, aren’t you?”

Feuilly frowned as he thought that over. Combeferre was actually one of the younger guys in the group. Joly and Marius were the youngest, but Combeferre and Enjolras were barely twenty three. Actually, Enjolras might still have been twenty two…

“Eponine’s eighteen though.” It sounded weak, even to him.

“She wasn’t when she fucked around with Courfeyrac.”

And Feuilly had completely forgotten about…

Wait. That’s right. She’d had consensual sex with Courfeyrac, and he most definitely would not have been into the weird ass shit that Eponine had been misled into thinking standard. Feuilly’s throat constricted as the full impact of that realization hit him. The girl he loved couldn’t sleep with him, but she’d had meaningless sex with one of his friends.

Not even completely meaningless, because she’d tried to date him shortly thereafter.

“Feuilly, are you okay?” Azelma asked.

“Yeah.” He gave himself a little shake. He’d think that one through later. “Yeah, I’m fine. Um, but…you know what, you’ve made some fair points. I was just trying to get at that whole you’re not interesting thing. Whatever Combeferre’s hang up about dating you is, it’s not that there’s something inherently wrong with you. He likes you as a person, doesn’t he? You guys hang out really comfortably. I’m pretty sure he likes you as a friend. And that could always turn into something later on, y’know? So if you’re actually not interested in his little brother-”

“Don’t force it,” Azelma said with a nod. “You’re right. And, um…since I stopped doing kind of stupid shit to get Combeferre’s attention, but just started talking to him…it’s gotten kinda nice. Just hanging out, I mean. I like talking about music with him.”
“Yeah?” So it wasn’t just a creeper thing?

Azelma smiled, and it had been so long since Feuilly had seen an expression like that from her that he’d almost forgotten what it looked like. “Yeah. He’s turned me onto some really cool bands. Like, I always thought jazz was old people stuff, but I’m really digging it. I made this Pandora station out of all these bands he recommended to me, and he filled up a flash drive for me so I have a bunch of really chill music to listen to when I feel overwhelmed. Seriously, I love it. I wanted to go to the Newport Jazz Festival with him and his friends this weekend, but the boys wanted me to go to Comic Con instead, so I couldn’t. It kind of sucked.”

“Wait, who did Combeferre go to the Newport Jazz Festival with?” As far as Feuilly had known, all of Combeferre’s friends had been at Comic Con. But that wasn’t the kind of thing you went to alone either. He really should have expected that.

“He went with Jehan and his new clique. He…didn’t tell you guys?”

Feuilly shook his head. “Jehan has a new clique?”

“Yeah. He’s been hanging with his boyfriend’s friends. I think that’s why we’re not seeing much of him anymore. If I were you guys, I’d get on that. You don’t want to lose a buddy just because of the drama with Courf, right?”

Feuilly grimly nodded, and to keep the disquiet he felt from showing he started asking Azelma questions about those new bands she’d gotten into.

Eponine was never going to believe him when he told her the full story behind the “creeper” Pandora station that had actually been made in full sincerity. Hell, he almost didn’t believe it himself.

Despite her continued feelings for Combeferre (feelings Feuilly at least was starting to regard with a little more weight) Azelma still decided to go on the date with Gerard. She was interested in meeting him, and thought one date couldn’t hurt.

Accordingly, Friday night Eponine helped her little sister get ready for her night out. She teased her straw blond hair into a reasonably cute style, helped her select an outfit that was flattering and almost Cosette-level classy, and loaned her her good lip gloss.

She only brought up safe sex eight times, and it took Azelma half the night to find the condoms stashed in her purse, which was better than she expected. Overall, Azelma appreciated her sister’s restraint.

Gerard was supposed to pick her up at seven thirty. She got a text from Combeferre at seven forty five that said they were on their way.

“They?” Eponine repeated.

Azelma shrugged. “I guess he’ll explain when they get here.”

Eponine made a half-hearted attempt to get Gavroche and Little R to play in their room, but by this point they’d overheard enough to be curious and just plain weren’t having it. Little R stationed himself in the part of the living room with the best view of the front door and set up some coloring supplies, and Gavroche pretended he cared about coloring enough to join him.

Combeferre knocked on the door just after eight o’clock. Feuilly let him in, and frowned when he assessed that Combeferre was not, in fact, his little brother. “Where’s Gerard?”
“In the front seat,” Combeferre said with a scowl. “That little shit didn’t make his own transportation arrangements, so he asked me at the last possible minute if he could use my car. It’s my turn to get Enjolras and Marius from Brammer Street though, so I’m very sorry,” here he turned to Azelma, “but I’m afraid I’m going to have to drop you guys off for your date and pick you up when you’re done. If I’d known he was planning to use my car I’d have helped Enjolras and Marius make other arrangements, but since he didn’t talk to me…”

“It’s okay,” Azelma said quickly. “But um…why didn’t Gerard come to the door?”

“Because chicks take forever when you pick them up,” Combeferre said, doing a pretty decent imitation of an ignorant teenager. Azelma was starting to regret her decision. “He’s listening to the radio.”

“Ah. Um, well I am ready to go, so…” She turned to her apprehensive looking sister and roommate. “Bye guys.”

“Bye. Well this is fucking weird. Combeferre, make sure she’s back by eleven. That’s her curfew.”

“Gerard’s is ten, so that shouldn’t be a problem.”

Azelma quirked an eyebrow. “His curfew’s ten? In the summertime on a weekend?”

“It used to be later. Mom wouldn’t tell me why she changed it, so I assume I don’t want to know.”

“Hoo boy. Kay, good night guys. I’m starting to think this won’t even last as long as our curfews.” She gave Eponine and Feuilly quick hugs then followed Combeferre out to the parking lot.

Gerard was slouched down in the front seat of the car texting. Azelma wasn’t quite sure what to do. It seemed like the two of them should sit together, but then, it also seemed really weird for them to sit in the back while Combeferre drove them around like a chauffeur.

The awkwardness didn’t faze Gerard, who only briefly looked up from his phone to offer a small wave to Azelma before going back to his texting. With an irritated huff, Azelma climbed into the back by herself.

Dear God, he was blasting Eminem. Azelma wasn’t aware people still listened to Eminem.

Thankfully, Combeferre plugged his mp3 player in and put on Miles Davis. Azelma breathed a quiet sigh of relief that he may have picked up on, based on the small smirk he wore when he glanced at the rearview mirror.

Gerard scrunched his dough-face up in dislike. “Do you have to put on your crusty old dude music now? I mean shit, you’re going to put my date to sleep or something, bro.”

“Your date’s got a little more class than you, bro,” Combeferre returned. “You did say you liked Miles Davis, right?”

“Yeah. If you’ve got any Gershwin on there though I’d really like to hear more of him. I’m totally in love with Rhapsody in Blue. It’s like my jam right now.”

Combeferre’s face lit up. “I can definitely do more Gershwin.”

“You guys are such nerds!” Gerard said, with an obnoxious bark of a laugh. He leaned up in his seat and turned around. “You’re just as cute as he said though. Hey lady. I’m Gerard.”
“I’d figured,” Azelma said, but she took his offered hand anyway and returned the shake.

“Kicking. So I know I said we’d do the dinner and movie thing, but I just got a text from one of my buddies and people are like heading over his place to hang and whatnot. Wanna go do that instead?”

Azelma weighed the possibility of spending a night solely in the company of Gerard versus a roomful of teenagers. Well…there was a small chance at least one of Gerard’s friends would be tolerable. “Sure, I’ll meet your friends.”

“Damn girl, you’re already awesome. Okay ‘Ferre, drive us to Nick’s house.”

“A please would be nice.”

“Yeah, it probably would.”

Combeferre rolled his eyes, but he started driving. Gerard went right back to texting, so Azelma made conversation with Combeferre instead. She didn’t intend to ignore the brother she was ostensibly out with in favor of the one she preferred, but Gerard didn’t exactly offer her an alternative. Too soon for her tastes, they arrived at some boring middle class house.

“I’m going to be at the Musain tonight with some of the other guys. Call me when you’re ready to be picked up, okay?”

“Yeah, whatever. Y’know, you totally still could have loaned me the car. I could just drive you to your stupid nerd café instead.”

Combeferre got out of the car, grabbed his brother by the arm and yanked him aside. Azelma remained a respectful distance away from them, but she watched their hushed conversation with interest.

Not least of which because her father had taught her how to read lips when she was Little R’s age.

“Listen up you lazy sack of shit. You already know I don’t like the idea of you going on this date and you’re still being a disrespectful brat. Treat me however you want. I’m your brother; at the end of the day I have to put up with you. But Azelma doesn’t and she deserves better so get your act together or so help me God I’ll sic Enjolras on you.”

Gerard tried for a mixture of boredom and insolence that just made him look vaguely constipated, but at the mention of Enjolras’ name a tremor of fear shot through him. Well that was interesting. “Fine, whatever. I’ll be all nice and shit. I mean, she is pretty cute. Seriously bro, thanks for setting me up with her.”

“You really don’t deserve it.”

“You don’t have to be an asshole.”

“Neither do you. Now hold her hand, hold open doors, and for the love of everything decent, if I find out you’ve dragged her out here to watch you and your fuck up friends get high and play video games-”

“Good night, ‘Ferre. I’ll call you when we’re ready to get going.” Gerard turned on his heel and started to walk away from Combeferre, but he snatched his brother’s arm once more and yanked him backwards.

Azelma had only seen Combeferre be mild and gentle so far. This was new, and even though she no
longer liked unpredictable and angry bad boys, she was a little giddy about being the provocation for such a strong reaction. Then Combeferre dashed her budding excitement to pieces with his next words. “I’m not fucking around, Gerard. That girl is the sister of someone very important to me. You treat her with respect or you will regret it.”

Right. Because whenever Azelma started to forget her crush was in love with her sister the universe just had to remind her that she was only ever viewed in relationship to Eponine.

Gerard didn’t look all that impressed with his brother’s threats. He sauntered away from Combeferre and put on a smile that he probably thought was seductive as he approached her. “Hey pretty lady. Ready to head inside and meet my bros?”

“Sure,” Azelma said, since she was more eager than ever to simply get the night over with.

Her phone chimed with a text as soon as they walked through the door, but she didn’t get a chance to check it until after she’d met five of Gerard’s guy friends and two of their girlfriends.

The plan for the night wasn’t getting high and playing video games; it was getting high and watching Adam Sandler movies. Azelma decided she was in her own personal hell and took out her phone to distract herself, since Gerard wasn’t paying all that much attention to her anyway.

She had a text from Combeferre waiting for her. If you need to escape, don’t hesitate to call. Good luck, and apologies in advance. We’ll keep a chair at the Musain open for you ;)

Azelma seriously considered taking him up on his offer.

For once, Grantaire was among the first to make it to the Musain for a get together. He looked around the café’s back room and only spotted Courfeyrac and Bahorel sitting at their usual pushed together tables.

Although upon reflection it rather made sense. Jehan didn’t really seem to be running in their circle anymore (an issue Enjolras hoped to bring up and have rectified that very night, but one that Grantaire personally wasn’t giving much priority; by his reckoning Jehan had made his own shitty choices and the consequences were his alone), Joly and Legle were away on their honeymoon, Marius and Enjolras were still at work, Combeferre was getting them from work, and Eponine and Feuilly were home with the younger Thenardiers. That really only left Musichetta and Cosette to trickle in.

“Hey guys.” Grantaire walked up to the table, and then frowned when Courfeyrac and Bahorel both jumped, broke apart, and fixed him with really artificial smiles. “Uh…were you guys talking about me or something?”

“No!” Bahorel yelped. “God, Grantaire, when did you get such an ego? Not everything’s about you. Actually, come to think of it, almost nothing’s about you.”

Grantaire’s brow furrowed, and he turned his baffled gaze to his best friend. “Uh…what the fuck’s going on?”

“We weren’t talking about you, dude, just something we’re not crazy about bringing up to the group at large.”

“Oh.” Grantaire sat down across from them and fished a sketchpad out of his bag. “Well cut it the crap out, because I’m here now and that was painfully awkward.”
“Sure. How goes the comic stuff? Did you set up a kickstarter yet?” Courfeyrac asked.

“No, and I’m damn well not going to either.”

That topic sustained them until the others trickled in, and soon enough Grantaire forgot all about the conversation between his friends that he’d interrupted.

At first conversation among the friends was light. They gossiped about the recent wedding, Comic Con was discussed again for Combeferre’s benefit, some pressure was put on Grantaire to buy a scanner or a tablet (he thought he saw Enjolras taking notes out of the corner of his eye, but every time he looked he was jotting down talking points on social issues, not tablet features), and then Enjolras steered them somewhat near the direction of productivity by asking Courfeyrac and Bahorel some questions about the rallies that had been going on in New York during their vacation in response to the Trayvon Martin verdict and the high profile LGBT hate crimes.

They were discussing the violence aimed at gay men in response to the Supreme Court rulings when Musichetta stood up and, after a few attempts, managed to speak over Enjolras. “You know boys, it’s cute that you keep using the whole acronym, but I can’t help but notice how overwhelmingly concerned you are with just the G in LGBT. I was hoping for better, since so many of you are bi. But so far this has been a white gay boys’ club, hasn’t it?”

Enjolras’ posture stiffened, but his voice was cool when he addressed her.

Possibly the dangerous side of cool.

“We handle issues as they’re brought to our attention. Considering the most active members of our circle are gay and straight white males, our perspective is probably a bit skewed as a result. If you have any suggestions for a cause that deserves our attention you’re more than welcome to speak up at any time.”

“Okay. What about women’s reproductive rights? We’ve had a record number of bills put forth to prevent access to safe abortions. Could you guys do something about that?”

Combeferre grinned at her. “Joly, Feuilly, Ponine, and I attended a demonstration held after Wendy Davis’ filibuster. You should have gotten the link on facebook.”

“We’ve also been signing petitions, calling legislators, and disseminating as much information as we can,” Courfeyrac added. “Bossuet wrote a really nice blog post about the recent attempts to undermine Roe v. Wade.”

“The boys are definitely concerned with women’s rights, ‘Chetta,” Cosette said. “Although they do mansplain a bit much if you don’t call them out on it.”

“And how,” Musichetta muttered bitterly.

“Plus I make sure they don’t forget about bisexuals. Courfeyrac and Grantaire are a little more willing to let things slide and subsume themselves to a gay identity, but that has never been my preference. I make sure the B is always represented.”

“There is a lot of bisexual hating in the broader community,” Courfeyrac acknowledged. “But not in this room. No one’s ever called me half-gay, or confused, or just scared to come all the way out or any of that other shit.”

“Or straight because I happen to have fallen in love with a man,” Cosette added. “That’s my least favorite piece of bullshit right there. Like I only count as a minority if I date a girl. Like it wasn’t
traumatizing coming out to Papa, or like I didn’t internalize all kinds of shame growing up as a Catholic attracted to women.”

Marius looked close to tears hearing his lady love discussing past painful experiences. She gave his hand a bracing squeeze in an effort to console him.

“We accept everyone’s right to self-define their preferences,” Enjolras continued. “I’ve no interest in the nature versus nurture argument regarding sexuality. There’s evidence supporting the view that we’re born this way, but there’s also evidence supporting sexual fluidity, and a wide range of conflicting but valid personal histories to look at. Whatever the case may be, I see the issue as divisive and ultimately moot. Whatever you use to define your sexuality, you should have the right to do so without fear, shame, or threats of harm, and that’s what we’re all advocating for together.”

“And that includes bisexuals, lesbians, and trans-folk,” Combeferre added.

“And asexuals, demisexuals, I’ll-give-it-a-try-sexuals…you know, everybody,” Courfeyrac joked.

Musichetta nodded. “Okay. So my issue’s been a semantics one.”

“If there ever is anything you specifically want to bring to our attention though, we don’t rigidly plan out our causes,” Combeferre said. “We just follow the news and try to help where we can.”

“I do have something then.” Musichetta walked to the center of their tables and bounced on her heels a little, taking in all the eyes respectfully turned her way. “Okay, so women’s rights is kind of my pet issue. I mean, I’m a crazy liberal like all of you, and I try to follow as much as I can, but this is totally my scene. Anyway, protecting a woman’s constitutional right to choose and keeping crazy right wing assholes out of my vagina and my medical decisions is a huge priority, but I also wanted to look at slut shaming and rape culture. We started talking about it a little bit at Comic Con because of these girls walking around with a cosplay doesn’t equal consent sign, and I thought it’d be cool to run with it from there. I mean, did you guys follow the Steubenville thing? Seriously, how sick is our society when there are people who don’t think those kids were guilty as fuck but saw them as victims for getting two year sentences when they fucking documented their inarguably illegal actions so we know without a fucking doubt how god damn guilty they are.”

Cosette grimly nodded. “That entire situation was appalling. Those news anchors talking about the poor high school students’ ruined lives, lives they ruined with their own disgusting behavior I might add, had me feeling ashamed of my gender.”

“But seriously, how frustrated do you get when you actually talk about rape with people and you hear the shit they say? For starters, most people don’t want to have the conversation to begin with. You’re just told to be careful about what you wear and where you wear it, and use the buddy system and carry your keys in your hand and don’t walk away from your drink-so all the responsibility is on us. Like if we get raped it’s our own fucking fault because, you know, guys just can’t control themselves.”

“Meanwhile it’s a form of social control,” Courfeyrac said, jumping in. “The other day Feuilly was telling me about how rape’s been used in the Arab Spring uprisings to intimidate female protestors. We’re not as overt about it in the States, but it’s the same playbook. As long as women are forced to modify their behavior to avoid assuming responsibility for a violent crime being perpetrated on them, it’s easier to exclude them from certain jobs, social functions, and even living in certain neighborhoods.”

Grantaire tried not to do it, but his eyes involuntarily shot over to Combeferre. He looked a little pale, but otherwise he wasn’t showing any obvious signs of how uncomfortable he must have found the
Meanwhile, Enjolras was visibly upset. “Musichetta, did you want to talk about women’s rights or rape culture?”

“Um…yes?” She smirked at him. “What’s your point, Enj? Rape culture is a really significant topic within the struggle for equal rights.”

“But it’s not solely the concern of women-”

“Oh please. Yes, I’m aware, guys get raped too. But not in the numbers women do, and they certainly don’t get shamed for it the same way we do-” Musichetta started, but she was cut off.

“And what kind of experience are you speaking with there, exactly?” Enjolras snapped. “Are you so intimately acquainted with multitudes of male victims that you can denigrate their experiences with that much authority?”

Grantaire tried to catch Enjolras’ eye, but it didn’t work. He was too busy glaring down Musichetta to catch the way Grantaire was silently trying to urge him to stop, or notice the fact that his best friend looked sick to his stomach and was starting to faintly tremble.

And of course, Musichetta had no idea what was really going on. “I see how it is. You open the floor and say I can say my piece, but as soon as I challenge you on something you start talking down to me. Is it because I’m a girl, or is it because I don’t have your fucking blessing to be an activist? I’m just some chick from the boonies, right? So what in the hell can I know?”

“Okay guys, I think it’s time to take a few deep breaths and revisit this one later,” Courfeyrac cut in. Bahorel ran his hand over the small of Musichetta’s back, and though she still looked pissed, she did calm down a little.

Enjolras, predictably, ignored Courfeyrac’s suggestion. “I take no issue with your gender, Musichetta, or your wish to address rape culture. What I take issue with is your assumption that the issue of rape should be framed purely in terms of women’s rights. Rape is rape, and it’s abhorrent whoever it happens to.”

“Look, male victims do deserve sympathy, but you know what? I’m only capable of feeling so much sympathy for your gender. You guys don’t realize this, but you’ve pretty much got it made. And as far as rape culture goes, there is no culture of rape against guys!” Musichetta exploded. “If it happens at all, it’s going to be an isolated incident. Do you know what the figures are for women? Do you know what a constant worry this has to be for us? It is completely a women’s rights concern.”

Before Enjolras could speak up again, Combeferre got up and left the room. No one besides Grantaire had been paying attention to him, so his departure seemed bafflingly abrupt.

“What just happened?” Marius asked.

Grantaire threw Enjolras an exasperated look, then shot to his feet and followed after Combeferre.

Enjolras pensively stared after them, but before he could figure out what to do he got a text from Combeferre. He read it aloud. “I couldn’t stand to listen to that debate anymore, and I realize my dramatic exit will raise certain questions. They’re our closest friends so tell them as much as you feel comfortable sharing.”

Musichetta sat down between Bahorel and Courfeyrac, and immediately started fidgeting with the bracelets she was wearing. “I said something really shitty and insensitive, didn’t I?”
“Enj, are we jumping to the right conclusions here?” Courfeyrac asked.

Keeping his eyes averted, Enjolras nodded. “Probably. It happened when we were still in high school.”

Musichetta clapped a hand over her mouth. “Shit. Oh, I’m such a bitch! Those things I was saying… shit. I never would have said all that if I’d known…”

“Consider this a learning experience then,” Enjolras said, doing his best to keep the anger he still felt from his tone. “You claim to hate the ‘blame the victim’ mentality, but if you follow that sentiment through to its logical conclusion then you’ll remember that, as it’s never the victim’s fault, anyone you meet could be a victim. I’d suggest choosing your words with more caution from now on.”

Musichetta nodded. “Yes, definitely. And I swear, Enjolras, I’ll apologize to him the next time I see him. God, I’m such a bitch.”

“You didn’t know,” Bahorel said firmly. “Don’t beat yourself up about it, ‘Chetta. You were trying to talk about something that has personal resonance for you.”

Musichetta nodded. “I guess so. Just…shit. I always hated people telling me how I should have felt when I was trying to get away from my mom’s boyfriend and I had to explain what I was going through, and just…shit. I just did the exact same thing I used to swear I’d never do.”

Courfeyrac stood up and grabbed his bag. “‘Chetta, Bahorel, I think we should take a drive and talk this out. Enjolras, you want to dismiss this meeting so you and Combeferre can go do the same?”

Dazedly, Enjolras nodded. The friends all went their separate ways, and Enjolras ran outside to try to track down Combeferre and Grantaire.
Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

Combeferre gets a few things off his chest and only traumatizes Enjolras a little bit.

Jehan shares some bad news, and so does Courfeyrac.

Chapter Notes

Okay guys, some points of business. For starters, THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR YOUR FEEDBACK LAST CHAPTER. I hope the caps lock conveys even a shred of my gratitude and enthusiasm. Seriously, I needed that so much and it helped me write the new chapter. Your perspectives were all so thoughtful and intriguing and thank you so much for taking the time to share them. This is usually the case (nothing like a full inbox of comment notifications to make you want to spend the day all hermit-style in your room or a cafe writing up the next chapter) but with this particular chapter and the subject matter it was really needed. What I'm saying is you made a difference, and I fully intend on taking the time to write back to everyone. I'm sorry I haven't gotten to you all. I will. And if I haven't yet, please don't get the impression that your comment was somehow less helpful or important than one of the ones I already answered. This is not the case.

For those of you who aren't subscribed to me as an author or this as a series, I added a cute one-shot about how Enjolras and Grantaire met that you might be interested in. It's called Halloween.

And now for the bad news. I think this is going to be my last cliffhanger of the series (but who knows? The best thing about cliffies is that I don't usually know when they're going to sneak up on me) and it is by far the least happy one I've written. Please plan your reading accordingly. I just...I know you're all going to hate me by the end of this chapter. I'm sorry, but I couldn't fight my muse on this. The follow-up is already drafted out and it's head-canon.

In my defense though, the canon material is really much more depressing than anything I've written, right? Love me anyway? <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

EARLIER THAT NIGHT…

“I’m doing it tonight.” Bahorel dropped into a seat next to Courfeyrac, nodded at him as though his greeting were an actual greeting, or at least contained some kind of context or hint at what previous conversation it was referencing, then he took a long swig from his locally brewed root beer.

Courfeyrac arched an eyebrow. “Kay…uh…new tattoo?”
“No.” Bahorel scowled, as though Courfeyrac were being willfully obtuse in missing his meaning, followed up with a pout. “My mom made me promise not to get any more of those until she was dead.”

“What, really?”

“Yeah. She said I was allowed to get a memorial tattoo for her, and I take that to mean that once I get the memorial tat my body’s my own canvas again.”

Courfeyrac shook his head, and couldn’t help but wonder at the nature of the relationship Bahorel had with his parents. Though if anything happened to his own mother (God forbid) a memorial tattoo would actually be high on his list of priorities.

“So what are you doing tonight?” Courfeyrac asked.

“I’m going to tell Musichetta how I feel about her. Right after the meeting.”

Courfeyrac blinked a few times. He managed to bite back what would have been an unnecessarily harsh first response, but one that agreed entirely with the sinking feeling in his gut. He settled for a cautious inquiry instead. “Have you…dropped any hints to her? Like while you’re hanging at the store? Y’know, mentioned that you’ve been thinking about giving dating girls another shot?”

Bahorel narrowed his eyes. Apparently Courfeyrac hadn’t been cautious enough, because he’d picked right up on his skepticism. “No…I told you the last time we talked about this shit, in New York. That sounds stupid. ‘Hey ‘Chetta, for no reason whatsoever, let me tell you how I think I might have jumped the gun when I defined my sexual orientation at age fucking thirteen.’ Smooth.”

“You know what sounds even less smooth? ‘Hey ‘Chetta, I know I’m one of your gay friends and thus someone you see as safe and teddy bear-ish because I’ve made myself non-sexual to you, but surprise! I want to fuck you.’ Smooth as hell, that.”

“I don’t just want to fuck her. Don’t be crude.”

“Look who you’re talking to.”

“Fair enough.” Bahorel sighed and rubbed at his eyes. “Okay, I get that it might freak her out. I appreciate that. But I need to tell her, dude. I can’t stop thinking about it. About her. I’ve never felt this way about someone before.”

Courfeyrac tapped his fingers against the table for a moment and thought about what to say next. He didn’t want to completely discourage Bahorel, after all, but he also thought the situation was best handled delicately.

He knew from experience how confusing getting a handle on one’s orientation could be. Even though his attraction to the genders fluctuated, he never let go of the label bisexual for that very reason. Sometimes he was more drawn to guys, but there had been that period in high school when he was sure he was never going to date a guy again. He’d been fresh from his first sexual encounter with a girl and was sure that that was the way to go (and then he’d made out with Grantaire before the week was out). He certainly wasn’t faulting Bahorel for reopening this particular act of self-investigation.

He could also totally understand why Bahorel had labeled himself as exclusively gay during his teen years. The guy was really passionate about drag. If you weren’t particularly introspective (which Bahorel most definitely was not) it was a pretty obvious conclusion to draw. ‘I like fierce heels and makeup, ergo I’m gay.’
In addition to the aforementioned heels and makeup, Bahorel also really appreciated the feminine form. Apparently upon meeting just the right possessor of feminine form, whom he could socialize with like one of the guys, he’d felt an attraction that had escalated into an infatuation, and now for possibly the first time in his life, Bahorel was saying he’d fallen in love with someone.

And if the stupid ass wasn’t careful, he was going to scare the girl off.

“Look…you and Musichetta bonded crazy well crazy fast. She’s been treating you like one of her best friends since she moved out here. Nothing kills a friendship like sexual tension—”

“Really? You’re going to say that?” Bahorel asked incredulously.

“What do you mean?”

“Marius,” Bahorel snapped. Courfeyrac opened his mouth to protest, and Bahorel continued. “Grantaire. Fucking Eponine!”

“Eponine, whom I haven’t had a decently deep conversation with since she fled my apartment after our awkward sexual tension. That’s exactly what I was getting at, although I was thinking more specifically of Jehan,” Courfeyrac said.

Before Bahorel could say anything in reply Grantaire walked up to join them, and they had to put an abrupt end to their conversation.

After the blow up between Enjolras and Musichetta, Courfeyrac couldn’t help but think back on the earlier conversation and wince. He and Bahorel were leading Musichetta out of the café to talk to her and calm her down (ostensibly—Bahorel looked more like he wanted to hit someone than do any consoling). Courfeyrac couldn’t think of a worse moment for the safe, gay friend to confess his undying love.

But Bahorel wasn’t always the sharpest tool in the shed either…

Enjolras left the Musain along with everyone else. He didn’t go hunting for Combeferre and Grantaire, though he left with that intent. He started walking in circles around the block staring at the phone in his hand.

Really, it was a wonder he didn’t walk into oncoming traffic.

‘I didn’t even notice,’ Enjolras realized. Combeferre must have been freaking out, but Enjolras was so caught up in shutting Musichetta down that he didn’t see any of it. And really, how was verbally castrating Musichetta an acceptable course of action? What had he been thinking?

In truth, he hadn’t been. He’d had a purely emotional response to Musichetta’s comments, and he’d lost control of himself in consequence.

His phone finally buzzed in his hand. Enjolras fumbled to open the text, which was from Grantaire asking him where he was. It was a fair question. Enjolras looked at his surroundings and concluded that he’d wandered towards the wharf, so he wrote up a text and asked Grantaire where he and Combeferre were.

*At the Commons. Hes pretty shaky. Come meet us?*

Without bothering to reply, Enjolras set off in that direction.
Bahorel kept an arm wrapped tightly around Musichetta as the two of them followed Courfeyrac out of the Musain and to the guy’s car.

His mind was reeling. He wanted to punch Enjolras in his smug fucking face, but thankfully the need to protect Musichetta had won out over that one, because angry though he was he still recognized that turning Enjolras’ pretty face to pulp would only offer temporary satisfaction followed up with a string of nasty consequences.

But really. One of your friends says they want to examine rape culture for personal reasons, and you bully them while ignoring your lifelong best friend, who’s being pushed into a fucking panic over the escalating conversation turned argument until he has to reveal to everyone that surprise, he’s a rape victim too. Musichetta and Eponine had dropped more than enough hints at this point for a clever kid like Enjolras to get it. There were multiple kids in their clique with that particular demon in their closet: fucking conduct yourself accordingly.

But the guy had never been that great at handling it when someone disagreed with him. It made him a brilliant public speaker; he countered points with the kind of passion it was hard to argue with. It was also the kind of passion that bulldozed everything in its path, which made personal conversations rather difficult.

Musichetta was starting to look more composed when they slid into the backseat of the Volvo together, but her habitual smirk wasn’t present and her pretty eyes were obviously troubled. The urge to punch Enjolras returned in full force.

The urge to punch Courfeyrac arose for a brief flash, as the result of the guy giving him a nasty look in the rearview mirror. Did the idiot honestly still think Bahorel was going to unload his issues on Musichetta now, when she was clearly shaken up and emotionally vulnerable?

Douche.

He didn’t say anything, thankfully, just started driving for the highway. They were barely out of Salem when Bahorel felt like he’d calmed down enough to speak. “‘Chetta, you were not being a bitch in any shape, way, or form. That was all Enjolras. He gets all absolutist and crazy-eyed, and if you don’t agree with him then you have to fucking shout him down to be heard.”

“He’s very good at convincing you you’re wrong. He made me think I liked tofu better than steak for almost a year,” Courfeyrac chimed in.

“The human body makes more efficient use of the protein found in soy than the protein in meat, and the environmental impact of cattle farming is devesta-see? There it is,” Bahorel said with a snort. “I fucking love steak.”

“Me too.”

“Guys, I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but this is really different than steak versus tofu,” Musichetta said in a wavery voice. “I just said male rape victims don’t deserve sympathy. In front of a male rape victim.”

“First of all, that’s not what you said. What you said was more nuanced than that kind of blanket statement. Secondly, Enjolras put you on the defensive and pushed an extreme response out of you-”

“For fuck’s sake Bahorel, you can’t put it all on Enjolras!” Musichetta yelled.

And then he felt like he’d been punched in the face. No, more like the gut. That was a gut shot right there.
Courfeyrac spoke up, with a light, non-confrontational tone that only sounded practiced if you knew the theater major really well. “I think you went a little further than you meant to with your phrasing, ‘Chetta. I mean, that’s fairly obvious given how emotional you’re being right now. But you did make some amazing points before things got heated. Not to belittle whatever happened to ‘Ferre, but I think rape and rape culture are two different conversations, and rape culture targets women in ways it doesn’t target men. Maybe that’s just what I wanted to hear from what you said though.”

“No, that is what I was trying to say,” Musichetta agreed. She rubbed at her eyes and let out a pained sounding sigh. “You mentioned rape as, as a form of social control. Th-that’s what I meant to focus on. Not a game of whose pain is more serious. I mean, Jesus, I’m not even sure I should be having that discussion at all. I was molested, but I wasn’t raped—”

“Hey, stop there, back up, and examine that statement,” Courfeyrac said. “I think it sounds like you have a perfectly valid and unique standpoint to share. Plus I plan on discussing rape culture at length whenever the opportunity presents itself, and I’ve never been raped. That’s never been a qualification for wanting to make positive changes. Just so we’re clear.”

Musichetta nodded, and wiped at her eyes. Meanwhile, the arm Bahorel had around her shoulder pressed just a little bit tighter. “You’re right. You’re totally right.”

“‘Chetta, what happened to you?” Bahorel asked. He wasn’t sure it was the right question to ask, but it also looked like Musichetta needed to get the story out so she could move on.

Apparently it was the right question, because after fortifying herself with a few deep breaths Musichetta started speaking. “When I was thirteen my mom started dating this new guy. My dad was a total deadbeat. I think I only met him like twice when I was little, and Mom never really had other boyfriends after him. She used to say that it was my fault. That guys didn’t want to date a woman with a kid. So anyway, this guy started dating her and he was scummy and he moved in with us almost right away and he didn’t work or anything, he just took all of Mom’s money but she wouldn’t get rid of him, because, y’know, guys don’t date women with kids so this was the best she was gonna do.”

“I already don’t like where this story is going.” Courfeyrac maneuvered the car into a secluded little lot facing a park, and once he’d parked he turned in his seat so he could give Musichetta his full attention.

She nodded. “Yeah, it’s going exactly where you think.” He handed her some napkins from his glove box. “Thanks. So anyway, the asshole started making disgusting comments about me, and I just really didn’t like the way he was looking at me. It made me really uncomfortable, but when I told Mom about it she freaked out. She said I shouldn’t be flirting with an adult, that it was sick, but I wasn’t fucking flirting. Like I wanted her ugly slug of a boyfriend. God, he was disgusting. And then one night I woke up with him on top of me in bed and his hands were everywhere…” She broke off.

“What’s this fucker’s name?” Bahorel growled.

Musichetta let out a shaky laugh. “Honey, it’s been almost a decade. You’re not going to find this guy and kick his ass, but I do appreciate your murderous urge. It’s very sweet of you. In actuality though, I probably could find him. I bet he’s still living with my mom.”

“What?” Courfeyrac yelped. “She didn’t kick him out?”

“Nope. I fought him off of me then ran into Mom’s room shrieking and she called me a slut. So I threw some shit in my backpack, walked to the bus station, and went to live with one of my buddies
a few towns over. That’s how I met Legle.” She smiled, as the last bit was apparently a fond reminiscence.

“I just, I feel like what was lost tonight is that I want to help. It was so scary, not getting any help and not being believed that there even was a problem. Like, I still feel like I have to check in from time to time, that I wasn’t the crazy one for thinking that Freddy was going to rape me, even though I woke up with him in my fucking bed. That’s an issue, y’know? I want to change that.”

“I’ll help you,” Bahorel promised, absolutely blindly because he was that fucking gone.

Musichetta eyed him quizzically. “I don’t think you can punch rape culture until it goes away, sweetie.”

“I can try. You don’t know that.”

Courfeyrac shot Bahorel a look he pointedly ignored. “Wanna maybe volunteer for a crisis hotline or something?”

Musichetta grinned. She dabbed at her face with the napkins. “Yeah, I think I’d like that. See, that’s kind of the direction I was hoping the meeting would go. Not ‘way to traumatize Combeferre.’ Totally wasn’t shooting for that at all.”

“Hey, we know,” Courfeyrac assured her. “Are you feeling any better? Did the drive help?”

“Yeah. And so did talking. Thanks for letting me get some of that out, guys. You’re the best.” She leaned up and kissed Bahorel’s cheek.

He wondered if it was going to tingle like that for the rest of the night.

His mind exploded with ‘tell her-tell her-tell her’ but he got his stupid mind under control before his very stupid mouth caught up with it. This wasn’t the moment.

He wasn’t sure when the moment was going to present itself, but when it did it was going to be fucking awesome, and she sure as hell wouldn’t be wiping tears from her eyes.

Well, hopefully.

Grantaire caught up to Combeferre pretty easily, but the thing was, he had no idea what to say when he did. He just sat with him for a little while and held his hand while the guy took breaths that were meant to be steadying, but kept ending in little gasps, until finally, starting to feel a bit panicky himself, he texted Enjolras.

Enjolras showed up less than ten minutes later, and Grantaire only needed one look to know his lover was going to be no help whatsoever.

Dammit. Enjolras was supposed to be made of strength. How could he not have any to lend his best friend when the kid was an inch from a breakdown? Grantaire was not emotionally ready for this shit. However, if they were really going to have him be the kid to lean on, he’d do his best. Enjolras was obviously that important to him, and Combeferre was definitely in that small circle of people Grantaire really didn’t want to let down.

“Are you okay?” Enjolras asked, voice small and achingly hesitant. He sounded nothing like himself.

“Yeah,” Combeferre croaked out, far too soon and sounding about as convincing as Grantaire had
any of the myriad times Courfeyrac had asked him that question back in the day. “Fine. Just needed a minute. Needed some air. I’m fine.”

“Bullshit.”

“Grantaire,” Enjolras snapped.

“No, I’m calling bullshit, and shenanigans, and whatever else I can call.” Grantaire took a deep breath, then forced himself to make eye contact to the rock of the group. Everyone knew Combeferre was the sensible one, and Grantaire was pretty much made of unhealthy choices and bullshit. Calling Combeferre out on hiding from his emotions and traumas was really fucking difficult.

Grantaire couldn’t shake the feeling that this was in his head, that in reality he was doing something wrong.

“Look, ‘Ferre…you’ve been running from this for kind of a while now. Too long. I think you need to face this, have a cry or whatever, stab a canvas with a brush, which is what I would do, and just get it out of your system, man. Just let it be gone.”

“I did get it out of my system,” Combeferre insisted. “She has no power over me. I don’t…I don’t need to relive it again to move on. I moved on. It’s done. It’s done.”

There was nothing done about that panicky tone of voice.

And then of course, there was Enjolras, who just looked traumatized. “I thought…you said…you said you couldn’t remember what happened.”

“I lied.”

“I need to sit down.”

Grantaire jumped off of the park bench and helped Enjolras onto it. He knelt on the ground in front of them instead, thankful he wasn’t wearing a pair of work jeans because he was going to ruin the knees.

“Why would you lie about that?” Enjolras whispered.

“Because I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to think about it,” Combeferre said, and Enjolras flinched at the harsh tone.

“I’m sor-”

“Will you stop that?” Combeferre yelled, jumping to his feet. “For fuck’s sake, Enjolras, how many times do I have to say this? How many times do I have to comfort you about it? It wasn’t your fault and it has nothing to do with you! Nothing. This one is mine, so just stop pretending like you’re involved. You were in the next fucking room, but you were so wrapped up in your own drama that you didn’t notice. I was with you that entire week and you never asked what was wrong. You didn’t even notice that I was being distant. And all you could talk about was your fucking mother and what an elitist capitalist princess she was. How she didn’t understand you and she was going to ruin your life. Cry me a fucking river, Enjolras. No one gets along with their parents when they’re teenagers, but worse things can happen.”

Grantaire found himself torn between two conflicting urges. Enjolras looked so hurt and shaken, like his whole world and all his convictions had just been shattered in front of him, that Grantaire desperately wanted to take him in his arms and soothe him until he looked like himself again. At the
same time, Combeferre wasn’t doing much better.

“Told you you needed to talk,” Grantaire said, which didn’t really accomplish either of his goals, though Combeferre looked like he wanted to attack him instead of Enjolras. Grantaire considered that an improvement. “But seriously dude, this is what happens when you bottle up. It comes out in all the wrong ways.”

“Grantaire, shut the fuck up. I’m so past being in the mood for this.”

“Do you or do you not blame Enjolras for what his mother did to you?” Grantaire asked. Thankfully, his voice didn’t waver, even though his insides felt like they were tearing apart from nerves.

He was proud of himself though. It had taken almost a full ten minutes for him to start craving alcohol, and the urge was easily suppressed this time.

Combeferre’s mouth pressed into a hard line, and he looked away. His hands were balled into fists at his sides. “He should have noticed. He shouldn’t have needed to be told.”

“How could I have—”

“Always been self-absorbed! I wasn’t your friend, I was your fucking secretary. I helped you stay organized and on task with all your stupid projects and causes, and I supported you but you have never, not once in your life, supported me back.”

“You never asked for it.” Oh holy fuck, was Enjolras crying? “I didn’t know…I swear to god I didn’t, and if I’d seen the signs I would have done something. I am so, so sorry Combeferre, I swear.”

“You know now, and you still pushed that conversation.”

“I couldn’t let what she was saying go unchallenged.”

“How about changing the fucking subject?”

Enjolras curled in on himself, eyes squeezed shut. “I was trying to help. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. You mean the world to me, Combeferre. I wanted to…I swear, you’re not my secretary. If I knew how to support you I’d have been doing it.”

“You’ve been plenty supportive of Grantaire. You didn’t need to be taught how to do that.”

Grantaire’s eyes widened. He supposed he deserved that, considering what a piss poor job he was doing of moderating the conversation, but he really didn’t want to be pulled into it like this.

Combeferre couldn’t still be jealous of him, could he?

“I did though!” Enjolras insisted, jumping to his feet. “I was terrible at first. Everyone said so, that I was too cruel, that I picked at him too much and that I—that I completely misrepresented my concern. You helped me. You and Jehan, you taught me how to talk to him and be a better boyfriend, and he helped me by telling me what he needed. That’s all I need from you, ‘Ferre. Part of the reason I’ve valued your friendship so much is because you’ve never made me feel hard or cruel for my manner. You’re so patient with me.”

Something finally broke in Combeferre, and when he turned to Enjolras he looked much more his usual self. “Except tonight. Enjolras, I’m sorry.”
“Don’t be. Just please, please forgive me for letting you down, and mean it this time.” His voice sounded choked.

Again, Grantaire really wanted to grab Enjolras and hug him and kiss away his tears. Now wasn’t the time though. He’d be cuddling the hell out of him later, but at the moment Grantaire needed to keep his damn mouth shut and let them get through this.

“What Marie did…I have no business holding that against you. But I do wish you’d have noticed that I needed you. I didn’t want to talk about it, but I really needed to, and I needed a friend, and I just wish you’d noticed.”

“I’m sorry.”

Combeferre clasped his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Thank you. You’re forgiven. I’m really sorry for distressing you so much. Grantaire’s right. I should have faced this a long time ago.”

Grantaire gave an exaggerated start. “Did you just say I was right about something?”

Enjolras let out a humorless laugh and rubbed at his eyes. “I almost forgot you were there.”

“Well that’s just mean. I never forget when you’re in a room, you know. Can I hug you yet or do you guys still need to hug it out?”

Enjolras looked at Combeferre uncertainly, but he responded with a slight nod. Then Grantaire found himself with an armful of Enjolras, and he cuddled for all he was worth until Enjolras calmed down. Even then, he held his hand all while the three of them walked home.

Combeferre poked his head into their bedroom later that night and informed them that he was going to look into getting some counseling. “I’ve been giving it some thought, and I think my tendency to put my own needs aside in favor of helping others is becoming a character flaw instead of a strength.”

“You are a bit doormat-y,” Grantaire agreed.

“Says one of the people sleeping in Combeferre’s willingly vacated bedroom paying a disproportionately small share of rent,” Enjolras reminded him.

“Says the one who whined him into bathing cats,” Grantaire returned. He turned his attention back to Combeferre. “When did you start to figure that out though?”

Combeferre actually blushed a bit. “When Feuilly and I went to the PEM together…he said something about how well I was taking Eponine’s decision. He knew I was just as invested in Eponine as he was, and he thought it was almost freakish how much I was putting Eponine’s feelings over mine. He was perfectly nice and friendly about it, but it got me thinking. I think I need to be a bit more assertive in my personal relationships.”

“We’ll try to stop taking advantage then,” Grantaire promised. Enjolras looked like he was about to say something about that, but Grantaire cut him off. “Don’t even. We totally do.”

“Good,” Combeferre said with a nod. “In that case, Enjolras, I won’t be driving you to work in the morning. You can borrow my car if you wish, but I want to sleep in. And Grantaire, will you please update your own social media for the day? I’d really appreciate it.”

Grantaire couldn’t help but laugh at Combeferre’s version of being assertive about his needs, which was still ridiculously polite and considerate, but he happily consented. Enjolras looked a little put out
about having to get his own ass to work for a six am opening, but then Grantaire elbowed him in the ribs and he was cordial about it.

He even woke up early the next morning and cooked Combeferre a plate of french toast before he left for the café.

Combeferre was so derailed by his night of drama that he forgot about his brother’s date with Azelma. He “slept in” (Grantaire would later inform him that sleeping until eight thirty was not sleeping in), and after reheating the french toast and settling in with a cup of coffee, he checked his phone and found that he had a ridiculous amount of texts from Azelma.

His frown deepened as he read them all.

*Hey, so I didnt want 2 bother u, but this kinda sucks. If that chair is still open at the Musain Ill totes take it ;)*

*Ferre? U there?*

*Im really sorry Ferre. I shouldn't insult your brother. Hes not bad or NEthing hes just a little dumb and I've gotten used 2 u guys so it kinda sucks talking about like parties and kids I've never met and stuff.*

*K so if you dont want to pick me up like u promised could u at least text me back so I have something 2 do? Their watching Adam Sandler movies. And not, like Billy Madison or something watchable. Like we just watched that fucking Twins one.*

*Did I piss u off? M sorry :( Didnt mean 2.*

*Can we talk about Gershwin? M begging you. Youre brother thinks hes a fucking philosopher when hes baked. Seriosly he thinks hes deep.*

*He just called you dumb. I want to bitch slap him. Would u b mad?*

*I dont care if u’d be mad. This little creep needs manners.*

*Ferre please pick us up now. Its way past his curfew and the girls I was kinda talking to left. Im alone with stoner highschool boys and it suks.*

*K were past his curfew and now were kinda gettin near mine.*

*Ferre? Ferre please? <3*

*Pretty please with sugar on top?*

*Pretty please with sugar and Miles Davis and everything wonderful and pretty in the world?*

*Feuilly’s on his way to get me :(*

*Good night Ferre. Sorry I bugged you so much.*

Combeferre gaped at his phone in horror, grabbed his shoes, then ran downstairs to hop in his car and drive to Danvers. Then he remembered that in his ‘I need to take care of myself’ moment with Enjolras, he’d told his best friend to borrow his car for the day.

“Shit fucking batshit asshole!” he yelled, because he’d never been as talented with profanities as
Grantaire.

He had a bike in his part of the basement storage. The haunted condo probably wasn’t that far of a bike ride…

Enjolras spent an overall pleasant morning working with one of the baristas he didn’t know personally. The pretty boy barista fan club had declined slightly in numbers when Enjolras had found out about Eponine’s ruse and subsequently informed their customer base that he was happily involved in a committed, monogamous relationship with a man, so shifts were often less hectic than they had been when he’d first started working at the café.

Then his coworker took off and Jehan came in for midshift. Hugh dropped him off, but since it was slow he lingered in the café for a good twenty minutes, leaning against the counter and smiling stupidly at Jehan while he nursed a latte.

“Hello Enjolras,” he greeted, sounding warm and sincere enough.

Enjolras feigned the feeling back, though he felt as conflicted about his cousin’s relationship as ever. Hugh was clearly on a cloud; Enjolras wanted to be happy for him, and at this point there was very little reason not to be. Courfeyrac appeared to have recovered from the break up, Jehan hadn’t really done anything wrong, and he and Hugh were much more compatible than Enjolras had realized.

He couldn’t put his finger on what was wrong, and it was bothering him to no end.

Jehan looked a little uncomfortable about having his boyfriend hovering around his workplace, which was also odd. Grantaire and Cosette spent a lot of their free time at the café, something Jacques didn’t appear to mind. As long as everyone got their work done and customers weren’t neglected, he thought filling the café with hip young people rather helped its image. Enjolras was pretty sure Feuilly would have been haunting Eponine’s shifts as well, if he weren’t working his own ridiculous hours at the nursing home and looking after her little brothers.

At any rate, Jehan went out back to give the walk-in fridge a deep scrubbing it didn’t really need, and Enjolras found himself without a line and with a love-dazed cousin leaning on the counter giving dreamy sighs.

Awkward.

“Enjolras, is this wonderful feeling how you are with your fiancé?”

Enjolras frowned. “Perhaps…when we first started dating.” If he’d ever looked quite that dazed and pathetic he’d have hoped one of his other friends would have smacked some sense into him.

“I kept thinking the first rush of bliss would fade as I spent more time with Jehan and got used to basking in his presence, but it only seems to increase over time. Isn’t it wonderful? To be free, to be open and honest, and to be loved for it. I’ve never been happier.”

“That’s…good.”

Hugh smiled dreamily at him. “We’re both really lucky, you know that, don’t you? To have found our soulmates and to do so in the right place and time for men to be able to celebrate that? You’re marrying yours, and maybe one day I’ll get to do the same.”

Enjolras stiffly nodded. “When Jehan’s ready, I suppose you will.”
“I hope to. Speaking of your man, Mom wants to meet him.”

“She…does?”

Hugh laughed. “Of course she does. And my sister as well. They’re very curious about this artist of yours. You’ve been invited over for dinner.”

Enjolras supposed the polite thing to do would be to accept. He had nothing against his aunt or his cousins, not really, even though he hadn’t been particularly close to them since his childhood. However, they were still family and he didn’t like the idea of associating with his family anymore.

His aunt Julie was his mother’s twin sister…

Before he could even begin to respond, Jehan burst into the room still wearing his ridiculous floral print gloves and seemingly unaware of the carton of soy milk in his hands. “I’ll do it!”

“Huh?”

Hugh leaned over the counter and pulled Jehan into a hug. Jehan leaned into the embrace and kissed both of Hugh’s cheeks, though his own were deathly pale. He looked like he’d volunteered himself for some kind of awful ordeal, something Hugh missed entirely as he was beaming with nothing short of radiant bliss.

They ignored Enjolras while they embraced and kissed and exulted together, until a customer interrupted and they had to get a grip on themselves long enough for Jehan and Enjolras to do their job. Once the customer left Enjolras stood between them and demanded an explanation.

Hugh was the one that spoke, though by this point Jehan appeared genuinely happy as well, if a bit more subdued than his boyfriend. “Well, I got into McGill for grad school and I wasn’t sure if I was going to go or not. I mean, I had my heart set on it so I didn’t really apply to that many programs here in the States and there are plenty of good schools in Boston…close to Jehan.”

“But he shouldn’t have to give up something that big for me. So I’m going to go with him.”

Enjolras slowly nodded, though he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “So…you’re going to move to Canada?” With a man you’ve been dating for less than a month when you’ve freely admitted to being in love with someone else. “Um…will that be soon?”

“At the end of the month,” Hugh said, face still shining with a cheek to cheek grin.

Enjolras forced himself to smile back. “That’s…great.”

Grantaire was going to have a coronary when he found out.

Grantaire was diligently working on his own facebook page like he’d promised Enjolras and Combeferre he would (ie playing Songpop with Courfeyrac, but responding to messages and comments every fifteen minutes or so), when there was a knock on the door. He put the laptop to sleep, checked that he wasn’t somehow indecent (real pants, shirt that covered mangled arms, no visible stains from absentminded snacking) and then let Cosette in.

“Hey. Sorry I’m late, but I passed Combeferre while I was driving over and he looked like he was going to keel over on the side of the road so I gave him a ride to Danvers.”

“Wait, what?”
Cosette giggled. “He was riding a bike, and I think it was his first time doing so since he got his driver’s license. It was kind of funny.”

“If he needed his car today he could have just told us. Enjolras can take the bus.”

Cosette shrugged. “I really don’t understand how that boy thinks.”

“The puppy’s pretty easy to figure out though, huh?” Grantaire walked into the kitchen and put the kettle on the stove while Cosette went to the cabinets to get some mugs and the sugar bowl.

“Laugh all you want, but Marius’ openness with me is actually a perk to the relationship. We communicate very easily.”

“How’s he doing? Y’know, now that your separation is looming so near?”

“Well, I’ve talked him out of transferring to U-Mass five times in two days. A good enough chunk of his credits wouldn’t go with him, so he’d never graduate on time if he did.”

“Cosette, he’s still got junior and senior year left, and you kids are pretty serious. You sure you want to live on opposite ends of the state for two years?” Grantaire asked.

“Of course I don’t want to. But I don’t want to mess up his studies any more than I already have. It doesn’t take much to get him unfocused, and dating me has already tanked his GPA. He needs to learn some discipline. I think this will be good for him.” She sat down at the table and smoothed out her skirt. “Now, my dear, how have you been?”

Grantaire recited how many days sober he was, giving a sarcastic eye roll that didn’t match his proud smile. Cosette beamed at him, and he allowed himself to feel it for the accomplishment it was without a shred of his usual cynicism. “So yeah, I’m good. Like, really good. The art thing looks like it might actually be a thing, Enjolras and I are solid, and for the first time ever I wouldn’t change a damn thing about my life. I’m really happy. So once you’re out in Western Mass you don’t need to worry about doing these check-ins with me.”

“Don’t be silly, Grantaire. I love chatting with you. We’re going to skype, if nothing else.”

The tea kettle whistled, so the two friends busied themselves making Cosette’s preferred blend of Chamomile-Lavender. From there they talked about lighter things; whether Valjean or Marius was having more anxiety about the impending separation, Grantaire’s incredulity at his rapidly growing fan base, how nice Joly and Legle’s wedding had been and how they’d both been taking mental notes the entire time for their own weddings…

They were interrupted by Grantaire’s phone. “It’s just Courf.” He rejected the call, as he talked to Courfeyrac all the time but his face-to-face meetings with Cosette were a bit more infrequent. The puppy was rather demanding on her time, so generally they did his faux-AA support over the phone.

Then the phone rang again. Cosette looked a little pensive. “Maybe you should answer it. It might be important.”

“It’s Courf. It’s never important.” But he answered the phone anyway. “What is it shithe-Courf? Calm down, I can’t understand…wait, what? …No. No that didn’t happen and fuck you.” He ended the call, slammed the phone down on the table, and with a shaking hand reached for his mug of tea.

Cosette had nearly jumped out of her skin when he slammed the phone. Her fearful gaze was all the more striking for the unusual size of her eyes, but she kept her voice even when she addressed him. “Grantaire…is everything alright?”
“Yes. Courfeyrac was just lying to me. You see, I’m happy now. I just said it to you and I meant it, and it’s the first time in my life so I’m going to get more than a couple of weeks of that.”

“What did he say?”

Grantaire got up, slowly pushed the chair back into the table, and then violently threw his mug against the kitchen floor where it spectacularly shattered. Cosette jumped to her feet and ran to the other side of the room, keeping the table between them, an instinct still left over from her brief time fostering with the Thenardiers.

But then Grantaire was curled in on himself on the ground, surrounded by broken shards of ceramic and spilled tea, and the sight tore at her heart. She got over her fear and touched his shoulder.

“He said to come to the hospital because Bridget got hit by a car and she’s dead. Oh my god Cosette, she’s dead.”

Chapter End Notes

BTW I plan on going into more detail on Bahorel's adventure with sexual fluidity when I write the New York one-shot ;)
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

Grantaire and Courfeyrac find support in their friends. Bridget is remembered.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was a little difficult to write. I hope the lighter parts don't feel terribly out of place, but I needed some breaks. Grantaire and Courfeyrac's grief will be a continuing theme for the remainder of the fic.

You guys' feedback last chapter was...interesting :P I'll reply to what I can, though honestly some of you made it quite tricky. I'm not sure what a good response to shouted denials entails, but I'll do my best. In all seriousness though, it's incredibly gratifying to know that I created a character that resonates so well with people. As always, thank you everyone for the interest you've shown in my rambles :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Enjolras, dear, shall we acknowledge the elephant in the room while we've got a lull, or would you rather tiptoe around conversation until the end of your shift?”

Enjolras gave a start, not only because he wasn’t expecting to be addressed, but he also wasn’t expecting to be addressed like that. Jehan’s pointed seeming-politeness was an acquired taste, and one you lost if you weren’t exposed to it enough. He’d been on his way to wipe down tables, but Enjolras turned and headed back for the counter where his friend was waiting. This was important too.

“You don’t think I should move to Canada,” Jehan said, opening the conversation with perfect frankness. It was one of the few traits Enjolras and Jehan had in common, and one he appreciated. Even though Jehan was supposedly the most sensitive of the group, Enjolras felt like he communicated most easily with the poet despite the fact that his forceful, direct personality was criticized as being insensitive.

“As usual, Jehan, you anticipate me with frightening accuracy.”

Jehan nodded. “I appreciate your efforts to be polite about it, but really my friend, your disapproval was rather easy to pick up on.”

“Shall I explain my reasoning or have you anticipated that too?” Enjolras asked with a smirk. He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned his hip against the counter.

Jehan smoothed a wrinkle out of his apron. When he looked at Enjolras he was wearing a particular smile of his. On the surface it appeared warm and friendly, but it was also a mask. He was feeling particularly emotional, but also secure in himself. Enjolras figured he didn’t have to worry about another outburst like the one from a few weeks ago.
“Perhaps we’d be better served if I explained my reasons for going. Forgive me for sounding cold, but very little of it is to do with your cousin. He’s more the means of facilitating a change I’d already sought on my own. And if I’m going to relocate, I may as well go with friends.”

“Who else is going to Montreal?” Enjolras asked. He privately wondered how heartbroken Hugh would be to learn that he was not Jehan’s sole motivation for moving to a different country, though Enjolras himself rejoiced at that. He’d worried Jehan was being too rash about committing to a relationship he didn’t really seem invested in.

“Some of Hugh’s friends are going, the best of them actually. I suspect the reason he had his heart set on McGill was so that he wouldn’t have to let go of Hester and Rachel. A few others are following in consequence as well.”

“I keep forgetting that Hugh’s friends with Hester Gresley. A Pulitzer winning author is a pretty significant departure from the sort of company he normally keeps. Jehan, just why do you want to run away?”

“Oh, lots of reasons,” Jehan said softly. “My writing’s been stagnating and I think a change of circumstances might help. I’ve seen very little of the world so far. And…I just haven’t been very happy for quite some time. I need to do something to get out of this rut. Besides, I won’t be locked into a doctoral program like Hugh. If Montreal doesn’t work out for me I can always return home.”

“I wish you wouldn’t go. I’ll miss you.”

Jehan clasped his hands. “I’ll miss you terribly, Enjolras. You’ve been a wonderful friend to me. I hope you’ll continue to be one despite the distance.”

Enjolras wished he had Jehan’s way with putting his emotions to words. Despite Jehan’s reassuringly thoughtful reasons for his move, Enjolras’ heart still felt heavy when he thought of it. He couldn’t help but feel that his friend was making a mistake, but he couldn’t figure out how to explain himself.

Before he could say anything further, the café’s landline rang. Jehan gave Enjolras’ hand another squeeze then went to answer it. “Brammer Street, how can I-Courfeyrac?” Jehan’s face paled, and for a moment Enjolras feared he might faint. He moved to take the phone from him, to save his friend from an uncomfortable conversation with his ex, but Jehan walked away from him. He was so focused on whatever Courfeyrac was saying that he didn’t seem to notice his actions.

Then his eyes filled with tears. “Oh my dear darling, you’re not alone, are you? …No, I’ll send Enjolras to Grantaire this instant…yes, yes we’ll take care of Grantaire, but what about you? And your father? …Courfeyrac, I’m so sorry. Is there anything else I can do? …Please, don’t hesitate to call…yes, I’ll tell the others to give you my number again. Darling, I’m so sorry. Goodbye.”

He hung up, then buried his face in his hands and wept.

“What is it?” Enjolras asked.

“C-call Lissa and see if she’ll come in. We need to-need to go. Enjolras, Bridget was killed. Grantaire knows, but he hung up on Courfeyrac, so he-”

“I need to go now then,” Enjolras said. His mind was already being deluged with different horrifying scenarios of what Grantaire might be doing in response to the terrible news. He was alone in a four story apartment building with easy roof access, there were various knives and tools, and a new pack of razor blades in the bathroom…
“Enjolras, please, wait for me-”

The café door slammed shut behind him as he raced for the bus stop, too frantic in his worry to remember that he’d borrowed Combeferre’s car.

Eponine exited the bathroom in a cloud of steam and comfy clothes (yoga pants and one of Feuilly’s shirts), carrying her dirty pajamas in a wadded up ball under her arm as she strode for the hamper in the “laundry room” portion of the apartment. Feuilly and Little R were sitting at the kitchen table with the remnants of a ‘rent is due’ breakfast classic, loaf-ends toast and margarine, and a pile of playing cards. Eponine barely gave them a second glance as she passed them in favor of the hamper, but then she heard what they were saying.

“To leave secretly.”

“A…Askund.”

“Close, buddy. Try again.”

“…as…ab. Abscond?”

“Very good! You’re doing really good, Little R.”

Eponine took care of the dirty clothes, then walked up to the table just as Feuilly was reaching for another card. “What are you two doing?”

“Enjolras gave me his GRE flash cards when he whittled down his belongings before moving in with Grantaire. He said he didn’t need them anyway, as they were mostly words anyone with half a brain should know before graduating the eighth grade.” Here Feuilly rolled his eyes. “Little R saw me using them and he asked me if I’d play with him, so I’m teaching him words.”

“…what are the GREs?” Eponine asked.

“Like the SATs, but for graduate programs. After I get my bachelors I’m pretty sure I’m going to have to keep going.” Feuilly set the flash cards in front of Little R, who’d been bobbing up and down in his seat while impatiently (but silently) waiting for another card. “You wanna keep using them on your own while I talk to your sister?”

“Yeah! Thanks Feuilly.” Little R picked up a card and started reading. “Meta…Meduh…um, no.” He stuck that card back in and picked out another (Eponine caught the word ‘Homeostasis’ and couldn’t say she blamed him). “To aroozuh or inkitey. Um…Feuilly, what’s this one say?”

“To arouse or incite.”

“Foment!”

“Great job, dude.” He ruffled Little R’s hair, but scooped up the cards and set them aside. “I think you’re going to have to finish learning how to read before you can play this on your own though. Why don’t you go see what Gavroche is doing?”

“Okay.”

Little R wandered off and Feuilly followed Eponine into the kitchen with the dirty dishes. “So for the record, I do believe Azelma when she said it wasn’t her fault she got in so late last night.”

Eponine leaned against the counter and adopted one of her more petulant looks. “She smelled like
“She wasn’t high. Trust me, Eponine. Before Grantaire started working on his substance issues and we all decided to tone down various problem behaviors in support of that lifesaving decision, some of the guys were pretty big potheads. I know when someone’s high and Azelma was not high.”

“Plus didn’t you say your mom was a pothead?” Eponine asked with a smirk.

“I found out about that posthumously. She did not, in fact, make it a habit to light up in front of her seven year old.” He playfully stuck his tongue out at her and she swatted his arm in return. “Look, go soft on the kid. I don’t think she had a very good time. She looked pretty miserable when I went and got her.”

“I guess Combeferre was right about them being poorly suited for each other then. Ah well. At least I don’t have to deal with Zelma dating a teenage boy.” Eponine gave a little shudder at the possibility.

Feuilly finished rinsing out the dishes and was just about to load up the dishwasher when Eponine snaked her arms around his waist and leaned up on tiptoe to kiss the back of his neck. “So it’s the first day off we’ve both had at the same time…ever, I think. What are you up to today, hon?”

Feuilly placed his hands over hers and leaned backwards into the embrace. “Homework, sadly. I’ve got a shit ton of assignments to catch up on. I’ve kinda been letting things go because of how crazy work’s been lately.”

Eponine abruptly pulled away and put her hands on her hips. “Seriously? You know, I traded shifts to get some time off with you, and mind you, it’s not ideal because we’ve still got the kids running around, but still. You cannot be spending the whole day with your computer!”

Feuilly looked taken aback. “What do you want me to do, Ponine? These classes are serious and I’m pretty damn rusty when it comes to school work now. Today was for chores and catch up. I’m sorry if you went to any kind of trouble, but you know, you didn’t tell me you were going to and I didn’t ask you to either.”

Eponine narrowed her eyes at her boyfriend. “Wrong answer, dipshit.” She turned on her heel and stalked away. Feuilly was following after her, but before he could get in any kind of apology (at least, Eponine hoped that was what he was going for) there was a frantic pounding on the front door.

They let a sweaty and disheveled Combeferre into their apartment, and before they could get anything sensible out of him Eponine’s phone rang. “Argh, what now?” She snatched it from where she’d left it on the kitchen table, frowning when she saw that it was Enjolras and therefore probably work related. “Hello?”

“Eponine, I need help. Can you and Feuilly pick me up and could you possibly work the rest of my shift for me? I need to get home, it’s an emergency, and I left the car at the cafe but the buses aren’t running enough and I need to get to him before he does something—”

“Hon, what’s wrong?”

When Enjolras explained about what had happened to Bridget, and how Grantaire had been surprised with the information while alone, Eponine sprang right into action mode. She had the car keys in her hand and was herding everyone together before she hung up.

Five minutes later she and Feuilly were heading for the bus stop by the café to grab Enjolras, and Combeferre and Azelma were watching the boys.
It took Enjolras almost an hour to get home to Grantaire. He tried calling him several times, but of course he wasn’t picking up (he’d later find out that Grantaire had broken his cheap flip phone when he’d slammed it on the table). He ran out of Combeferre’s car as soon as he parked it, and, without waiting for Feuilly, barreled up the stairs.

He probably looked more than a little psychotic when he burst into the living room. Enjolras wanted to cry happy tears when he found Grantaire. The kid was miserable, but he was safe and that was probably because he wasn’t alone.

Grantaire was lying on the couch in a bundle of blankets while Cosette stroked his hair and murmured reassuringly. She gave a start when Enjolras ran in like a crazy person, but she recovered herself pretty quickly all things considered.

She also had the sense to duck out of the way when Enjolras went running at the couch. He grabbed Grantaire by the shoulders, pulled him up into a sitting position, divesting him of most of his blanket cocoon in the process, and hugged him tightly. Grantaire had spent most of the last hour sobbing, so at the moment he didn’t have many more tears to give. He remained worryingly numb and sadly vacant while Enjolras clung to him and reassured himself that his lover hadn’t done anything rash in his absence.

Cosette briefly left the room and returned with a damp washcloth. “Rub this around his eyes. His skin looked a little puffy and sore.”

Enjolras nodded. “Thank you.” He gingerly patted Grantaire’s face, then brushed some sweaty bangs aside and kissed his forehead. “I’m so sorry, ‘Taire. What do you need from me?”

Grantaire blinked a few times, then shook his head. He looked lost. “I don’t know,” he rasped out. “I don’t know what to do.”

Feuilly walked into the room, took one look at Grantaire, then respectfully stood by the door instead. Cosette joined him. “Have either of you spoken with Courfeyrac?” she murmured.

Feuilly shook his head. “I brought Eponine to the café to cover for Enjolras and Jehan. I guess Jehan’s on his way to the hospital.”

“Jehan?”

“I know. But Courfeyrac called Grantaire because he didn’t want to be alone, and obviously Grantaire can’t go. Jehan volunteered to stay with him instead. They haven’t even spoken since the breakup. Do you…do you think that’s going to be okay?”

Cosette gave a helpless shrug. “I don’t know what to make of anything right now. If you boys don’t mind, now that you’re all here I want to step out for a little while. Papa’s got some excellent books on grieving and I think I could use a refresher before stepping into a caregiver role.”

“Thank you, Cosette,” Enjolras called. She nodded a goodbye to him, retrieved her purse from the kitchen, and left.

Feuilly took another look at the limp, dazed wreck that was Grantaire, and of Enjolras’ painful and desperate determination to fix an impossible situation, and decided that he was a third wheel. He went into the kitchen to participate in the chain of texts the friends were sending each other and give the couple some privacy.

The next few days were among the more difficult Enjolras and Grantaire had faced together.
Grantaire spent most of his time shut in their room in a state of unresponsiveness. Enjolras would have worried more, but Grantaire was still perfectly lucid. He came out of his fits of sullenness long enough to eat and bathe, and when he noticed that Enjolras had chewed his nails down to stubs worrying for him, he explained that he simply didn’t know what to do, so he was doing nothing.

“I can’t paint like this. That will come later, but right now I’m too shaky to hold a brush. In the old days, I’d have gone for a nice red wine to loosen me up enough to get the grief on canvas. And when it’s bad-bad, I’d do something stronger to black out. Or, y’know…” He rubbed at his arms self-consciously. “But I’m not doing any of that shit anymore, so…so yeah. Nothing’s about all I got left.”

“Do you want to talk?” Enjolras asked.

Grantaire shook his head. “Later. M’not quite ready yet.”

“Okay. I love you.”

He smiled weakly, and then broke down into fresh tears because that made him think of their wedding, and how Bridget wouldn’t get to see it.

Neither of them worked while this was going on. Jacques, Enjolras’ boss, was great about it. He helped Enjolras find coverage for all of his shifts and managed to pay him some “vacation” hours Enjolras was pretty sure he wasn’t supposed to actually have. Conversely, Grantaire’s boss was a prick and he got fired for calling out for too many shifts.

At least their success at the con and the commissions and sales that had poured in as a result were going to buffer them through this. Grantaire was still going to have to go job hunting as soon as he recovered though.

On the morning of the wake Grantaire calmly got himself dressed, then sat down on the end of the bed with his headphones on, blasting music with his eyes closed. Enjolras watched from the doorway for a song or two, privately worried for his lover’s emotional health in a particularly concentrated way as opposed to the constant ache that had been his companion for the past few days, then determined he shouldn’t interfere. Grantaire was pretty good about coming to him when he needed comfort.

He went and sat with Combeferre in the kitchen instead. Combeferre was already mostly dressed, but he was only wearing an undershirt. His charcoal dress shirt was spread out on the table, and he was picking cat hair off of it with a lint roller while he drank a mug of tea. “Guess who’s been using the dresser drawer I keep my nice clothes in as a cat bed?”

Enjolras couldn’t see either of Combeferre’s chubby kitties fitting, so he winced and apologized on Raoul’s behalf.

“It’s cool. I’ve almost got all the fur up. So…how’s Grantaire doing?”

Enjolras shrugged. “It’s hard to read him right now.”

“Are you okay?”

He pressed his lips together and shook his head. “Not in the least. But I’ll deal with my feelings when Grantaire and Courfeyrac don’t need our help quite so much.”

“Enjolras-”
“I’ll be fine. It’s not like supporting my lover and my friend through their grief will be bad for me.”

Grantaire appeared in the doorway a moment later, and Combeferre let the conversation drift. They pointedly chatted about things that were not the wake until it was time to get going.

Combeferre parked his car next to Feuilly’s. They didn’t recognize any of the other cars in the lot, aside from Courfeyrac’s Volvo, but then, they’d also gotten to the funeral home early.

Feuilly and Eponine were on the porch out front, Eponine attacking Gavroche’s hair with a comb while Feuilly distracted him by teaching him how to tie his tie. Little R was mostly hidden behind Azelma’s knees, and to everyone’s surprise, Peter Parker, or Michel, they supposed, was standing a ways off looking very uncomfortable in a sweater vest and bow tie. They all looked up when Enjolras, Combeferre, and Grantaire walked up the steps and joined them.

“Hi ‘Taire,” Little R walked up to him first and held out an envelope. “I made you and Curfrack cards.”

“Thanks, buddy.” Grantaire reacted on autopilot. Enjolras ended up being the one to take the card for safe keeping, and Feuilly pulled Little R aside to try to explain why his friend was behaving so oddly. Grantaire distractedly caught the phrase “people act all different ways when they’re sad” without really processing it.

“‘Taire,” Eponine said, lightly taking his arm. “Courf’s inside with his dad. He told me to tell you he wants to see you as soon as you’re ready.”

Hollowly, Grantaire nodded. He let out a quiet relieved breath when Enjolras followed him inside, because he was having a difficult time walking into that building and making everything real.

Grantaire couldn’t even really remember his own mother’s wake. He’d spent most of it spectacularly shitfaced, and hadn’t been much more coherent for the funeral.

Enjolras reached over and gently touched the small of his back, urging him forward. Feeling a bit more grounded, Grantaire made his way through the funeral home. The first room they passed through was cluttered beyond belief with flowers that almost obscured the easels displaying photoboards. The room was almost bereft of furniture in an attempt to contain all the vases and baskets. Already blinking back tears, Grantaire hurried away from the sentimental displays and went into the adjoining room.

If the first room had gone overboard with the flowers, it was nothing in comparison to the display around the casket. It was an allergy sufferer’s nightmare.

The casket was nice and simple. Warm colored, plain. Bridget would have approved, Grantaire supposed.

He couldn’t bring his eyes to rest on her body. Not yet.

Baby steps.

Charles was bent over on the kneeler just in front of his wife, face scrunched up in silent prayer while Courfeyrac rubbed his back.

He looked almost like a stranger. Courfeyrac wasn’t exactly a flamboyant dresser; that distinction was all Jehan’s, but he certainly didn’t dress somberly under normal circumstances. Grantaire was pretty sure he’d never seen him all in black before. It suited him. He’d tamed his unruly mop of hair
into a semblance of order and between that and the nicely cut suit he looked unusually elegant.

Of course, this illusion only lasted until you noticed that he’d chewed his lip bloody and that his eyes were red rimmed.

“H-hey,” Grantaire murmured, feeling like an intruder.

Then Courfeyrac hugged him and that feeling dissipated in the wake of shared grief. “You’re not leaving my side until this is over, okay?” Courfeyrac’s voice was trembling; he didn’t sound like himself either. “I need your help, dude. Dad’s…”

“I’ll be here,” Grantaire promised.

“Good. Cool. Okay, I can do this.” Courfeyrac let go of him and wiped at his face with the back of his hand. “Um…when—when I was making one of the boards—did you look at them? It was, um, well I’ve got some pictures of Mom from when she was a teenager, and there’s some—some cool ones from the wedding. And there’s a really nice one of you and her. I thought you might want it after.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“C’mon. Let’s go look at them before the place fills up.” Courfeyrac turned to Charles. “Dad, we’ll be right back.”

Charles didn’t say anything. A further hunching of his shoulders was the only indication that he might have heard them.

Enjolras remained a few steps behind them while they looked through the photographs. Bridget’s life was fairly well documented. Grantaire saw photos that were completely new to him; Bridget as a baby and a young girl in Ireland, a particularly moody black and white shot of her as a teenager smoking a cigarette while wearing a flower child dress with a leather jacket. She was perched on a rock in front of a harsh looking ocean landscape. Grantaire wanted to paint it, and immediately asked Courfeyrac if he could have that one too.

“Sure. This is the one I was talking about though.” He started towards a board that was mostly pictures of him and his mom from his teen years. Grantaire was in more of the pictures than he was comfortable with; there were a couple from prom, one from a graduation dinner, one from one of Courfeyrac’s plays, one from a student art show. Courfeyrac pointed out a shot of Grantaire and Bridget in the kitchen together getting ready for Thanksgiving dinner.

Grantaire was hit with a vivid recollection of that day. He’d been eighteen at the time and it was his first Thanksgiving after losing his own mother. Bridget had “forced” him over to replace the old routine of having dinner with his parents at the hospital. They’d spent a lot of one on one time throughout the day, as Courfeyrac had no interest in helping his mother in the kitchen and Grantaire hadn’t wanted to be anywhere else doing anything else.

It really was a nice picture. Charles had taken it, without them noticing until after the deed had been done. The candid shot captured Bridget mid-laugh, with streaks of flour in her hair and smeared across her cheek. One of her arms was flung around Grantaire while he smiled warmly at her in gratitude.

“Yeah, I’d like to keep that one,” Grantaire whispered.

“Cool. I’ll set it aside for you.”

“Courf, um…there’re kind of a lot of pictures of me up.”
“Yeah. And?”

“Well…don’t you think your family might think that’s weird?”

Courfeyrac regarded him blankly for a moment before speaking. “I don’t give half a fuck if they do. Dude, you’ve been my best friend since I was fourteen and Mom loved you. Everyone knows you guys had a special relationship.”

“O-okay.”

He let it go, and they continued looking over the photos and reading the cards on the flowers until it was time to get started. Grantaire felt a stab of discomfort again when he realized Courfeyrac wanted him to stand in the line with him. But it had to be okay, because Courfeyrac wanted him there and he was Courfeyrac’s best friend. He was allowed to support him.

He kind of wished Enjolras could stand with them and support him though.

Feuilly and the Thenardiers were the first through to offer their condolences. Feuilly carried Little R, who took one look at the casket before hiding his face in Feuilly’s neck. Gavroche, spitfire though he was, went somber and serious, allowing himself to be herded about by his sisters with an uncharacteristically docile manner.

Eponine pulled Courfeyrac into a hug that he returned with a muffled sob. When they broke apart their eyes were both wet. Even Azelma gave him a hug.

Next came some of Courfeyrac’s cousins and aunts and uncles. Grantaire tried to keep as near Courfeyrac as possible, so the family would know that he was there in a supportive capacity, not to coopt their grief. Bridget’s sister, Nancy, joined them in the line, keeping close to Charles and periodically forcing him to wipe his eyes or go sit down for a minute.

Charles clearly wasn’t doing well, but he also was reluctant to leave the casket. Grantaire replaced Nancy every now and then, giving Charles a bracing pat or just looking at him with perfect sympathy and understanding. Awkward and abrasive as they both were, Bridget had been the one person who’d never judged them for it. She just loved them, and now she was gone and their worlds were both that much darker for losing that one person with whom effortless conversation and unconditional sympathy had always been present.

It felt like the wake was going to last forever. Bridget had been incredibly involved in her community, Church members, town council members, the garden club, Courfeyrac’s old teachers, a bunch of their former classmates and classmates’ parents, and tons of people Courfeyrac only pretended to know made their way through the room with meaningless sympathy that had to be politely answered.

It was a nice break whenever one of their friends showed up. Cosette and Marius came through with Valjean, who pulled Charles aside for a few minutes, to the surprise of the young people. Whatever he said, it seemed to help.

Combeferre, Enjolras, and Bahorel were through shortly after that. Enjolras embraced Grantaire and murmured in his ear. “You’re doing excellent, my love, but do you need a break?”

“I’m okay,” Grantaire said, casting a nervous glance at Courfeyrac.

“We’re milling around, if you need anything. You’re doing really well, but if you need to take some time for yourself…”
“I’m okay,” he insisted again, lest it cease being true with that tempting offer of sympathy.

Bahorel took coffee orders from Courfeyrac and Nancy, with Charles and Grantaire saying they weren’t feeling well enough to drink anything, and then they were inundated with more faceless well-wishers.

Joly, Legle, and Musichetta came through before Bahorel got back with the coffees. Grantaire was thinking it might finally be time to force Courfeyrac to take a break, when his eyes fell on a couple he hadn’t expected to see.

His father had just ambled into the room. Ray was swaying a little where he stood, clad in black jeans and a stained green polo. He looked vaguely disoriented, and was leaning heavily on his daughter’s arm.

Jacqui looked more put-together, at least. Her dull brown hair had been pulled back into a matronly bun, and her simple grey dress would have flattered her if she hadn’t been slouching.

Charles did a double take when they reached him. “Ray. I’m surprised to see you here.”

“Why? You came to my wife’s crap. Why wouldn’t I come to yours?”

“Charles, I am so sorry for your loss,” Jacqui cut in, shooting her father a withering look. She nudged Ray so that his weight was centered on his own feet, and then she gave Courfeyrac and Charles quick hugs.

While Jacqui was distracted giving her obligatory remarks to the father and son, Ray turned on Grantaire. “The hell’re you doing standing in th’line? You wouldn’t even stand in the line for your own fucking mother, you ungrateful shit.”

“Hi Dad,” Grantaire returned, doing his best to keep his voice toneless.

Jacqui abruptly turned away from Courfeyrac. “Dad, I warned you.”

“But he-”

“Nope. Absolutely not. I specifically told you that you were not allowed to cause a scene. And what are you doing? Causing a scene. I’m taking you out to the car.”

“But-”

“We’re not playing the ‘who’s grieving correctly’ game this time. Now c’mon.” Jacqui grabbed Ray’s arm and gave it a tug. She started hauling him away, but turned back when she got to the doorway. “Hey, R. Come outside in like five minutes and have a cigg with me. We need to catch up.”

“Okay.”

Grantaire went out to the parking lot after about ten minutes. He would have gone in the five Jacqui had asked for, but he had to assure Courfeyrac that he was fine despite being unexpectedly confronted with his abusive father, and then convince himself that Courfeyrac was going to be okay on his own for a little while. Thankfully, Aunt Nancy seemed to be stepping up. Jacqui was waiting for him on a bench by the rear exit.

Rather than explain that he was trying not to smoke anymore (a pack lasted him about two weeks
these days), Grantaire politely took the cigarette she offered and dropped onto the bench next to her.

“So how are you holding up, Sunshine?”

“Better than I ever would have expected,” Grantaire said, with surprising honesty. “I’ve got a pretty good support system though.”

“Yeah. You look really good. Seriously, kid. I almost didn’t recognize my baby brother in all your presentability.” She took a long drag from her cigarette and promptly dropped ash on her skirt. She didn’t seem to notice. “Sorry about Dad. I made him swear up and down not to be an asshole, but what are you gonna do? It’s wired into him at this point.”

“Yeah. Well, he always did make everything about Mom.”

“Mm. For him, everything was.” Jacqui let out a sigh and rubbed at her temple. “He’s not so bad now though. I mean, for him. He mostly just sits in his room upstairs and drinks and watches shitty TV. We haven’t gotten ourselves evicted in like five years.”

Grantaire felt a twinge of guilt for not helping Jacqui look after their father, which was just ridiculous, so it was easily brushed aside. Not only was Ray a grown man and therefore by rights not their responsibility, but Jacqui was better equipped to support him than Grantaire was. She’d always had a better relationship with the man, she had gainful employment as a nurse, and she lived on her own.

She chatted with him for a few minutes about her life and its challenges. Grantaire listened politely, though he really didn’t care much about the sexy coworker that wasn’t paying attention to her cute scrubs, or how the woman who lived upstairs from them owned too many cats and the smell had gotten out into the hallway.

Then Jacqui started asking him questions and he had to tune back into the conversation. “So I see you’re an artist now. Like really and truly selling your art, an artist. I always knew you were going to go somewhere with that. Congratulations, kid.”

“Thanks. It’s…weird. Jacqui, it’s really fucking weird. No one’s ever cared about my art before.”

Jacqui flicked her cigarette butt away and went to light a fresh one. She let out a rumble of a laugh. “Yeah? I think that’s in your head, R. See, I remember back when you were in eighth grade and Mr. Russo stole one of your paintings from you, forged Dad’s signature, and entered you in a contest. Didn’t you win a five hundred dollar scholarship?”

Grantaire shrugged. “I guess that was going a bit above and beyond. But still…I like drawing. Ergo, it shouldn’t work out for me. That’s not how life works.”

“Clearly. Well, just make sure you don’t follow me in my fuck ups. I got into healthcare because I was sure it would always pay the bills, and it will. But I’m going to fucking hate what’s left of my life because this is not my passion.”

Grantaire frowned. “When I sell out, I’ll buy you a house.”

She laughed. “Thanks. And if selling out doesn’t work, you’re perfectly welcome to crash with me and Dad.”

“Ah, thanks, but I probably won’t take you up on that.”

“Grantaire?”
They both looked up, and Grantaire gave a small start because he hadn’t even noticed Enjolras walking up to them.

“You weren’t inside and I got worried. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah.” Grantaire flicked his cigarette and nodded at Jacqui. “I was just catching up with my sister. Enjolras, this is Jacqui. Jacqui, this is Enjolras.”

“You’re real?” Jacqui shrieked.

They both gave her a funny look. “Why…why wouldn’t I be real?”

Jacqui blinked a few times, then burst into loud guffaws. “Sorry, that sounds brain dead stupid. It’s just, R’s been posting about you on facebook for fucking ever and then when he changed his relationship status I just assumed he’d made this imaginary boyfriend and was doing it ironically or something. Because with the way he talks about you, you do not sound real.”

“Ah. Well I am.”

“Clearly.” She smiled at him and they shook hands. “I guess I’ll need to get to know you then, if you’re going to be marrying my baby brother. You’ll have a friend request before the day is out.”

“I’ll be sure to accept it. I guess I’ll leave you to your catching up then. I’ll be inside if you need me, Grantaire.” Enjolras bent down to give him a quick kiss, then went back inside.

Jacqui may or may not have been checking out his ass as he walked away. “Damn, R.” Make that a ‘definitely’ on checking out his ass.

“Yep.” Grantaire couldn’t help the proud smirk.

“That man is too pretty to be real.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Does he have a brother?”

Grantaire snorted. “Nope. He’s got a nearly identical cousin though.”

“Ooo…that works.”

“He’s gay too though. And taken.”

“Well why’d you fucking bring him up then? Asshole.”

“Are you surprised?”

“Don’t think I won’t give you a noogie just because you’re taller than me now.”

The friends all went their separate ways after the wake was over. Feuilly and the Thenardiers were the first to leave, as they had to drive Michel back to the Lawrences, and then Bahorel and Musichetta left together to take a drive. Cosette and Marius went through the line once more to say goodbye to Courfeyrac before they left with Valjean, Joly and Legle did another coffee run for the grievers before ducking out, and Combeferre and Enjolras remained until the end.

They were on their way out the door with Grantaire when the three of them saw something that gave
them pause. Hugh was parked just in front of the funeral home, as opposed to the parking lot next to it, and after a few minutes Jehan and Courfeyrac brushed past them to climb into the backseat together.

Enjolras arched a brow but didn’t say anything. Grantaire seemed resolved to pretend he hadn’t noticed anything, so Combeferre remained quiet as well.

They all met up at the Musain after the funeral the next day. By this point the friends had lifted each other’s spirits enough to move from crushing grief to celebrating the life lost. Courfeyrac and Grantaire told stories about Bridget, Jehan passed around a plate of layer bars he’d made from one of her recipes, and then Courfeyrac and Combeferre taught them some Irish dirges.

“You’re Irish-Irish too?” Grantaire asked.

“Not as directly as Courfeyrac, but three out of four grandparents are from the old country,” Combeferre answered. “It’s Massachusetts, ’Taire. I think we’re all part-Irish, aren’t we?”

“Italian,” Legle said. “And, y’know, French-Canadian, but I think most of us have that one too, right?”

Murmurs of agreement passed around the table.

Courfeyrac smirked. “So we all exemplify a local history lesson in nineteenth century patterns of immigration, huh? My dad’s family came to the Salem area for the mills. Just in time for that industry to move south.”

“My family went to Lawrence for the mills initially,” Feuilly said. “We came out to Lynn for factory work relatively recently.”

“Enjolras, are you okay?” Grantaire asked quietly, noticing that, for whatever reason, his boyfriend was uncomfortable with the conversation.

Enjolras gave a curt nod, but didn’t say anything.

“They went to Lynn for factory work?” Courfeyrac asked. “Were they making Fluff?” That question invested everyone in the conversation. Marshmallow Fluff was a beloved local product that locals usually forgot was made locally.

Feuilly shook his head. “We started out at one of the really big mills in Lawrence,” here Enjolras cringed, “but my Dad worked at a factory in Salem. We moved to Lynn to be close to his work.”

Cosette let out a little gasp and dropped a nearly full cup of tea on the floor. For a few minutes everyone sitting nearby her frantically helped her mop up the spilled tea while Marius urgently checked to make sure that she hadn’t scalded herself (even Joly thought he was overdoing his concern over potential burns), but then they all settled down again and Marius left to get Cosette a fresh cup of tea.

“What was that about, if you don’t mind my asking?” Musichetta shot Cosette a look that was equal parts concerned and curious.

She blushed. “Sorry. It’s just…I think I know which factory Feuilly’s father worked for, that’s all.”

Feuilly looked confused. “Well sure. There was only like one still open in Salem when we were kids. There really isn’t a lot of manufacturing left in this area. I don’t see why it’s worth freaking out over. I’m also kinda curious why Enjolras kept flinching when I mentioned the textile mills in
“Me too,” Grantaire said, with a pointed look at his boyfriend.

Enjolras let out a long sigh. “Fine, I suppose I might as well come out with it. You know how my family is disgustingly wealthy and that I mean the disgusting part with every fiber of my being?” They all nodded at this, even Musichetta and Marius, who really weren’t all that well acquainted with the level of Enjolras’ former privilege. “My ancestors owned half a dozen textile mills. They got the startup capital in their ventures with the East India Company.”

“Working the triangular trade?” Courfeyrac asked. Legle let out a low whistle.

Eponine frowned. “For those of us who didn’t pay attention in social studies?”

“The slave trade. Enjolras’ family traded refuse cod to the sugar plantations in the West Indies, and the sugar was manufactured into rum which was then traded for more slaves for the plantations,” Combeferre explained.

“Oh. Oh shit. No wonder you hate your parents’ money so much,” Eponine said with a sympathetic frown.

Enjolras stiffly nodded. “And the conditions the mills operated under weren’t all that much better than honest to god slavery, so yes, I have a lot of issues with my privilege. And if all of your families really did settle into the area because of the Industrial Revolution, there’s a good chance at least some of your ancestors worked themselves to death for the benefit of mine.”

“It’s okay, Enj. We won’t hold it against you,” Bahorel joked.

Cosette stood up and walked outside rather suddenly. Looking panicked, Marius followed after her, calling her name.

“That was…odd,” Joly observed.

Musichetta reached for her drink and winked at him. “At least it’s not my fault this time. Can we sing dirges again, because that part was fun.”

Combeferre and Courfeyrac went back to teaching them dirges, meanwhile, Grantaire covertly started texting Cosette under the table (he stole Enjolras’ phone to do so, as they hadn’t gotten around to replacing his yet).

That was how he found out that Valjean used to own the factory Feuilly’s father worked at.

The one where almost a hundred workers had died as a direct result of being exposed to hazardous materials.

Chapter End Notes

There are rather a lot of local history drops at the end of this chapter. I though it best to compile some handy references for those of you who are not from the general area (which I assume is most of you):
http://www.marshmallowfluff.com/pages/homepage.html (yes, it's that important)

http://abolition.e2bn.org/slavery_43.html - I like this one for mentioning some agency on behalf of the African slaves, but generally none of the links I'm finding on the triangular trade do it justice. It either leans too American or too British (and if I remember correctly, the majority of the slaves who suffered through the Middle Passage wound up in South America). One thing I remember from my local history classes at school though, apparently after the American Revolution when the British tried to keep trading with the slavers in Africa they ran into some difficulty because the slavers only wanted New England rum and wouldn't accept British brandy as a substitute :P

http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/salem.html This talks a little about the museum I dream of working at. If you're ever in Massachusetts, make sure you visit the PEM!

http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/ww/mills.html The mill museums are also really cool :)
Chapter 54

Chapter Summary

Feuilly and Eponine have some issues.
Courfeyrac and Grantaire struggle with their grief.

Chapter Notes

Not really a whole lot to say this update. I had a difficult time writing this chapter, and I'm not quite sure why. Eponine and Feuilly continue to throw me, so sorry if this isn't up to my usual par. Shout out to Max for letting me ramble about the fic with her on facebook. Her awesomeness got me back into my writing groove and got my confidence up enough to finish the damn chapter <3

Also, I think of the promised one-shots the wedding will show up before the New York one. I got some serious inspiration for that the other day at work (when I can't sit down and write, obviously :P)

Azelma was asleep on the couch when Eponine and Feuilly got back from the Musain. She started awake as soon as the front door shut behind them, then dove to clear the browsing history from the laptop she’d borrowed from Feuilly while they were out for the post-funeral gathering.

Eponine gladly took off her three inch heels, the only pair of formal shoes she had that matched her “classy” black dress, and limped to the couch to join her. “How were the boys?”

Azelma shrugged. “Quiet. They were both kind of…kind of off. Gav went to bed without a fuss and Little R was being really quiet, even for him. I don’t know if taking them to the wake was such a good idea.”

Eponine bristled. “I’m pretty sure it was their first wake, but I don’t think it was the first time Gavroche ever saw a dead body before. He was at the New Year’s Eve card game at Claquesous’ place, wasn’t he?”

Azelma shook her head. “No, he was squatting in the condemned movie theater at the time.”

“Ah.”

Feuilly shot them both concerned looks that they didn’t see, but refrained from saying anything. It was a strategy he’d adopted pretty early into living with the Thenardier family and so far it was proving beneficial to the sanity of all.

He might ask about that one later when he and Eponine were in private though.
The sisters started chatting about how their respective nights; Azelma talked a little more about how the boys seemed to be responding to the tragic events of the week, and Eponine did the same regarding the college boys. Feuilly half listened, lost in his own thoughts regarding the loss of their friend’s mother, and then he noticed the small light coming from the crack under Gavroche and Little R’s bedroom door.

Scowling, he went to peek into the room, expecting to find Gavroche sitting up in bed with a flashlight and a comic book. To his surprise, Gavroche was passed out in bed with his mouth hanging open and an arm dangling over the side of the top bunk.

Little R was sitting in the corner with tear tracks down his cheeks. He was holding up a flashlight with one shaking hand, and he was trying to draw on a half sheet of construction paper with the other. The floor around him was covered with nearly all of his art supplies, along with crumpled up pieces of paper.

As quietly as he could Feuilly crossed the room and crouched down in front of him. He put a finger to his lips and motioned to Gavroche. Little R nodded, took Feuilly’s hand, and walked out into the main room with him.

Eponine and Azelma shot them surprised looks when the two made their way past the sofa, but they didn’t say anything. Feuilly held Little R’s hand all while they walked into his bedroom, then he shut the door behind him and pulled out his desk chair for Little R. The boy sat down and kicked his legs back and forth. He kept his head down.

Feuilly sat down on the bed next to him and spent nearly five minutes trying to think of something to say. He started to stutter out an inquiry into what Little R had been doing coloring when he was supposed to be sleeping, when the kid supplied an explanation himself.

“Taire was still sad. The first card didn’t work, so I tried to make a better one. But it’s not working either. He’s s’posed to smile when I make him cards. He usually does but he didn’t this time. I think I know what I did wrong with the card though. He was teaching me about compuh…comizishun. I used too much negaty space and I’m not a’posed to do that anymore. So I’ll use less next time and then it’ll work.”

When Little R looked up with that confused, vulnerable look he had, Feuilly was tempted to bolt and return with the girls for reinforcements. He managed to remind himself just in time that the kid did better with one on one discussions, and that groups made him too nervous to talk. And Feuilly had volunteered for this, so he sucked it up and tried to figure out what to say, all the while fearing he’d somehow make it worse.

“Buddy…look, it’s great that you want to cheer Grantaire up. I mean, making him the cards is really nice. But losing Bridget is a big loss for him. It’s going to take him time to recover from that. While he is recovering, having the card helps because it reminds him that you care about him too, but there’s no magic solution for grief. It just takes time.”

“When Statue Man almost died the card helped. That was big too, an’ it made them both happy, that I drewed for them so then I kept drawing for people and they like it.” Little R’s eyes were wide and pleading, begging Feuilly to be wrong about art’s inability to mend that kind of hurt. “People like me when I color them pictures. I color all the time now, and no one yells or anything, Fooy. It’s much better than before. I haven’t been kicked since I left my Mom an’ Dad’s. You know, except for once.” He closed his eyes in a tight grimace and dropped his head again, this time also clutching at himself protectively.

Shit. This was why Feuilly hadn’t trusted himself for the conversation. He was a bit startled to learn
that Little R thought the only reason he wasn’t being beaten and abused anymore was because he colored pictures for everyone. That kind of explained how prolific his art was though, and why he got nervous if he wasn’t given quiet time to draw.

Feuilly tentatively touched Little R’s shoulder, and when he didn’t flinch he carefully grasped the tiny chin and nudged his face so that they were making eye contact. “Buddy, none of us are ever going to hit you, I promise. Not your sisters, not your brothers, and certainly not me or our friends. There is nothing, I repeat, nothing you could ever do to make any of us raise a hand to you. We like it when you color for us because we like your pictures, but they’re not obligations.”

“You don’t have to make them if you don’t want to. If you’d rather watch TV or play outside with Gavroche, you can do that too. We thought you liked to draw. Buddy, we only like the pictures so much because we think you like making them for us.”

Little R made a slow nod. “I do like coloring, but not always. Okay. Are you sure though? Because I don’t do anything else, and Dad always said that we needed to pull our weight. That meant that we had to cry in front of rubes or take things out of their pockets or stuff. I like coloring pictures way more than that.”

“Living here isn’t like living with your Mom and Dad.”

“Well yeah, duh. I noticed that.”

Feuilly grinned. “So it means there are all new rules. While you’re living with me and Eponine, you don’t have to worry about doing anything other than growing up and learning new things. And even then…take lots of breaks and have fun too. You don’t need to memorize those GRE flash cards until you’re my age.”

“Really? Okay, well then I have like forever on that. Thanks Fooy. But um…what about ‘Taire? Is there a way to make him smile now?”

Feuilly gave Little R’s hand a gentle squeeze. “He was smiling tonight. Eponine and I were out with him, and we were sitting together with lots of friends and talking about all the good things that Courfeyrac’s mom did for everyone. That’s a good thing to do when you lose someone and you miss them. You think about all the best things about them and the ways they made you happy. You honor their memory that way.”

“And he was smiling?” Little R asked, with a gravity poorly suited to his youth. Feuilly nodded, and some of the gravity left. “Statue Man’s gotta be helping. Good. I still want to draw him another card though. I’ll figure out negaty space if I practice enough.”

“Seeing as it’s three hours past your bedtime though, I think we need to put off the coloring until tomorrow.”

“I guess.”

Feuilly walked him to the bathroom and waited while he washed his face, then he walked him to his bedroom and tucked him in. “We can leave the crayons and the construction paper where it is for now. Do you feel better? Do you think you can sleep?”

“It took some effort not to grin like an idiot at the rush of warmth that brought to him. He couldn’t
help but feel like these one-on-one damaged munchkin chats would have been handled much better by Combeferre, so any positive feedback he got from the kids really hit him hard.

Looking after the younger Thenardiers was a particularly important task Feuilly was terrified of fucking up.

Feuilly wished Little R good night, then tip toed out of the room. By this point Azelma had gone to bed and it was only Eponine sitting on the couch. She was texting one of their friends, but she ended the conversation when Feuilly joined her.

“So what was that about?”

Feuilly tiredly rubbed at his eyes, and did his best to sum up the conversation. Somehow during the course of his rambling Eponine wound up partially draped over his chest with his arm curled around her. She was running her fingers up and down his side in a gentle, lazy caress.

“Thank you,” she murmured, when he’d finally rambled to silence. “You know, you don’t have to do things like that.”

“Like what?”

“Hon, don’t get me wrong. I totally love that you’re helping me take care of the kids. In fact, I’m positive I’d have gone crazy by now without you and everything you’ve been doing for us. But you know…it’s not, like, a condition of the relationship or anything.”

“Oh, I know that. You did happen to notice that I was helping you look after the kids even before we started dating, right?”

“Mm.” Eponine kept tracing her aimless patterns, but she dipped a bit lower, her fingers dancing just under his shirt and over the skin of his hip. She let her eyes fall shut. “I don’t want you to feel pressured. That conversation you just had with Little R sounded scary.”

“It was. I don’t want to screw up and accidentally hurt the kids somehow.”

“A fucking men to that. Hey babe, um…so the other day when I flipped out on you…”

Feuilly kissed the top of her head. “Don’t worry about it. That was pre-menstrual Eponine for ‘I miss you,’ right?”

She pulled away from him with a horrified expression on her face. “You keep track of my period?”

“Mebbe. Look, you and Azelma have particularly brutal cycles. I made a note last month after she locked herself in the bathroom and blared Beyonce songs for three straight hours. Now I know when to stock up on carbs and chocolate. It’s a survival mechanism.”

Eponine pretended to be indignant for exactly thirty seconds, but in truth, the dark chocolate bars in the freezer had been very much appreciated.

“Well anyway, period aside, I’m sorry I blew up at you. I kinda feel like I’m failing at this whole girlfriend thing. I mean…we barely see each other when we’re not parenting the kids and I can’t even…um…”

Feuilly stopped her with a gentle press of his finger to her lips and waited for her to make eye contact with him. “Eponine, don’t. You’re worth the wait, and it’s worth it to both of us to make sure we get it right. There’s more to being in love than having sex, okay?”
“I feel like I’m letting you down.”

“Well you’re not.”

He said it with so much conviction. She tried once more to believe him, but it was difficult. She’d never witnessed a relationship that didn’t have a sexual component to it. It didn’t seem real.

Nothing about this thing with Feuilly felt real. He was too good. He made her smile too easily and he was always there and listening and just so damn helpful.

And he was clearly trying not to yawn. Smirking, Eponine leaned up and pressed a quick kiss to his lips. “Let’s get you to bed, mister.”

“Mm, I think you could use a nice long rest, my dear, as you seem to have me confused with your little brothers.”

“I’d have said mister man if that were the case.”

“Ah. Well I appreciate the distinction.”

Feuilly allowed himself to be tugged to his feet by his petite companion, and smiled lazily when Eponine playfully shoved his towards his bedroom. Then he lingered at the doorway, reluctant to go inside and part with her for the night.

Then Eponine leaned in for a goodnight kiss that just kept going. They were soft, gentle kisses, but every time their lips parted they found them pressed together again. She felt so damn perfect in his arms.

“Feuilly…” She had to whisper against his lips, because he still couldn’t move away. “Can I sleep in your room tonight? I won’t…I mean, I’m not asking to…”

“It’s fine. It’s fine.” He kept an arm around her while they walked to his bed, and her eyes stayed on him while he undressed.

Eponine fell asleep safe in the arms of a man, a novel experience for her but one she was getting to enjoy more and more with every repetition.

Neither Enjolras or Combeferre were willing to admit that they were “Grantaire-sitting”, but that’s exactly what both of them were doing.

Whenever Enjolras left the apartment for work, Combeferre hung in and spent his time in the living room so that if Grantaire felt like he needed company he had easy access to it. When Enjolras wasn’t working, he was home. They kept the kitchen stocked with Grantaire’s favorite blends of tea and snacks, they neatly stacked his DVDs by the television, which was on a lot more than either of the book nerd roommates preferred, and Enjolras refrained from criticizing the crass cartoons his lover enjoyed.

He even shooed his cat away if it looked like Grantaire needed a cuddle.

Grantaire’s grief had settled somewhat into a dull ache. It made him lethargic and restless in turns. He knew he needed to be job hunting, but he was also reluctant to leave the house, so he spent the last few days before the new semester glued to the couch marathoning DVDs and doodling.

Combeferre was taking a shift Grantaire-sitting when the monotony was interrupted. They were on
an episode of Futurama when Grantaire’s new phone went off. He tried to ignore it, but then
Combeferre dropped it on his chest and he had to at least acknowledge that his phone was ringing.

He did so by turning an insolent pout on his roommate. “It’s Courfeyrac. I don’t want company.”

“Answer it or I will. You should not be ignoring him right now.”

Grantaire rolled his eyes, but he picked up the phone. “He should know better than to turn to me
when I’m…blegh.” Rather than elucidate on the meaning of ‘blegh’ he took the call. “What?”

“I’m downstairs. Is it cool if I come up? I brought Pocky.”

“You like Pocky, not me. But yeah, c’mon up.”

“Thanks dude.”

He dropped his phone onto the floor by the couch and scrubbed a hand through his hair. “Argh. I
don’t want to fucking talk about…blegh. He’s going to make me, isn’t he?”

“Probably. You’re his best friend, Grantaire. If he needs you, you should at least try.”

“Will you kindly stop being so sensible and mature? I’m trying to be a self-indulgent mess right
now.”

“No offense ‘Taire, but you’ve been doing that for almost a week now. I think you can take a five
minute break for your best friend of almost ten years.” Combeferre got up to get the door, then he left
for his room to give them some privacy. Courfeyrac sat down on the loveseat, a stick of blueberry
Pocky dangling from his lips.

He looked pretty good, considering he’d just buried his mother. Which was to say if you didn’t know
him personally, you wouldn’t have noticed how subdued he was, how lacking this imitation of his
natural exuberance was, and you wouldn’t be able to see the pain in his brown eyes, which just
weren’t as warm as they usually were.

Grantaire knew he looked like a mess, but that was also nothing new for him.

They sat in an uncomfortable, tense silence. Grantaire muted the television but didn’t turn it off, and
he kept his eyes on the screen. He didn’t bother sitting up or really even look at his friend.

“So is this what you’ve been doing?” Courfeyrac asked, when the uncomfortable silence stretched
on to the ten minute mark.

Grantaire shrugged. “Mostly.”

“Oh. Well, it’s good to know my texts have been unanswered and my calls ignored for a perfectly
valid reason.”

Grantaire shifted his eyes to Courfeyrac, frowned, then glanced back at the television screen. “Sorry.
I just…there are better people to talk to, Courf. I can’t even support myself. I can’t support you.”

“Dude, I know you’re hurting. You get it. That’s why I want to hang with you. Besides, I need your
help specifically on something.”

Grantaire vaguely noticed some rustling noises, but he still wasn’t looking at Courfeyrac and
therefore didn’t see him rooting around in his bag for something. Then a sheet of paper was dropped
on his chest, much like the phone had been earlier. He picked it up and scrunched his face in
confusion as he stared at a messy sketch. “What is this?”

“I want to do a memorial tattoo for Mom. I know I want it to be a heart made out of Celtic knots, and then her date of birth and date of death underneath, but I’m no artist and all the sketches I’ve asked for so far have come back tacky. Fix it up for me.”

“Please?” Grantaire asked with a mocking lilt.

Courfeyrac shook his head. “Do it because it’s important and I fucking need a friend right now, okay? I mean seriously, I appreciate that you stood with me for almost all of the wake, and you were great for the funeral too, but this is more than a two day event, ‘Taire. I lost my mother. You get it. Help me out. You know what she was for me.”

Grantaire sat up and rubbed at his eyes. “I…yeah. Okay, I’ll fix up the sketch. Um…sorry. I mean it, Courf, I’m really sorry. I wish I had more of me to give, but I don’t. I’m a sucky friend, okay?”

“Oh don’t even. We both know you’re better than this.”

Grantaire pressed his lips together and looked down at the drawing. His mind was already working on it. There was potential in the design, but the execution was admittedly terrible, even keeping in mind that Courfeyrac had never been good at drawing. “Where were you thinking of getting it?”

Courfeyrac tapped his right forearm. “Here, on the inside I think. Pretty sure I can still get hired as a high school teacher with a tattoo I can cover with a long sleeved shirt.”

Grantaire nodded distantly. “Would you mind if I got the same one?”

“Not at all. I’d…I’d like that.”

“Cool.”

Grantaire unmuted the TV and Courfeyrac lounged on the loveseat for an episode of Sealab. Grantaire started working on the sketch. He decided to keep it as line art, no color, with strong, clean lines. He kept thinking of that picture of Bridget as a teenager, the moody one of her smoking on the beach in that leather jacket.

“How’ve you been doing?” Courfeyrac asked.

“Meh. I’ve been doing it sober.”

“Well I figured. Um…has that been rough?”

Grantaire shrugged. “I’m not really sure how to cope with this shit. I haven’t been drawing much, I don’t have a job, and I can’t drink or smoke. I’ve pretty much been overeating and watching cartoons and trying not to think. You?”

“Talking to Jehan, actually.”

Grantaire sat up and finally gave Courfeyrac his full attention. He’d hoped, of course, that one of his other friends had stepped up and helped Courfeyrac when he didn’t have it in him, but for it to be Jehan…just what in the fuck was everyone thinking?

“Is that…uh…”

“It’s weird,” Courfeyrac said. “I freely admit that it’s weird. But…he’s kinda the person I wanted to see most. As soon as I found out…as soon as I walked into the hospital and found out that I was too
late and that she’d already…I mean, I just wanted him there because he always knows what to say and no one listens like Jehan. He even hears what I don’t say, if that makes sense."

It didn’t make much sense, except Enjolras and Combeferre heard him in the exact same way so Grantaire understood.

But Jehan.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea to be talking to him though?"

Courfeyrac shook his head. “It’s a shit idea, really. I’m fucked up and in grief and vulnerable, and I was only just starting to get over him. This is the worst thing ever, but I can’t stop and you can’t fucking make me. I’m going to take whatever comfort I can from him for as long as he’ll pity me enough to let me in his life again.”

Grantaire privately wondered if Courfeyrac being aware of how fucked up it was made it okay. Probably not, come to think of it.

“What’s Jehan’s new boy toy think of it?”

Courfeyrac smirked. “Hates it, naturally, but he can’t seem to think of a way to tell me to get lost without coming across as evil. And I like making him uncomfortable, the stupid prick.”

“Jehan’s new squeeze is a prick?”

Courfeyrac frowned. “Not really…he’s actually a pretty cool guy. I’d probably get along with him if he weren’t dating the love of my life. But as he is, he’s a prick.”

“Ah.”

Courfeyrac started tapping his knees. “He looks a lot like Enjolras, and sometimes their voices even sound the same. It’s kind of freaky.”

“Thereir moms are twins.”

“Oh. Well that explains some of it, I guess. I just…I dunno. I think I flirted with Enjolras like once when I first met him, but since then he’s just so not my type that I…I can’t imagine dating someone who reminds me of him. I just don’t get it. I know Jehan’s not in the least attracted to Enjolras either, and really he doesn’t even seem all that attracted to Hugh—”

“Don’t. As the expert on all things related to unhealthy, self-destructive fixations, I am rendering my expert opinion to inform you that this is a terrible direction for your thoughts to go.”

Courfeyrac rolled his eyes. “I know that already. But still…he’s not in love. I’ve seen him in love.”

“He might just be uncomfortable because you’re both there at the same time. You don’t see him when he’s alone with Hugh.”

“True enough. I dunno…” Courfeyrac reached for another stick of Pocky, coincidentally averting his eyes in the process. “He still cares about me. He wouldn’t be helping me now if he didn’t. Maybe he’ll…maybe he’ll like remember why he used to crush on me in the first place. I can hope a little.”

Grantaire’s expression was stony. “A little bit’s enough to really sting later, Courf. Be careful.”

Courfeyrac climbed to his feet and started for the door. Grantaire thought about following after him, but it had already slammed before he could muster the strength to do more than stir.
Stupid lethargy. Damn friggin’ depression.

He couldn’t quite convince himself to get up, so Grantaire restarted the disc he’d just watched and continued not-drinking himself into a stupor.

They needed to talk. They really, really needed to talk.

For one thing, Feuilly was going absolutely crazy wondering what it was about Courfeyrac that allowed Eponine to loosen up and be comfortable enough for sex without resorting to the default kinks she’d learned from Montparnasse. What was so great about Courfeyrac? What did he say or do that Feuilly wasn’t saying or doing?

The cuddles and kisses they’d shared the other night had momentarily soothed his paranoia, but when he woke in bed next to Eponine the following morning all he could think of was was her and Courfeyrac. He wasn’t used to being jealous. He didn’t like being jealous, but he couldn’t turn it off.

Even when Feuilly’d been certain that Eponine was going to pick Combeferre instead of him, it had never eaten away at him like this. It had hurt, but in a different way. He’d been sure that even if he couldn’t be the one to do it, his lady was going to be taken care of, and that was a completely different agony than feeling like he was failing her.

There was clearly something going on with Eponine too. It was possible she was picking up on his unease regarding Courfeyrac, though he hadn’t talked about it with her yet, but something was definitely off. She was behaving erratically, even taking her monthly cycle into account. She bounced between clinginess and passive aggression, and sometimes it felt like no matter what he tried to do he couldn’t make her happy, that he didn’t have it in him. It made him miss when they’d just been friends and they’d go for a drive and spend hours talking.

Now he could reach over and put his arm around her whenever he wanted, unlike in those days, but more than half the time she shrugged away from him because she was ‘too busy for that shit.’

Feuilly watched her folding laundry at the kitchen table, and he felt his stomach knot up. He’d felt so close to her just barely two weeks ago. How could a chasm spring up between them so quickly?

Recalibrating a friendship for romance sucked. Fuck Enjolras and Grantaire for making it look like the most natural, inevitable thing in the world.

Feuilly was on the verge of telling Eponine he wanted to talk to her when her phone rang. Without even noticing Feuilly’s awkward hovering, Eponine brushed past him to get her cell from the counter.

“Hello? …Oh, um, yeah…yeah, okay. Let me just…” She turned towards him. “Hey, Feuilly? Can you keep an ear on the boys for a little bit? ‘Chetta and ‘Ferre are outside. They need to talk to me about something so they want me to go for a drive with them.”

Feuilly desperately wanted to say no. They had plenty of their own issues they needed to address.

He didn’t want to be a controlling douche either though. Eponine had already dealt with enough of that shit for one lifetime.

“Go ahead. Have fun.”
Eponine smiled gratefully at him and kissed his cheek. “Thanks, hon. It doesn’t sound like a fun sort of conversation though.”

And indeed it was not.

They cruised around in Musichetta’s car while she filled Eponine in on the Musain blow out she’d missed, then they hit up a drive through. The transaction conveniently gave Eponine time to process the news that Musichetta and Combeferre had more in common with her than she’d thought, which was probably the whole point as no one seemed all that interested in their fries or their sodas.

Once they were on the road again Combeferre spoke up. “We’d gathered from a few things you’ve said here and there that you’ve been in some situations where consent was…dubious. At best.”

Eponine stiffly nodded. “Yep. My dad tried to out and out pimp me when I was eleven, but my mother almost killed him. I lived in fear of his gang’s wandering hands until Parnasse started protecting me, and even then…there was a cost.”

“I’m sorry, hon,” Musichetta said. She reached into the back and squeezed Eponine’s hand. Eponine squeezed back and tried to will away the lump in her throat.

Eponine picked at her fries, but her stomach was too knotted up to eat. It wasn’t the old anger or self-disgust getting at her though. Oddly enough, it was gratitude.

It was never going to happen again. For as long as she lived, she would never have to live with the fear that had sent her running to Montparnasse. She knew there were better options now, and she was never going to have to stay anywhere she didn’t feel safe. She had real friends now, and they’d given her that freedom. And the best thing about it was that she could pass on that safety to her siblings.

“We brought it up,” Combeferre said, gently bringing her out of her thoughts, “because Musichetta and I have been speaking privately about this ever since it came up in the Musain, and it’s a subject we do want to pursue. Musichetta and Bahorel are getting training to volunteer for a hotline. And I’m…I’m going to work through some things with a professional first, but when I’m ready I want to talk about what happened to me. With other people, I mean. When it happened I tried to get help a couple of times, but everyone made light of it because I was a teenaged boy and teens always want sex, apparently. Whatever the circumstances.”

Eponine felt like crying, but it only lasted a minute. Still though. “I can’t believe your dad didn’t help you.”

Combeferre’s expression hardened, and Eponine guessed he’d been struggling with that one too. She’d never met Combeferre’s parents, but from all accounts they were loving and sensible guardians. It was just plain horrifying to think that Combeferre had gone to his father for help, and had Marie’s attack laughed off as harmless.

“And if you don’t want to go all activist that is more than fine. No peer pressure,” Musichetta promised. “If you wanted to, we were thinking of maybe meeting up from time to time and just chatting. I’ve got wicked intimacy issues and I think I self-sabotage by going after unattainable men because in truth, I kind of don’t want anyone to touch me.”

“I’ve had similar problems,” Combeferre admitted. “If you’re experiencing any of the same, we
might have an easier time tackling these issues together.”

Eponine was sure her expression turned to something ridiculous. She took a sizeable gulp of soda to delay answering, but nope, that didn’t help.

“You don’t have to,” Musichetta cut in, no doubt noticing how incredibly uncomfortable she’d gotten. “No pressure.”

“None at all,” Combeferre added. He was sitting in the front passenger, but he unbuckled and turned around in the seat to watch her with concern. “I’m sorry. We didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“No, no it’s…” What was it? “You know, I don’t even know. I need some time to think about this. To, um…yeah. Think.”

To come up with a polite way to explain why she so totally could not talk about her intimacy issues with Combeferre. Musichetta? Sure. Absolutely. Hell, that would probably help her immensely. She’d get right to the bottom of her problems with Feuilly in no time flat. But Combeferre? He was giving her all sorts of brand spanking new intimacy issues all over again.

And for some stupid reason the feelings that hadn’t quite taken when he’d asked her out were hitting her in full force. Now that she was in a relationship with Feuilly, she found herself crushing on Combeferre.

Fucking hell.

“Okay, sweetie. I’ll bring you home and you can think. It is kind of a lot to go over, isn’t it?” Musichetta said. “It’s a really heavy conversation.”

“Yeah,” Eponine said dazedly.

They dropped her off at the apartment complex. Musichetta got out of the car to give her a hug, and Eponine promised to give her a call later that night. She awkwardly waved at Combeferre, and when he waved back her stomach did a weird whoosh thing it used to do when she’d first met Marius and she’d been stupid over him.

Shit-shit-shit.

It was only once she was back home and sitting in the living room pretending to watch TV with the boys that she realized she liked Combeferre because he no longer seemed like this frighteningly perfect being. He was just as broken as she was.

Grantaire was not-sleeping in bed next to Enjolras, mentally going over designs for the memorial tattoo in a way that could only be described as obsessive (especially as he’d already drawn at least a dozen different variations that evening) when his phone lit up from a text. He snatched the phone off the nightstand and opened the text.

It was Courfeyrac.

_You were right._

Grantaire frowned, and typed out a few question marks. The answer was quick in coming.

_Wasn’t love. Just pity. Jehan’s moving to Canada wit Hugh. Feel like my hearts been ripped out all_
Grantaire shot into a sitting position, then tried to get out of bed without taking his eyes off his phone. He got tangled in the blankets and wound up falling to the floor with a loud thud.

Enjolras shot up and let out a strangled shout. “‘Taire? What, huh?”

“M’fine!” Grantaire called from the floor. “I think I bruised my ass, but I’m fine.” He climbed to his feet and was about to sit back down on the bed when he got another text.

*I’ll be fine. You can go back to sleep.*

Grantaire started furiously typing up a response. *Listen you miserable bastard, u don’t get to text me sounding like ME and then fucking tell me to go to sleep. I wasn’t sleeping and Im damn well not sleeping now so get your ass over here and play video games wit me. Please.*

“‘Taire, what’s going on?” Poor Enjolras sounded so confused when he was half awake.

“Courf’s having an issue. You can go back to sleep, love. I’ve got it.”

Enjolras blinked sleepily a few times. “I can help you if…you don’t need to do this a-alone.” He was silenced by a yawn. Grantaire gently grasped his shoulders and nudged him until he leaned into the pillows. He pulled the sheet up over Enjolras and kissed his forehead. The exhausted barista konked out almost immediately, which was for the best since he was working another opening.

Grantaire noticed another text, and he felt a surge of relief when he read it.

*Omw.*
Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

The author makes a foolish and sloppy attempt to resolve as many dangling plot points as possible while still telling a coherent story.

Chapter Notes

Damn, this chapter was hard to write. It blocked me up for awhile, and then RL got busy. The good news is I'm now full time at one of my shitty jobs and I qualify for health insurance. The bad news is I still don't get a living wage and I'm still in massive amounts of debt. I also started a new job at a museum, but it's just a seasonal gig. Ah well. I'll be doing something I'm passionate about until November, at least.

So yeah, that's why this chapter took so long. Sorry for the wait. Sorry for continuing to be backed up on comments. You guys continue to be fabulous and I look forward to getting your feedback on this one <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I can’t fucking do this.”

“Of course you can do this.”

“No, really. I can’t do this. You’re asking me to work with the public.”

Courfeyrac rolled his eyes. “‘Taire, you’ve worked with the public on and off for four fucking years. Being a cashier at the comic book store counts as customer service. You were engaged with customers, who are in fact people.”

“That is debatable,” Grantaire said. Rather than have him go off on a rant fueled by his hatred of retail in general and obnoxious comic book fanboys in particular, Enjolras cut him off and attempted to get back on topic.

“Grantaire, love, you’re talking about this as though you have a choice. You really don’t. We’re impoverished and you need a new job.” He forced the application into Grantaire’s hand (an application Enjolras had filled out, complete with an impressive forgery of his fiancé’s signature) and gave him a none-too-gentle encouragement shove towards a house museum.

Musichetta and Bahorel had given Enjolras a short list of all the local businesses hiring for the approaching busy season. Salem was hit with a massive upsing in business for the entire month of October thanks to the tourism machine they’d made out of Halloween. As such, jobs were plentiful, but you had to know where to apply, as a lot of the places filled up during the summer months so they could use the comparatively calmer weeks leading up to the big events to train their new staff. Of the places hiring, Enjolras figured the museum was their most likely prospect, as he had a few connections from all his networking. He’d traded a few emails with one of the curators and someone
in HR, so Grantaire was going to be hired…

Assuming they could get him to walk inside and hand in his application.

Grantaire looked the museum over again and let out a whiny huff. “But I don’t want to be a tour guide! Tour guides are cheerful. They’re friendly. They like talking to people.”

“You love talking to people!” Courfeyrac insisted.

“I talk at people, as you damn well know, and there’s a huge fucking difference. I won’t get to control what I say here. I’ll just be spewing crap about rich old white men and how it’s great that they were so rich and white, and now we’ve got a shrine set up to them in this damn old house.” Grantaire turned a pleading look to his lover. “This has got to be something we agree on. That this kind of museum culture is crap.”

“Oh, absolutely,” Enjolras said with a nod. “It would turn my stomach to have to play up participants in the Triangle Trade as valuable contributors to society. You know, kind of like listening to vapid fifteen year olds try to impress me by discussing social politics based on what they’ve skimmed off Twitter. I keep my mouth shut, smile politely where needed, and bring home a paycheck every week. You can damn well do the same.”

Still visibly sulking, Grantaire trudged inside with his head down. He returned less than five minutes later with his hands shoved in his pockets and a scowl on his face. “I have an interview tomorrow afternoon.”

“Beautiful.”

“Enjolras, they want me to wear a tie.”

“Well, we all make sacrifices.”

______________________________

“Feuilly, we need to talk.”

Feuilly, who had just staggered into the apartment after a particularly draining shift on the advanced dementia floor of his nursing home, was hoping to collapse in front of the TV before dragging his aching body to bed. He found himself suddenly energized by panic at his girlfriend’s words. Eponine was at the table where she’d clearly been waiting to anxiously pounce on him the moment he got home.

Azelma and the boys were in the living room. Without a word, Azelma gathered up her headphones and Feuilly’s borrowed laptop and crept from the room. Gavroche threw Eponine an insolent look before following suit.

Little R ran up to Feuilly, hugged his knees, then followed after his brother. The hug helped. A little.

“That sounds ominous,” Feuilly observed. He kicked off his shoes and then crossed the open space to join Eponine at the table, all the while doing his best to conceal just how tired he was. It didn’t really work. Taking pity on him, Eponine got up and fetched him a mug of coffee that had been waiting on the counter.

“It’s not ominous, I swear. It’s just…we’re broken, the two of us, and I want to fix it. I want to fix it now because it’s killing me, not having you as a bestie anymore. If we can’t stay friends then I don’t want to be your girlfriend. No, wait, that’s not how I meant to say it!” she screeched, obviously frightened by what must have been a look of terror on his face. “I want to be your girlfriend, I do, but
I don’t want to lose the friend part. O-okay?”

Feuilly mustered a smile, and gazed fondly at her from eyes half-lidded with exhaustion. He cupped Eponine’s face in his hands and gave her a kiss. “We’re on the same page then.”

“Cool.”

They both sat down at the table together, Feuilly with a mug of coffee and Eponine with a soda. “So what have you been hiding from me?” she asked. “I know something’s bothering the fuck out of you, but usually when you’ve got something heavy on your mind you spill about it by now.”

Feuilly nodded, took a deep breath, and just came out with it. “Courfeyrac.”

“Huh?”

“You…you said you can’t sleep with me because I’m too, I don’t know, *nice*, I guess…but you slept with Courfeyrac. So…so why him? Why was he able to make you feel comfortable when I can’t? He’s nice, and from what I hear very considerate of his lovers.”

“And their dysfunctions,” Eponine said with a nod. “Feuilly, I was drunk and high when Courf and I slept together. I toned down on the substances when I broke up with Montparnasse, and I quit entirely when I decided to try to get custody of Gav and Little R. I mean, the booze and the weed definitely helped me relax and loosen up but…it’s not an option, and besides, I wouldn’t want that to be, I mean…you’re special. You’re so special to me, Feuilly. I don’t want to muddy any of that experience when we get there.”

She reached over and twined her fingers with his. He squeezed her hand, and took a deep breath for what felt like the first time in days. “I didn’t mean to get jealous. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Sweetie, that was insecurity, not jealousy. Jealousy would have been punching Courfeyrac in the face, or something ridiculous like that.”

“I suppose.”

“Okay, my turn.” Eponine squirmed a little. “This one might actually make you jealous, and I’m really sorry, but I feel weird and I just want to get this out there. I started crushing on Combeferre a little.”

“O-oh.” Feuilly wasn’t quite sure how to take that. He was definitely having a jealous reaction, but insecurity must have been winning out because he didn’t want to punch Combeferre in the face, he wanted to punch himself. Repeatedly.

Actually, he kind of already felt like he’d been punched in the gut.

“It’s nothing. Really, it’s nothing. He’s just been giving me that little whoosh feeling that was missing back when he tried asking me out, but it’s the same exact stupid whoosh I got from Marius, you know, when I didn’t know him at all and was just like ‘look it’s a cute guy who’s actually a good person—I didn’t know those were real.’ There’s no substance there. It’s not what we have, so if the stupid crush makes me do something dumb when we’re hanging in the group, just don’t get worried if I smile stupidly at him or some shit like that. I’m your girl, and I have no plans to change that.”

Feuilly smirked. “So how many of the guys have you crushed on now?”

Eponine punched his arm, and he let out a yelp. “Oh don’t even. That did not hurt. But for the
record, five. Six if you include girls, but you specifically said guys.”

“Wait…Co~”

“Musichetta.” Eponine wrinkled her nose up. “Cosette’s my foster sister. Ew, God no. But consider this a warning. Musichetta and I already agreed to run away and marry each other if we ever felt the need to give up on men, so you best make sure you treat me right. She’d be an excellent wife.”

Feuilly laughed. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I appreciate you not asking for a threesome.”

“I’d like to get just the two of us in bed before we even joke about adding a third. But again, no rush.”

“Yeah, about that…” Eponine got out of her chair and sat down on his lap. She wrapped her arms around Feuilly’s neck and leaned close until their noses were touching. “I’ve been talking to ‘Chetta about my issues and it’s really helping. She has some of the same hang ups I do, so I don’t feel as crazy or self-conscious about them anymore. I want…I want you to touch me a little more.”

Feuilly’s hands were already resting on her sides, but he cautiously spread his fingers a bit at her words. “I think I can handle that.”

“I also want to start sleeping in your room. Would that be okay?”

She’d been in there every night that week, which was important. Between their work schedules and looking after the boys, sleep and the couple of hours surrounding it was the only alone-time the couple ever got.

“That’d be perfect,” Feuilly assured her. He placed a soft kiss on her lips. “We’re still going at your pace though. No rush.”

“I know. I think that’s why I want to rush so bad,” she said with an embarrassed laugh. “I love you. I want to do this with you, but I want it…”

“To be good. I know. And it will be.” Feuilly kissed her again. “I promise, it will be. I love you too, Ponine.”

“See? I told you this wasn’t ominous.”

Feuilly grinned. “Your opening still sucked.”

The playful hand she’d been running through his curls suddenly tugged, and he winced. “Well, don’t be a jerk. Feuilly, are you okay?”

“Yeah…it’s just, after a certain point coffee stops working.”

Eponine hummed sympathetically, got off his lap, and held out her hand. She tugged him from the chair and herded him towards his bedroom. “You can just…Ponine, you’re tired too. You’ve been looking after the boys all day. I’m fine.”

“I know.” Eponine tugged his shirt over his head, pressed a kiss between his shoulder blades, and then gave him a nudge. He promptly collapsed onto the bed. He was mostly asleep by the time she returned from raiding his dresser for pajama pants and a clean t-shirt, which made helping him change into those items more of a challenge than it should have been.
He was out entirely within minutes, falling under to the pleasant sensation of skinny fingers scrubbing their way fondly through his hair.

Jehan walked around the mostly empty rooms that had been his home for the better part of three years, acknowledging the tender ache he felt for them. His associations with the place were a mix of important firsts; his first apartment, his first time living away from his parents, and the first time, other than brief interruptions from the Thenardiers, that he’d lived alone.

He’d really made the little space his. Even though his knick knacks and trinkets were all packed up to wait in storage at his parents’ house, he could feel himself in the walls and the floors. Most of his possessions had already been transferred to his old bedroom in Cambridge, but there were a few boxes coming to Canada with him in the trunk of Hugh’s car, and there was one box in particular he couldn’t decide on.

Jehan sat down in front of the sizable cardboard box and opened it for yet another perusal. The top layer consisted of sketches he’d stolen from Grantaire, most of them snatched from the artist’s hands on his way to the recycling bin. They were rough and contained lots of mistakes, but Jehan had always liked the raw enthusiasm captured in his friend’s most absent minded doodling.

He’d had his collection of Grantaire doodles taped up on the walls leading to his bathroom and bedroom.

Just under the sketches was a heavy wooden frame with one of the few finished works Grantaire had ever made for him. This one was a chalk pastel done from a snapshot of the guys all gathered at the tables at the Musain just before Marius joined their clique. Louison had taken the picture for them, so even the most camera-shy of the group were present and distinct. Jehan had had that one in the living room.

Next was a shoe box full of origami creations Feuilly had made him during his stint at the craft store (these had been perched along the top of his dresser). Below that was his Feuilly-scarf. Next he picked up a fountain pen Joly got him for his birthday, then a cast iron teapot Enjolras gave him for Christmas, and then the hot pink Walt Whitman shirt, and the tarot cards he and Combeferre had dabbled with what felt like forever ago. Jehan’s smile felt painful when he gently extracted an antique volume of Dickinson Bahorel had absently procured for him from a yard sale. He honestly couldn’t even remember the last time he’d spoken to Bahorel.

Of course, the majority of the box was filled with mementos of Courfeyrac. Even though the boy was perpetually glued to his phone or laptop, he’d still taken the time to write over a dozen love letters, because he’d known without asking that Jehan wanted them. In addition to his wall posts and texts, he’d given Jehan a card with a thoughtful message inside for every big milestone, even before they’d started dating. He’d gotten Jehan a handsome volume of EE Cummings and scrawled a love letter on the inside cover after their first night together, a treasure Jehan couldn’t bear to part with even though it pained him to look at it. And then there were the pictures.

He had more pictures of Courfeyrac than he had of himself.

Jehan’s eyes filled with tears when he caught sight of some of Bridget’s recipe cards. He hastily wiped them away in response to a knock on the door.

Figuring it was Hugh (whom he had no pictures of), Jehan tucked the mementos back inside the box and closed it up before he opened the door. It wasn’t Hugh, but he was still glad the sentimental items were out of sight when he found Courfeyrac on his stoop.
He didn’t look well. His thick brown curls were in a state of disarray to put all previous boyish messiness to shame. There were shadows under his red rimmed eyes, and he was jittery. And far too pale.

“Courfeyrac…hi.” It seemed rude to ask him what he was doing there, though that was the only thing running through Jehan’s head.

“I need to talk to you. Before you go. I need to… I didn’t get my say when you dumped me, and then the time apart didn’t—we didn’t become friends again and you’re leaving in two days so I need to talk. Please, just give me like twenty minutes. That’s fair, isn’t it?”

It was. Jehan wanted to turn and run in the opposite direction (he also wanted to smooth back Courfeyrac’s wayward curls, take him in his arms, and kiss him until he smiled again, but he’d gotten good at ignoring that impulse). Courfeyrac was right though. Twenty minutes was fair.

He stepped aside and Courfeyrac walked into the apartment. He seemed almost as pained as Jehan felt, seeing the cozy, eccentric little place as a mere shadow of itself. The furniture was gone already, so they sat on the floor between two cardboard boxes, facing each other with a jar candle burning dimly between them.

“You have more than twenty minutes,” Jehan said softly, when it was clear Courfeyrac didn’t know how to begin. “You have as much time as you need. You deserve closure, so however uncomfortable this may be—take all the time you need.”

Courfeyrac’s lips quirked in the worst, palest imitation of one of his characteristic grins. “Does that mean I can keep you from going to Canada if I never shut up? Because I’m pretty sure I can do that.”

“I’ve no doubt of your oratorical abilities dear, but you can’t prevent me from moving. It’s… something I need to do.”

“I don’t understand why,” Courfeyrac said. “I mean, I know life’s pretty much sucked since June, but you don’t need to run away. We can… we can be friends again. Whatever I’ve done to make you, to, well, whatever it was…I’m sorry.” He dropped his head, his voice trembling as he continued. “I didn’t try to oust you from the group or make anyone take sides. I was just hurting because, you know, I love you and you don’t love me, or you do and you don’t want to acknowledge it or whatever, but whatever the fuck it was, it was your right to dump me instead of working through it. What wasn’t cool was walking away from our friends and not… not being in my life at all. We used to be friends. I miss you so much, Jehan.”

“Courfeyrac…”

“And what in the fuck is Hugh giving you that I can’t?” Courfeyrac asked, bolting upright with a fierceness and anger that startled Jehan. “I mean, he’s rich and pretty, but you’ve never struck me as a gold digger and you always said I was beautiful, so what is it about that asshole? I just don’t get it. I don’t get why he’s better than me.”

“He’s not,” Jehan whispered.

“Then why did you pick him?”

“I didn’t. He picked me.”

Courfeyrac’s eyes were hard and angry. “I picked you too. I picked you, and I tried so fucking hard to make you happy.”
“I know. I know, darling, and I tried too, but it wasn’t working. You must have noticed that it wasn’t working.”

“We could have made it work,” Courfeyrac insisted. “If you hadn’t given up, we could have addressed-”

“What? Fundamental incompatibility?” Jehan asked. “We were making each other miserable, and the strength of our feelings made the pain all the sharper. That’s why I pulled away so much. And that’s why I have to leave. I need to figure myself out before I can invest myself in another person again. I need some distance, some space. I can’t be part of a group, with my identity determined by my role when we’re with our friends.”

“For Hugh?” Courfeyrac sneered.

“For myself. And for the record, Hugh loves the things about me that I value. He loves quiet things, and poetry, and nature. He’s helping me rediscover the things that made me me. He’s very good for me right now.”

And maybe someday Courfeyrac would be good for him again.

“I can’t stay and see our relationship turn completely toxic. Darling, I want you in my life again someday, but I can’t do it just yet.”

A silence settled between them, thick and awful. Jehan appeared outwardly composed, but that was only because of years of meditation study. Inwardly he was all a shambles. He imagined his emotions as a tangled jumble of tautly pulled strings, and he did his best to examine and soften each of them and let them go. If he didn’t untangle the jumble he wouldn’t be able to breathe, and he needed to breathe to get through this.

It had already been over twenty minutes.

Courfeyrac looked at his clenching and unclenching fists. He was faintly trembling, and whatever was going on in his head and heart remained a mystery to Jehan until he finally broke the silence.

“You sound pretty sure of yourself. There’s nothing I can say to change your mind?” He looked up, and the naked hurt and desperation in his eyes struck Jehan deeply. He’d be remembering that pained expression for days, if not years.

“No, dear, there isn’t.”

“If…if you do…you still have my number. Call me, please.”

“Courfeyrac, I’m not going to-”

“I need a little bit of hope. Just give me this. Just, maybe tomorrow or the day after you’ll show up at my place and it’ll be like the end of one of your awful chick flicks. You’ll be there, and we’ll fix everything and live happily ever after. Because I love you, dammit, and that should mean something. Just let me hope, okay?”

And then, before Jehan could muster any kind of answer, Courfeyrac climbed to his feet and left the apartment.

Jehan clapped his hands over his face and let out a wretched sob he’d been holding in for a good five minutes. He tried to focus on his breath, to keep untangling the emotional threads, any meditation trick he’d learned that he thought might help at all, but it was really hard to meditate when you
couldn't breathe for the violence of your sobs.

Eponine fluffed her sister's nearly waist-length blond hair and eyed it contemplatively. "You're sure you want me to do this? I mean, you totally have the bone structure to rock it, but once I take scissors to your tresses they're not coming back for at least a couple of years."

"I know." Azelma rolled her eyes, sick of repeating herself. "Just make it look cute, Ponine. I'm trusting you here."

"Right. No pressure."

Eponine cautiously began to cut, and soon the sound of long strands of dull colored hair plopping onto newspaper reached their ears. Azelma squirmed in the kitchen chair a little, but kept her nervous fidgeting to a minimum. She'd never worn her hair short before. It felt stupid, to obsess over something as trivial as a haircut considering all the upheavals she'd been through in the past few months, but she couldn't help wondering if she was making a mistake.

By the time Eponine finished, it looked like the newspaper laid over the linoleum tiles contained the mortal remains of Cousin It.

"Alright. The hair is gone, now I just have to make it look cute. I'm thinking short side bang?"

"Kay."

Azelma didn't much care about the particular style she ended up with, as long as it was vaguely flattering and just different. She was about to start her senior year of high school, and she'd be doing so in a new town. Unfortunately, Danvers was close enough to Salem that a lot of her new classmates already knew her, so she couldn't completely reinvent herself, but it wouldn't be for lack of trying. Things were going to be different. She could be more than just another screwed up Thenardier kid, or Montparnasse's less-pretty backup girlfriend.

Ideally she'd like to be known as that sophisticated girl with the nerdy but hot college boyfriend, but at this point Azelma wasn't going to hold her breath on that.

Eponine spent at least a half hour styling what remained of Azelma's hair. When she finished she looked nervous, and Azelma feared the worst. The Thenardier women had always worn their hair long, so when it came to short styles Eponine really only knew little boy cuts.

Then Azelma caught her reflection in the large hand mirror Eponine was holding up for her, and she broke out in a wide smile. "I love it! Oh, you were right. I totally have the bone structure for this."

"You're more angular than me. I figured this would help make your eyes pop. And the sandy color of your hair looks better now that there's less of it."

Azelma jumped out of the chair and hugged her. "Thanks Eponine!"

"No problem. You remember our deal, right? Since you like it, you're going to clean the bathrooms for a month to pay me back."

Azelma's smile wavered. She should have pretended to hate it.

Grantaire was sitting cross legged in the center of the bed when Enjolras got home from work. His hair was mussed from him dragging his fingers through it in frustration, and he was wearing a cheap
pair of reading glasses he’d picked up from the pharmacy (years and years of drawing, painting, and reading with no regard whatsoever for lighting and eye strain were starting to catch up to him, to the point where he’d probably have to give in and visit an actual optometrist at some point).

Based on the papers and envelopes around him, and the laptop open in front of him, Grantaire was doing their budget for the month. He looked irritable, a side effect of the unpleasant task, but Enjolras was struck with lust anyway. Something about the reading glasses always made Enjolras want to jump his boyfriend.

“Hey Enj. So I should totally not have gotten that memorial tattoo. We’re absolutely fucked for bills, even taking into account the eight bucks an hour I’m going to be bringing in for the next two months.”

Enjolras emptied out his pockets onto the bed, contributing the takings from a night of substantial tips. “Does this help?”

Grantaire shrugged. “Margot wants me to get a textbook that costs a hundred and thirty bucks, so not really, no. Are you sure you want to take six classes, by the by? Because if you dropped one of those history courses, I mean, they’re all at least four books and one of them’s seven.”

“I won’t need them all right away though,” Enjolras said. He scooped the money up and moved it to an empty vase on their dresser where they stored the loose change and small bills until one of them could get to the bank. “Besides, I thought you paid for the tattoo with the last of your con profits. That money was always a bonus, wasn’t it?”

“You took from our finances to get the banners and the merch, so kinda sorta.”

“Grantaire, I’m glad you got the tattoo. Please don’t regret it. We’ll make it work.” Enjolras kicked off his shoes, stripped down to his boxers and undershirt, and crawled onto the bed next to Grantaire. He wrapped his arms around him and kissed along his jaw. “Eponine thinks she can throw you a couple days at Brammer Street if you really can’t find anything after the museum lets go of the seasonal staff. Two of our baristas are going to New York for school, and, you know, Jehan…so we’ve got openings.”

“I’ll make a shitty barista.”

“Probably, but Marius and I can drag up your tips.”

Grantaire took the glasses off and rubbed at his eyes. “At least we’ll both be on meal plan again starting next week. We won’t need to grocery shop again until December.”

“So the text books are really slamming us then?” Enjolras asked.

“Text books are fucking killing us. And it’s absolute shit, really, because if Margot would let me get the third edition of this book instead of the fourth, I could get it used off Amazon for sixty bucks. Instead she wants the absolute most recent copy for, what, two incidental revisions, probably? And it’s over double. You and the guys should cover this, the way the text book industry fucks students over. This is shit.”

“I’ll add it to the to-do list.” Enjolras wrapped an arm around Grantaire’s waist and rested his head on his shoulder. “Would you mind taking a break from stewing over our miserable finances? I’d like to check my email.”

“It’s all yours.” Grantaire handed the computer over, then dramatically flopped against the pillows while still rubbing at his eyes. Enjolras frowned, and once again wrestled with himself over asking
his father for some financial help. His lover most definitely needed real prescription glasses.

Not wanting to open that can of worms for examination just then though, Enjolras logged into his email instead. He deleted a few messages outright, thought about reading through newsletters and updates from some of the activist groups he was a part of but decided to save them for later, and then noticed a message from an unfamiliar sender. He let out a small gasp when he read the subject.

“Everything okay?” Grantaire asked.

“Yes,” Enjolras answered quickly. He opened the message, and a smile lit his face. “In fact, everything’s very okay.”

“What happened? Did Gap sign in on the Bangladesh fire and safety accord?” Grantaire teased.

Enjolras sighed. “No love, I’ve all but given up on that. Grantaire…don’t kill me, but—”

“I love when you open with that.” Grantaire sat up on his elbows, insolent smirk in place. “What did you do?”

“Submitted the first issue of Red and Black to independent comic book publishers.”

“What?” Grantaire’s expression turned difficult to read, but his pallor was most definitely worrying. “You did what? Enj, that is a far cry from forging a job application I kept meaning to fill out anyway! This is different—this is a fucking violation. How could you do that?”

“It’s okay, it worked!” Enjolras thrust the laptop at him. “It worked because you’re brilliant and other people think so too. It’s not just because I’m stupidly in love with you, look! You’ve got talent. They want to publish you. They want to carry you on Comixology and they’re sending you a contract and they’re offering you seventy per cent for royalties. Just look.”

Grantaire’s eyes moved over the screen, his expression turning almost painfully surprised the more he read. When he finished looking over the email he shakily set the laptop aside and turned a lost look on Enjolras. “That’s…really? They actually want it.”

“Yes, Grantaire.” Enjolras crawled across the bed to him and clasped his hands. “They want to publish you, just like I knew they would. I wouldn’t have submitted your work if I didn’t have faith in you.”

For one, horrifying moment Enjolras thought Grantaire was having a mental breakdown. He dropped his head to his chest and made the most awful noises, like he couldn’t breathe. “‘Taire?”

“I’m fine, I just…I can’t believe, I…holy shit. I’m an artist.” He looked up again, a hesitant grin just starting to creep up on his face. “People are going to pay me for my work. I…I can do this.”

Enjolras nodded. “Yes. You definitely can’t dismiss your abilities anymore.”

“You’re such a beautiful optimist. Enjolras, if you really think I’m not going to shit talk myself anymore just because some idiots have agreed to publish my scribbles…speaking of which, they sent us a contract. Can you help me look it over before I sign it?”

Enjolras opened the attachment and skimmed it, wearing a thoughtful frown as he did so. “It all looks good to me, but then, I don’t really have training in this sort of thing. Do you mind if I forward it to Bossuet?”

“By all means.” Grantaire had been reading over Enjolras’ shoulder, quite literally as he had his chin
resting on it. “Um… the email says that they want to release the first issue by Halloween, and if the
sales are good they want a second issue for December and another one for February. That’s… kind of
a demanding schedule. When the hell am I supposed to work on this thing?”

Enjolras finished typing out a quick email to Legle, attached the file with the contract, sent it out and
then put the laptop to sleep and set it aside. “What do you mean? Don’t you already have about ten
issues drawn?”

“Well yeah, but they’re shitty. No, Enj, that’s not my low self-esteem talking. I printed the first eight
of them on copy paper at Staples. I drew the first four with a ball point pen on notebook paper. Even
the most recent ones, when I tried harder because I knew I was going to be selling them at cons, they
need to be reformatted for a digital carrier. If I’m working and going to school…I mean, I suppose I
could figure out how to get by without sleeping.”

Enjolras scrubbed a hand through his hair. “I don’t know. I’d say quit the museum, but you haven’t
even started yet and that actually would burn some bridges for me later down the line. I used my
social history connections to get you that job.”

“It’s only sixteen hours a week. I can swing that. Enj… I think I should drop out of school.”

Enjolras closed his eyes and pressed his lips together. He’d been expecting that, actually. Grantaire
had never cared for his schoolwork the way Enjolras and some of their other friends did. He’d gone
to college mostly because Courfeyrac had, and after high school he hadn’t really known what to do
with himself. He hated studying art academically, though he did occasionally begrudgingly admit to
learning useful techniques and historical perspective. Mostly he just felt overburdened by the
expectations and pressure that went with deadlines, and it played havoc with his depression.

School wasn’t a good fit for him, but it was the reason they’d met. The campus would feel wrong
without him. And besides, someday he might need that degree that he was only a few semesters
away from completing…

“Enjolras?” Grantaire gently grasped his shoulders. “I’m sorry. I didn’t meant to, um, that was stupid.
We should at least wait and see what Bossuet says before I start making actual plans for this.”

“You’re not happy at school,” Enjolras observed.

“Not really, no.”

Enjolras nodded. “I was under the impression you mostly hated it.”

“Yeah. But um…I’ve got all that debt, as you’ve so aptly pointed out in the past, and it seemed like
I’d fare at least a little better with a degree. Granted, an art degree is barely a step up from a
philosophy degree, but… yeah, who’m I kidding. I’d have dropped out sophomore year if it weren’t
for you.”

“Me?” Enjolras’ brows knit in confusion. “We were at our worst sophomore year. I still hadn’t
figured you out yet, and it was frustrating me, and I was vile to you. How did I keep you in school?”

“Because I was stupidly in love with you. I was better able to creepily pine over you if we were
going to the same school. Or did you think I was actually interested in that Age of Imperialism class
we had together? I was legitimately interested in the American Jazz Age class though. I would have
taken that even if I wasn’t all-but-stalking you.”

“That was a fun class.” Enjolras moved the laptop from the bed to the floor, then leaned back against
the pillows in a silent invitation to cuddle while they reminisced. Grantaire obliged, sinking
immediately into Enjolras’ arms and nuzzling against him. “I think that’s when I started really listening to you. It was the first time I ever heard you lead a discussion without derailing it.”

“Well, I can talk about the intersection of pop culture and social politics. Better than you, even.”

“Much better than me,” Enjolras said with a laugh. “I just took the class because I like Dr. Wilson. I was poorly equipped to take on the Harlem Renaissance or Joe Louis or any of the actual jazz music he brought up. I basically regurgitated the readings. You, on the other hand, shined. I think you actually got a higher grade than me, if memory serves.”

“Yeah, it was my only A…ever, actually. Dr. Wilson’s a great guy. I’ll have to visit him this semester…let him know I’m getting published.”

Enjolras stroked Grantaire’s hair, a proud smile on his face. “He won’t be surprised. No one will.”

“I still am.” He leaned up on his elbows. “And I still can’t believe you did that. You’re either the worst or the best manager ever. I haven’t figured that out yet.”

“Manager?”

Grantaire leaned forward and bumped noses with Enjolras. “You seem like the right choice. You’re the only reason Boston Comic Con wasn’t a total loss for me and you got me my first contract. We know I can’t do the business end on my own.”

“Alright, I accept. Just so long as you keep doing the budgets.”

“Believe me, Enj, that’s in both our best interests.”

“Oh shut up.”

Azelma decided she wanted some new clothes to go with her new hair. Most of what she owned consisted of Eponine’s hand-me-downs, which sometimes worked but often made her look frumpy. Eponine dressed well enough, but she carefully selected clothes that flattered her own figure. The girls did look a lot alike, but Azelma was a paler, more angular version. She was bony where Eponine was soft curves, and Azelma’s chest was flat. Some of Eponine’s old clothes just looked ridiculous on her.

Thing was, the last couple of weeks of summer had gotten busy for their friends. Musichetta had promised to take Azelma thrifting before school started, but she couldn’t find a time to make good on the promise. Cosette moved away before she could help, no one was talking to Jehan (who was also leaving too soon to be helpful even if the experienced thriftier had been in easy communication with the group), Joly wouldn’t touch used clothes with a forty nine and a half foot pole, and Azelma felt weird asking any of the other guys to take her.

She really needed to work on getting her license.

Azelma begged Eponine and Feuilly for almost a full twenty four hours, but their work schedules were too delicately balanced against each other for them to manage it. Feuilly looked like he felt genuinely bad about it, at least, and he offered to help Azelma work out the bus schedule. However, Azelma wasn’t avoiding the bus because she didn’t understand the routes. She was avoiding the bus because of the high likelihood she stood of running into her old crowd while riding it.

Finally Azelma sucked it up and started texting the guys she wasn’t super close to. She skipped Enjolras and Grantaire, as she was acquainted with the fate of the Prius. She then discovered that
Marius didn’t have a car either, and suddenly Courfeyrac’s bitching and whining made that much more sense. Legle had been forbidden from setting foot into a second hand store by his bed bug fearing husband, and Bahorel never responded.

Willing back a flurry of nerves, Azelma texted Combeferre. He was already in the area for an appointment, so he promised to swing by and get her in an hour.

The girl proceeded to spend the next hour going back and forth between fits of sulking and manic grooming. At one point Eponine snatched the eyebrow tweezers from her hands, coldly informing her that if she kept it up she’d have no eyebrows left by the time Combeferre showed up.

“Calm down, hon. It’s not a date. You’re just going shopping together.”

Azelma’s breath sped up at the coldness in Eponine’s tone. “I know it’s not a date. Honestly, how could I not know at this point?” She turned on her heel, stalked into their room, slammed the door, and flopped dramatically onto her bed.

She was getting so damn sick of her sister’s negativity and snide remarks. It was a bit rich of her to be so nasty about an infatuation, considering how she’d been with Marius and Courfeyrac. Would it really be so bad to let Azelma hope just a little?

Really, she thought her crush on Combeferre was one of the better hopes she’d ever cherished for herself. Before she’d just wanted a boyfriend, any boyfriend, preferably good looking but all Azelma really cared about was whether the guy wanted her or not. Now she wanted a specific boyfriend, and it was because he was good. To her, to others, and just in general, Combeferre was a good man.

Azelma hadn’t even been attracted to Combeferre when they’d first met. She’d dismissed him as a nerd, initially, with Montparnasse’s wild, edgier beauty still on the brain. But each gentle gesture and mark of concern and compassion had endeared the college boy to Azelma, until he’d become the only person in the room she ever saw, which was something. For the most part, their group was fairly easy on the eyes. Azelma had convinced herself she’d fallen in love a few times over the years, but her feelings for Combeferre showed those childish fantasies for what they were.

She also knew and appreciated that she’d been transparent about her feelings, embarrassingly so at times. If he liked her back he would have said something by now. She still liked to hope though. Sometimes he seemed to care for her as more than Eponine’s little sister, and he’d seemed a little jealous when she’d gone on that date with Gerard…

Azelma’s favorite fantasy of the moment consisted of Combeferre sweeping her off her feet on her eighteenth birthday. Her age could explain away a perceived lack of interest.

She just wanted to hope for a little longer.

Azelma was putting on a pair of clunky boots she was hoping to replace, but that looked cute enough with skinny jeans, when Eponine walked into the bedroom. “He’s outside.”

“Cool. Thanks.”

“Hey, um…” Eponine handed her a wad of crumpled ones that had to be tip money. “Sorry I’ve been such a bitch about the crush. Those are my issues, not yours. You do look really cute, so try to rock it a little. The healthier guys seem to dig confidence, so get a dress that makes you feel pretty or something. It’s on me.”

“I’ve got my own cash saved up for this. Shouldn’t you use this for school supplies for Gav and Little R?”
“Already covered, sweetie. Just take the money and have a good time, okay? You’ve got good taste. I’ll try to be less catty about that.”

Azelma shoved the ones in her pocket and gave Eponine a tight hug.

She did end up having a good time with Combeferre, but it was bittersweet. Her fantasies of romance at her eighteenth birthday took a strong challenge from his pointedly friendly interactions. Combeferre offered to buy her dinner when they’d finished shopping, and even her eager imagination couldn’t transform the burger and fries into date material.

When Combeferre dropped her off, Azelma knew exactly where she stood with him. She wasn’t just the sister of his unrequited crush anymore, at least. They had a friendship that existed in its own right, without Eponine providing the impetus for their interactions.

He was her friend. Hers. For now, that could be enough.

Marius’ eyes were damp when he returned from seeing Cosette off, but overall he was taking it much better than Courfeyrac expected. He didn’t have any visible injuries, for one thing. Courfeyrac had been positive the daydreamer would walk into something sharp (if not oncoming traffic) while stewing over his “lost” love on the walk home from the bus stop.

Even though he owed Legle ten bucks, he was rather relieved to have Marius home safely.

“How’re you doing?” Courfeyrac asked.

“I’ve only texted her three times, and I’m not panicking, because they’re driving so she can’t text me back. And that’s the only reason she isn’t.”

Courfeyrac lifted an eyebrow. “I, um, I meant your feelings…but if you need me to check in on your obsessive compulsive creeping of your girlfriend now that she’s moved a few hours away from you, I’ll happily confiscate your phone.”

He was joking. Marius didn’t seem to get that, because he eagerly thrust his phone into Courfeyrac’s hands. “You’re a good friend, Courfeyrac.”

“Um, yeah…” Courfeyrac stowed the cheap little phone next to his own flashier one in his pocket, and the two friends sat down on the couch. “So Marius, on a scale of one to ten, how bummed are you about Cosette moving away? One being reasonably sad, ten being so sad I absolutely cannot bring up something else potentially distressing just yet.”

Marius frowned. “Four, I suppose. I’m going to be stewing over this for a bit, so I’m not going to be a terribly good listener if you need to go over something important but Courfeyrac…if it is important I’d appreciate you just telling me.”

Courfeyrac nodded. “Fair enough. I…think I need to move back in with my dad.”

Marius compulsively reached out to give Courfeyrac’s shoulder a comforting squeeze, a gesture he appreciated. “He’s having that hard a time?”

“Mom did everything for him. I went by today to visit him and he’s…he’s completely falling apart. There’s no food in the house. Even the sympathy casseroles the neighbors left him have been used up or thrown out because he absentily left them on the counter and they went bad. There’s shit everywhere. He’s going to trip and break his neck or something. I’m surprised he’s been able to go to work. He needs me.”
“Okay.” Marius gave a grim nod. “I guess I have been staying on your couch for far too long as it is. I’ll find somewhere else to live.”

“Marius-”

“Don’t worry about me, please. Just take care of your father.”

Courfeyrac gave a slow, unsteady nod. He glanced down at his fidgety hands and promptly started picking at a hangnail, all the while keeping his gaze away from the puppy. Grantaire was always going to be his best friend; they’d been through too much together for that not to be the case, but damn did he appreciate his friendship with Marius. It was easy and natural in all the best ways, and a nice change of pace from Grantaire’s neediness and bitchiness.

“Cosette’s a lucky girl,” Courfeyrac finally said, making Marius faintly blush. “Seriously dude, thanks for not being mad. I’m tenant at will, and this month’s already paid and I put down my last month when I moved in, so you’ve got some time.”

“I’ll make arrangements. Thanks for putting me up as long as you have. I know I haven’t been the most helpful roommate in the world-”

“Marius, stop. You’ve been pretty much exactly the company I needed during some pretty grueling drama. I’m going to miss living with you. Hell, if I didn’t think my dad would traumatize you, I’d say you should just move in with us in Lynn…but Dad would fucking traumatize you. You’re better off finding something else.”

“I’ve actually got a couple of ideas. But um…I could, could use a distraction. You know, from thinking about Cosette, because I really want to tackle you and steal my phone back and check for texts.”

“Marius, darling, you’ve never needed the excuse of a cell phone to tackle me.” Courfeyrac winked, and Marius let out a snort at the sexually charged joke he never would have gotten when they’d first become friends. “Seriously though, what do you want to do for a distraction? Video games? Netflix?”

“Um…actually, I was thinking of heading down to the Musain. There’s usually at least a few of us there. It seems like a good idea to be social.”

“Oh yeah. Hell, that’s probably even healthy.” Courfeyrac stood up and started sifting through the accumulated clutter on the floor for two sneakers that matched.

There was, indeed, a sizable group gathered at the Musain, though they weren’t at their pushed together tables this time. Enjolras and Grantaire were sitting in a corner table splitting a pot of tea and anxiously looking over an open laptop. Grantaire was squirmy, and clearly in one of his contrary moods, while Enjolras had his activist-game face on, something odd to see when he was only talking to his fiancé. When Courfeyrac passed by the table he was pretty sure he overheard something about dropping out of school.

For the moment, it seemed safest to leave the couple to it, but he would definitely be having a chat with Grantaire later on.

The newlyweds also had their own table. Legle appeared to be hard at work, with stacks of reference books piled around him as well as his own open laptop. Joly was skimming a booklist for the upcoming semester, looking pensive and mumbling to himself about the courses he was taking.
Courfeyrac figured the last couple in the room was the safest one to sit with. Bahorel and Musichetta were at a table closer to the counter, and Courfeyrac started walking towards them. Then he noticed the way they were hunched together, and the unusual intensity Bahorel exuded while talking to her. All his recent conversations with Bahorel about the flirty fortune teller came to mind, and Courfeyrac inconspicuously changed directions for the counter itself and ordered his and Marius’ drinks. He wasn’t sure where the hell they were going to sit when they were ready, but at least they’d have their table rent.

Maybe one of the couples would look less awkward by then.

Legle took a break from his uncharacteristic productiveness to stroll over to Grantaire and Enjolras and interrupt their…not-quite-a-fight (though it totally would have been a fight for a normal couple). To Courfeyrac’s surprise his intrusion seemed to go over well. Whatever he told them, it helped them resolve their issue, and soon enough Legle and Joly had joined Enjolras and Grantaire’s table.

“Right, that’s the winner then,” Courfeyrac muttered.

“Huh?”

“Just follow me, Marius.”

Courfeyrac sat down across from Grantaire and arched a brow. Grantaire smirked in response.

“Dude, what’s going on?” Courfeyrac asked. “I thought I heard you guys saying something about dropping out of school.”

“Yeah…that’s because I’m going to quit school to follow my dreams.” He couldn’t even say it with a straight face.

“You? Follow your dreams? I thought you didn’t have any. Isn’t that part of the black hearted cynic bit?”

“It was, but now I’m selling out.” Grantaire quickly explained about Enjolras submitting his work for publication (he referred to the act as a violation, Enjolras whapped him upside the head, and he insisted that he meant it endearingly), and that time constraints meant he’d have to either ditch work, school, or the chance to be published. “And…I kind of hate school, so fuck that noise.”

“But…you’re only like two semesters away from graduating, aren’t you?”

“We’re two semesters away from graduating,” Enjolras corrected. “Grantaire’s at least three and some summer classes, if not four.”

“Oh. Well yeah, follow your dreams, man. Enjolras can always pick up the slack for you if it doesn’t work out. We know he’s going places.”

“We’ve already decided you’re going to be my kept man,” Enjolras said. Grantaire grumbled about that under his breath, though he didn’t seem to genuinely dislike the idea.

From there they enthused about Grantaire’s future as a published artist, tempting the notorious pessimist into cautious and unfamiliar optimism. Joly let out a few oddly placed sighs during the conversation, but whenever anyone asked him what he was thinking, even his husband, he only laughed and changed the subject.

When Bahorel and Musichetta finally joined them they were being fairly secretive themselves. They definitely looked smug about something though. Courfeyrac was dying to know what they’d talked about, and if Bahorel had spilled one secret in particular, but he knew his chances of getting it out of
them while they were in a group weren’t very good.

Marius’ phone started vibrating with new texts shortly after that, so Courfeyrac handed it off. Marius stayed at the table for another five minutes before heading back to the apartment to spend his first night apart from his girlfriend on the phone with her until the small hours of the morning.

It was a good night, really. Courfeyrac’s friends had always been a wonderful distraction, and they continued to be. It was good to see Grantaire smiling so much, especially considering how hard his own grief was still hitting him (whenever the smile relaxed, the pain shone clearly enough in his features). It was reassuring to know that he was being taken care of and that Courfeyrac didn’t have to worry about him hurting himself anymore. Whatever communication Bahorel had traded with Musichetta, he was happier for it as well.

Good news left and right. Lots to smile over.

Courfeyrac’s life had devolved into absolute shit, but he still liked being happy for his friends. He missed his mother so much it hurt to breathe sometimes, but he had his friends to lean on if he needed to. He hated living with his father. The man was too old to be taken care of the way Bridget had looked after him, but Charles really was incompetent and he’d self-destruct on his own. It was going to suck, but Courfeyrac would do his duty as a son and help his father as long as he needed him.

Jehan was supposed to leave in the morning. His phone hadn’t gone off once. Courfeyrac knew it wouldn’t, and he knew that it was stupid to listen for it the entire time he was at the Musain.

He knew it was stupid when he spent a sleepless night staring at his dark, silent phone while Marius chatted away with Cosette on his own cell one room over.

Jehan was trembling a bit when he walked up the stairs to Combeferre, Enjolras, and Grantaire’s apartment. In retrospect, he was amazed he didn’t spill the tray of lattes he was carrying. As it was, his nerves were too unsteady to hold the tray in one hand so he could knock on the door with the other, so he had to set them down at his feet to accomplish the task.

Of course it would be Grantaire who answered the door. He’d rather hoped the artist might stay at the Musain with the others, but of course he’d left with his lover when Enjolras had ducked out early for ‘a prior engagement.’

Jehan tried to muster a cheery smile for his friend (he hoped they were still friends, anyway), but it was difficult. Grantaire looked about as bad as he had in the pre-Enjolras days; he was unshaven, his hair was wild and greasy, he had dark shadows under his eyes, and his expression was an odd mix of bleakness with an undercurrent of anger. He looked a bit unhinged.

Plus his forearm was bandaged, and considering the boy had a history of self-harm…

Before Jehan managed to ask if Grantaire was alright the door was slammed in his face. Blinking back tears, he fumbled for his cell phone, but there was no need. Raised voices from the other side of the door clued him in that Enjolras at least was aware he was there.

“We invited him, ‘Taire-”

“He’s a selfish dick! Why the fuck would you invite over a selfish dick?!”

“Watch it. He’s one of my best friends”

“Yeah, well he fucked over my best friend so as far as I’m concerned he can go fuck himself with a
rusty tent spike! Courfeyrac did nothing to deserve all the shit and head games that asshole has thrown his way. Sensitive, gentle poet my pasty white ass!”

“I’m not having this discussion. If you don’t want to see Jehan then go sit in the bedroom, but you will *not* deprive me and Combeferre of our chance to say goodbye before he moves out of the damn country. I’m serious Grantaire: *go away.*”

A silence fell after that. Tears freely started making their way down Jehan’s cheeks as he shook his head. He uselessly mouthed a plea for Enjolras to take back those words, but then the silence was broken, this time by Grantaire.

“Fine. Fucking fine! Be that way. I’ll be in our god damn room.”

The front door opened just in time for the bedroom door to slam with a bang that made Jehan jump and Enjolras wince.

“Oh Enjolras, don’t you think you should go to him?”

Enjolras calmly walked past Jehan, picked up the tray of lattes, and walked into the living room. Jehan followed after him, nervously picking at the buttons of his oversize work shirt.

Enjolras’ features were hard and impossible to read. It was hard to miss the cool anger he radiated when he stiffly shook his head. “Grantaire needs some time to cool down. We’ll talk later.”

That probably was for the best, as Grantaire was clearly not the only person who needed to cool down. Still though…

“But he, what if he…that bandage?” Jehan winced, sure he wasn’t handling the delicate subject as well as it needed to be handled.

Enjolras actually looked amused by the stutters, and some of the tension drained from him. “The bandage wasn’t from cutting. It’s a healing tattoo.”

“Oh.” Relief coursed through him. Enjolras recognized it, although it had to be a sensation he was intimately familiar with, what with loving someone so prone to hurting himself. He appeared to appreciate Jehan’s concern and sympathy.

“Appearances aside, he’s actually doing rather well. None of his unhealthy coping mechanisms have come into play so far. Mostly the grief’s been coming out through artwork.”

Jehan dimly nodded. “I wrote a few poems for Bridget, but they’ll probably stay in my notebooks. I don’t think it would be wise to read them…at least not while I’m here.” He sat down on the couch and Enjolras followed suit. “Where’s Combeferre?”

“He had an appointment,” Enjolras said, trying and failing to mask how uncomfortable that made him. Jehan figured that meant that Combeferre was finally meeting with his therapist. “He should be home any minute though.”

“Good. So…” Jehan nervously tapped at the knees of his faded corduroy pants. “What did Grantaire get for his tattoo?”

“It’s a memorial tattoo for Bridget. Courfeyrac got the same one. A heart made of Celtic knot work with the dates of her birth and death underneath. I had to borrow some money to make up what he spent on it, but it’s really lovely and I think he needed it.”
Something about that statement was bothering Enjolras greatly. Jehan couldn’t tell if it was the obvious difficulty in dealing with the loss of someone so important to his lover, or if there was some other trauma at play. He weighed asking about it, and decided a delicate maneuvering of the conversation was probably best...at least until Combeferre got home.

Jehan tried to make some light small talk, but Enjolras failed to pick up the thread of the conversation. His eyes (with shadows nearly as defined as his fiancé’s, indicating just as much sleeplessness) kept darting towards the bedroom. After a painful five minutes Jehan gave a little sigh, and gently prodded Enjolras into checking on Grantaire.

Combeferre showed up shortly thereafter, looking a bit distant and reflective, but undoubtedly cheerful. Jehan smiled, glad his friend had found a therapist he could connect with.

“Where’s Enjolras?” Combeferre asked, after sitting across from the couch with his latte.

“He and Grantaire had a bit of a fight. He’s just checking in on him.”

“Oh no. He’ll be in there all night.”

“I most certainly will not,” Enjolras snapped, appearing in the doorway with his arms folded across his chest. “I promised to spend the night with the two of you and that’s exactly what I intend to do.”

“How’s Grantaire?” Jehan asked.

“Surly, but otherwise fine. He’s working on layouts for the new version of Red and Black number one.”

For a few minutes the three friends lapsed into a silence that was almost comfortable. Logan peeked his head into the room, then ran over to Jehan and jumped up on his lap. It had been months since Jehan had seen the cat, so he lost himself giving Logan scratches and rubbing his belly.

Combeferre sipped at his drink, quiet and content, agile mind still picking through his session. Enjolras looked to be closer to brooding than either of his companions, but his silence wasn’t unpleasant.

Jehan felt a pang of regret, realizing just how much he was going to miss this. Their little trio had assembled just before Combeferre and Courfeyrac turned their disparate little cliques into the group. They’d met up in Jehan’s dorm room after a shared class, splitting a package of hummus from the campus cafeteria while they did their homework, occasionally breaking the silence to share something particularly interesting from their readings and lecture notes. When they were done with their social studying, they’d just talked. Enjolras would infect the other two with his fiery passion, Combeferre would mellow the raw enthusiasm into something practical, and Jehan would just dream.

He was never going to find friends who fit him so well again.

“Jehan, you can’t leave,” Enjolras said, as though reading his thoughts.

“We’ve talked about it at length, which I’m sure comes as no surprise to you,” Combeferre said. “And we’re pretty sure we’re being neither selfish nor petty in concluding that it’s a disastrous plan.”

Jehan shifted the cat from his lap to his arms, using the comforting warmth of soft fur and contented purrs to bolster himself. “It’s a lonely plan, but disastrous is a bit much. Guys...I’ve subsumed my entire identity to the group. I figured that out pretty quickly when I accidentally put myself outside it and I...I just lost myself. I didn’t know what to do with myself anymore. You’ve been my entire social life for the past three years, and they’ve been important years. I should have been discovering
myself, growing. Instead I just…I’m just an ami. That’s all I know how to be, and I have to say, I’m not terribly good at it anymore. I want to step back for a bit. Forgive me for saying it this way, but it does seem rather romantic to set out on my own in a beautiful foreign city to accomplish the task.”

Combeferre smirked, with only a hint of bitterness to it. “But Jehan, that very romantic notion belies your entire argument. Of course you’re yourself. Yes, our group is quite clingy and dependent upon each other, but you can establish your identity more firmly without running away.”

Jehan was about to counter, when Enjolras spoke up. “Hugh called me last night. He said you broke up with him. If that’s true…why are you still going?”

“I didn’t…break up exactly,” Jehan explained. “I just…I asked him to slow things down. Enjolras, he was making so much more out of my affections than I was giving him. I told him several times over that I still wasn’t over my last boyfriend and that I wanted to move slowly.” Jehan couldn’t help blushing a bit and lowering his eyes at what he had to say next. “I guess he misunderstood that part. He thought I meant physically, but I meant emotionally. I wasn’t ready for him to fall in love just yet.”

“I see…”

Enjolras quirked an eyebrow. “So…what are you doing with my cousin then?”

“We’re going to try being friends for now, but I’m open to being boyfriends again in the future,” Jehan explained.

“Ah. So you’re not…um…you know what, never mind. It’s not my business anyway.”

Jehan giggled. “We’re not friends with benefits, if that’s what you were worried about. I still haven’t slept with your cousin.”

“I didn’t need to know,” Enjolras said, hilariously uncomfortable with the conversation. “But that’s definitely…definitely good. Yeah. I, er, don’t think Hugh would have been able to handle an arrangement like that very well. He’s rather stupidly in love with you.”

Jehan frowned. “I noticed. I could have handled that better. Now I’ve hurt two wonderful men I actually strongly care for. But that’s why I think I need a change and a fresh start.”

“Well, make sure you follow through with it,” Combeferre cautioned. “Moving to a new place is just running away if you don’t work on yourself. The same problems can come back again.”

Jehan nodded. “I’m aware. But thank you, both of you, for actually listening to me and hearing me. It’s…your friendship has meant so much to me…ah. At least I had no illusions about trying not to cry.”

Combeferre reached to hand him a napkin, then gave up on it entirely and just pulled Jehan into a hug. When they broke apart Combeferre was crying too.

To Jehan’s complete surprise, Enjolras hugged him as soon as Combeferre let go of him, and Enjolras was most definitely not a hugger. “I’m going to miss you terribly, Jehan,” he whispered, and Jehan let out a broken sob in response.

“I’ll miss you too, both of you. But I won’t lose touch. I promise, I won’t lose touch, and I won’t live in Montreal forever no matter how much I love the city. I’m going to come back. I love both of you and Massachusetts has always been my home and I’m going to come back.”
“Of course you are,” Combeferre said, entirely without conviction in his tone.

Enjolras’ eyes were threatening tears. God, if Enjolras actually cried Jehan wasn’t sure what he was going to do.

He wiped at his face and frantically apologized for getting so emotional. Combeferre lightened the conversation immensely with plans of epic road trips, and Jehan eagerly jumped in, talking about all the wonderful things they’d be able to do together in his new city. Even as they talked, they all understood the reality. With Enjolras’ financial burdens and a fragile lover who would point blank refuse to go with him, there was no way he could disappear for over a week to Canada, even if he didn’t have a demanding school and work schedule. Combeferre, though more comfortable financially, was just as overworked during the semester and wasn’t likely to travel alone. Jehan was going to visit home as often as he could, but the brunt of his time was going to be spent with his family now that he was going to be living so far away from them.

Even if it only was for a few years, chances were the distance would result in them growing apart.

When Jehan finally left to give his packing one final inspection before bed, he couldn’t help but feel a crushing finality in the goodbyes he shared with his friends.

He was right. It almost destroyed him when Enjolras cried.

TEN YEARS LATER…

Chapter End Notes

I'm aware I missed a bunch of spots with the dangling plot lines. I'll cover as many of them as I can during the upcoming Ten Years Later chapters, and everything else will go into the one-shots.
Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

Ten years later, Combeferre and Courfeyrac take the train out to New York to visit some old friends.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys. Again, sorry for the delay in updating. RL is still quite hectic but it should be calming down enough for me to get back into my writing groove. My seasonal employment is almost at an end, and that'll get me back down to one job and hopefully a more sane sleep schedule. As my sleep schedule is rather erratic at the moment I'm feeling a bit dazed, and I'm not really sure how this chapter came out. I like all my ideas for the ten years later bit, but I feel like the actual writing is all over the place.

Anywho, hope you like it :)

Also, I really and truly do intend to get back to answering comments sometime in the near future, so if you see a reply to something you wrote over a month ago it means I finally got my lazy butt in gear on that.

TEN YEARS LATER…

Combeferre was grading papers in his office when he got the first text. Sighing, he lowered the paper he’d been reading, but didn’t quite set it down, his eyes flicking over to where his phone sat at the edge of his desk and confirming that it was only Courfeyrac. He decided that the lazy bastard could walk down the hall if it was really important and turned his attention back to his student’s assignment.

He really wanted to get this stack of papers finished in time for his eight am on Friday. He liked the kids in that section, and as such, he didn’t want to keep them in suspense about their grades for any longer than he absolutely had to. The little shits in his ten am section on the other hand…those entitled bastards could wait until Monday.

His phone went off with three more texts in the time it took him to grade that first paper. By the time he was jotting down an encouraging note with a large B+ his office door burst open. Courfeyrac theatrically threw himself into a chair opposite the desk and pouted. The action had looked slightly ridiculous on him when he and Combeferre had first met as college freshmen, and it looked incredibly ridiculous now that they were in their early thirties.

To be fair though, Courfeyrac still looked like a fresh faced twenty something and was often mistaken for one of the students at their college instead of the adjunct professor he happened to be. Even though Combeferre was one of the youngest tenured professors at the school, if not the youngest, he still never ran into that. Something in the way he presented himself always gave him away as a professor. That and he was already starting to go grey, though his friends all assured him
the silver flecks in his hair suited him.

“Dude! Your phone is right there. I know you saw my texts.”

“Mm hm.” Combeferre finished the note, set the girl’s paper aside, and picked up another one. “I figured if it was important you’d walk the ten feet to my office. And here you are. So professor, what’s so important?”

“Well Dr. Asshole, bite me. Just because I’m adjunct and your good reference is the only reason I got this job…”

Combeferre smirked. He probably got more enjoyment than he should have out of teasing Courfeyrac over the doctor/professor distinction (really he didn’t care about the titles, but Courfeyrac did, so it was an excellent way to get under his skin when he was being a pest).

“Well? What is it?” Combeferre asked. He didn’t look up from the paper, even though he wasn’t actually reading it. Combeferre fully accepted that his old friend was going to monopolize his attention for the next fifteen minutes or so at least, but he also wanted to convey that he’d been doing something important when he’d been interrupted.

“Two things,” Courfeyrac answered. He started kicking his legs, which were hanging over the arm of the chair. Combeferre arched a skeptical brow at the olive green corduroys Courfeyrac was wearing with his checkered Converse. There was no way that outfit counted as business-casual. And he complained when people didn’t realize he was a professor… “First, I can’t get the fucking school site to upload the articles I want my kids to read.”

“Yes, that is a common theme when it comes to this school and technology.”

“…help?”

Combeferre sighed. “I actually gave up on the online component functioning the way it’s supposed to ages ago. I just had all my kids buy flash drives at the beginning of the semester and I saved the supplemental readings to the drives for them.”

“That must have been a pain in the ass.”

Combeferre shrugged. He finally set the paper down and took off his reading glasses. “It was one pain in the ass night, yes, but otherwise a very relaxing semester. Of course, I’m still dealing with kids who didn’t get the text book or just don’t think they need to do the readings, but there’s no way to avoid those.”

Courfeyrac scowled. “Even though I used to be one of those punks-”

“You get why they annoyed me and Enjolras so much, don’t you?”

“Oh!” Courfeyrac bolted into an upright position. “Speaking of Enj, are you still swinging by his place tonight?”

Combeferre nodded. He usually took the train from Boston to New York on Wednesday nights after work, spent Thursday with Enjolras and Grantaire, and was back in time for his eight am class on Friday mornings.

“I gave my kids a review day tomorrow and I’m off from my other job. After you help me post that article I need them to review, would you mind if I tagged along for your visit? I need to talk to you and ‘Taire and Enj about something.”
Combeferre immediately consented, though he was sure Courfeyrac’s presence would make him less productive until he could pass the cheerful conversationalist off to one of their friends. He decided to try to set some boundaries, though he was sure he would be ignored and his papers would remain ungraded for the rest of the night. “Of course you can come. I’ll be grading these during the train ride though, so I won’t be very good company. But Courfeyrac, I probably can’t fix the website for you. It always does this. That’s why the full time faculty doesn’t use it.”

“You have a magic touch, ‘Ferre! You’ve gotten it to work like six times when I couldn’t. Please-please-please!”

Courfeyrac proved more persistent in his whining than the strength of Combeferre’s resolve, so he ended up fixing his friend’s tech issues for him (even though the fix amounted to emailing Courfeyrac’s students a link that worked instead of getting the website to function appropriately). Courfeyrac proclaimed him the best, then departed for his shared office down the hall. Combeferre dutifully resumed his grading, and after another hour he packed up and went to the suite of offices Courfeyrac shared with other faculty members so they could walk to the train station together.

Instead of his cheerful colleague, he found a post-it note with a hastily scrawled message saying that Courfeyrac would meet him at the station. Combeferre supposed he should have found that suspicious, but figuring that Courfeyrac had needed to run home to pack an overnight bag, he shrugged it off and left for the train station.

By the time Combeferre got to the train station the city was experiencing the tail end of the commuting rush. The platform was packed with crowds of irritable people heading home after a long day of work. Even though the platform was absolutely packed, Combeferre had no problem spotting Courfeyrac.

More specifically, he had no problem spotting Courfeyrac’s four year old son where he was perched on his father’s shoulders.

Combeferre wanted to be irritated, because really Courfeyrac ought to have told him that he’d be bringing Gusty with him when he invited himself along for a trip to New York. However, Augustine, or Gusty as he’d been nicknamed by his mother and was fondly called by friends and family, was one of the happiest and most pleasant children on the planet and Combeferre often felt that he didn’t get to see enough of his honorary nephew.

Gusty let out a pleased yelp of surprise when he saw Combeferre walking towards them, and immediately started waving and beckoning towards him. “Daddy look, it’s Uncle ‘Ferre! Hi Uncle ‘Ferre! We’re right here! Come stand with me and Daddy!”

Combeferre shouldered his way through the crowd and caught the boy when he leapt off his father’s shoulders and into Combeferre’s outstretched arms. He crushed him close for a tight hug, noogied the messy brown curls he’d inherited from his father, and then gingerly set him on the ground. Gusty hugged Combeferre’s knees, then reached up to place a chubby hand in Combeferre’s, the other in Courfeyrac’s.

“I’m still grading my papers on the train,” Combeferre informed Courfeyrac.

“I expect you to,” Courfeyrac said. “Look, if either of us was going to be a distracting nuisance for you, you know it’s more likely to be me than Gusty. If anything, he’ll entertain me and keep me from pesterling you.”

“True enough. What do you say, Gusty? You going to keep your Daddy in line for me?”
“Um…okay. I was going to color. Can I still do that?” Gusty asked. Laughing, Combeferre nodded. “Cool-cool. We’re going to visit Uncle R and Uncle Angel-ras, so I wanna make them new pictures. Oh! I should make you a new picture too, Uncle ‘Ferre. Do you want a picture?”

Combeferre smiled warmly, and nodded again. He already had quite the gallery of childish scribbles hanging in his home office, dating back to the Thenardier brothers and going all the way up to Feuilly and Eponine’s youngest, who was just now getting old enough to hold a crayon in her little fist. Even Gerard’s baby-mamas had given him pictures drawn by his biological nephews and niece. In his opinion, it was a gallery that could never be filled and he was always happy to install a new piece.

By some miracle they managed to get a seat on the train with a table, so Combeferre was able to spread out with his papers, Gusty had plenty of room to color, and Courfeyrac was able to set up his tablet and goof off to his heart’s content. Combeferre threw a skeptical look Courfeyrac's way, tempted to ask his work colleague if he had something he should be doing, but he decided against it. The two of them had very different teaching styles, but they’d both proven to be effective. Courfeyrac always appeared to take his job, and even life in general, less seriously than he probably should have, but that wasn’t actually the case. Combeferre had seen him lead discussion groups in his classes. He was always prepared, though God only knew when he managed to get his research done. Combeferre never saw him work, and the man was a single father…

Gusty happily colored his three pictures. He presented Combeferre with a picture of a red Power Ranger, then curled up on his father’s lap to watch an episode of Dinosaur Train on the tablet. The two of them were particularly amused about watching Dinosaur Train on an actual train, an enthusiasm Combeferre was too tired to share. Gusty nodded off shortly after that, nestled safely in his father’s arms.

“Hey ‘Ferre, can you switch off the tablet for me?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks. Uh…you’re not mad about me sneaking Gusty along, right? I couldn’t find a sitter on such short notice, and, y’know…it’s kinda mean to run away to visit his Uncle R without him.”

Combeferre tiredly smiled at him and made a dismissive motion with his hand. “It’s alright, Courf. I think we’ve all said this to you at least a dozen times. No one considers spending time with Gusty a chore. We all love being around him. You’re raising an incredible little boy.”

“Thanks.” Courfeyrac looked down at his son and smiled indulgently. “He is turning out pretty rad so far, huh? I was fucking terrified at first, but…if I’m screwing it all up it’s not showing yet.”

“You’re not screwing up, and considering the challenges you faced that’s an impressive feat.”

“You think so?” Courfeyrac looked up, an odd sort of vulnerability shining in his normally exuberant features. “I mean, he seems happy and everything. But there’s so much I want to give him. I want him to have what Gigi has, y’know?”

Combeferre frowned. Gigi was Marius and Cosette’s daughter. She was about the same age as Gusty, and similarly cheerful and friendly, though much more quietly so. She’d inherited a good amount of her mother’s grace, or at least, a four year old version of it. Combeferre assumed Courfeyrac was referring to the fact that Gigi lived with both her parents and her elderly grandfather in a spacious house with a good sized backyard in an affluent small town, while Gusty saw his mother a few times a year if he was lucky and lived with his father in a cluttered but clean and cared for apartment in one of the less spectacular parts of Beverly.
“Gigi has security, and that comes from being surrounded by people who love her and make her feel safe. Gusty has that too,” Combeferre said, hoping the message would sink in. He was pretty sure there was nothing he could say to make Courfeyrac stop worrying about his son though. Still, he hoped his attempt eased some of the anxiety Courfeyrac felt at least a little.

Courfeyrac stroked his free hand through Gusty’s curls, then looked up at Combeferre and changed the subject. “How’re you doing with your papers?”

“Little more than halfway done.” They chatted about work for the remainder of the trip, a conversation topic that absorbed both of them so thoroughly that Combeferre didn’t think to call Enjolras and Grantaire and inform them of the additional guests until they arrived in New York.

Enjolras was warming pasta sauce on the stove top when his husband irritably banged his way into the kitchen and huffily addressed him. He stood in the center of the room with his arms crossed over his chest, long hair tied back in an untidy bun with two pencils and a marker stuck through it. “Enj, is this deadline real or is this one of your tricks to get me ahead of schedule?”

Enjolras smirked. “It’s a real deadline, love. Remember, I already faked you out once this month for the convention.”

“You’ve faked me out more than once in a month before. Babe, I’m dying. Please tell me the truth. Is the deadline legit?”

“Mm hm. The publishers expect twenty five pages from you by noon tomorrow.” He calmly added some dried garlic to the sauce, then checked on their ravioli. Behind him, Grantaire made an impatient noise. “I suppose you’d best get back to work so you can join me and Combeferre for dinner tonight.”

“Fuck bunnies.” Grantaire stormed out of the room, loudly slamming the door behind him, only to return less than a minute later. “Enj, really?”

“Yes, for real. What page are you on anyway?”

“I’ve got them all penciled…”

“Oh for fuck’s sake Grantaire, you’re supposed to be submitting finished work! How many pages have you completed?”

Grantaire’s answer was unintelligible. He bitterly slunk out of the room once more to shut himself away in his art studio and continue working on the comic book series that had made him something of a celebrity with adolescents and twenty-somethings.

Enjolras sighed, then left the stove in favor of checking their stock of caffeine. They had a healthy supply of coffees of varying strengths and flavors, as well as energy drinks and bars of chocolate with espresso beans in them. It was shaping up to be a sleepless night for the artist, which meant a sleepless night for his partner as well. Enjolras would be fetching Grantaire beverages and snacks, giving him words of encouragement, and jumping in to help with tasks that were within his range of artistic ability. They’d both probably be awake for sunrise, and a fair few hours after the fact as well.

People joked about Enjolras being Grantaire’s kept man, and there was some truth to the statement. Red and Black’s success had generated a small fortune for the couple, so Enjolras never had to worry about earning his own income independent of his husband’s. However, Enjolras was involved in the comic as much more than the creator’s husband and driving inspiration. He handled the business end of Grantaire’s work, scheduled his appearances, kept him on task, and had ghost-
colored five issues of the series. He went to every con with his husband and supported him emotionally when he was overwhelmed by the social obligations that went with keeping his creative venture afloat. Enjolras was easily as responsible for their financial prosperity as his husband.

Enjolras finished up their dinner and left it warming in pots on the stove. He was just starting to set the table when his phone rang. “Hey ‘Ferre.”

“Hey. How are you?”

“Oh, hectic. We’re closing in on a deadline so you probably won’t be seeing much of Grantaire tonight.”

Combeferre sighed. “Crap. Courfeyrac tagged along and he brought Gusty with him.”

“Double crap. I’ve been lying to him. The real deadline’s not until Saturday, but he’s only finished the pencils.”

“Enjolras, you’re not really going to make him sit in the studio by himself when his godson is here to see him.”

“But.”

“Seriously, if you do, the four year old will be in the living room with us throwing a tantrum because he can’t play with Uncle R.”

Enjolras conceded defeat. After hanging up with Combeferre he went to check on Grantaire in the studio.

Grantaire was slouched down in his office chair studying his reflection in one of the many mirrors hanging around the room. He arched his eyebrow, waggled it, then started frantically scribbling a likeness of the exaggerated expression he’d made. Enjolras let out an irritated huff. “You said you had the pencils done!”

“I do, mostly. I just think they came out like shit in a couple spots so I’m fixing them before I ink and color. I’ll be done by the morning, I swear.”

Enjolras sighed. “No you won’t. ‘Ferre brought Courf and Gusty with him. They’re on their way now.”

Grantaire looked betrayed. “You did lie about the deadline!”

“Of course I lied. You’re never ready on time if I don’t.”

Grantaire scowled and set his clipboard on the drafting table. He used his bare feet to roll the chair away from the table and closer to Enjolras, in case his lover couldn’t make out the look of annoyance on his face clearly enough with the space between them. “I know I told you to do this to me, but honestly, we’ve gotta figure out a system for when I really, truly need a break so you can let me know I have the leisure to take one.”

Enjolras closed what little space remained between them so that he was standing between Grantaire’s spread legs. He arched his brow, defiant gaze challenging Grantaire’s annoyance until it gave way. He calmly removed Grantaire’s glasses and placed them in his shirt pocket, then smoothed back an errant strand of wavy black hair. “I’m sorry, love. I thought you were just being whiny. Are you really that tired?”
Grantaire’s eyes closed in a grimace that indicated a headache from staring at his artwork for too
many hours in one day. His expression softened, and some of the tension visibly drained from him
when Enjolras bent over to trail kisses along the side of his face and down his jaw. “I am tired… I
mean, that’s not really the right word for it though…”

“Mm?” Enjolras planted his hands on the armrest and leaned closer, nuzzling against Grantaire’s
neck.

“Yeah…I think I just need a break.” He uncrossed his arms, placing his hands on Enjolras’ slim hips
and pulling the other man onto his lap. Enjolras happily complied and began kissing his husband in
earnest.

If their friends walked in, they’d probably tease the couple mercilessly about the fact that they still
made out in every room of their condo like hormonal teenagers, even after almost seven years of
marriage and a full ten years being together. Enjolras wouldn’t care in the least if they did. He was so
completely far from being ashamed of the continued intensity of his feelings for his lover that even
Courfeyrac’s most obnoxious digs couldn’t provoke the least bit of embarrassment from him.

Enjolras clasped his left hand with Grantaire’s, rubbed his thumb over the slim band of white gold on
Grantaire’s finger, and smiled into their next kiss. Grantaire laughed and placed a quick kiss on his
nose. “I can’t believe you still do that.”

“I like feeling my ring on you. It did take some effort to get it there.” Three postponed ceremonies
and Grantaire not showing up for the wedding twice, to be exact. Grantaire dropped his eyes to the
floor, and Enjolras mentally cursed himself for bringing that up. “The effort was worth it, ‘Taire.
Having a life with you has been worth all the downs that came with our ups. Come on, you know
that.”

“I do,” Grantaire conceded. “I still feel like a jack ass about some of those downs though.”

“Well, don’t.” Enjolras said it like it was the most simple thing in the world, because after this many
years of combatting Grantaire’s depression and anxiety, the simple reminders did as much as his most
long winded and eloquent reassurances. Besides, Grantaire responded to touch almost as readily as
he did to Enjolras’ words, and they were pretty much entwined around each other. As such, they
both felt it when Enjolras’ phone started vibrating with a new call.

Reluctantly, Enjolras leaned just far enough from Grantaire to get his phone out of his pocket. “Hey
‘Ferre. You guys here then? …okay. I’ll be right there.” Enjolras dropped one last chaste kiss on
Grantaire’s lips then climbed off of him. “I’ll go let our guests in. Why don’t you take the pencils out
of your hair?”

Grantaire absently patted at his bun, seemingly surprised to find artistic utensils there. He must have
been particularly spaced out when he stuck them there for safe keeping.

By the time he met them in the kitchen, Grantaire looked significantly more grounded. He’d retied
his hair into a ponytail and changed into jeans and a t-shirt instead of the ratty sweats he wore when
confined to his studio. As soon as Gusty saw him he barreled across the room and jumped into
Grantaire’s arms. “Uncle R!”

“Wey buddy!” Grantaire swung him around the room, then tossed him onto the couch and descended
upon him for tickles. Enjolras and Combeferre edged out of the room during the commotion and
went to exchange more subdued greetings in the kitchen.

It didn’t seem to matter how many of their close friends had children; Enjolras never managed to
warm up to kids. He struggled to communicate with them, but to his credit he didn’t dislike them and tried to keep expressions of his discomfort to a minimum. Feuilly and Eponine’s eldest, Cammy, had recently turned nine and Enjolras was just now finding it possible to hold conversations with her. He figured in a few more years he might even enjoy spending time with her. Four year olds, like Gusty and Gigi, were simply beyond his comprehension.

Combeferre and Enjolras heaped the finished ravioli onto their plates, though it took a good twenty minutes to get Gusty and Grantaire to settle down enough to sit down and eat. By then it was coming up on the small child’s bedtime, so Grantaire disappeared upstairs with him for a tubby and a few lullabees. Courfeyrac, more than content to surrender the bedtime routine to his best friend, settled into the living room with Combeferre and Enjolras.

Courfeyrac slumped over on the loveseat, eyes half-lidded. “Gusty woke up two hours before my alarm this morning. He decided to surprise me by making my coffee for me.”

“How’d that go?” Combeferre asked.

“Poorly. He didn’t break anything, but he covered the counter with foul smelling brown sludge. On the plus side, I finally cleaned my coffee maker. Guys, kids are exhausting. You probably shouldn’t have any of your own. You can borrow mine whenever you want though.”

Enjolras let out a full bodied shudder at the thought, while Combeferre rolled his eyes. “If you need more help with Gusty, I’ll happily resume our weekly sleepovers.”

“Grantaire wants to take him for weekend visits again too,” Enjolras said. “He’s not quite ready yet though. Maybe after San Diego this year.”

“Enjolras, San Diego Comic Con is in July.”

“Yes, I’m aware.”

Courfeyrac tiredly tossed a throw pillow in the general direction of his friend. He missed by about a foot, but he got his point across. “My kid is the most disgustingly cute little thing in the universe and you love him. You would be blessed to have him over your house for visits.”

“Be that as it may, you do not want me to be the one looking after him. I’m bad with kids, and until San Diego is over Grantaire is going to be very, very busy. And frankly, when his workload is this heavy I already feel like I’m looking after a four year old. He gets very whiny and petulant.”

This time the throw pillow was lobbed at him with force and aim. It whacked Enjolras off the back of the head, making him turn around and pout at his lover, who’d thrown the pillow from the doorway. “Courf, Gusty’s all tucked in in the guest room but he wants you to say goodnight. And Enjolras, if you think I’ve been whiny so far, just wait.”

Courfeyrac spent a few minutes saying goodnight to Gusty, and when he returned Enjolras and Grantaire were cuddling on the couch while Combeferre sat opposite them looking through the pencils for an upcoming issue of Red and Black. Courfeyrac let out a loud snort. “You guys still act like newlyweds.”

“Mm hm. So you’ve said.” Enjolras tightened the arm he had wrapped around his husband.

“Jealous much?” Grantaire asked. Courfeyrac scowled with a little too much readiness to be part of their banter, and realizing he’d hit a nerve, Grantaire sat up and settled for sitting next to Enjolras instead of draped over him. “So why’d you tag along anyway? ‘Ferre said you wanted to talk to us about something.”
“Yeah, Feuilly’s coming back from Jerusalem next week, and Bahorel and ‘Chetta are going to be back in town too. We were thinking of getting the old gang together for another reunion sometime soon. You guys are the hardest ones to track down for a social obligation. Are you already busy for Thanksgiving?”

Enjolras disappeared for a moment and returned with a large day planner bursting with scraps of paper and post-its of varying size and color. He looked through his notes for November while Grantaire anxiously watched. “Hm. Well we do have rather a lot coming up. The publishers want to issue a new trade collecting issues fifty seven through seventy, we’re supposed to appear at a con at the beginning of the month, you’ve got two book signings, and we’ve got a meeting with those Adult Swim people about adapting the series for animation—”

“Wait, what?!” Courfeyrac yelped. Combeferre gaped at them silently. “Sitting on that one, were you?”

Enjolras didn’t bother looking up from the planner. “Nothing’s set in stone yet. It’s all incredibly tentative. Anyway, Thanksgiving itself is open, but we’ve got a lot going on leading up to and shortly thereafter.” He turned to his husband. “‘Taire, if you want to do this, you’ll have to really push yourself. I can probably write the new introduction for the trade myself, but the rest is mostly on your shoulders. Do you think you can handle it?”

“We haven’t gotten the entire group in one room together since Gigi’s first birthday party. We’re fucking doing this, Enj. Jesus, we even missed ‘Chetta and Bahorel’s wedding.”

“To be fair, they eloped at the last minute,” Combeferre said.

“Yeah. They called it a ‘why the fuck not’ wedding. ‘Ferre and I only managed to get there because we were already in Boston for work. Almost everyone else missed it too.”

“Still. We miss a lot by being this busy,” Grantaire said. Not quite changing the subject, he turned a self-conscious smile on Courfeyrac. “Did Gusty like the birthday present we got him?”

“What, the mini-moonbounce? Do you know a four year old on the planet who wouldn’t want their own moonbounce? I had to hide his sleeping bag from him. He kept setting it up in the damn thing so he could sleep in there and never have to leave it. You totally won birthday with that.”

Grantaire grinned. “Cool. We tried to make it out there for the party, but, y’know…”

“It’s cool. Grantaire, you Skype him all the time and you visit as often as you can. You’re totally fulfilling your godfatherly duties.” Courfeyrac and Combeferre proceeded to tell their friends all about Gusty’s party, and the goings-on of their other friends and their children. Enjolras took out his laptop partway through and started working on a new article for the social justice blog he still religiously updated, demanding work schedule be damned. Rants about his friends kids just didn’t hold his interest.

Cosette and Marius were expecting again, and had only just found out that Gigi was going to have a little brother. As Gigi was named after Marius’ father, Gigi being short for Georgiana, they were planning on naming the little boy after Cosette’s Papa, though they were hoping to agree on a nickname rather than calling the baby Jean. Marius was unemployed again, his dreamy disposition making it somewhat difficult for him to hold down a steady job, but Cosette wasn’t so far along that she had to leave work, so the little family was still getting by fairly comfortably.

“If Marius needs to work for me again, let him know that that’s always an option, will you?” Grantaire said.
Courfeyrac smirked. “I already suggested it, but Cosette wants him to try to find a real job. I wouldn’t take him off the payroll though. He’s kind of an ideal stay at home dad, if you ask me.”

“What was it we used to say Marius did for us again?” Enjolras asked. “Was he an editor?”

“Something like that,” Grantaire said dismissively. Technically Legle was an editor for them as well, and Gavroche had interned for them at one point. Legle’s editing basically amounted to meeting up with Grantaire from time to time, going out for greasy diner food, and letting Grantaire bounce ideas off of him before he drafted a new issue. Every now and then Grantaire had him spell check something just so he felt like he was earning his weekly paychecks.

The old friends chatted for hours. Combeferre saw Enjolras and Grantaire almost every week, but Courfeyrac’s visits were much more infrequent and besides that, he was a better gossip than Combeferre. He chatted for hours, updating the couple on the goings-on of their friends and relatives, eventually pulling up his facebook page for the sake of visual aids.

It was nearly two in the morning by the time they decided to call it a night. Combeferre took a pillow and blanket into the den, Grantaire, hit with a sudden burst of inspiration locked himself into his studio, Enjolras went to bed alone, and Courfeyrac joined his son in the guest room.

Before climbing into bed next to his drooling four year old, Courfeyrac pulled out his laptop one more time and made a facebook event for the Thanksgiving reunion. “Hm…I hope Ponine just lets us use the café again,” he muttered before filling it in as the location. Eponine had opened a café near their old college campus a few years ago with some start-up capital from Grantaire, and the place was flourishing. It had been the site of more than one private gathering for their group, and he couldn’t imagine she’d mind them using it again.

Courfeyrac then started adding guests. He started with the usuals, but frowned when he got to the Thenardiers. Little R and Gavroche were definitely in, but he wasn’t sure if Mike and Azelma would want to come. He hadn’t actually seen Azelma since she’d moved to New York to do her undergrad. She was back in Salem though, and it couldn’t hurt to invite her…(or, it couldn’t hurt Courfeyrac. It might cause a pang or two for Combeferre).

After inviting Azelma, Courfeyrac decided to just throw the invite to Mike as well, even though most of their friends hadn’t really talked to the kid since the days when he’d gone by Peter Parker. Courfeyrac sent out the invites, finished designing the page, and then gave into temptation and creeped Jean Prouvaire’s page.

They were still facebook friends even though they hadn’t spoken in ten years. In all that time, Jehan hadn’t unfriended him, but he also hadn’t responded to a single thing Courfeyrac had posted. He hadn’t given a single indication that he ever saw anything Courfeyrac posted in his feed. And Courfeyrac had been so damn sure the sentimental poet was going to like at least one of the pictures of Gusty he’d posted when the baby was first born.

Then again, maybe Jehan wasn’t sentimental or poetic anymore. Courfeyrac wasn’t really in a place to know.

Jehan’s profile pic of the moment was of a ceramic beckoning cat statue, so he was still fascinated by Asian junk, at least. His cover photo was of a wide shot of breathtaking foliage, and all his most recent status updates were excerpts from a chap book. “Ah…so he is still into poetry,” Courfeyrac creeped through a few of his photo albums, telling himself he was only doing this because the upcoming reunion was making him think of old times.

Against his better judgment, he sent Jehan an invite to the Thanksgiving reunion too.
Chapter 57

Chapter Summary

We find out a bit more about what the characters have been up to over the course of the past ten years. Jean Prouvaire gets his invite to the reunion.

Chapter Notes

Man, natural sounding exposition is hard. Sorry about cramming so much of it into this chapter. The next one should read a bit more easily.

Also, I've had some free time this week and I'm starting to go through my backlog of comments. If you see responses to something you wrote like four months ago, that's why :/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Courfeyrac had met Gusty’s mother when he’d been at a particularly vulnerable point in his life. His clique had mostly disbanded at the time; Combeferre and Enjolras temporarily moved away for grad school, Grantaire’s comic book was starting to get successful enough that even if he hadn’t followed after his fiancé, he still wouldn’t have been around much because of his promotional duties. Joly had had a nervous breakdown related to his hypochondria, so he and Legle had gone back to western Massachusetts for a few months to plan out a life plan that didn’t involve the constant exposure to diseases that went with nursing. Marius and Cosette were newlyweds and busy setting up their new life together in the house Valjean gifted them as a wedding present, Eponine and Feuilly were struggling to get by with their constantly expanding family, and Jehan had been a non-presence since his move to Montreal.

To top it off, Courfeyrac had faced the inevitability that he wasn’t capable of giving his father the care and attention he needed, so he’d gotten Charles settled into an assisted living facility. He’d faced the painful task of selling his childhood home and a good chunk of the family’s possessions without much help from his friends. Feuilly and Marius had both been able to clear an evening to help him sort through his belongings and cart away the donations, but that had been about it.

Really though, the physical labors weren’t what he’d needed help with.

It felt like saying his final goodbyes to his mother all over again when he sold her house (her kitchen), and he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was a horrible son for being unable to keep Charles in the house he’d worked so hard to buy. The thing was, even though the guy was a little young for it he had Alzheimer’s and Courfeyrac just couldn’t take care of him by himself. He visited Charles as often as he could, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d failed him as a son.

Having Grantaire to talk to would have been incredibly helpful. As close as he’d gotten to his other friends, Grantaire was the one who’d been there since his childhood. His sympathy would be felt in a way no one else’s was capable of, because he’d been there. The house was home to him too.
Courfeyrac was mulling all this over by himself, feeding his bad mood and letting it fester to the point of consuming him, when a girl tapped him on the shoulder and asked if she could buy him a drink. She wasn’t even pretty, not really, but she had enough charisma to hold his attention. Courfeyrac followed her away from the bus stop he’d been sitting at and went to a bar with her instead of heading home to his dismal, lonely apartment.

She got lovelier as the night progressed, and not just under the influence of the drinks they shared. Her mind was positively wicked, between her wit and her imagination. Courfeyrac felt like he could have listened to Felicia Thomas talk forever. When she invited herself to his apartment he couldn’t help but say yes. Even if he hadn’t been desperately lonely, there was something about the girl…

Of course Felicia was incredibly charming and charismatic. Complete and utter basket cases often are.

She’d left while he was still asleep, carting away a good chunk of his possessions considering she was on the scrawny side and she didn’t have a car. From what the neighbor down the hall told him, Felicia had been wearing layers and layers of his clothing in addition to the full trash bags she’d carried off. Courfeyrac found that baffling, as his clothes weren’t really worth anything. And for some odd reason she’d stolen his toaster.

He’d shrugged it off as a lesson learned. Charming though someone may appear, he should still keep a better eye on his one-night stands if he let them stay the night.

And then Felicia somehow became a two-night stand. That second time was undoubtedly a mistake, and he paid for that by losing the prescription painkillers he’d gotten after having his wisdom teeth removed (but really, he’d only used one of them and he was just going to dispose of the rest at some point anyway, so she really wasn’t putting him out or anything…) and for appliances she swiped his blender. The third time he let her in he took the precaution of padlocking his kitchen cabinets, so she took a lamp.

The fourth time they went to her place and he took as much of his stuff back with him as he could. She didn’t seem to really need it. If anything, she seemed like a hoarder.

They kept talking and fucking and eventually a really screwed up relationship started to form. Courfeyrac gradually started introducing Felicia to his friends, who were all visibly uncomfortable around her but pretended to like her anyway. Then, one by one, they each pulled him aside for a private chat about how concerned they were regarding his loneliness and the resulting life choices.

“But I’m not lonely,” he explained, first to Marius, then Feuilly, Grantaire, Combeferre, and even Bahorel. Once Bahorel expressed his concern about Courfeyrac’s taste in romantic partners, he admitted that he needed to give Felicia a closer look.

Okay, she was unstable, she had some pretty obvious substance issues, but she was also always around (what with being unemployed and all) and she liked spending time with him. All of his friends were busy being adults and living real lives, and without Felicia around to distract him Courfeyrac just ended up sitting in his tiny apartment feeling like a horrible son and a fuck up. It wasn’t like he was going to marry her or something stupid like that. They didn’t love each other.

They were dating so they wouldn’t be alone, and Felicia felt the exact same way.

And then she got pregnant and everything got serious all at once.

Courfeyrac tried proposing to her and she laughed in his face. So he asked her to move in with him, if that was the best he could get. “At least you won’t have to steal from me anymore. We’ll have all the same stuff.”
Felicia stared at him like he’d grown a second head. “Hon, are you fucking crazy? You’re not going to start a family with me. I’m…not that type of girl.”

“You’re pregnant, Felicia. I’m not saying it’s going to be conventional because clearly we’re not conventional people, but we are starting some version of a family.”

“Assuming I keep the baby.”

Courfeyrac could have sworn his heart stopped. When he could breathe again he cleared his throat and met her gaze. “I’d made that assumption.”

“You want to be a dad?” She let out a mean bark of a laugh, and then paled when he nodded. “Do you really think I should be a mother? Really, Courf?”

“I’d like it if you were. Anyway, you’re welcome to stay with me.” Then, not sure what else to say, he’d let her change the subject. He was having a difficult time reconciling his personal politics regarding women’s reproductive rights with the very real and terrifying possibility that his girlfriend was going to abort his unborn child.

She hadn’t though. She’d broken up with him, then she’d moved in with him and they’d started sleeping together without definition, and then she’d cut that off again and accused him of taking advantage of her while she was hormonal and crazy (“But you’re hormonal and crazy even when you’re not pregnant!”) and basically given him nine months of the worst kind of head games. Anytime Courfeyrac disagreed with her over something she threatened to trigger a miscarriage. Her prenatal care left a lot to be desired, and was the source of most of their fights. Courfeyrac spent many a sleepless night wandering the city trying to track down his baby mama, hoping she hadn’t killed their son.

Gusty was born addiction to prescription pain meds and suffered a horrible withdrawal period. Courfeyrac’s adjustment to being a new father was made much more difficult due to his son’s condition. With visible, tangible evidence of the harm Felicia’s negligence had wreaked on their son, Courfeyrac finally got angry enough to call her out on her issues.

Felicia waived all parental rights to her child, cleaned out Courfeyrac’s savings, and took off. He didn’t see her again until Gusty turned two. He didn’t fully believe her when she said she wanted to start over and be a good mom and a good person, but he thought he owed it to his son to at least try and reconcile so that Gusty could have a mother. He wasn’t terribly surprised when she stole more of his money and took off.

They fell into a sort of rhythm after that. Felicia would drop off the face of the earth, then after a few months Courfeyrac would find her in his apartment acting as though everything were completely normal between them. She’d pretend to be a mom for a few days, maybe even a week if he was lucky, then she’d panic and run off again.

Really, Courfeyrac didn’t expect her to change. But when he moved to Beverly he kept a landline and made sure his number remained listed so that she’d be able to look him up. On the off chance she finally did have that life changing insight that should have come with bringing another living being into this world and finding them utterly dependent on you, he wanted Felicia to be able to see her son. He wanted to keep hoping she’d get better, and that Gusty could have both of his parents in his life.

On the plus side, Gusty had so many honorary uncles, aunts, and cousins that he didn’t even seem to notice there was anything odd about his family. He’d asked why Gigi and Cammy had moms that lived with them once, and Courfeyrac had done his best to explain. It didn’t come up again, and
Gusty didn’t really seem to mind, but it continued to plague his father. He worried that he wasn’t enough for his little boy.

His friends all assured him that his fears were baseless. As Grantaire put it, “You’re really ruling at the whole single Dad thing. And you know I’d tell you if you were fucking up.”

Gusty threw a tiny tantrum when they had to say goodbye to Uncle R and Uncle Angelras at the train station, which always made Courfeyrac nervous. The kid’s tantrums really weren’t that bad, but he always felt like he came across as an inept parent when they happened in public. Once again, Gusty slept for most of the train ride back to Boston, and the following train ride to Beverly.

Courfeyrac carried him into their apartment, laid him down in his Cars bed, and kissed his forehead.

He thought about throwing some laundry into the washer or grading a few papers for one of his classes, but ultimately dismissed it in favor of dicking around on facebook. When he checked, nearly all of their friends had accepted their invites to the reunion and Eponine had okayed the use of her café.

Jehan still hadn’t answered. Trying not to feel too disappointed, and failing to convince himself that that hadn’t been the reason he’d signed on in the first place, Courfeyrac went to bed.

Eponine was standing in front of the message board at the café with a hand perched on her hip, snorting derisively at one of the fliers that had been posted, when Little R showed up for his shift. He was quick enough to set his backpack on the counter before running over and grabbing his sister’s wrist when she went to remove the obnoxiously colored slip of paper. “One of my classmates posted that one, Ponine.”

“Sweetie, we’ve been over this. I don’t mind if the clubs from your school use my café as a meeting place, but when it comes to the little twits who think they’re political activists…just please, try to have them meet during one of your shifts, not mine. Otherwise I’ll start channeling Enjolras and I’ll yell at them and make them feel stupid, and that’s really bad for business.”

“So is cancelling their meeting for no real reason. Come on, sis, they’re trying. They want to do good. And really, with the way you whine about them you’re channeling Grantaire, not Enjolras. Enjolras would find a way to turn their raw enthusiasm into…some kind of productivity.”

Frankly, if he knew how, he’d be helping. As was, the Diversity and Justice club from his school was much more interested in sitting around self-importantly bitching about the state of the world than actually getting involved in it.

Little R had asked Enjolras for a few tips once, and then carried them back to a meeting and generated a genuine enthusiasm, but the enthusiasm only lasted a few weeks. The other teens went right back to idle bitching while goofing off on their smart phones. Dejected, Little R gave his dismal report to Enjolras and the seasoned activist shrugged it off, saying it was a high school thing. There was a chance they’d mature into better activists with time, but it was much more likely that only a couple of them would make any attempt to effect meaningful social change.

Eponine left the flier up, and the two of them walked back to the counter. Little R snagged his apron from one of the hooks by the door to the back room and tied it on, while Eponine untied hers and returned it to what Gavroche had labeled the peg of prominence. “So how was school today, kiddo?”

Little R shrugged. “Meh. I like high school better than middle school so far, but that’s not really saying much.”
“No, I suppose it’s not. Anything I need to worry about happen today?”

Little R chewed on his lip thoughtfully before answering. He had a history of being bullied, but he got the feeling it scared Eponine and Feuilly a lot more than it actually bothered him. The only times he really cared were when the attacks turned from verbal to physical. “Some kids did try to start something today,” he admitted, and Eponine visibly tensed, her expression turning hard and merciless. “But I handled it. It’s okay, I swear.”

“I’ll be the one to decide that. What did they do?”

“They were just saying things. Y’know, calling me gay and stuff like that. So I told them that I wasn’t, but that if I was I wouldn’t have a problem with it and that they should find a better insult. And then I suggested a few and they started making fun of me for using big words. So now they’re calling me a nerd instead of a faggot, which again, I don’t really mind.” He started checking over the bake case, hoping that if he looked more invested in work than their conversation that she’d let it drop.

No such luck.

Eponine let out an exasperated groan. “Jean, don’t engage them! Seriously, when they start saying shit like that you’re not supposed to egg them on. You’re supposed to leave and get help. We’ve talked about this.”

“That just gets me beaten up. Seriously, it didn’t end bad this time. I think I earned respect from a couple of them. I definitely confused them, and that was kind of fun.”

“Even Grantaire has been over this with you. Making the bullies feel stupid doesn’t make them stop. It amps everything up. C’mon kid, you’re supposed to try to diffuse the situation.”

“Eponine, a girl overheard what I said and she asked me out. I-I’ve got a date to the freshman semi. I really think I handled it just fine.” He could feel his cheeks heating up as he finally mentioned what had been the best part of his day. “Sh-she said she likes…likes confident guys with beliefs.” This time when he bit his lip he was smiling.

Now Eponine looked displeased for another reason entirely. “What’s this girl’s name?”

“Ava.”

“What’s her last name?”

“Why? You’re not going to stalk her, are you?”

“The Valjeans’ gardener still has enough connections to the police to get us a background check on this floozy, and I completely intend to take advantage of that.”

“Eponine, you cannot sic the disgraced former detective on the first girl who’s ever shown interest in me! Don’t you remember what happened when you meddled in Gavroche’s love life? He’s confident and charming and he was single until he went away to college because you scared everyone in town!”

Eponine folded her arms over her chest. “You’re too young to date.”

“I’m fourteen!”

“Right. Way too fucking young to date.” She let out an involuntary shudder, and Little R chalked
this up as a conversation that had more to do with his sister’s demons than his actual situation. He’d let it drop for now and bring it up again later when he had Feuilly for back up.

Considering his brother in law had been out of the country for the last month and a half, this wasn’t the best time in the world to talk to Eponine anyway. She tended to get less rational the longer she was separated from “her rock”, and that was even before they’d thrown a sickly six month old into the equation.

As if his thoughts had summoned her, Zahara’s cries reached them from the inner office that also served as a nursery when needed. Eponine looked down at her watch and frowned. “Shit. I probably should have woken her up from that nap an hour ago. Now bed time’s going to be a bitch and a half.”

“If you want, I can watch Zahara and the other kids tonight and you can work the café.”

“Nice try kiddo, but you’re not babysitting alone until you’re old enough to drive.” Eponine playfully flicked his faux-hawk as she brushed past her brother. A moment later she emerged with her youngest daughter perched on her hip. Zahara was still sniffling, but she wasn’t all out wailing. She smiled shyly at her uncle before sticking her chubby fist in her mouth.

“Hello my little flower,” Little R greeted. “Did you have a nice nap?”

The baby giggled, and Eponine briefly considered letting Little R babysit despite his inability to drive. It was only a brief temptation though. She considered having a vehicle at the ready for emergencies a prerequisite for watching her kids. Even though only one of them was biologically hers, they all seemed to have inherited some of the Thenardier free spirit that had had Gavroche toddling down the street as soon as he was tall enough to reach a doorknob.

In addition to Thenardier-brashness, Eponine also seemed to possess Thenardier-fertility. They’d calculated it out, and were pretty sure that Eponine had gotten pregnant after her very first sexual encounter with Feuilly. Roughly nine months later little Camilla-Marie was born, and Eponine had nearly sworn off sex until she could arrange to have her tubes tied. She and Feuilly had been living in a squalid basement apartment at the time, having fallen behind enough on their rent to lose the haunted apartment in Danvers, and they were struggling just to take care of her brothers, let alone a bouncing bundle of joy.

She’d almost lost the boys during her subsequent financial difficulties, but their friends had stepped up and supported the young couple through their adjustment. Caring for a baby, it turned out, was a whole different ballpark from looking after Gav and Little R, who still needed a lot of attention in their own right. And then Azelma graduated and went off to college, and generated her own set of bills (because even though Eponine could have watched the girl go off on her own, she couldn’t in good conscience just let her struggle).

Surprisingly, Jean Valjean had been their ultimate savior. He’d already turned the top floor of his house into a legal apartment for Marius, but after graduation Marius had moved to western Mass to live with Cosette and left it vacant. Valjean made an addition to the apartment and then, without bothering to advertise it, offered it to Eponine and Feuilly for almost no rent.

They’d lived with Valjean until Feuilly managed to get a full time job with the Boston branch of Immigration Services, at which point they could just barely afford their own place (Gavroche pitching in on bills from his part-time job was very much appreciated). Shortly thereafter, Grantaire had suddenly become rich and, not quite comfortable with his prosperity, had started throwing his cash around to wipe out his friends’ debts. Feuilly found his student loans gone, their credit card debt followed shortly thereafter, and Eponine was given start-up capital for what turned out to be a nicely
profitable little café.

It was around this point that the couple noticed they were actually functioning really well as parents. Cammy was bright, cheerful, and came home from school with a new award for citizenship or some kind of academic achievement at least once a month. Gavroche developed a sense of responsibility to go with his talents, and other than the bullying, Little R was doing so well in school that no one who met him could even guess what a horrible start to life he’d had. When Feuilly started talking about his cases at home, talking at length about refugees and orphans he was trying to find homes for, Eponine was the one to suggest that maybe they could help out.

Thiago was the first addition to their family, then came Mehmed, and finally Zahara. Eponine was determined that Zahara was going to be their last, but she also knew she’d fold in an instant the next time Feuilly gave her a tear-jerking story with an unhappy little face to accompany it.

Of their munchkins, Zahara had the most painful background. Her biological mother had attempted to flee her Taliban-controlled village. Ultimately she hadn’t succeeded, and Feuilly found her dead body and her very much living but sickly infant when he’d visited the region. He’d named her Zahara, because she’d reminded him of that clichéd flower growing between the cracks of a concrete sidewalk. She was the fussiest of their children and needed the most attention. Even Combeferre, gentle, empathetic Combeferre, couldn’t get the baby to calm down for longer than five minutes at a time, but Little R seemed to have a magic touch.

Eponine wasn’t always able to keep her daughter happy and secure. She was severely tempted to close the café early and take Little R home with her for help, but she dismissed it. The job was good for Little R; it forced him to socialize, even if it was only with customers. Besides that, Feuilly was coming home that very evening. She’d have her partner by her side again, automatically cutting her domestic difficulties by half.

Hopefully he hadn’t found any sob story little refugees while he was away on what was supposed to be a research-only assignment.

Eponine managed to calm Zahara down enough to get her in her car seat/carrier (with more than a little help from her brother), packed up her things, and left the café just before the first afterschool rush of customers.

Thankfully the customers were mostly kids from his own school, and thus acquaintances if not friends of Little R’s. They didn’t mind having to wait to be served, so he was able to handle the rush pretty well on his own. He was still grateful for Gavroche’s help when he swung by around dinnertime though.

Azelma was in a mood. She breathed a sigh of relief upon safely nesting her new car into a space in the parking garage at the airport, then gave herself a minute to get composed. Driving through Boston was possibly one of her least favorite things, but she wanted to be more helpful while she was staying with her sister and the young family, so she’d offered to pick Feuilly up from the airport. She wasn’t regretting it. Even if she did kind of want to murder some of her fellow motorists.

Azelma gave her appearance a quick check in the mirror, decided she was just as chic looking as ever, and set off for the terminal. Feuilly’s plane wasn’t due for another fifteen minutes, and between that and getting his luggage she definitely had enough time to snap him a coffee as a ‘welcome back’ greeting. The line at the Starbucks was considerable, so she pulled up an e-book on her phone and lost herself in some Jane Austen while she waited.
“Excuse me, miss…?”

Funny how ten years, two degrees, a successful career, and a shit ton of therapy hadn’t done jack to prepare her for the sound of his voice. Once again, Azelma felt like the silly, lovesick little teenager who’d humiliated herself pursuing a calm and collected college boy.

She shut off her phone, turned around, and found herself face to face with her old high school crush. “Hello Combeferre. What are you doing here?”

He broke out in a smile. “So that really is you. I wasn’t sure…you look so different from the last time I saw you. I’m here to pick up Feuilly.”

“Me too.” She couldn’t help but smirk. “I’m guessing Eponine made arrangements with me, and Feuilly asked you.”

“So they’re just as good at communicating with each other as ever. Were you going to bring him a coffee or a snack?”

“Coffee.”

“Ah. I’ll get him a bagel then.”

They waited in line together, purchasing drinks for themselves in addition to their presents for Feuilly, then found seats by the baggage claim.

Azelma couldn’t help giving her companion a quick inspection. She hadn’t seen Combeferre in person since Cammy’s fifth birthday. They always seemed to miss each other on those occasions when his close friendship with her family should have brought them together. She had been following him on facebook though. Not as obsessively as when she’d been a teen, but she’d clicked on his pictures often enough to know he was going gray and that he’d started wearing glasses more often than not. She’d both worried and silently rejoiced that he seemed to be prematurely middle-aging to fit the role of dusty old professor, but the effect in person was quite different.

Her stomach was still doing that uncomfortable whooshing thing that happened when she crushed badly over someone. His smile was still so nice and comforting, and he seemed genuinely happy to see her.

‘Maybe I’m finally grown up enough for him,’ she couldn’t help but think, then felt irritated at herself for it. Azelma had taken pains to grow into a mature and above all self-sufficient young woman. She didn’t need her high school crush to show an interest in her to feel validated.

She still swooned when he turned his thoughtful hazel gaze on her and politely enquired after her. “I was surprised to hear you were coming back to Salem. It looked like you were doing so well in New York.”

“I was. Financially, anyway. I don’t know…something just didn’t feel right. I’ll probably wind up back where I started, begging for my old job, but in the meantime staying with Ponine and Feuilly’s been a nice change of pace. Plus there’s a world of difference between reading about my nieces and nephews on facebook and actually seeing them.”

Combeferre nodded his agreement, which prompted Azelma to ask after his brother. Combeferre let out an undignified snort. “You know, he still asks about you sometimes. He thinks I sabotaged his chances with you.”

“Oh. Wow, no. Just, not at all, no. He did all the sabotaging on his own.”
“Oh, I’m fully aware. He’s doing well by his standards. He’s managed to stay out of jail for almost a year, but he’s also posting ridiculously stupid things on facebook, so I’m sure his parole officer will find a reason to send him back soon enough.”

To her surprise, conversation came easily between them. Different topics bled naturally into each other, and when he started talking about academics, which would have been inevitable even if he weren’t a professor, she found herself actually able to keep up rather than smile dazedly while he ranted. She actually had an opinion to give on different citation styles, whether grammar and stylistic errors should count against students as opposed to the arguments and ideas they presented, how this applied to ESL students, and any other manner of issues.

They both managed to miss Feuilly. He initially walked past them, then doubled back and stood in front of them waiting to be acknowledged, an amused look on his face.

Azelma saw him first, and jumped to her feet. “Hey bro!” She rushed forward and wrapped her arms around his neck. He returned the hug, then threw a nod Combeferre’s way. “Eponine told me to pick you up.”

“And I’d already made arrangements with Combeferre. Yeah, this isn’t the first time this has happened. We really should be better about this. Ooo…who got me the coffee?”

They walked to the garage without making further arrangements. Since they got to Combeferre’s car first, Feuilly went with him, but they agreed to meet up again at the café.

Azelma hoped it wasn’t just her imagination when she thought she saw Combeferre’s eyes linger on her as they parted ways.

Hugh Scarlett wasn’t really surprised when his first few attempts at knocking on Jean Prouvaire’s study door went unanswered. That was the whole reason he had a copy of every key the man owned. It did give him pause though. Perhaps he should come back later rather than interrupt what must have been the throes of inspiration.

‘No, he made me promise. Twenty four hours of solitude max. After that, I’m supposed to interrupt him and remind him to eat.’ Hugh went through his key ring, found the heavy antique one that would permit him access to the eccentric poet’s study, and walked inside.

Jean was sitting by the large bay window, wearing a bathrobe with fuzzy hand knit socks. His long, auburn and silver hair was hanging around his face, and there were dark shadows under his eyes. He had a large, leather bound journal open on his lap and was frantically scribbling in it with a blown glass fountain pen. He was a bit twitchy, meaning he’d probably put off sleep longer than was wise with the help of enough caffeine to overdose a graduate student.

On the plus side, he was probably going to have his book finished before the week was out.

“Darling, it’s been twenty four hours. By rights I’m supposed to make you eat a real meal and put you to bed.”

“But Hugh, I’m almost done! Just one more hour?”

“You set these rules in place yourself, Jean. Now, put the fountain pen down and come with me.”

Jean let out an impatient sigh but did as instructed. He set the leather bound journal he’d been scribbling in on his writing desk and held out his hands. Hugh helped him down from the window seat and steered him into the kitchen, where he’d laid out a bowl of soup and half a sandwich. Jean
ate with a ravenous appetite, all the while rambling about his newest poems.

Smiling indulgently, Hugh vaguely listened to him while his mind drifted. Every time he helped his ex out of his artistic funks he found himself grateful he’d never actually tied himself down to Jean Prouvaire. Once his youthful enthusiasm for the relationship had burned away, these sorts of eccentricities would have bothered him. Rachel did alright managing Hester’s bursts of literary whimsy, but from the perspective of a lover, Hugh wasn’t sure he could do the same.

As a friend, with a perfectly sane lover waiting for him at home, Hugh managed fine. He saw Jean to bed, tucked him in like a child, tidied up the kitchen and the writing room, then left with Jean’s warm thanks playing in his head.

Jean woke ten hours later, feeling an odd mixture of refreshed and utterly drained. He decided to put off editing his work for another day. After a shower, some tea, and some cuddles from his cats, he settled in his living room with his laptop for some well-earned goofing off.

After checking his email, Jean logged into facebook to send a message of thanks to Hugh and a progress report to Hester. Once those tasks were accomplished, he looked through his notifications and found the usual messages related to his friends, game requests he never responded to, and then a thoroughly unexpected invite to a Salem-based reunion.

Jean frowned, wondering if it had been sent by accident. In his ten years away from home, not one of his friends had made any kind of sincere effort to see him. For the first three years he’d kept in touch with Combeferre and Enjolras, and Combeferre had talked about making the trek to Montreal for a visit, but he’d never followed through with it. Eventually they’d stopped even online correspondence as they’d just drifted too much from the immediacy of each other’s lives to stay in contact.

Jean wasn’t living in Canada anymore though. He’d followed Hester and Rachel to Providence, as had Hugh, after Hester got her professorship at Brown University. A trip from Providence to Salem wouldn’t take that long, even if he had to take the train.

He’d most certainly be done with his book by Thanksgiving. Really, it wouldn’t be a practical problem to attend the reunion. He did want to go…

He just wasn’t sure if the feeling was mutual.

Chapter End Notes

So, I'm not sure how clearly I managed to convey this, but Felicia Thomas is a play off of Felix Tholomyes. I know I already used the name Felicia for the housekeeper's daughter earlier in the fic. They're not the same Felicia (I just really like that name so it's one of my go-to's).

I've been intrigued by the description of Courfeyrac being like Tholomyes, only not a douche. "We could almost leave it there as far as Courfeyrac goes and just say, as for the rest: For Courfeyrac, see Tholomyes...Only, Courfeyrac was a good lad. Beneath the apparent outward similarities of wit, there was a huge difference between him and Tholomyes. The latent man that existed in each was altogether different. In Tholomyes there was prosecutor and in Courfeyrac a paladin." That description made me want to have Courfeyrac face the challenge of having a child unexpectedly out of wedlock, but
rise to the occasion as opposed to Tholomyes, the evil jackass.

Felicia's obviously only loosely based on Tholomyes, in that she's absent. She contributed to naming Gusty (softening the unwieldy name Courfeyrac pretentiously bestowed on his kid in a Euphrasie/Cosette manner) and then that's pretty much it. So yeah, after talking it out with my sister I figured I should come out and say that this is not the same Felicia Yvette tried to get Enjolras to marry.

Also, this should go without saying, but no actual research went into my construction of Feuilly and Eponine's family. I just decided I wanted Feuilly to work with immigrants, and I wanted them to have a herd of little rescued refugee babies. Those strike me as very fitting life choices for Feuilly.
Chapter 58

Chapter Summary

The Thanksgiving reunion.

Chapter Notes

JJ91 asked for a list of the kids’ names and ages, so here’s the next-gen Amis:

Eponine and Feuilly are the proud parents of four children. Camilla-Marie, called Cammy for short, is their only biological child and is nine years old. The rest of their kids are adopted. Thiago is four, Mehmed is three, and Zahara is six months old.

Joly and Bossuet have twin girls, Emma and Angeline, who are six. The girls are biologically theirs - Musichetta was their surrogate.

Courfeyrac has a four year old, Augustine, nicknamed Gusty.

Marius and Cosette have a four year old girl, Georgiana nicknamed Gigi, and they're expecting a baby boy they plan on naming Jean.

Jehan is a pet-parent with three rescue cats. Combeferre still has Raoul (and Grantaire still hasn’t questioned where that name came from) as well as a calico named Minerva.

For any additions to the families, you'll just have to keep reading ;)

Oh, Gerard has an unspecified number of offspring from his various baby-mamas :P

Combeferre and Enjolras were deep in conversation over an article Enjolras was revising for his blog when Grantaire burst into the room, eyes wild, his entire frame trembling with barely suppressed energy. Clearly, the guy was in the throes of some kind of inspiration.

This was confirmed when he handed Enjolras a wiffle bat and a novelty felt hat. “Here, take your shirt off, hold the bat above your head, and pretend like you’re walking up that wall. Y’know like in the old Adam West Batman show, they’d have him be grappling up the wall, but really he was just walking hunched over and they’d turned the camera on the side? Do something like that.”

Combeferre just managed to stifle a giggle. It’s not like this was the first time he’d seen this happen. Someone who visited the eccentric couple with his level of frequency had to get used to Grantaire’s interruptions.

Enjolras took it in stride. At one point he would have found the request annoying and insisted that Grantaire wait until he was finished talking to Combeferre to ask for such a bizarre favor, but after this many years he respected his lover’s artistic quirks (after all, they did put food on the table). He put his laptop to sleep, stripped off his t-shirt, walked over to a bare stretch of wall, and did as instructed. “Wouldn’t the hat be falling off my head if I’m walking up a wall?”
“Not important, love.”

“Okay. What kind of facial expression do you want me to make?”

“Doesn’t matter. I’ve already done some selfies to model the face.”

“Okay. In that case…” Enjolras crossed his eyes, twisted his mouth into a grimace, and stuck his tongue as far left of his face as he could manage.

Grantaire almost dropped his cellphone. “Don’t be an ass. Actually, hold that. I like it better than the ones I’ve got. I’ll use that instead. Okay, turn a little towards me…perfect.” Grantaire took six or seven pictures from a few different angles, then ran forward and gave Enjolras a quick peck.

“Thanks. You’re a life saver.”

“Not a problem, ‘Taire.”

“He’s helping himself as much as you,” Combeferre couldn’t help but add. Enjolras rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t really say anything. It was true, after all.

Despite being hard at work on his third degree, Enjolras was still technically broke. He’d never mended fences with his parents, and he spent so much time working on his studies and his activism that he’d never bothered getting a real job. Of course, he was practically an employee for Grantaire, between artistic modeling and all the other work he’d taken on for his less-than-business savvy lover.

It was a good system for both of them. Grantaire brought money in in a way that satisfied him artistically and intellectually, Enjolras provided emotional and business support to allow him to keep doing so, and Enjolras got to work on causes that really mattered to him instead of worrying about paying the bills.

Grantaire ran off to his art studio clutching his phone gleefully. “Remember, we’re leaving for Massachusetts in an hour! You can’t get too lost in your comics!” Enjolras called after him. He wasn’t entirely sure he’d been heard. Shrugging it off, Enjolras watched his husband go with a fond smile, set the props down, and put his shirt back on. “What were we talking about?”

“We were finishing up campus efforts at rape prevention, how we want to get schools, such as mine and Courf’s, to stop placing all the responsibility for prevention on the victim, and we were about to cycle back to the garment industry. I think the campus article looks pretty good, and I didn’t see any issues when I looked over the garment one last night. And your husband the walking non-sequitur did provide a good opportunity to change subjects.”

Enjolras sat down in front of his laptop and saved the word file they’d been looking over.

“Something else on your mind?”

“I was just thinking about the reunion—”

“I had a question about that, actually,” Enjolras said. “I was looking at the invites page last night and I noticed a couple of things. For starters, Cosette is under the impression that children are invited.”

Combeferre looked at him blankly. “Enjolras, children are invited. More of our friends have children than don’t at this point. If we expected them all to get babysitters, none of them would be able to come.”

Enjolras scowled. “Please tell me they’re all at least potty trained? We’re holding this in a café. It doesn’t seem sanitary to have the little things crawling around touching everything if they’re swimming in urine.”
Combeferre took his glasses off and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Oh my God, Enjolras, you can’t actually be this bad. None of the children are actively potty training, but Feuilly and Eponine’s youngest ones are still in diapers. I think. Mehmed might be done with them, come to think of it.”

“Ah. Well that’s not the same as popping a squat on the rug.”

“Those were accidents, Enjolras.”

“They were on-purposes. That little jerk knew exactly what she was doing.” And that was why, despite having a large, open, mostly child-proofed home, Enjolras never babysat unless his husband was going to be home with him.

Combeferre gave his head a little shake. “Did you notice anything else about the invites list?”

Enjolras’ manner changed at once. He frowned thoughtfully and gave a quick nod. “Yes. Courfeyrac invited Jehan. The last time I checked he hadn’t answered. Do you think he’ll show up?”

“I doubt it. I haven’t heard from him in years. I was rather surprised Courf even invited him. I’m wondering if I should worry about him.”

“Mm. Considering what happened the last time he got desperately lonely.”

“We did get Gusty out of that,” Combeferre pointed out. The look Enjolras gave him in response implied that he felt he’d made his point. Combeferre sighed. He partially agreed with Enjolras. He loved Gusty to death, but the boy was also consolation for the horrendously painful circumstances he’d been conceived from. “I don’t want to see Courfeyrac that unhappy again. He doesn’t seem like he’s doing poorly, but then, for him to reach out to Jehan…we both know he never really got over that relationship.”

“I can’t keep much of an eye on him from New York. I barely see him anymore. He and Grantaire talk all the time though. I’ll nudge ‘Taire and tell him to pay attention to Courfeyrac’s mood.”

Combeferre nodded. “Azelma’s coming.”

“I assumed she would be. She’s back in town.”

Combeferre rolled his eyes, and Enjolras realized that that was supposed to be significant and not just idle chatter. It still took him a second. “Oh! Oh, right. She’s the one who had the crush on you.”

“Yeah, the excessively damaged and hurt teenager who fixated on me with a vulnerable dependence that terrified me as a young man? That’d be the one.”

Enjolras frowned. “I know you’re teasing me, but I’d still like to point out that I am a lot better than I was at recognizing when you need to discuss your emotional needs. Even if I didn’t have difficulties recognizing these kinds of social cues, you have to acknowledge that you still suck at giving them. You talk about everything with that gentle, mildly disinterested tone and you intentionally mask your investment in what you’re discussing.”

Combeferre laughed. “My but you’re still so defensive over this.”

Enjolras crossed his arms over his chest, adopting one of his more mild glares. Still chuckling under his breath, Combeferre continued. “Yes, well, anyway…I bumped into her at the airport a few days ago when I was picking up Feuilly. She’s…different than I remembered. And not, actually. I think I saw this in her years ago. She’s very intriguing.”
“Oh?” It looked like he’d succeeded in capturing Enjolras’ attention. Which was rare; Enjolras most certainly did not care to gossip about romantic endeavors, but Combeferre also never talked about women. Even if it was a topic Enjolras himself was only marginally interested in, being perfectly satisfied with the state of his own love life, he knew it was important to his friend and therefore worth some investment.

Enjolras knew Combeferre wanted to be married and that he wanted to start a family. He didn’t quite understand why the man was still single. Dense though he was about these things, Enjolras had noticed women flirting with Combeferre more than once over the years, and a few of Grantaire’s work acquaintances had asked after him. He’d had ample opportunity to settle into the life he wanted by that point, and the fact that he hadn’t was somewhat baffling to his oldest friend.

“Are you interested in her then?” Enjolras asked.

“I’ve always found her interesting…but honestly, I don’t know. I’m certainly interested in seeing more of her.” Combeferre shrugged.

“Ask her out.”

“I can’t ask her out.”

“Good god, you’re still a teenager.”

“Enjolras,” Combeferre snapped. “Look, I don’t think she’s interested in me anymore. I put a lot of effort into establishing a friends-and-friends-only relationship with her back when we all still lived in Salem. I wouldn’t blame her for resenting that. She’s grown into a lovely young woman. I’m sure there are worthier young men trying to catch her interest—”

“Ferre—”

“-who haven’t already spurned her.”

Enjolras uncrossed his arms, switching to tapping his hands impatiently against his knees. He didn’t seem at all pleased with the conclusion Combeferre had drawn, but he also couldn’t think of a convincing counterargument. After a minute or so of stony silence, he let out an irritated huff and climbed to his feet. “I’m going to check on Grantaire and make sure he actually remembered to pack.”

“Alright. I’m not going to creep Azelma’s facebook page while I wait for you two to get ready. Did you know she works in publishing?”

“From what I understand she’s unemployed and living with her sister.”

“Up until a few weeks ago she worked in publishing, then.”

Enjolras stopped at the doorway and turned back to his friend. “If you’re not going to ask her out then I have no interest in conversing about this girl and I will not indulge you in making chit chat. Fair warning.”

Combeferre smirked and nodded. Once Enjolras was out of the room he pulled Azelma’s page up on his phone and went back to looking through her pictures.

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Little R spent the evening before the reunion working at the café. The plan was to close at normal hours Wednesday and keep the café closed during Thanksgiving. The friends were going to meet at
the café after their dinners and have dessert together. As such, tidying the place up and decorating for
their private gathering fell to the employee working the Wednesday night close.

Therefore, Little R interspersed goofing off on his phone with staple-gunning plastic autumn leaves
to various surfaces. He’d gotten through the last rush with some help from Gavroche, and then when
an hour passed without a customer Gavroche had ducked out early to “tutor” one of the theater kids
he and Courfeyrac worked with.

After ascertaining that this one was at least a high school senior, Little R decided that he didn’t need
to report that to Eponine and Feuilly. He’d let Gavroche go, then switched out the bland acoustic
music Eponine liked them to play in the café in favor of his own playlist.

He wasn’t even pretending to decorate, far too invested in an article he was reading on Cracked,
when the jingle bells tied to the door announced a late customer. Little R hid his phone behind the
counter and fixed his work smile into place, then promptly dropped the practiced smile in the wake
of an excited squeal. “Grantaire!”

“Hey kiddo.”

Little R hopped over the counter and went to crush his oldest friend as best he was able with his
perpetually underweight frame. Laughing, Grantaire returned the hug, then stepped aside so Little R
could flip the sign and lock the door.

“When did you get back in town?” he asked.

“Like twenty minutes ago. Enjolras is unpacking our things and he doesn’t want me getting in his
way, so he and ‘Ferre dropped me here. So yeah. What the fuck did you do to your head?”

Little R pouted. “I like it. It’s edgy.”

“It makes you look like a lesbian. Seriously kid, rethink the faux hawk. I like the green though. Your
hair looks good green.”

Little R grinned. “And this is how surprised I am you like my green hair. You know who else likes
it…?”

“Ava whats-her-name? Yeah, Eponine called me in a panic over your little girlfriend.”

“She’s not my girlfriend. Not yet, anyway. Grantaire, I really like her. She’s so confident and pretty
and she likes me back. Please talk some sense into my paranoid sister so she doesn’t ruin this for
me.”

“We’re working on it. Feuilly and I have already yelled at her, and I think we got Zelma and
Combeferre involved too. Hm…you guys have new seasonal stuff now, huh?” He was leaning
against the counter staring at the menu. The main one, which hadn’t changed since the place opened,
had been designed by Grantaire and featured some of his distinct artistic embellishments. As his
comic got more and more famous, the Thenardiers had come to the conclusion that no small part of
their success was due to the fact that their chic little café, nestled in a safe college neighborhood, was
openly affiliated with a popular and subversive indie artist. A much less impressive sheet of
laminated paper proclaimed their seasonal beverages, which, excepting the pumpkin spice, had all
been created by Little R and Gavroche while they were goofing off with the syrups and the contents
of the bake case.

“Eponine let us put the one that tastes like Count Chocula on the menu. Do you want that?”
“Sure. Which one is it? What’d you name it?”

“Big R.” Little R’s face heated up a little as he ducked behind the counter to make it. “You’re the one who noticed the Count Chocula thing, and I designed it, so Gav thought it was fitting.”

“Hey, that’s the most flattering praise I’ve gotten all day. Seriously, I love this thing.” Grantaire took his wallet out and started counting out bills, but stopped when the young barista scowled at him.

“Come on ‘Taire, when have we ever let you pay for a drink? Seriously, it’s in the employee handbook. Your money’s no good here.”

“I know I gave your sister some money to get this place off the ground, but after this many years of free drinks I have to have burned through it.”

“I seriously doubt that.”

“At least let me put it in your tip jar.”

Little R rolled his eyes, but ultimately didn’t stop Grantaire from sticking a fifty in the mason jar they collected tips in. He made an earl grey tea for himself, then abandoned his closing tasks in favor of catching up with his friend.

Grantaire’s first questions were all about his semi-date. He’d had an earful from Eponine, but that was all paranoid speculation as she knew very little of this girl, and had made the worst of what she’d heard. Little R showed Grantaire some pictures of Ava, chatting excitedly about her interests and how outgoing and social she was (traits he clearly admired due to a certain lacking on his own part).

Grantaire raised an eyebrow when he got a look at the teen. “Huh. It’s like a little baby Enjolras.”

Little R’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “She’s really pretty, but I don’t think she looks like Enjolras. Her hair’s all long and dark and her eyes are brown and she’s got dark skin.”

“Oh, she doesn’t actually look like him. I just meant the brazen political statements crammed into her appearance.” In the two pictures he’d seen, the girl’s arms were covered with rubber cause bracelets, she was wearing t-shirts with political slogans, her backpack was covered with buttons proclaiming her social-political ideals, and in one of them she was clutching a Gloria Steinem book.

“I guess we have similar tastes then,” Little R teased. “She’s pretty awesome, ‘Taire. We were talking and we thought it’d be cool if for the semi she wore a suit and I wore a dress.”

Grantaire’s expression was hard to read. “That’d be pretty, uh, edgy, I guess…but don’t you think it’d rile up the bullies?”

“Probably, but fuck them.”

Grantaire paused a beat before answering. “I’m glad you’re not letting them get to you kiddo, but that doesn’t mean you should invite them to wail on you either. There is such a thing as self-preservation.”

“I know, I know. It was just an idea.” Little R gloomily put his phone away and stood up. “I should start closing.”

“Hey, don’t shut down on me. If you really think you can do this safely then I’ll take you dress shopping, but my biggest concern is your safety. Not all of the kids at your school are as chill as this
Little R nodded. "A lot of them out and out suck. No one’s tried to punch me or anything, but I also haven’t flagrantly flouted gender norms yet. I see your point, I guess. But you know, if I always play it safe then when am I supposed to be myself? Eponine and Feuilly tried to talk me out of cutting and dyeing my hair because of the bullying, and no one’s done anything about that."

“I suppose if anyone starts shit about the dress I could always kidnap you and have you finish out high school in New York.”

Little R grinned. "See, that's what I'm trying to get through to Ponine and everyone else. If I've got safety nets and support everywhere I turn, then why do I need to be afraid? Will you talk to her for me?"

Grantaire nodded. "Definitely. Especially if you make me another one of these chocolate things before you clean that machine."

Giggling, Little R abandoned his cleaning supplies in favor of steaming some more milk.

The Pontmercy/Valjean household had the type of Thanksgiving dinner usually reserved for charming holiday specials. Gigi was wearing a brand new crushed velvet dress with patent leather shoes, her silky blond hair tied back in pigtails. She started out in a seat next to her mama, but finished dinner sitting on her grandpapa’s lap, much to the old man’s delight.

Once dinner was finished Cosette insisted on clearing up the dishes, though Marius kept offering to help. “Oh no you don’t. You have cover letters to write.”

“But darling, it’s Thanksgiving! Don’t I get one day off from applying for jobs?”

“If the internet goes down then you can have a break. And please keep this in mind the next time you’re tempted to daydream yourself out of real employment.”

Heaving a heavy sigh, Marius followed Valjean into the living room, but rather than snuggle with Gigi by the fire, he took up a familiar post at the end of the couch with his laptop and a print copy of his resume that had been scribbled over with suggestions and edits by Feuilly and Combeferre.

Marius was still hard at work seeking work when Cosette finished cleaning up. Valjean was reading Gigi stories from her children’s Bible, so Cosette sat down nearby and picked up the baby blanket she was knitting for the boy they were expecting. Everything was warm and peaceful; just the kind of life she’d always wanted for her beloved family.

Then they heard a thunder of stamping feet just before the racket of the most aggressive doorbell ringing and knocking any of them had ever heard. Cosette couldn’t help but smile, though Valjean’s posture stiffened ever so slightly, and he tightened the embrace his granddaughter was wrapped in, as though to protect her from an oncoming storm.

Well, oncoming storm actually described the situation rather well.

Seeing this as an opportunity to escape his job hunt, Marius put his computer to sleep and went to answer the door. Next moment, they were inundated with Eponine and Feuilly’s children.

“Unca Maurice, did you make your pie? I want pie!”
“Where’s Gigi? I wan’ play with Gigi!”

“It’s Marius, not Maurice. You’re too big to still be that dumb!”

“I’m not dumb! You’re that word Mommy says but says we can’t say! The one with the b, not the one with the a.”

“Don’t call me a b-we-can’t-say!”

“Stop it, you’re hurting me!”

With a resigned sigh, Valjean closed the children’s Bible and set Gigi back on the floor. “Don’t you dare give them any of Marius’ pie, my child. It appears they’ve already had enough sugar for the entire holiday season.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Papa.” Cosette heaved herself out of the chair and went to the entryway to rescue her husband. A harassed looking Eponine was holding her two eldest by their arms, keeping them apart so that they couldn’t hit each other. However, she had to scold them one at a time because of this. “Children,” Cosette said, getting their attention with an ease that Eponine both admired and was viciously jealous of. “Would you like me to play piano for you before we go to the café?”

“Yeah! Play Christmas carols!” Cammy yelled.

Thiago frowned. “It’s Thanksgiving though.”

“Do you know any Thanksgiving carols, dummy?”

“I’m not a dummy!”

“Children.” Cosette used her mommy-voice and they immediately stopped whining. She turned her attention to Eponine. “Where’s Feuilly?”

“He’s in the car with Zahara trying to calm her down. She’s screaming her head off and we didn’t want Papa to get a headache.”

“Well, much obliged but you don’t have to banish your husband and your daughter for our comfort. Papa’s more than used to kids.”

“Eh, Feuilly will have her calmed down in no time. By the way, happy Thanksgiving.” Eponine pulled her ex-foster sister into a hug, then the two of them calmed the children down enough for Cosette’s offered diversion of piano playing to actually work.

The family visited at the house for about an hour, until it was time for them to set out for the café. Valjean offered to babysit for them so that they could enjoy their time with their friends without “having to fuss over the young ones” and the adults looked at the kind old man like he was insane.

They were too kind to point out their very real doubt of his ability to look after all the kids at once. Valjean was getting older, and though far from feeble, he was certainly slower than Thiago when the kid got on a tear. He also was not in Zahara’s incredibly small circle of trusted adults (the girl only refrained from screaming her head off when in the company of her parents, her youngest uncle, or Bossuet).

Instead, they asked him if he wanted to come along and Valjean politely declined. Then the group loaded themselves into their vehicles and set off for the café.
Gavroche, Little R, and Grantaire were waiting for them when they got there. They’d finished the decorating duties Little R had mostly neglected the previous night, and Gavroche had plugged in his mp3 player, putting on an eclectic playlist mostly taken from Combeferre’s impressive music library. All Eponine had to do to deem the place finished was spread out a few table cloths and make room for the desserts. Marius got things rolling by setting out his pies, which he then had to staunchly defend from the children in the interests of fairness. Thiago and Mehmed had proven their proficiency in demolishing Pontmercy pies all on their lonesome, without sparing a second thought for other guests who might want at least a bite.

Gusty came running into the café next, wearing a Superman cape with his otherwise classy Thanksgiving clothes. He started pretending to blow up Mehmed’s head, and then the boys plus Gigi were off on an imagination game that made use of the legs of the chairs and tables as a haunted forest. Courfeyrac trailed after his son by a long enough interval that everyone rightly assumed Gusty had taken off as soon as the car was parked. He put a container of store bought cookies on the dessert table and huffily collapsed in a chair.

“Courf, there’s spinach in your hair,” Grantaire couldn’t help but point out.

“Mm. Turns out Gusty's not a fan of spinach. He was pretty animated when he made me aware of that.”

“You guys have a good Thanksgiving dinner then?” Grantaire teased. Courfeyrac rolled his eyes.

“Other than some arguments about the veggies it wasn’t bad. I didn’t burn anything, he even liked the gravy, and then we visited Dad and Gusty gave him that turkey drawing you helped him make. How was your dinner? Wait, where’s Enj?”

“He went to Combeferre’s. I did dinner with Little R and Gavroche, which I can only assume was infinitely better than celebrating Thanksgiving with activists. No one talked about genocide or artificially inseminated turkeys. We just ate our meat and had a damn good time doing it.”

“Mm, murder!” Gavroche said, enthusiastically pumping his fist. Little R rolled his eyes.

“Is Mike coming?” Courfeyrac asked. “I haven’t seen the little shit since…well, since he was a little shit.”

“Nah, he's busy with his girlfriend,” Gavroche reported. “On the plus side he’s avoiding the Lawrences too, so he’s snubbing his real family and his meal ticket equally.”

Joly and Legle arrived next with their twin girls, who somehow transformed the adventure game into something involving their pony toys. Mehmed didn’t seem to mind, and Gusty was enthusiastic about anything with Gigi’s approval, but Thiago wandered away from the chair forest in favor of trying to steal one of Marius’ pies.

Joly contributed a horrible looking blueberry/acai pudding concoction that was supposed to be full of antioxidants for their dessert table. After his nervous collapse and withdrawal from established medical science, he’d channeled his hypochondriac energy into holistic healing and New Age philosophies. The friends let him get his macrobiotic vegan and chakra clearing rants out of the way before Enjolras and Combeferre arrived, with nearly perfect timing. Enjolras showed up just as Joly was winding down, and he was gracious enough to pretend he hadn’t heard Enjolras’ derisively skeptical snort.

Legle’s contribution to the dessert table, a plate of what he called heart attack inducing chocolate chip cookies baked around double stuff Oreos, was much less alarming looking and generally better.
received than his husband’s magenta gunk. Enjolras added a box of gourmet cupcakes from a local bakery while Combeferre contributed a fruit platter.

Bahorel and Musichetta arrived next, he wearing a dramatic red cocktail dress with a flowing copper wig, she in full gypsy fortune teller garb and a noticeable baby bump.

“Oh good god, it’s all going to be parent chit chat from here on out, isn’t it?” Enjolras grumbled.

“Oh my God, ‘Chetta! Why didn’t you tell us you were expecting too!?” Eponine shrieked.

“Because I wanted to surprise everyone,” she explained. “Duh.”

“How far along are you?” Courfeyrac asked. He squinted at the prominent belly. “Far enough to know the gender, yes?”

Bahorel snorted. “We won’t know the kid’s gender until they’re old enough to tell us, dude.”

“Again, duh,” Musichetta said, rolling her eyes while Enjolras gave an approving nod. “But in seriousness, we didn’t want to know. It’s not going to change anything. Either way we’re doing a superhero nursery and we’ll accept dresses or little boy clothes, whatever. I’m sure our baby will be pretty enough to rock all of it.” She leaned up on her tiptoes to give her husband a kiss on the cheek.

Considering the couple’s news, Bahorel and Musichetta stole the attention of the room for the next twenty minutes or so. When Azelma snuck in with her pumpkin bread almost no one noticed.

Combeferre, of course, snapped his head up, made brief eye contact, and then determinedly started making conversation with Bahorel about the wisdom of attending PTA meetings in drag. Looking slightly exasperated, Enjolras broke away from the parenting discussion he couldn’t have been less invested in and approached the girl he’d never really been friends with.

“Hello Azelma. Where have you been? I expected you to arrive with one of your siblings.”

“Oh, I did dinner with Ponine and her brood, but I ducked out of their family gathering at Marius and Cosette’s so I could bake the pumpkin bread. Did Cammy and Thiago eat all of Marius’ pies yet?”

“Not yet. We’re not starting until everyone’s here. I think you’re the last one though, so once everyone stops talking about Bahorel and Musichetta’s expected bundle of joy we should be able to get going. You’re looking well.”

Azelma shrugged out of her coat, revealing a vintage dress that flattered her petite figure. Enjolras wasn’t a great judge of feminine beauty, but he appreciated the fact that Azelma had grown into a lovely young woman and had most definitely found a way to be comfortable in her own skin, without drawing constant comparisons to her sister.

Based on the way Combeferre’s eyes kept darting over towards them, he’d noticed this as well (though he seemed to be under the impression that this was something that needed constant reexamination).

She draped her coat over her arm and offered a polite smile. “Thanks. You too. I love seeing what you and Grantaire are up to on facebook. The pictures you guys posted from that last con were awesome. Seriously, those kids who airbrushed their skin to cosplay Red and Black were wicked cool.”

Enjolras paused, weighing whether he wanted to engage in idle chit chat or just get to it. He glanced over at his best friend, who saw him looking and almost aggressively turned away to chat up
Musichetta. With a resigned sigh, accepting that he wouldn’t be interrupted by the person who ought to be doing this, Enjolras decided to come out with it. “Are you still interested in Combeferre?”

Azelma almost choked on a snort. “You know, your penchant for skipping over formalities and, well, bullshit is pretty refreshing. I still can’t believe you just asked me that.”

“Are you going to answer me?”

She considered. “No, I don’t think so. I’ll answer ‘Ferre, if he decides he wants to ask me though. But seriously, your attempt to meddle on your friend’s behalf is adorable. Good try, Enj.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I sincerely doubt he’s going to do anything, so I thought I’d at least try.” With that, he stalked over to his husband, hoping to talk about anything other than romantic entanglements and babies.

Sadly, that was not to be. Rubbing Musichetta’s belly and feeling a kick, holding Zahara and singing her a lullaby (turns out Uncle R instantaneously wound up on the baby’s list of trusted adults, which annoyed Joly to no end because he’d been actively trying to make the cut for weeks), playing ponies with the young ‘uns, and discussing comics with Cammy and Thiago had kicked up all Grantaire’s old paternal desires. Handsome features twisting into a scowl, Enjolras gave his oft-repeated stock answer. “I’ll think about kids if you let me get another cat.”

“Enjolras, I can’t breathe around cats. Having a kid won’t kill you.”

“I beg to differ. At the least, making me responsible for a child probably wouldn’t end well for the child. Besides, with your work schedule—”

“With our work schedule we aren’t around enough to take care of a kid or a cat. We’d have to scale back. Which would be fine by me, because I’ve made more than enough money for this lifetime.”

Well, that was new. Clearly Enjolras was going to have to take this argument more seriously.

“Can we talk about this later?” Enjolras asked quietly, leaning into Grantaire’s personal space so that he could lightly touch his arm. Grantaire nodded, and wisely steered the conversation away from either children or felines.

“Guys, the chocolate pudding pie is gone!” Marius yelped.

Eponine smacked a hand over her face. “So are two of my children. I’m sorry Marius. I’ll bet you anything it’s in the back room with Cammy and Thiago.”

“They didn’t get the pumpkin, did they?” Legle asked, real anxiety in his voice. Marius assured him that they hadn’t, and after that an equitable distribution of the desserts was begun.

Feuilly dragged his disobedient children out of the backroom and had them return the nearly empty pie platter to Marius, along with a less-than-heartfelt apology for stealing his pie when his back was turned.

Overall the reunion was going nicely. Many a picture was posted to the internet, the hoard of children played well together, and the tension was minimal. Combeferre even approached Azelma and made some perfectly platonic conversation similar to what they’d traded at the airport.

After a few hours things were obviously winding down. The parents in the room made some offhand comments about getting their young ones home and tucked in, and some of them started gathering coats and scarves. Then there was a knock on the door.
Eponine made an exasperated noise. “Little R, didn’t you put the sign up about the café being closed for a private function?”

“Plus it’s fucking Thanksgiving. Who expects a small business to be open on Thanksgiving?” Gavroche added.

“The sign’s up. Maybe they’ll go away,” Little R said.

But the knocking continued. It wasn’t angry, over the top pounding that sometimes came from stubborn customers in denial about concepts like store hours, but it was persistent despite its gentleness. Finally, Eponine decided to open the door widely enough to ask them to go away.

Then she let out a loud gasp. “Jehan! What are you doing here?!”

The room went silent, apart from the noise of the children playing under the tables. Eponine stepped aside so that Jehan could walk in. Apple cheeked from standing out in the cold for so long, and looking a little sheepish about his very presence, Jehan gave the room a little wave. “Hey guys. Long time no see.”

“Fucking understatement, but hi,” Grantaire said. He shot a look Courfeyrac’s way, taking note of the fact that his friend looked delighted with a certain amount of wariness.

Then the smile Courfeyrac wore gave way to a pained grimace. “Hey, Jehan. You made it. Too bad though, I was just leaving. This one’s mine and he needs to be in bed like now so, so yeah. Bye.” He pulled Gusty away from his friends and started tugging him in the direction of the door even though the kid didn’t have his coat yet.

“Daddy, stop! I didn’t say bye to anybody! Daddy, you’re pulling my arm, stop it please?”

“Quiet, Gusty.”

“I need my shoes.”

“I’ll carry you, now come on. We’re going. Sorry we can’t stay. Bye guys. Bye.” Courfeyrac scooped Gusty up, settled him awkwardly on his hip, and all but fled the café.

Jehan watched him go with an expression that was hard to read. He tried to smile, failed, and then bolted out the door himself.

“Well that was…something,” Musichetta said. There were murmurs of agreement. “So, is anyone going to eat that last piece of pumpkin bread? No? Kay, I’m totally taking it.”

“There’s plenty of antioxidant pudding left!”

“Yes…there certainly is.”
Chapter 59

Chapter Summary

Couples and drama. But seriously, what else would you expect from this fic? ;)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Daddy, I’m cold! I want to go back inside! I w-want to see my friends! Daddy!” Gusty’s complaints were halted by the occasional sob, or the need to wipe tears and snot from his face.

Courfeyrac couldn’t say he blamed him in the least for his tears. He tried to put Gusty up on his shoulders, since he normally liked piggy back rides, but considering they were running down the street in November winds without his coat or his shoes, that only made him howl all the louder, so Courfeyrac opened his coat, hugged Gusty to his chest, and wrapped the flaps of his coat around him. “I’m sorry. Pumpkin, I’m so sorry—”

“Can we go back? Please?”

Sighing, Courfeyrac sat down on the stoop of a closed shop and settled Gusty on his knee. He took his coat off entirely and wrapped it around him blanket-style, then tried to speak through his chattering teeth. “Gus, why are you crying?”

Gusty rubbed at his eyes, spreading snot from his runny nose over his face in the process. “Because y-you said I h-had ta stop playing with m-my friends and w-we didn’t take home any d-desserts and I d-didn’t get to play with Uncle R and h-he’s going to go away again without a h-hug and I don’t want to go to bed early. I’m sorry I didn’t stop Cammy and Thiago from getting the p-pie and I’m sorry I pulled Emma’s hair. If I’m good can we go back? Please?”

“Oh Pumpkin.” Courfeyrac hugged him as tightly as he could and kissed the top of his head. “You’re not in trouble, Gusty, I promise. You’re not going to bed early. And you’ll get to see Uncle R again before he goes back to New York.”

“So why’d we leave the party?”

“Courfeyrac?”

That was why.

Still keeping his son safely nestled in his arms, Courfeyrac stood up and turned around. Jehan was standing behind him, breathless and windswept from the walk. Standing less than a foot apart for the first time in ten years, Courfeyrac drank in the sight of his former lover.

Like Combeferre, Jehan had greyed early, though not with any set pattern. Combeferre’s grey was mostly settled in attractive streaks by his temples, while Jehan’s strands of silver and white peeked out all throughout his shoulder length hair. It suited him. Courfeyrac was stupidly tempted to run his fingers through the pale auburn strands to check if they were as soft as they looked.

Jehan was wearing a smile, but an obviously insincere one. It didn’t come close to reaching his eyes,
which were wide and a little terrified. He looked tense, like any noise sudden enough might send him running. But he wanted to look happy. “Um h-hi. I know you—that is, I don’t want to—to interrupt, or interfere with your fatherly duties, but I’d hoped we might be able to chat at least a little?”

“Daddy says I’m not going to bed early,” Gusty said, before Courfeyrac could begin to string together something comprehensible. “My name’s Augustine and I’m four years old. I know all the states in alphabetical order. Want to hear?”

Jehan’s grin lost that ugly, awful tension and gained a shadow of the gentle warmth Courfeyrac remembered and cherished. “Maybe some other time, little dear. That’s very impressive though.”

“Yeah, hold your judgment until you actually hear it,” Courfeyrac blurted out. Gusty was attempting to learn a song he’d heard at preschool, Fifty Nifty United States, but he always messed up the recitation of the states by adding in his favorite places and omitting the states he wasn’t familiar with. “Alabama, Alaska…Beverly, Boston, California, Fenway Park, the Garden, Lynn, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Salem, School and Texas! Ta-da. Oh, and Uncle Ferre’s house.”

“I’m sure you do a lovely job,” Jehan insisted, before turning his attention back to Courfeyrac. “So what do you say? Can we walk and talk?”

Courfeyrac felt a flutter of nerves. It was like being a stupid twenty something all over again. He was supposed to have grown past this. Hell, he was never supposed to get this tangled up in another person to begin with. That had never been part of the plan.

Plan. The four year old shivering and clinging to him was proof enough that nothing structured had ever even vaguely influenced his life.

It was far too cold for walking and talking, so Courfeyrac settled Gusty more comfortably on his hip and asked Jehan to take a drive instead. Looking delighted, which in turn made Courfeyrac feel confused and reluctantly hopeful, Jehan accepted and they set off together for Courfeyrac’s car.

“Hey…Daddy?”

“Yes Gusty?”

Gusty blinked up at Jehan. “Who is this guy?”

Jehan laughed. “My name is Jean Prouvaire. I’m an old friend of your father’s.”

“Oh. I’m Gusty and this is my daddy. I was just wondering. By the way, your hair is neat.”

“Well thank you. Your hair is neat too.”

Courfeyrac’s abrupt exit, as well as Jehan’s equally abrupt entrance and exit, pretty much killed the party for the adults. People started trickling out after that, the parents much more slowly than the lucky ones who didn’t have to gather children that scattered at the first mention of putting on coats and shoes.

Grantaire was sitting on the floor with his back against the counter, sending Courfeyrac texts he knew he wouldn’t see until after his cheering words would no longer be necessary, but feeling an urge to do something for his friend. He didn’t know what he was hoping for more; that Jehan would catch up to Courfeyrac before he drove away or that he’d miss him. He didn’t look up from his phone until Enjolras walked up to him and gently tapped his thigh with the tip of his shoe.
“‘Taire, everyone else is leaving.’”

“Guess I’d better make the hugging rounds then.”

“I was thinking you should put on your jacket since it’s cold as fuck out there, but if you’d like a hug you should probably get on that. You already missed Feuilly and Eponine.”

“Those fuckers!” Phone forgotten, Grantaire ran off to say goodbye to his friends, while Enjolras rolled his eyes and gathered up the couple’s possessions.

Combeferre was hovering by the doorway waiting to trade a few words with Enjolras and Grantaire, on the off chance he didn’t see them again before they left for New York, when he felt a tap on his arm. He turned around and found himself staring (rather vapidly, he was horrified to realize) at Azelma.

“Hey. Any chance you’d want to talk with me about something other than English professor nerdery tonight?” She threw him a charming smile and he had to swallow around a suddenly dry throat.

He really didn’t like this role reversal. Being on the other end of the jittery crush was decidedly unpleasant.

“Yes…” he finally managed to choke out. “That’d be…that’d be good.”

“Great. My car’s out back. Actually, we’d better get moving because I’m blocking Ponine in and she already managed to cram the brood in. She’s going to be pissed at me.”

Combeferre waited for her to get her coat and scarf on, then held the door open for her. They weren’t fast enough to avoid a parting shot from Grantaire.

“Enjolras says not to be a fucking pussy! I second that!”

“Thanks, Grantaire!” Combeferre growled out over his shoulder. The asshole only laughed at him.

Azelma seemed to find it amusing, but she mercifully didn’t mention the comment. They got into her car and waited for it to warm up. Azelma turned on the seat warmers, then put on a Gershwin recording. “For old time’s sake.”

Combeferre gave a strained nod. He cast about for something to say, but his conversation skills seemed to have abandoned him. He found himself talking about the completely seasonally appropriate cold weather.

Azelma indulged him, and chatted about how much she was looking forward to playing with her nieces and nephews in the snow. The children proved a sufficient enough conversation topic to last them until the car warmed up and even for a few blocks of driving.

They were back to an awkward silence when she got to the highway. They both tried to break it at once.

“Azelma, I-”

“Look, this was a bad i…what were you about to say?”

Combeferre knew he must have looked as stricken as he felt. That hadn’t sounded encouraging in the least. “Y-you should probably go first.”

Azelma took a deep breath, then sat up straighter and fixed her eyes on the road. “I was just about to
say that this is probably not the best idea I’ve ever had. I’m…not entirely sure how I feel about you anymore. I should probably try to figure that out.”

“I’ve been absolutely entranced since I first lay eyes on you again. That must sound ridiculous. I’m sorry. I have so little experience with these things. I’m probably going to spout terrible clichés at you.”

A little color came to her cheeks, but she didn’t seem entirely displeased by his faltering attempt to talk to her.

“I think I would have killed someone to hear you say that when I was a kid, so how’s that for a cliché? But seriously…that’s what’s holding me up. I wanted you to like me so damn much when I was a kid, and now that it seems like you might I’m not sure if, I mean…you’re like, not even a real person to me, if that makes any sense. You became an ideal to me at some point and that’s a pretty fucked up role to stick you into. Plus I’ve completely connected you to a horrible time in my past and I don’t want to take the chance of undoing any of the work I’ve done by becoming that kind of person again. So those are my issues out on the table. How are you?” She let out a nervous laugh, then took the next exit, put on her blinker and pulled over to the side of the road.

“Azelma…not to dismiss your misgivings, because I’m sure of course that they carry a lot of weight to you, but it also seems like a shame to give them so much weight that we miss an opportunity. I’ve always liked you. I didn’t trust myself to be more than your friend when you were young and fragile, considering I had issues of my own to work through.”

Azelma shook her head. “No, that’s not right. You liked Eponine.”

“I did. She picked Feuilly, and I moved on.”

“Not very far, apparently.” Azelma crossed her arms over her chest, her expression settling into something Combeferre couldn’t read.

He sighed. “I didn’t think it was appropriate to have feelings for you back then, especially considering I’d pursued your sister first. I understand if I ruined my chances by ignoring your affections back then. It was cowardly of me.”

She made an indifferent sounding hum, and the two of them sat in a strained silence for a fair few minutes, broken intermittently by the sound of the car’s blinker.

Combeferre let out another protracted sigh, wondering if he should ask her to drop him off at his apartment and just end this.

“It wasn’t cowardly, you adorable imbecile. It was considerate,” she murmured, quietly enough that he almost didn’t hear her. “Combeferre, the whole reason I liked you so damn much was because you were so good with feelings, and you were compassionate, and you, like, just knew things. God, see this is why I was afraid to talk to you before I’d prepared myself. I’m being about as eloquent as I was when I was sixteen and fucking stupid.”

Azelma snapped her head so that she was facing forward again, even putting her hands back on the steering wheel. “I am an accomplished, intelligent woman. Now stop having such dreamy eyes so I can remember that.”

That startled a laugh out of him. “You think I have dreamy eyes?” he couldn’t help but ask.

Smirking, she turned towards him again and nodded. “You look good. I like the stuffy academic look on you, though it doesn’t look very stuffy. You’re like that considerate professor who
anticipates when his kids need extensions and actually has visitors during his office hours, aren’t you?”

“…do most professors not have kids show up for office hours?”

“Oh sweetie, all your students must have crushes on you.” She leaned over and took his glasses off, then touched the side of his face, gently forcing him to make eye contact. “And your eyes are undeniably dreamy. You must have noticed. I’m sure you’ve seen your own reflection.”

“Azelma, I have no idea how to respond to that.”

“I guess I’ve been mixing my signals pretty badly.”

“Just a smidge.” He cleared his throat. Her fingertips were still dancing over his jaw and cheekbone. “Can I take you to dinner?”

Her face lit up in a dazzling smile and she nodded. “Dinner would be an excellent start.”

Enjolras and Grantaire were sitting up in bed in the guest room at Combeferre’s apartment with their phones on their laps, each of them waiting for an update from their friends. Enjolras had his head on Grantaire’s shoulder and was starting to nod off, but Grantaire was staring raptly at their phones, tense, sure he would hear from Courfeyrac…any minute now…any minute…

“Hmph?” Enjolras jumped in response to his phone vibrating with a new text. Grantaire swore under his breath while Enjolras rubbed at his eyes and read the message. “Oh, that’s good.”

“What?” Grantaire spat.

“They’re going on a date tomorrow night. She’s driving him back here now. Oh shit, I’m probably going to have to pretend to listen while he talks about her, aren’t I?”

Grantaire rolled his eyes. “Comes with the territory, yeah.”

“Grantaire, I’m exhausted. Can’t he rant to me about how beautiful his new girlfriend is tomorrow?”

“Did you ever inconvenience Combeferre bugging him about me?” Grantaire asked knowingly. He poked Enjolras’ shoulder and tried not to laugh too hard as his face crumpled in exaggerated distress.

“Inconvenienced is a rather nice euphemism for what I put him through. Fine, I’ll be a decent friend, but I’m going to need coffee if I’m not going to be caught snoring in the middle of his recitation of her, I’m sure, myriad perfections.” Enjolras made a deep sigh, then crawled over his husband to get out of bed and go fire up the coffee maker.

Grantaire slumped down against the pillows and gave his phone an angry shake. “Come on Courf, what the fuck? What’s going on?” As if in answer, his phone lit up with a text. “Fucking finally!”

Enjolras poked his head back into the room. “What happened? Did he talk to Jehan?”

Grantaire’s expression was difficult to read as he read the first in a succession of texts. “Uh…well, they certainly talked.”

“And?” Enjolras jumped back onto the bed and eyed him eagerly. “What did he say? Is he still in love with Courfeyrac? He is, isn’t he?”

Grantaire shook his head at the phone. “I have no fucking clue. I can’t decipher this shit. Hold on,
I’m going to call him.”

Enjolras whacked his arm. “Don’t call him! What if Jehan is still there?”

“Then I can yell at his stupid ass, and don’t hit me! Abuse! Domestic abuse!”

Enjolras grabbed a pillow and made a half-hearted attempt to smother him. Grantaire responded with some impotent slaps that soon devolved into a more sincere effort to defend himself from Enjolras and his pillow.

They were still wrestling when Combeferre ran into the room, flushed and excited. He rolled his eyes when he saw his best friend pinning his husband to the mattress with a pillow pressed over his face. “God, are you twelve?”

“Hello ‘Ferre. How was your drive?”

Grantaire made a noise muffled by the pillow that might have been a plea for help. Combeferre ignored it. “Absolutely enchanting. She’s perfect, Enjolras. I was so stupid, not to see it before. We could have been together all these years.”

“I find that highly unlikely. She was unstable, and you were just starting therapy yourself with some pretty severe intimacy issues to overcome. It’s probably for the best you waited until you’d both improved yourselves and gotten some sense of stability.” He was briefly interrupted by Grantaire getting a hand free and tugging his hair. “That’s very rude, ‘Taire, we’re trying to have a conversation. No, I don’t care in the least if you can breathe or not.”

“If you can talk, you can breathe,” Combeferre offered helpfully. Grantaire flipped him off.

Taking pity on his husband, Enjolras sat up and tossed the pillow aside. After teasing Grantaire about the effect Enjolras’ pillow had had on his massive tangle of hair, Combeferre sat down on the edge of the mattress and shared the highlights of his conversation with Azelma with his friends. Enjolras was clearly bored but trying to hide it, which he appreciated, and Grantaire seemed genuinely pleased for him.

Once Combeferre had rambled to silence, Grantaire turned his attention back to his phone. “Jehan’s staying in Massachusetts for a few days and they have plans for the morning…oh, he goes by Jean now. Huh. Well that’s alien. I don’t think I like it.”

Enjolras shrugged. “The random h was kind of a weird youthful affectation. We’re not kids anymore.”

“Mm. So we don’t do things like smother our husbands with feather pillows?”

“I’ve still got the pillow, asshole.” Enjolras snatched the phone away from him and read the texts himself. “Hm. I hope it goes well. Courfeyrac could bring Jehan back into the group. I’ve missed him.”

Combeferre silently nodded, expression thoughtful, while Grantaire scowled. Enjolras whapped his arm. “Do not wreck this for us, ‘Taire.”

“It was shitty of him to dump Courf and abandon you guys. You get that, right? That he has some serious apologizing to do before you guys make him an intimate acquaintance again? I’m certainly not letting him back in no-questions-asked.”

“This may come as a shock to you, Grantaire, but we did in fact have some emotional interactions
with Jehan that you weren’t privy to,” Combeferre teased. “As far as I’m concerned, he has nothing
he needs to apologize to me for.”

“Or me. We drifted apart after we graduated. It happens,” Enjolras said. “I’d certainly like to renew
my friendship if he’s amenable. And if he’s accepted that his feelings for Courfeyrac are as strong as
they ever were, all the better for him.”

“He’d be a good stepfather for Gusty, wouldn’t he?” Combeferre asked. Enjolras agreed, and
Grantaire made a gagging noise.

“Whatever you guys think, Prouvaire has some explaining to do. To Courfeyrac, and I guess to me
as well. I’m not giving him my friendship again without some explanations from his side.”

“That’s more than fair.”

“Don’t fucking handle me, Combeferre.”

“Okay, I won’t. Quit being a baby. I’m going to bed.” Combeferre nodded a goodnight at Enjolras,
who returned it, then left the room still smiling like an idiot over his impending date with Azelma.

Enjolras flopped back against the mattress, stretched his arms over his head, and let his eyes drift
shut. “Mm…I didn’t even need the coffee. That couldn’t have gone much better.”

Grantaire settled half-draped over him, and soon Enjolras’ hands dropped to smooth some of the
wildness out of his messy black hair. “Sorry if I’m being a whiny bitch.”

“While Jehan was opening up to me and Combeferre, you were helping Courfeyrac cope with the
pain and confusion of the breakup and his unresolved feelings. I understand, ‘Taire. I’m still not
going to let the chance to reestablish a friendship that was once incredibly dear to me go by just to
suit your bitterness, but I understand where it’s coming from. Jehan should apologize to you. He hurt
you.”

“Eh, he hurt Courfeyrac and got me by accident. But yeah…I suppose if he does manage to make up
with Courf, I have no reason to be an ass about it.” Grantaire let out a deep sigh. “And Prouvaire’s
better than the bitch woman that somehow spawned my Gusty. At least he only hurt Courf through
stupidity. Even at my most bitter, I never thought it was intentional.”

“It wasn’t.” Enjolras finished smoothing Grantaire’s hair down and switched to softly caressing the
side of his face. “He overanalyzed his feelings and panicked. Jehan was always prone to stewing
over things and blowing them out of proportion. It’s a shame they broke up. I think if they’d
managed to weather that period of discomfort they might have been as happy as we are.”

“About that.” Grantaire rolled far enough away from him so that they were looking eye to eye.
“Enjolras…I’m actually not that happy anymore.”

Enjolras stared at him in some surprise, trying to ignore the way his body seemed to seize up at his
lover’s words. “Wh-what? That’s certainly news to me.”

Jean and Courfeyrac hadn’t actually said anything substantial to each other during the drive, a side
effect of the fact that Gusty had quite possibly eaten his weight in sugar at the dessert table and was
bouncing excitedly in his booster seat in the back. He felt the need to share every thought that came
into his cute little head, asked Jean all manner of questions that still managed to seem nosy even from
a preschooler, and then shrilly sang at the top of his lungs anytime a song he liked came on.
“Uh… want to just come to my place for a bit? We’re probably not going to get the chance to really talk until the pumpkin’s in bed.”

Jean nodded, hoping he wasn’t coming across as annoyed as he felt. It seemed rude to imply that the little boy was irritating, even if he was.

‘No, that’s not fair. He’s probably lovely when he’s not on a sugar high,’ Jean tried to reason. Except that Courfeyrac was usually hyper, with or without sugar, and Gusty seemed to have a lot in common with his father…

Courfeyrac drove them to a rather unimpressive tenement in one of the former industrial neighborhoods in Beverly. The first thing Jean noticed about the place was that it lacked any kind of yard space, which must have been difficult for such an active little boy. The next thing he noticed was the large amount of broken glass in the street and on the sidewalk.

Courfeyrac must have noticed him staring at the junk on the ground and the rude graffiti carved into their porch railing. “We have a lot of playdates at Marius and Cosette’s. I’d take him to Joly and Bossuet’s too, but Joly’s gone all New Age holistic healer and you always run the risk of having to imbibe some kind of horrid home remedy if you go to their place. It’s gotten worse since he discovered the joys of organic gardening and canning.”

Jean wanted to inquire after Joly’s switch from conventional medicine to New Age, but Courfeyrac’s attention was immediately taken up by his son once Gusty jumped down from the car and raced for their front door. “Hurry up, Daddy, it’s cold! Cold-cold-cold-cold-cold-cold-cold-”

“Sweetheart, complaining about it doesn’t make you warmer,” Jean said, trying and failing to sound gentle in his admonishment.

Courfeyrac laughed. “Wow, you’re another Enjolras, aren’t you?”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing. I’ll tell you later.”

Jean immediately started looking about him once they got inside the apartment, searching his surroundings for clues about the life his former lover had had in his absence. He needn’t have bothered with an immediate inspection-Jean got ample time to poke around during the hour bedtime took.

First they had to watch an episode of Mickey Mouse Clubhouse. Then Courfeyrac had to chase the boy down, tackle him, and literally wrestle him into pajamas. After that he hugged Jean’s knees and wished him goodnight.

Jean settled on the couch in the living room, figuring bedtime had to go quickly after that. Unfortunately, the routine included three bedtime stories and at least five lullabies, as well as a failed negotiation for a later bedtime.

Jean was getting sick of looking at the same three professional portraits of Gusty hanging in the living room and the childish scribbles that covered nearly every bit of once-exposed wall. The living room was in a state of disarray, so Jean tidied it in an attempt to ease some of his anxious energy. When Courfeyrac still didn’t emerge from his son’s bedroom he went on into the kitchen, did the dishes, swept the floor, and fussed around in his cabinets enough to find a tea set and a box of earl grey.

When Courfeyrac did finally find him he let out a startled laugh when he saw Jean sitting at his table.
with the tea set and a volume of Twain. “Made yourself at home, huh?”

“I was bored. Does bedtime always take that long?” he asked, closing up the book and returning it to a stack that seemed to be set aside for Courfeyrac’s job. At least, the annotations in the margins appeared to be more for the benefit of lectures than actually reading the novel.

“Sometimes it’s longer, actually. Gusty always puts up an epic struggle against the Sandman. You’d think it’d make him sleep in, but no, he’s always up around five, no matter what time he actually konks out.” Courfeyrac sighed, then sat down across from Jean and helped himself to a mug of tea. “Aw, you sugared the crap out of it for me. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Jean said, trying and failing to hold Courfeyrac’s gaze. They sat in a tense silence for a few minutes, Jean wishing he’d used the precious solitary moments to gather his thoughts rather than clean up a dwelling that was only going to be freshly destroyed when hurricane Gusty awoke with the first rays of dawn.

Courfeyrac drained half his cup before fixing on anything to say. “So…uh…looks like the years have treated you well. You’re like, a real poet and everything now, huh? What’s that like?”

Jean smiled. “Not quite what I’d pictured. I have a fairly decent reputation and I always manage to find publishers for my work, but I’m not exactly a professional writer. I do a lot of adjunct teaching and I even went back to retail a few times to make ends meet. I’d be a starving artist in the most literal sense of the term without the support I’ve gotten from my friends.”

“Are you still with Hugh?” Courfeyrac asked, doing a fair job of sounding disinterested. If Jean hadn’t spent four solid years studying this man’s every movement and inflection he would have thought him making polite conversation.

“No. We were on-again off-again for about four years after we moved to Montreal, but eventually he had the sense to give up on me. Hester just fixed him up with one of her colleagues from the university, and it seems to be going well. She has her eyes on a philosophy professor for me, but I’m not terribly enthused about a blind date.”

“Even with an Ivy professor? Sounds like that’d be a good match for you.”

Jean shrugged. “What about you? You’re a professor now, aren’t you?” He’d meant it as reciprocal conversation, a ‘what have you been up to,’ but considering what he’d just said, that’s not how Courfeyrac took it.

His cheeks colored a little. “I dunno how well adjunct at a crappy college compares with Ivy League university material, but yeah…I’m a professor. Nothing to brag about to your friends.”

“My friends are more concerned with happiness than material gain. Thus them helping me pursue poetry when a more sensible man would have given in and gotten a real job by now.” Jean rested his chin on his interlaced fingers and leaned forwards. “I’ve learned quite a bit from Rachel and Hester over the years, and it’s made me reevaluate some choices I made.”

“Yeah?” Courfeyrac eyed him with an intensity coupled with a vulnerability that used to unsettle Jean. The power they’d wielded over each other’s feelings had scared him when he’d been a younger man. Now he felt more charitable towards that reciprocal influence.

“I’m sorry, Courfeyrac. I was cold, and selfish, and I hurt you even though my intentions were the exact opposite.”

Courfeyrac reached across the table and clasped his hand. “I forgave you for that forever ago. What
really hurt was you pulling away. I mean, I get that being friends again would have been weird…but eventually…shit. I wish you hadn’t moved away. I always felt like I chased you.”

“You didn’t. Darling, it was me. I made everything so terrible and pressing in my head, and then when Hugh offered me an escape I ran for it without giving it due consideration.”

“Well…you’re back now.” Courfeyrac glanced down at their twined fingers and then offered him a hopeful smile. “I didn’t think you were actually going to come to the party. Sorry for running out the door like a scared little baby.”

Jean laughed. “That was a bit odd, wasn’t it? Whatever. You fled about a block. I went to another country. Don’t worry about it.”

Courfeyrac used his free hand to push back a strand of Jean’s hair, and his eyes drifted shut in response to the tender caress. “It’s as soft as it looks. Damn, I’ve been wanting to do that for hours. You’re still the prettiest poet I’ve ever seen.”

“And you’re still…you. Sorry, I appear to have lost my eloquence. I missed you, Courfeyrac. You can keep petting my hair, you know. I rather like it.”

Not only did Courfeyrac keep up the hair petting, he looked to be about to lean in for the kiss.

Then the kitchen light was flicked on. “Daddy? There’s a weird noise coming from under my bed. Can you make sure it’s my four year old imagination again? Daddy, why are you touching Jean’s hair? Are you having a tea party? Can I have a tea party? I’m not sleepy yet and I want tea. Well, I’d rather have chocolate milk. Can I have chocolate milk?”

Nothing could prevent the irritated sigh that left his lips, and there was no way to mask it or interpret it as anything else. Courfeyrac looked a bit guarded when he stood up to address his son.

Jean ended up leaving without his kiss, but with tentative plans to meet in the morning for breakfast. And Courfeyrac sent at least a dozen texts to Grantaire, wondering how much a deal breaker it was going to be if Jean Prouvaire disliked children as much as Enjolras.

Grantaire, meanwhile, couldn’t help but wonder if Enjolras’ feelings about children were going to finally become a deal breaker for him as well.

Chapter End Notes

The end is nigh...

I made myself sad :(
Chapter 60

Chapter Summary

No cliffhangers!

Oh man, guys, I'm going to miss working on this fic so much. Thanks to everyone who's tagged along for this surprisingly long and eventful ride. It's been a pleasure writing for all of you, and I hope you'll pop in to the extended-universe fics as I continue to update those too.

Chapter Notes

When I started writing this fic I had no idea what it was going to turn into. I had Les Mis on the brain, my old love kicked up from the 2012 movie and a recent rereading of the novel, further fed by repeatedly listening to all the soundtracks of the play I've collected over the years. I'd never considered Les Mis something that you could write fan fiction for before, and when I finally realized it was a thing my early forays were all canon-era. And damn were those hard to write (satisfying though...I definitely want to get back into writing canon-era if I can).

I noticed the prevalence of college AUs floating around AO3, thought it might be fun to write my own, and the first chapter of this monster of a fic flowed out of my brain with very little effort on my part. The first story arc came together remarkably easily. It's the kind of writing groove I hope for every time I sit down at my keyboard, and very rarely find. At any rate, I realized right away that I'd captured something wonderful with these altered characters and determined to keep the story going for as long as the ideas held out.

You guys have some sense of what happened afterwards. I realize I've pissed a lot of people off (though thankfully those guys probably haven't hung around for 60 chapters), but I've also indulged in the warmth and passion of the best aspects of a fandom community. I mean it every time I've said it's been a pleasure writing for this audience, and I can't thank you guys enough for giving this fic writer a confidence boost every time I really needed it. The past year wasn't a very good one for me, and some days I dashed out a chapter as quickly as I could just because I knew there'd be some encouraging comments waiting for me in my inbox when I woke up in the morning, and some days those really were the only kind words I had directed at me.

This might sound egotistical of me, and if it does I'm sorry, but I can't help noticing that for the first time in my fourteen years of fic writing that I'm a big fish in a pretty big fandom. Some people have attributed a lot more importance and influence on this fic than I think it really deserves, but on the off hand that's the case I want to throw out a word of support regarding College AUs while I still have a bit of spotlight.

I've noticed what I call fandom-hipsters bitching about the prevalence of College AUs, complaining about how fandom has been hijacked away from them and their "correct" fan fiction, which to me just seems to be missing the point. In my not-always-humble opinion, fandoms are supposed to be about fan love. We create fan works to express our
passions for something we love, laboring on our projects for no other purpose than to share our passions with other fans with no reward except kind words. I think College AUs are popular because they're the easiest way to get right to expressing our fan love. It hasn't escaped my notice that people generally set their AUs in their own communities, mostly forgoing keeping the boys French. Les Mis is often praised as a book that, despite its very specific setting and cultural context, has a universal element that pulls everyone in no matter their background. I personally think AUs are fitting to that. We're seeing the universal elements in the boys and adapting them to our contexts, and I think it's a wonderful way to use the canon material. I mean think about, we're injecting life and modern day relevance into a work that's over a hundred years old. That's pretty awesome.

Besides, the idea that there's only one way to write fan fiction is just stupid. I think I got stuck while writing canon-era stuff because I like to explore untrod territory in a story, and that's difficult to do when all your favorite characters died in their youth.

So if you can bear with my preaching a little longer, this is a lead-in to some advice I want to give the fandom.

The whole point in coming together to produce fan works is to express love, right? So don't ever waste time with flames and trolling. A well-meaning critique is one thing, but always encourage. None of us are writing professionally. We're not being paid. This is purely an act of love, so why on earth would you ever punish someone for writing something you didn't enjoy? You didn't pay for it. You didn't have to read it; you chose to. If they present a different view of the characters than you hold, so what? They're not hurting anyone. The canon is still in tact, and you're free to challenge their views by generating your own works.

Maybe this is idealism, but I'd like to think of fan communities as celebratory. Just be kind to one another, or in my view you've missed the point.

Thanks for your patience in dealing with my preaching. Maybe more so than for any chapter I've posted, I'm really eager to hear your thoughts so if you'd take the time to leave one last comment I'd really appreciate it.

<3 D3R

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Thanks to his work schedule Combeferre was a habitual early riser. Even when he had the day off his body still didn’t let him sleep past five thirty. Despite his best efforts, he only managed to laze in his nice warm bed for about twenty minutes before nature called. Sighing, he shook the cats off his legs, found his slippers, and stumbled down the hall to the bathroom.

He was heading back towards his blankets and some irritated cats when he heard movement in the kitchen. Combeferre poked his head in and found Enjolras sitting at the table staring intently at an open laptop. He looked terrible; eyes redder than usual and a bit puffy, hair on end from running his fingers through it, and still wearing his clothes from the night before.

It was difficult to make out in the faint early morning light, but Combeferre thought he saw tear tracks on his friend’s cheeks.
“Enjolras? Is everything okay?”

Enjolras jumped, not having heard Combeferre’s approach. “Oh, good morning ‘Ferre. You’re up early.”

“Mm hm. Thank you morning classes.” He walked over to the coffee maker and switched it on. “What happened? Did you and Grantaire have a fight?” They were rather prone to them during holidays. Something about gatherings always put Grantaire in an off-mood, a dependable occurrence Enjolras still didn’t manage to anticipate even after a decade with his partner.

Enjolras rubbed at his eyes with the heel of his hand. “ Yep.”

“Big one?”

“Yep.”

“Ah.”

Combeferre continued fussing with the coffee while Enjolras scrolled through whatever it was he was looking at. After a few minutes Combeferre set a mug of pumpkin spice by his friend’s elbow and then sat down across from him, warming his hands with his own mug. “What was it this time?”

Enjolras held his mug in his hands, but rather than take a sip he stared dejectedly at his caffeine instead. “He’s not happy with me anymore.”

“Wait, what? Did he say he wants to call things off?” Combeferre knew that statistically speaking at least one of the couples in his life was likely to get a divorce at some point, but he still found the thought unfathomable. Enjolras and Grantaire’s relationship had become one of his constants, as had Marius and Cosette, Feuilly and Eponine, Joly and Bossuet, and even Bahorel and Musichetta, though they were possibly the most unorthodox in their expressions of devotion.

Enjolras shook his head. “No. Nothing like that. He still loves me, thank god. He practically screamed that at me when I started crying. I’m surprised you didn’t hear us.”

Now that he thought about it, Combeferre vaguely recalled being woken by raised voices, but he’d simply rolled over and gone back to sleep with a pillow over his head. He was used to having the spirited couple as houseguests-possibly too used to them, considering.

“So what’s wrong?”

“It’s…our life that he doesn’t like. And, now that I’m thinking about it…I should have noticed.”

Enjolras flipped the laptop around so that Combeferre could see it. He’d been looking through back issues of Red and Black, something he often did when he was worried about his lover. Grantaire never consciously drew from his own life for inspiration, but his issues had a way of appearing in his work, especially if he was having trouble trying to communicate them to the people he was frightened of letting down.

Combeferre looked through the page Enjolras had been on and slowly nodded. “He feels trapped?”

“And overworked. It’s not fun for him anymore, the comic. He finds fun moments, and he’s excited about the cartoon, but…I’m pushing him too hard. He’s burning himself out, and, you know…he never had my drive. He has the talent, so I’ve been putting all my energy into pushing him to be successful. He made some good points. We don’t really ever sit back and enjoy what we have. H-he said he’d think about getting a cat again if he didn’t think it would be utterly neglected from how little we’re home. He’s right, ‘Ferre. We’re never home. We never relax.”
“Okay. Well, you guys can work on that.” Combeferre risked a smile. “Actually, so far it sounds like I’m on Grantaire’s side. You guys do work way too hard. It’d be nice if you had enough time off to do things like come out here and visit me a little more so I don’t have to blow so much cash on weekly trips to New York. The train’s not cheap, you know.”

Enjolras rested his elbows on the table and then dropped his head into his hands. “Can you not? I already feel like an ass.”

“Sorry.” He totally wasn’t sorry. “So you and Grantaire are going to be okay then?”

“…I hope so.”

“What does that mean? Enjolras?”

“I don’t know, ‘Ferre. I’ve been up all night searching through his books and interviews for clues to his feelings because he can’t fucking open up to me and talk like an adult.” Enjolras let out a shaking breath and lowered his hands. “This isn’t supposed to happen anymore. Why doesn’t he talk to me? Why didn’t he tell me he was upset? I’ve been just the way I always am. Bantering, jumping him as soon as we’re alone, telling him how mad I am for him…he hasn’t been any different. How could he be stupid and lovey with me when he hates our life? How could he be that dishonest?”

“I don’t think it was dishonesty, Enj,” Combeferre said, careful to keep his tone gentle but firm. “He undoubtedly loves you just as much as ever. Any fool who spends more than five minutes with you two can see that. You’re not the problem. The work schedule is. And…”

“Kids,” Enjolras whispered. It was one of their oldest problems, and tended to rear its ugly head whenever Grantaire got extended time with his herd of honorary nieces and nephews.

Combeferre sighed. “I think he’s always secretly hoped you might change your mind someday. This side of thirty, that hope’s looking more and more unlikely. And we both know Grantaire’s not exactly the hopeful sort, so for him to cling to this one…”

“If it’s the only way I can keep him-”

“Which is completely the wrong reason to have a baby-”

“I know that,” Enjolras snapped. “But I won’t lose my husband. I can’t even picture my life without him at this point.” He slumped down in his chair, shoulders sagging, looking the picture of defeat. It was strange to see on a man who generally appeared to embody conviction.

Gently, Combeferre extracted the coffee mug from Enjolras’ hands and helped him to his feet. “You need to sleep. You’ve got some difficult conversations ahead of you and you’ll do a shit job if you don’t let yourself rest.”

Enjolras shook his head. “I can’t, ‘Ferre, I tried. I’m too tense. I can’t sleep when I’m this…scared.” It seemed to cost him something to admit that that’s what it was.

Combeferre bracingly patted his back. “My friend, you’ll get through this. There are very few things I’ve ever been sure of, but your ability to succeed and the strength of your devotion to Grantaire and his devotion to you are at the top of the list. You’ll get through this.”

Enjolras gave a listless nod and started shuffling back towards the bedrooms. He tensed in the hallway, and when Combeferre looked up his hazel eyes locked on Grantaire’s half-lidded blue gaze. He had severe bedhead and he was shivering in a t-shirt and boxers. “I heard voices…what’s going on?”
Combeferre gave Enjolras a gentle shove. “Your husband can’t sleep. Use your loving influence to get him to relax, won’t you?”

Grantaire pushed some tangled bangs out of his face and squinted at Combeferre. “What makes you think I can get Enjolras to do anything?”

Combeferre faltered, thinking for a second that the comment was meant in sincerity. Grantaire’s delivery was a bit garbled thanks to him being half-awake. However, there was no mistaking his actions for anything other than concerned when he put a hand on Enjolras’ hip and guided him towards the guest room, gently chiding him for working through the night. Combeferre didn’t correct his assumption, but he hoped Enjolras might.

Combeferre packed up Enjolras’ laptop and the stack of comics he’d left on the table, thought about making breakfast, and then decided he’d rather make another attempt at sleeping in.

As he passed by the guest room, he found himself unable to resist opening the door a crack to peek in on the lovers.

Grantaire was leaning up against the headboard, barely awake and reverently stroking his fingers through Enjolras’ hair. Enjolras was asleep with his head on Grantaire’s stomach, arms wrapped around him. They certainly looked peaceful enough.

Hm. Maybe he’d get a godchild out of them yet.

Joly darted up in bed and struggled to open his eyes around the sleepies-gunk. “Hon? Did you hear something?”

“Nnrgh,” Legle answered. Joly thumped him over the head, then went back to vigorously rubbing his eyes to clear them.

“Bossuet, wake up. I definitely heard something.”

“…then go investigate. M’sleeping.”

“You’re useless.”

“I pay th’bills.”

“Grantaire and Enjolras pay our bills,” Joly corrected. He managed to get his eyes open, stuck a blue calcite in the pocket of his sweatpants as a talisman against vision issues, and crept down to the kitchen to investigate.

As he expected, he found the girls banging around by themselves trying to make breakfast. “Dad!” Angeline exclaimed. “Go back to bed. You’re spoiling our surprise!”

Joly leaned against the counter and eyed the breakfast tray skeptically. “You were making us breakfast out of leftover cookies and pie?”

Emma shrugged her bony shoulders. “I think that’s a perfectly good breakfast. Now get back in bed so we can surprise you.” She shooed her father out of the room, then went back to piling treats on one of their folding breakfast trays.

Realizing that his entire family was going to conspire against him on this and admitting defeat in advance, Joly got back into bed and poked Legle’s shoulder until he started stirring. “The girls have
raided the cabinets. We’re having sugar in all its varied forms for breakfast.”

“Sounds wonderful.”

Joly scoffed, so Legle pushed himself up on his elbows and silenced any further protests with a kiss. Joly pushed him away. “Love, morning breath.”

“It shut you up, didn’t it? It’s the holidays, Jol. Relax and enjoy it. You have them eat that gluten free, low sugar, no additives, nothing fun crap all the rest of the year.”

“Thanksgiving was yesterday. Black Friday does not count as a holiday.”

“No, but school’s cancelled and we’re supposed to be sleeping in. It’s like a holiday.” Legle fell back against the pillows and held out his arms invitingly. Wearing a small smile, Joly accepted the invitation and melted against his husband.

They were still cuddling when the girls came in with their trays of junk. They set the trays on the bed then carefully climbed up, Emma sitting in Legle’s lap while Angeline sat in Joly’s, and the four of them ate their sugar. Once they were finished, Joly cleared the sticky dishes away and cleaned up the mess in the kitchen. By the time he’d finished restoring order to his normally tidy domestic sphere, his family had conspired against him to turn his bed into a blanket fort and start a Netflix marathon.

“Love, how well do you think staying in bed all day is going to work when you’ve begun the day with a sugar high to end all sugar highs?”

Legle waved a hand dismissively. “It’s fine. They like our cartoons, don’t you girls?”

“Well, yes…” Angeline began. “But we’re not going to stay inside all day, are we Daddy?”

“I want to go play with Gusty! Can we play with Gusty?” Emma asked. She’d developed what was either a little kid crush on the amiable boy, or the sadistic enjoyment of a super villain with an energetic minion eager to do anything a cute girl in pigtails told him to. Either way, the adults found the relationship amusing, though they were eying it with some wariness in case it turned to bullying.

“I want to see Gigi. Her grandpa gave her the bestest ponies in the history of ever, and, and last night we only had mine to play with, but we could have an even better game together.” Angeline’s powers of persuasion were augmented by darling brown eyes and rosy cheeks that were downright dangerous in a toy store. Legle’s laziness already seemed to be relenting in the wake of his daughters’ wishes.

Smirking, Joly walked over to the dresser and opened the top drawer, where they kept Legle’s “real” pants. Considering his job was a bit of a joke, he mostly worked from home and as such mostly wore pajamas, sweatpants, or boxers. Joly insisted on dressing him in actual adult clothes whenever they left the house with the girls though.

Most of their activism had fallen to the wayside over the years. They still cared passionately about issues of social justice, kept themselves informed, and voted accordingly, but the men were more likely to discuss these things while packing school lunches for their small daughters or doing yard work than by attending a rally or gathering signatures for petitions. However, one of the legacies of their almost fanatical involvement with causes in their youth was Joly’s insistence that as a middle class LGBT family they were representing more than just themselves when the public eye was on them. He firmly believed that advances had been gained for the community through normal, day to day interactions with neighbors as well as through rallies and pickets and politics, and he wanted his family to present a good image for those on the fence about gay rights.
As such, when he and his husband walked down the street with their girls, Legle wasn’t allowed to wear his fleece bacon print pajama pants. He, personally, didn’t think bacon print pajama pants were going to undermine the credibility of the gay community to their somewhat snooty neighbors, but Joly had replaced his hypochondria with a lot of little tics, and Legle was willing to let this one go.

Legle was reluctantly pulled from his blanket-fort to oversee his daughters’ preparations to leave the house (Emma liked trying to sneak out of the house in old Halloween costumes, and Angeline was already oddly fond of makeup considering neither of the fathers had thought to purchase any for the six year olds themselves-they suspected Bahorel) while Joly made phone calls to see about arranging a play date.

He was still on the phone when his husband and girls appeared in the kitchen, all respectably dressed and Angeline only wearing a bit of unnecessary blush and some flavored chapstick. Sighing, Joly hung up and faced his family with a frown. “I’m afraid I couldn’t get ahold of anyone. It looks like you’ll have to pile back into the blanket-fort.”

“But I already took it down,” Legle whined. “Why don’t we just swing by Courfeyrac’s? He’s always home.”

“Yes, but he didn’t pick up. And, considering last night…” Here Joly shot his husband a significant look.

Legle missed the significance at first. “Uh…oh! Oh, yeah. Well wait then, doesn’t that mean he’d need cheering up? I think a munchkin playdate is for the best then.”

Joly threw a pensive look at his cell phone. “Courf didn’t pick up. I suppose it couldn’t hurt to swing by…”

“That’s the spirit! C’mon girls, race to the car!”

Smiling fondly, Joly gathered up the backpack full of healthy snacks, first aid supplies, and emergency boredom fighting activities he never left the house without but Legle never seemed to remember existed, and followed his family out to the car.

As Courfeyrac had rightly suspected, getting ready for a date with a four year old in the house was nearly impossible. Not that his breakfast plans with Jean could really be counted as a date, but it was the closest thing to a date Courfeyrac had seen since becoming a single father.

It took him almost twenty minutes just to brush his teeth, so that was probably a good thing.

“Thanksgiving’s over. Why do I have to wear yucky sweaters that itch my neck?” Gusty asked. “I wanna wear my Star Wars t-shirt!”

Courfeyrac defiantly yanked a dark blue sweater over his son’s curly head and surveyed the results. “First off, it’s too cold out for your Star Wars t-shirt. Second, there’s nothing wrong with wanting to look nice every now and then.”

Gusty glared at him. “My T-Rex shirt is long sleeved.”

“No it’s not.”

“Not the blue one, the black one. I wanna wear that. It doesn’t itch my neck and I can wear my cape with it.”
“You’re not wearing your cape today. C’mon Gus, work with me here.”

Gusty was in no mood to work with his father. Instead, the instant Courfeyrac’s back was turned he stripped naked, threw the sweater into the bathroom sink, and ran from the room screaming Disney song lyrics at the top of his lungs.

Courfeyrac picked the sweater up, counted the toothpaste stains on it, and heaved a dramatic sigh. He tossed the ruined sweater into the laundry hamper, scooped Gusty up as he went running down the hall, carried the squirming boy into his bedroom, and dropped him on the bed. “Time out. I don’t think I even need to list everything about that that was inappropriate.” He shut the door on Gusty’s cries and returned to the bathroom to retrieve his cell phone.

There was no way he was going out for breakfast, not when Gusty was having one of his bad days. He went to call Jean and see if maybe they could do lunch instead, and noticed his missed calls from Joly. “Oh no. It is too frickin’ early in the day for everyone to call me up and ask about Jean. I need coffee before I can deal with this shit.”

He shuffled towards the kitchen, looking through his contacts for Jean’s newly added number, and then the doorbell rang. Courfeyrac squeezed his eyes shut in a grimace.

His friends hadn’t been calling him to pick apart his pathetic excuse of a love life. They’d just wanted a babysitter or a playdate.

Courfeyrac’s bedroom door creaked open. “Daddy?”

“Get back in there,” Courfeyrac snapped. “Your time out isn’t over, and besides that you need pants on to greet company!”

Gusty sniffled, but the door creaked shut again.

Courfeyrac really wasn’t in much better a state when he irritably flung open the front door. He’d gotten halfway through taming his messy nest of hair with a wet comb before having to vacate the bathroom for an emergency potty, so about half of his chocolate brown tresses were neat and half of them were sticking almost straight up and it had dried that way. He was wearing a nice pair of slacks, but he was still wearing the ancient Captain America t-shirt he’d gone to bed in, and it was heavily spattered with oatmeal thanks to a breakfast mishap. He had one sock on, didn’t really remember putting it on, and thusly had no idea where its mate had wound up, and he had bags under his eyes from a mostly sleepless night.

And Joly and Bossuet were standing on his doorstep with their adorable little girls, looking like a fucking JC Penny Father’s Day ad. Courfeyrac involuntarily scowled at them. “What?”

Joly looked concerned. “Rough morning?”

Typical morning, really. Well, with the one significant difference that Courfeyrac was full of anxious energy over his impending breakfast date, which he was likely going to have to miss.

He stepped aside and let his friends into the apartment. Gusty had blatantly been listening by the door, and when he heard company approaching he seemed to decide that their presence nullified his time out. He raced out of the room and immediately tripped on the bottom of the nice shirt Courfeyrac had laid out for himself for the breakfast date. The child had reasoned that running through the house naked would only upset his daddy worse, but none of his clothes were in his father’s room and so he’d made do with what was available.

He ripped the shirt and bumped his head with the fall, and then Courfeyrac was off to comfort him
while trying not to cry frustrated tears of his own.

Legle hovered awkwardly in the doorway, one tiny female hand clasped in each of his large ones. “Uh…maybe we should come back later.”

“Take the girls into the living room. I’m going to see what’s going on.” Joly handed off the backpack of supplies before following Courfeyrac into Gusty’s room.

Gusty was still crying softly, now wearing a pair of Spiderman tightie-whities and throwing clothes out of his dresser drawer. To Joly’s surprise Courfeyrac was crying as well, but there wasn’t a trace of it in his voice while he spoke into his cellphone. To Joly’s horror, it sounded like he was cancelling a date with Jehan.

Intervention was obviously necessary. Joly snatched the phone away from Courfeyrac and brightly addressed his former friend. “Hello, Jehan! It was so lovely to see you last night, even if it was only for a minute. How are you doing, hon?”

“Uh…very well, thank you,” Jehan answered, perfectly politely despite a note of puzzlement in his quiet voice. “Is Courfeyrac still there?”

“Yes, but he’s tending to Gusty. You know how kids have a way of monopolizing your attention. Speaking of that, I was just thinking that you and Courf could probably use some private adult time to catch up. Bossuet and I desperately need a playmate for the girls today, so you should totally head on over and steal Courf away so we can make off with his son. Seriously, come on over. I know Bossuet wants to say hi to you too.”

Courfeyrac didn’t seem to know what was going on at first. He just stared at Joly with his mouth hanging open, eyes wide and uncomprehending. Joly felt for him. His first year with twins had given him many moments of what he called ‘Daddy-burn-out’, but thankfully he’d had a husband to split the stress and confusion with. He really marveled sometimes at how well Courfeyrac functioned going it alone.

Once the moment passed, Courfeyrac mouthed a silent thank you while Joly busily traded a few more pleasantries with his old friend. Courfeyrac then bolted from the room to start getting ready for his date. Joly hung up, and then knelt down next to the little boy who was in full-blown tantrum mode.

“Excuse me mister, but is this how we treat our clothes?” Joly asked, slipping into his ‘listen-to-me-now’ dad voice.

Gusty blew a raspberry at him and threw a superhero cape over his head. Joly didn’t blink. “I think that’s how little boys who want to spend their day in their room behave, not big boys who want to escort Emma and Angeline to the library.”

That got Gusty’s attention. “Are Emmy and Angeline here?” Joly nodded. “Um…I’m un-throwing the cape now.” Gusty very politely picked up the cape, folded it as neatly as his clumsy hands were capable, and put it in the drawer, effectively ignoring the pile of clothes he’d already dumped out. “Can I escort Gigi too?”

“Gigi’s not with us, but I can leave a message for Marius. In the meantime, why don’t you pick out just one outfit you like and put all the rest of them back?”

“Okay…then can I play with Emmy and Angeline?”

“Of course.”
Joly helped Gusty change into a pair of maroon sweat pants and a T-Rex shirt that almost matched, combed his hair for him, and then sent him into the living room to color with his children. He then found Courfeyrac in the bathroom, trying to fix his hair and missing all the bits sticking up in the back. “Here, let me.”

“Thanks,” Courfeyrac mumbled.

“So…nervous?”

“Terrified. Which is stupid. I pretty much gave up on him ages ago…y’know, aside from the part where I still dream about him changing his mind and coming back to me every couple of months.”

For ten years. Damn.

“Is that what’s happening then? Are you two rekindling?” Joly asked, unable to suppress an excited smile at the thought.

“I don’t know. I hope so, but I have no clue what’s going on.” Courfeyrac wrinkled his nose up in distaste. “I don’t think Jean’s into single dads, to tell the truth.”

“Is he not aware of Gusty’s existence somehow?” Joly asked, arching a brow with a mischievous look on his face. Courfeyrac rolled his eyes. “Ah, so he does know you’re a daddy, and yet he’s still meeting up with you. C’mon, someone can be a little awkward with kids without being full blown Enjolras.”

“That’s true, I guess.” Shit, now he was going to be paranoid about being too defensive. Courfeyrac sighed, then stepped away from Joly and the comb to look at his reflection in the mirror. “Wow, I look like death. I can’t even remember the last time I got a good night of sleep. Wait, pretty sure it was when Grantaire took Gusty to New York with him for a week.”

Joly sympathetically patted his back. “Just do what I do, Courf. Every time you start to worry about how worn and tired and dowdy you might look, just remind yourself that he saw you naked when you were in your prime.”

Courfeyrac gave a startled laugh and covered his face with his hand. “That calms you down? Because seriously? I don’t look a damn thing like I did when I was twenty three.”

“Hon, you’re actually aging better than any of the rest of us. There are people who think you still are twenty three.”

“That’s just because I’m an immature goof.”

“Well it works for you. You might want to put on a shirt with less oatmeal though. I don’t think any amount of charming immaturity can spin that into a fashion statement.”

Courfeyrac glanced down at his chest uncomprehendingly for a minute, then what might have been a look of dismay turned into a laugh no less infectious for the hint of self-deprecation to it. He went to grab a clean shirt, and considering his pep talk successfully administered, Joly left to gather up his children (a category he kindly included his grown husband in) for their trip to the children’s room at the library.

It was much nearer lunch than breakfast by the time Courfeyrac was ready to see Jean, but the poet was craving pancakes so pancakes they were to pursue.
It turned out to be a surprisingly difficult task. Every diner and small family owned restaurant Courfeyrac knew of was either closed or finished with their breakfast menu for the day. Of course, there were two obvious choices for pancakes in the general vicinity, but Courfeyrac was reluctant to suggest large chain restaurants, given that the current focus of Enjolras and Combeferre’s worker’s rights efforts was raising the minimum wage for food servers and getting them paid sick days.

Jean turned to face his passenger wearing a tiny grin. “I won’t tell Enjolras if you won’t.”

Courfeyrac smiled in relief. “IHOP then. I ate enough Denny’s for a lifetime when I was a teen.”

Having exhausted himself with worry and bitter resentment, once Enjolras relaxed enough to slip off to sleep he stayed that way well into the afternoon. Grantaire dozed with him for an hour or two, but having slept during the night (as was his general preference) he was wide awake by ten. He lazed in bed, cuddling his husband for another half hour or so, but eventually his attention drifted from even that well-loved past time.

He slipped out of bed and quietly crept from the room. He found Combeferre settled in the living room, looking so characteristically ‘Ferre that his fingers itched to sketch the familiar sight into a caricature.

He was reclining on the couch with a stack of papers, a mug of tea sitting on the coffee table in front of him, his chubby calico cat sprawled on his lap, and a new one Grantaire hadn’t met perched on his feet. It reminded Grantaire of their college days, though of course the cats were different, the papers he proofread were Combeferre’s students’, not his own, and the glasses and grey hairs were testaments to the passage of time. Logan and Gladiator had met peaceful, old age kitty deaths a few years ago, and after the requisite grieving period Combeferre had visited a shelter and found a new apartment mate in the calico, Minerva. Enjolras’ old cat, Raoul, was still kicking around somewhere, though Grantaire had barely seen him during the visit. He made it a point to avoid the cats as much as was possible and was a bit disgruntled to see a new one.

“Where’s our little allergen factory?” Grantaire asked, when it looked like Combeferre was at a good stopping point in his proof reading.

Combeferre set the paper down in favor of his tea mug and smirked at his friend. “He’s around here somewhere. Raoul’s still not a terribly social cat. I’d guess he’s napping in a dresser drawer, getting his fur and allergens all over my work clothes.”

“He still does that?”

Looking equal parts exasperated and fond of the little pest, Combeferre nodded. “Did you and Enjolras talk?”

“Not yet. The poor guy worked himself into a panic over my last attempt.” Grantaire sighed. “I can’t believe I still suck this much at communicating with him. You’d think I’d have it down to a science after all this time, but no. I still blindside him every time I try to talk about my needs.”

“Yes, well maybe casually slipping bombshells into nighttime chats isn’t the best way to introduce important subjects,” Combeferre said wryly.

Grantaire had the decency to feel a little ashamed of himself. “What’s done is done. At least he knows now. So, uh…you heard from Courf or Jehan yet?”

Combeferre looked a little annoyed by the abrupt dismissal of the old subject, but he played along. Neither of them had heard from their friends, and a perusal of social media turned up no clues about
how that might be going. Grantaire indulged Combeferre and listened to him chat about Azelma for a bit, then he claimed a need to distance himself from the cats, snagged a quick breakfast from the kitchen, and retreated to the cat-free guest room where his husband still soundly slept.

Grantaire got out his sketchbook and contemplated the love of his life with pencil and paper, though he knew Enjolras would chew him out for it later (“Honestly ‘Taire, it’s creepy enough to watch someone sleep. Sketching is an entirely new level of creepiness.”), but he didn’t really care. His mind was still a jumble of disoriented half-formed thoughts and desires, and art was still his safest way to escape while retaining any hope of making sense of his bewildering mind.

What stood out clear as day was that there was no way he could even think of leaving his husband. There were things he wanted that Enjolras didn’t. When they’d first come together, Grantaire wouldn’t have dreamed of fighting for his own dreams, so grateful had he been just to have the love he didn’t think he deserved (and besides, how could the few petty wants of a jaded cynic compare to the spectacular goals of an impassioned idealist?). It would have seemed selfish beyond belief, not to mention petulant, to ask for anything more than the miracle that had already been bestowed in the form of Enjolras’ affections.

Grantaire was a different man now. Much of it was for the patient care and work Enjolras had put into him, but the effort had born fruit and Grantaire now knew his worth as an individual. He was allowed to want things, and he was allowed to be happy. Maybe he and Enjolras would never agree on some things, but there must be a way to better balance their joined life so that the sacrifices didn’t weigh more heavily on one than the other.

Grantaire was still sketching by the time Enjolras started stirring, though luckily he was drafting a strip for his book at that point. Enjolras leaned up on his elbows, shot Grantaire a look of distaste over his shoulder when he noticed the open sketchpad and the way his lover was sat facing him, and then dropped back against the pillow with a disgruntled “hrm.”

“I’m not drawing you!” Grantaire whined.

“Well, I’m not drawing you anymore.” He dashed off a quick bit of dialogue before it flew out of his head again, set the sketchpad down, and then bounded into bed. Grantaire gathered the fall of golden curls from the nape of Enjolras’ neck so he could lay a quick kiss there, then settled down beside him with an arm draped over Enjolras’ side, fingers sliding under his shirt to trace along his belly. “You should be less grumpy, you know. Now that you’re waking up.”

“It’s my husband, you see. I think he’s trying to drive me insane.” Enjolras shifted so that he was facing Grantaire, eyes still half lidded and sleepy, and wry smirk failing to hide a few lingering traces of unease. “First he scared the ever living shit out of me by making me think he wanted a divorce—”

“Maybe he thought you’d know better than to think him even capable of such a thing,” Grantaire returned, bringing his hand up to stroke along Enjolras’ face instead. “I’m never going to stop being mad about you, Enj. You’re stuck with me for life. I’ll breathe my last the day I lose you.”

Enjolras was quiet for a fraction of a minute, puzzling out whether he wanted to argue with that or not. Not that he was planning on dying an early death or had any intentions of otherwise parting with his husband, but he still didn’t like Grantaire intimating that he was going to commit suicide if anything should happen to him. He liked to think that if he had to, Grantaire could live a long and healthy life without him.

Opting to leave the tired old fight for another day, he continued. “Then this heartless husband of
mine, he decided to spring all these problems on me out of nowhere, making me out to be some
heartless bastard who neither cared about nor noticed his needs. And just when I felt like the most
miserable excuse for a partner on earth, he fell asleep, apparently unburdened since he’d passed all
the weight to me.”

“I’d kick the bum to the curb. Y’know, if that’s even remotely what had happened,” Grantaire said.
He interrupted his gentle stroking back of Enjolras’ hair to give him a light bop on his perfectly
formed nose.

“Well what’s your version?” Enjolras asked.

“My version? Well for starters, it isn’t exactly news that I’m overworked and lonely. I’ve been telling
you, so I don’t see how that was blindsiding you.”

Enjolras turned defensive. “You always get whiny before deadlines. How could I have known this
was different?”

“Because it’s been getting worse every time. I’ve been begging you for a vacation, but you keep
talking up how well we’re doing, and you light up every time we make a donation to one of your
causes. Babe, I’m getting enough migraines and eye strain from how hard I’m working to require
medication. It’s different than just deadline whininess.”

Enjolras’ gaze lowered, and he finally nodded. “I guess it was the bluntness, then. When you said
you were unhappy like that, it made me think of…” He trailed off, but as he was tracing his fingers
along some particularly significant tattoos on Grantaire’s forearm it was pretty clear what he was
talking about.

“Love, it’s not that. Not to tempt the fates or anything, but I don’t even know if I’m capable of falling
into that kind of despair again. I’ve got you, and we’ve got some pretty rad friends with amazing
little babies to cheer me up and get me out of my head when I’ve strayed too far in, and I’ve got the
right balance of medication and art therapy to keep me healthy.”

He found himself with an armful of sleepy activist, squeezing him tightly as he let out some shaky
breaths. “You promise?”

“Absolutely. This isn’t that kind of unhappiness. I think this one’s more of a discontent, and a
conquerable one at that.”

“Good.” Enjolras dropped a kiss onto Grantaire’s stubbled jaw. “I started working on a plan last
night, actually.” He climbed out of bed and went to fetch his laptop, leaving an amused husband
staring after him. How like Enjolras to treat this like one of his projects. Grantaire wouldn’t have
been surprised in the least if Enjolras came back with a power point and lecture notes.

What he showed Grantaire was even better. Grantaire stared at the computer screen in wonder,
taking in the sight of neat little pictures of New England homes and their asking prices. “You want to
buy a house in Salem?”

“Despite the drama, I think our college years were our best. I’ve always missed that ridiculously big
place my parents had for me. Living by the ocean was nice, and we were so close to all our friends.”

“But what about work?”

Enjolras shrugged. “Red and Black may have seen print runs and it may be on its way to becoming a
cartoon, but it’s still a web comic at heart. A home studio in Salem would be just as effective as one
in the heart of comic publishing. Besides, it’s easy enough to commute to New York through
Boston. And if we cut down on your con appearances we won’t be doing all that much commuting anyway.”

Grantaire wore an unmistakable look of longing as he stared at the federalist mansions history nerd Enjolras had been drawn to. It seemed almost too good to be true. “Hey, some of these are two-families. Are these all houses you were thinking of, or just what’s available in the city right now?”

“These are my choices. I was thinking if we got a two family, maybe we could ask Courfeyrac to be our tenant? He’s never going to let us buy him a house, but I don’t think offering him a nicer apartment would be a crushing blow to his dignity.”

“And then Gusty could have a yard and he’d be right next door…” Grantaire’s breath hitched as something occurred to him. He tore his eyes from the cheerful fantasies on the laptop screen and met a pensive look from his husband. “You’re really sure about the no kids thing then?”

Enjolras chewed his lip and nodded. “I don’t have it in me to be a father. I’m sorry, Grantaire, with all my heart I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s…I mean, I like kids, don’t get me wrong. I’ve always gotten along with them better than adults. But I’d probably make a shitty dad.”

“You wouldn’t,” Enjolras insisted unthinkingly.

“Really? With my upbringing you don’t think there’s a chance of it?” Grantaire laughed. “My parents failed me in every way possible. I am terrified of the thought of screwing some poor kid up the way they fucked me up. Mentoring Little R and spoiling Gusty rotten are probably as close to child rearing as I should get.”

Enjolras shook his head. “You’re a warm, loving man and a devoted husband. What happened to you during your early life was tragic, but I’ve never thought it defined you even when you were trying your damndest to force it. My desire to never have children is entirely a selfish one. I just don’t want them. I wouldn’t know what to do with them if I had them. But if circumstances ever dropped any upon us, I wouldn’t have a single qualm about your suitability to be a guardian. ‘Taire, how many of our friends have asked you to be backup guardians should something happen to them?”

Grantaire shrugged. “Just…all of them, actually. Even Marius and Cosette, and I never expected them to think I was good enough for Gigi.”

Grantaire looked at the computer screen again and contemplated the houses Enjolras had picked out, trying to see them as homes. He imagined chasing Gusty around in the yards, setting up art studios in the sunniest of the rooms, and felt the most wonderful ache as he constructed his little castles in the air. “This’ll work. Apparently I’m homesick as fuck.”

Enjolras melted against his side, a relieved smile on his face. “Me too. It’ll be good to live near our friends again. We’ve still got to go back to New York today though. It’s going to take some work to make this happen.”

“Mm. Got to buy the house before we can live in it.” He handed the laptop over and leaned back against the pillows. “Pick out whichever one you want. I don’t care what the house looks like so long as I get the choicest lighting for my studio. Y’know, and a yard for the kiddos.”

“Naturally. And a separate room for cat furniture-”

Grantaire chucked a pillow at him.
Little R jiggled the handle to the bathroom door, found it locked, and let out a disgruntled groan. “Zelma! Can you let me use the bathroom for like ten minutes before you do your three hour girly whatever the hell it is pre-date thing? I need to get to the train station so I can see Grantaire and Enjolras off.”

The lock clicked open, and then Azelma’s face, twisted into an annoyed scowl, peeked through the crack. “I’m sorry, did you just imply that I was getting ready for my dinner with Combeferre now? It’s three thirty. We’re not even meeting up until seven.”

“Uh huh.” Little R waited for her to elaborate, but she just stood there looking pissed off about something. “Uh…you used to groom obsessively when there was just a chance of you bumping into him. I thought that since you were going on a real date…”

She slammed the door with a loud bang that made him jump. Little R stomped downstairs and ran into the kitchen, where Feuilly was simultaneously trying to get some work done on his laptop and prepare hot dogs and beans for the kids. “Feuilly! Azelma’s hogging the bathroom!”

As if in answer, they heard the old pipes of the building rattle in the wake of a flushing toilet. Shortly thereafter Azelma strode smugly into the room, wearing yoga pants and an over-sized sweatshirt, her hair held out of her eyes with an assortment of bobby pins. She stuck her tongue out at her brother and he galloped upstairs to steal the family’s one bathroom before any of the other inhabitants could get to it.

“Can you believe he really thought I was getting ready for the date already?” Azelma asked.

Feuilly looked up from the computer with a pointed smirk and then silently turned towards the stove. Azelma scowled, but she finally dropped the smug down by a few notches. “Okay, fine, so I was a little obsessive when I was a teen. You know, ten frickin’ years ago. I like to think I’ve grown up a bit since then.”

“You undoubtedly have. But Azelma, your obsessive behaviors regarding Combeferre made enough of an impression on your brother than he still clearly remembers and expects them despite having observed them when he was four.”

“Alright, point made. Well, anyway, I’m not the creeper I used to be. I don’t even care if the date doesn’t go well. If it does, great, fine. He’s a wonderful man. If it doesn’t, whatevs. I’m used to getting by on my own. Doesn’t bother me either way.”

Feuilly started scooping the warmed beans onto cheerful plastic baby plates, somehow managing to infect the basic parental task with an air of being amused at his sister-in-law’s expense. “Just don’t take it too far the other way.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Azelma, you like Combeferre. You like him for good reasons. Don’t sabotage the date just to prove your independence, okay?”

“I-I wouldn’t…” But when she stopped to think about it, she kind of was. “Urgh…okay, point ceded. Apparently I only fluctuate between wild extremes.”

“I’d blame the Thenardier blood,” Feuilly said calmly as he began chopping up the hot dogs. “By the by, I’m going to take the kids to Marius’ for a visit around suppertime. Considering how late lunch is today, we probably won’t be leaving until around six, so you and Ponine should have the house to yourselves…”
An hour before my date. Which is a sensible amount of prep time,” Azelma finished. She walked over to Feuilly and kissed his cheek. “You’re the best big brother ever.”

“Thanks. Though the hope that you’ll bring an amazing brother in law into the family is a bit of a selfish one. I wouldn’t mind having ‘Ferre around for all of the family gatherings.”

“Ah huh. Well I wouldn’t start planning the wedding yet.”

“Mm. We should see how you guys manage a first date, I guess.”

Azelma quirked an eyebrow, picking up on an odd inflection in his voice. “What does that mean?”

Feuilly answered automatically, followed with a wince and a distinct ‘I should not have said that’ face. “Combeferre absolutely sucks at dating.”

“Sucks how?”

“Um… I don’t think there’s a way I can answer this that won’t have me attacked by a six foot plus ginger when I least expect it.”

Azelma leaned against the counter with her arms crossed over her chest. “Combeferre’s a sweet, gentle man-”

“Says you.”

“And I’m your sister. Confidentiality’s sort of implied. I didn’t realize Combeferre had a hard time dating.”

Feuilly started putting plates on the table, incidentally putting some space between him and his houseguest. “The guy’s painfully awkward and there’s not a bit of flirt in him. We tried setting him up on a few blind dates a while ago, but none of them took. Just go easy on him, Azelma. If he shuts down, or starts to get twitchy or anxious or anything, it’s overwhelmingly likely that it has nothing to do with you and everything to do with him.”

“Really?” She was almost sure Feuilly was messing with her, but then, she knew the guy well enough to tell when he was joking around and he was deadly serious. “But Combeferre always seemed so confident.”

“Cool and collected, yes. Confident…meh. He’s confident when you’re talking about abstract intellectual subjects that have very little to do with day to day life. Kids! Lunch is done!”

Azelma tried to press Feuilly for more information, but once Thiago and Mehmed thundered into the room she had to give it up as a lost cause. To his credit, Feuilly did try to keep his conversation going, but every other word was interrupted with a “get your hands off your brother’s plate” or a “eat what you’ve got and maybe you can have some carrot sticks.”

She was almost run over by Little R in the hallway. “Oops, sorry sis!”

“Wait a sec.” She grabbed him by the hood of his sweatshirt and forced him to slow down. “How are you getting to the train station?”

“Bike.”

Well that explained the rush. “Get in my car. I’ll give you a ride.”

“Thanks Zelma!”
She snagged her keys from the hook by the door and called back into the kitchen, telling Feuilly and the kids where she was going, then went out to her car where she found her baby brother fidgeting in the front passenger. “You okay kiddo?”

“Yeah. I just don’t want to miss them. I don’t always get a chance to say goodbye. The last two times they left while I was at school and Ponine and Feuilly wouldn’t let me skip.”

“Well you’re definitely seeing them this time, so calm it down. Seriously, that looks like a pee dance and it’s making me nervous.”

Little R stuck his tongue out at her, but he did calm down significantly until they hit just about every red light on the way and struggled to find parking. Despite the car having saved him significant time over what the bike ride would have been, they still got to the train platform with barely five minutes before the train to Boston was supposed to arrive.

Little R jumped out of the car as soon as it was parked. Azelma locked up and hurried after him, and would have lost sight of him entirely were it not for his bright green hair. She pushed her way through the crowd of commuters and finally caught up to her baby brother as he jumped Grantaire, wrapping his skinny arms around the artist’s neck and hanging from him like dead weight. Grantaire hugged him back, and started to say something but was silenced by Enjolras before he could get more than a word out.

“Uh, guess I’m not allowed to tell you that yet.”

“Don’t you think you should wait until it’s finalized?”

“It’s pretty clear you do,” Grantaire grumbled. He gave Little R’s shoulder a squeeze and promised to call him with good news in a couple of days.

“Hey guys,” Azelma greeted, and got much more subdued acknowledgments from the couple than her brother had received. She was starting to wonder how they’d gotten to the train station to begin with, then she saw Combeferre strolling towards them with a tray of coffees. Combeferre, looking remarkably dashing in his dreamy-yet-approachable professor clothes, and she was wearing a mess of bobby pins and yoga pants stained with Zahara’s spit up.

Feuilly was right. She’d taken this not getting caught up in him thing way too far the other direction.

“’Ferre, hi.” And that squeak of a greeting was totally not going to save it.

Apparently he missed the bobby pins and the throw up, because his eyes lit up when he saw her. “Azelma. It’s so good to see you.” And without further ado, he shoved the coffees into Enjolras’ hands and secured her for some apparently pressing chit chat about an article he’d read on education that needed her thoughts now-right-now.

He completely ignored Enjolras and Grantaire until the train arrived, which seemed to suit Little R as it allowed him to get all of his mentor’s attention for those last, almost sacred five minutes. Enjolras looked a bit pissy about it though.

Little R tried to sneak onto the train with the surge of the crowd, but his neon hair prevented any possibility of that working. Combeferre nabbed him by the collar and pulled him far enough back on the platform to wave at the window as Grantaire and Enjolras departed. Once the train was out of sight, the three of them started walking back towards the parking lot and almost ran into Courfeyrac, who was red in the face and winded looking, his son perched precariously on his back.

“We…we missed them?”
“Um…” Combeferre frowned, not sure if it was worth answering the incredibly obvious inquiry.

Gusty immediately burst into loud sobs. “I didn’t get to say goodbye! I didn’t get to say goodbye or give him a hug and I didn’t get to see the train!”

“Gus, I’m sorry. I tried.”

“No you didn’t! You were kissing that man with the pony tail, which is not saying goodbye to Uncle R and Uncle Angel-ras!”

“Wait a minute, you were what?” Combeferre grinned, already tuning out the tantruming toddler.

With some difficulty, Courfeyrac got Gusty off his shoulders and appeased him by getting Grantaire on the phone for him. Gusty wandered off a few steps and started happily chatting with his godfather, telling him all about his morning with Emma and Angeline, allowing the adults to interrogate their friend.

“Are you and Jehan a thing again?” Combeferre asked. “Shit, I mean Jean. It’s going to take me forever to get used to that.”

“I…I don’t know if we’re a thing,” Courfeyrac said slowly. “But we got breakfast, and we talked a lot, and when he dropped me back at my place he kissed me goodbye. We’re going to take it slowly and see where it goes. Kinda gotta, really…considering…” He motioned towards the four year old happily chatting away about the merits of Curious George as opposed to Thomas the Tank Engine.

Combeferre frowned. “He’s not really put off by you being a single father, is he?”

“If he is he’s an asshole and you can do better,” Azelma said, defensively thinking of her own nieces and nephews, whom she loved with a protective fierceness. The idea that anyone could see a child as a hindrance or a burden made her hackles rise, though she’d never examined exactly where that sensitivity came from.

“He doesn’t hate kids,” Courfeyrac insisted. “But he’s never dated a guy with kids either. He doesn’t want to get too involved too fast in case we don’t work out. He said something about not wanting to lead Gusty on, which I totally agree with. So we’re going to try a few more dates and see what happens. And if we get there, we get there. If we don’t…I’ll handle it more gracefully than I did last time.”

“Hey buddy,” Combeferre said, giving Gusty a prod on the shoulder. “Let your daddy talk to Uncle R for a minute so he can tell him what he just told us. It’ll only take a minute.” Gusty tried to run away, but the phone was negotiated away from him with the promise of a rare piggy back ride from Combeferre, who was infinitely more interesting for piggy back rides than the other adults by virtue of his height. Courfeyrac was thusly able to give the sought after update to Grantaire, who immediately berated him for falling prey to the poet’s charms, but there was no bite to his voice.

Damned if the guy was ever going to admit it, but he sounded happy for his friend.

They all lingered at the edge of the train platform chatting with each other, even after Gusty hung up with Uncle R. When the chilly winds got the better of them, Combeferre walked the Thenardier siblings to their car while Courfeyrac started fighting Gusty into the booster seat in the back of his own vehicle. She snagged Combeferre’s hand where it swung loosely by his side as he walked, and when they got to her car he placed a chaste kiss on her knuckle.

“I’ll see you in a few hours,” he said, looking enormously pleased with life in general.
She was sure she was smiling like an idiot when she said goodbye. She had to be, because Little R was laughing at her when Azelma got into the car. “What?”

“Nothing, actually. It’s nice to see you smile like that, Zelma. Only… you look a little funny with all the bobby pins, when Combeferre looks so suave.”

Then Azelma caught her reflection in the mirror and let out a groan. “Oh no. I look hideous.”

“Combeferre was looking at you like you were a movie star. I wouldn’t worry. Besides, you rock scruffy Auntie clothes almost as well as Ponine rocks the scruffy Mommy clothes.”

“Thanks, kiddo.” It was nice to hear, but Azelma felt a surge of determination to show up for the date looking like a knock out.

The next group gathering may not have seen Feuilly at his goal of having a brother in law to help him weather the holidays with the Thenardiers, but he was a few steps closer.

Combeferre and Azelma had gone on enough dates to have stopped counting them. She came to visit her new sweetie at work with lunch a few times, and found starry eyed little things visiting him for office hours every time. The poor things looked absolutely stricken when the cute blond in the skirt suit and heels leaned her slim hip on their hot professor’s desk, straightened his tie, cleaned his glasses and otherwise fretted over him in a way that was both familiar and territorial. And the perfect dear didn’t notice a damn thing about what was really going on.

“Hon, all of your students are crushing on you.”

“I really don’t understand why you and Courfeyrac keep saying that. We were talking about Anne Bradstreet. It’s not the most romantic poetry in the world. It’s actually rather morbid and depressing.”

It was a few weeks after Christmas when they strolled up the drive to Enjolras and Grantaire’s new home. They’d managed to bully Courfeyrac into submission, and so Gusty was the first to greet them, cheeks red and eyes bright from too much play in the massive sledding course the adults had crafted with the snow blower in the enormous yard.

“Hi guys! You wanna play with my sled? Lookit the fort we made!”

The couple was cheerfully detained by the young child eagerly sharing all the outdoor delights he’d been gifted with. They were able to tempt him inside with them through the lure of hot chocolate, which was thankfully already being fixed for him in the kitchen of Enjolras and Grantaire’s home (Gusty seemed equally at liberty to come and go through either of the homes in the building).

Grantaire laid a mug in front of the boy while Courfeyrac got him out of his wet things and Enjolras grumpily followed after all of them with a towel and some organic all-purpose cleaning spray.

After he’d hung Gusty’s things up by the door, Courfeyrac took a seat at the table next to his son and absent mindedly stroked back his hair while the kid fished all the marshmallows out of his cocoa (though of course Uncle R was waiting with a bag of mini marshmallows to refill when needed). The proud papa looked more youthful than ever, something Combeferre attributed to the new living arrangement. Letting his best friend carry some of the burden of fatherhood was helping him enjoy its many perks, and besides that, he didn’t look as haggard or stressed anymore.

Then Jean walked in and the blissful smile Courfeyrac greeted him with prompted Combeferre to re-evaluate. Courfeyrac was less burdened and stupidly in love again.

“Sorry. I went to the wrong house,” Jean said as he shrugged out of his coat. He gave Courfeyrac a
quick peck, then sat down on Gusty’s other side, though he swung an arm behind the child’s chair to lace his fingers with the boy’s father’s.

“Who else is meeting us here?” Enjolras asked, casting a look of dismay at the small puddle of slushy snow Jean had tracked in with him.

“I think we’re just waiting on Bahorel and Musichetta,” Azelma said. “Gav and Little R are at the café already, and they just texted that Joly and Legle are already there, and Ep and Feuilly are going to meet us there with the brood, Zahara permitting. Oh, shoot, no we’re still waiting on Marius and Cosette too.”

“Is Gigi coming? Can she come play with my sled and my fort?” Gusty asked.

“Not tonight, pumpkin. We’ll see if Uncle Marius’ll let her sleep over. Then you and Gigi can play in the yard in the morning.”

“Didn’t we just have a sleepover?” Enjolras whined.

Courfeyrac rolled his eyes. “Yep. Emma and Angeline slept over a few days ago, but neither of them are Gigi. Besides, what’s it matter to you? They’re sleeping over my place, not yours.”

“I’m getting really sick of that one,” Enjolras grumbled. “You know damn well your sleepovers always spill over to my house.” But the sight of Grantaire cracking his godson up by making silly faces every time he went to take a sip of cocoa softened his heart a little. He mumbled something about having his kitchen overrun with small children whenever Courfeyrac forgot to go food shopping, but was ignored by everyone present in favor of Gusty singing a pop song and basically eating up as much adult attention as he could while he was still the only kid in the room.

The doting adults only managed to cram another six or seven tablespoons of sugar into the little boy before obnoxious honking informed them that Musichetta and Bahorel were waiting outside, with the Pontmercy family idling in a minivan just behind them. Then there was a commotion as everyone got their winter things back on and piled into vehicles to head out for the actual gathering place of the night, the Thenardiers’ café.

“Do you really think the children are going to be able to sit still for a poetry reading?” Enjolras inquired as he climbed into the backseat of Courfeyrac’s car with Grantaire and Gusty.

Courfeyrac shrugged. “Who cares? If they get too antsy we can just kick them out to the back room. Eponine’s got it set up as more of a nursery than an office at this point anyway, since she takes her kids to work with her so much.”

“That’s why I picked Eponine’s café for my book release,” Jean added. “I wanted everyone to be able to be there. Including you, little man,” he added with an affectionate smile for Gusty. Gusty beamed up at the front passenger, nearly as enamored of the poet as his daddy.

It was a short drive downtown to the café, though finding parking turned out to be an issue. “I guess it was a good thing we met up at our place first. Fewer vehicles,” Grantaire said.

Jean looked at the crowded streets in some awe. “Do you think all these people are really here for the poetry reading and the book signing?”

“Most definitely,” Enjolras said, though he refrained from mentioning that he thought quite a few of them were probably there to get copies of the latest volume of Red and Black signed. But the dual signing could only help, even if Jean did get a little upstaged by the established artist.
They finally found a space a couple streets away, and hurried over to the café as quickly as possible, whose warmth seemed all the more inviting the longer they trudged through snow and slush in biting winds.

The café was indeed warm and cheerful, but also packed. If Gavroche hadn’t set aside tables for them they would have had to stand in the back. As is, the kids were herded into the back room just to free some more space. In a reversion to his old hypochondriac habits, Joly had apparently jumped at the chance to play munckin minder in the office rather than expose himself to all the winter colds brought in with a crowd that size.

Everyone politely refrained from reminding him that the group of children were probably carrying more minor pestilences between them than all the adults crammed into the main room, but it wasn’t as much in consideration of Joly’s nerves as it was a desire not to be shut up with the next-gen of Amis when they were there to celebrate Jean and Grantaire’s creative accomplishments.

Eponine had been mingling, but she noticed how overwhelmed her baby brother looked behind the counter and went over to help him. “You need a break, kiddo?”

“No. I should be okay, but um, if you wanted to take the orders and do the, uh, talking to the customers part, that’d be good.”

She shooed him away from the register and over towards the milk steamer. However, the poor thing really did look incredibly fatigued. Enjolras tapped Gavroche’s shoulder, but as he was talking to a pretty college student he pretended not to feel it and determinedly kept talking about his personal acquaintance with the creator of Red and Black. “Oh yeah, we go back ages. Old family friend. I could introduce you if you wanted.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely,” Enjolras said, nudging his way into the conversation. “He’s standing right behind us. Grantaire,” Enjolras tugged his husband’s arm and all but pushed him at his admirer, then turned his attention back to Gavroche. “Your brother is clearly overwhelmed.”

“Yeah, and?” Gavroche snapped, gaze still hopefully fixed on the pretty girl who was chatting a mile a minute about all the meaning Grantaire’s comics had had for her during some dark periods of her adolescence.

“Go help or I will spend the entire night cockblocking you.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Ask Courfeyrac if I wouldn’t.”

With a defeated sigh, Gavroche stalked towards the counter. “You know you used to be a barista! You could help too.”

Enjolras didn’t seem to have anything to say to that, so he followed Gavroche and helped the Thenardiers make drinks until business slowed down.

Feuilly was making some last minute adjustments to the sound equipment they’d set up on the stage, with Jean fussing eagerly around him trying to be helpful but mostly just getting in the way. Grantaire managed to shake off his fangirl but was quickly pounced by a couple of fanboys and another girl. He threw an exasperated look Enjolras’ way, but he was too busy making drinks to see it.
“No, really Jean, I think I’ve got…oh look, that went through. Hey everyone! We’re just about ready to start the poetry reading if you want to take your seats.”

“When do we get our comics signed?” someone in the crowd shouted, to whoops and applause from the others.

“Later!” Grantaire yelled. “Poetry first! Yay poetry…” He didn’t sound as enthused as he might have, but Jean blew him a kiss anyway.

The line thinned out as the reading began, allowing Enjolras and Gavroche the opportunity to escape the counter. Gavroche managed to flirt his way into a seat at a table of girls, but the chair Enjolras had claimed for himself had been stolen by Musichetta. He looked like he was considering asking for it back, but at a warning look from the alarmingly pregnant woman with the swollen feet he let out a defeated sigh and backed off.

Then an inked-over arm snagged its way around his waist and Enjolras was pulled onto his husband’s lap. Grantaire pressed a kiss to Enjolras’ cheek and a vanilla latte into his hand. With a small smile, Enjolras settled into his seat for the night and turned his attention towards the amateur poets, though it periodically wandered to the broad hand caressing his leg.

Eponine finished ringing up the last bright eyed little hipster in her line, then leaned against the counter to watch the room. She was struck with an incredible sense of deja-vu at the sight of all of her friends hanging out in a café (even if it was hers) for a poetry reading. It was too good an opportunity for people watching to resist, so she peered around, weighing her friends as they were against how she remembered them.

She looked with pride at her younger sister, looking chic and comfortable, effortlessly holding the attention of and keeping pace with a better man than Eponine ever could have dreamed of her meeting during their turbulent youth. She was so proud of Azelma, and was certain that time would get her a brother in law and maybe some nieces and nephews of her own.

And then there was Combeferre. He hadn’t changed as drastically as some of their other friends, though he was quite different from the quiet intellectual that had become one of the first memorable regulars at her old afterschool job. His changes were the result of a constant growth and evolution. Combeferre would always be improving himself, the result of a restless spirit and a desire to make everything better. One of the chief improvements in him, perhaps Eponine’s favorite, was that he now carried his potentially imposing frame with a friendly ease instead of a shy aloofness. He no longer stood behind his friends, letting them take the spotlight, but shone along with everyone else. It was a pleasure to see, and Eponine was impatient to get to call him her big brother.

Initially she hadn’t really noticed Feuilly when he’d started popping up at Brammer Street. She’d dismissed him as the cheap one, never really noticing that he always dropped the twenty six cents of change from his tea purchase into the tip jar for her or appreciating the fact that it was all he could really give. It had taken her ages to notice just how generous a spirit he possessed, since he hadn’t been in the circumstances to show it, but once she’d taken notice she couldn’t help but be struck by him. She looked down at the tattoo around her left ring finger, a swirl of Celtic knots she and Feuilly had adopted in place of traditional rings, and allowed a rare sappy smile for herself.

Of course, the first objects of her affections needed scrutiny as well, so with some effort Eponine turned away from the pleasant contemplation of her husband to think over the changes ten years had wrought in Marius Pontmercy. Oh who was she kidding? He was and would always be their puppy. No amount of teasing, drama, or financial setbacks seemed able to cure Marius of his daydreaming and almost painful innocence, but really none of them wanted their friend any other way. Certainly not his ladylove, though she did like to heave deep sighs over his atrocious employment record.
(thankfully Cosette was perfectly able to provide for the family if it came down to it).

And then there was Courfeyrac. In many ways he was much the same as he’d always been. Friendly, upbeat, still a flirt though without the sincerity of the old days, and still remarkably open and generous. Fatherhood had grounded him somewhat and brought out a practical side of his nature that didn’t dull any of the pleasing exuberance and eccentricities of his character, and besides that his boy was adorable. Eponine was hoping to snatch Gusty away as a son in law in the future, though she had a feeling Marius and Cosette’s beautiful little girl might make that tricky for her.

She watched Courfeyrac rest his head on Jean’s shoulder as they listened to the poets and felt a protective urge to drag Jean out back and give him a threatening worthy of the Patron-Minette. The urge fled almost as soon as it came, because it was clear to the codependent “family” that Jean’s intentions towards their flirt were only the best. In fact, sometimes he seemed to go overboard in his attempts to atone for the sudden breakup and subsequent fleeing during their youth, which made Eponine feel guilty about her ruffled overprotective mama feathers…until she remembered that Grantaire still wanted to smack Jean Prouvaire upside his scatterbrained head sometimes too.

Jean’s other friends had come out for the poetry reading, as Jean was featuring and hawking his new book. Eponine supposed she ought to like them, they were all friendly enough…but really she didn’t see herself ever warming up to Hester Gresley, Rachel West, or Enjolras’ snobby cousin.

Bahorel was in what he called lazy drag; he was wearing makeup and heeled boots, and otherwise his clothes were more androgynous than clearly committed to one gender or the other. He’d barely been a presence at Brammer Street when Eponine had first been making judgments about his friends, thanks to the secret lifestyle he’d come clean about only after she’d been properly acquainted with him. Eponine thought back and tried to recall what she’d first thought about the man…aggressive, off-putting, cocky, and kind of slutty. Well, very little of that had turned out to be true. He still liked a good brawl as much as ever, but preferred to do so with his wife and partner at his side, and what Eponine had initially taken to be the short fuse of a hyper macho tough guy was mostly posturing. Bahorel was another puppy and everyone knew it, though a different breed from Marius.

Musichetta had never been one of the Brammer Street regulars, so Eponine reflected on her as a Musain and Corinth buddy instead. Musichetta was probably the first female friend Eponine had that never felt like a threat. She couldn’t tell if this was a reflection on her and the growth she’d accomplished in the months before they’d met, or if Musichetta deserved all the credit just for being the fantastically strong lady that she was. She’d filled a void in Eponine’s life and set her an invaluable example of the kind of fiery and strong woman she wanted to be. In fact, Eponine had probably only been able to get as close to Cosette and Azelma as she had because of her friendship and the genuine closeness she’d shared with Musichetta.

Bossuet was sitting with Musichetta, looking like half a person with his hubby out of the room. He’d been Eponine’s least favorite part of the Student Revolution before she’d gotten to know them; he broke at least a dozen ceramic mugs before the baristas wised up and started giving him to-go cups no matter what he said, he bumped into tables and chairs, making sticky spills for them to clean up, he forgot his wallet and found himself unable to pay once a drink had already been made, or he had his wallet but had very little in it and ordered cheap as fuck drinks that he didn’t tip on. She’d loathed the bald bastard until she’d found the humor in his constant mishaps and learned to laugh with him instead of mean spiritedly digging on him once his back was turned.

And then there was his beautiful, light hearted husband, one of the best “mommy” friends Eponine had. The fussy nature that had manifested in hypochondria made Joly a thorough researcher on all his domestic duties. Eponine texted him at least a dozen times a day to reassure herself that there was nothing suspicious about Thiago’s cough, or that Mehmed would survive eating a bug he’d found in
the yard. The very fact that Joly was telling his friends not to go overboard worrying about a cough or an ingested insect was a sign of how far he’d come in ten years.

Then her eyes rested on Enjolras and Eponine was overcome with a sense of approval. She’d hated him when they’d first met, thinking him pompous, judgmental, and hypocritical. Then the asshole had gone and saved her life and she’d had to reevaluate pretty much everything she’d thought she’d known about him, and life in general. Eponine admitted that Enjolras wasn’t a hypocrite about any of his ideals; he really believed in helping people, even when he had to make sacrifices. Eponine still thought he could be a bit of a jerk, but he worked so hard and made good on so many of his values that she couldn’t help but respect him. She’d never seen someone practice what they preached like Enjolras, and she loved that he made her believe things could get better…even if she tended to revert to her upbeat sarcasm when he wasn’t around.

Of course, Enjolras had been a different man when she’d first met him. There’d been a harshness in him that bordered on something almost terrible, but it had been softened with the happiness that came from accepting and celebrating his love for Grantaire. When Grantaire got sentimental he tended to go on about how Enjolras had saved him, but Eponine at least thought the salvation was mutual for the couple.

And then there was Grantaire. Her first friend in what had seemed a closed-off, elitist clique of spoiled rich kids (or so it had seemed to a bad tempered teenager determined to fit labels on all her customers). She was proud of her friend, and eternally thankful for the example he’d set her in overcoming his demons instead of being dragged down by them. She’d been content to sit with him in a dirty living room getting shit faced and mocking the world, but Enjolras lit a fire under his boy and he’d unconsciously shared the lessons with Eponine. Grantaire’s happiness might have been her favorite of the changes the years had brought them.

She was pulled from her contemplations by Grantaire temporarily displacing his husband from his lap and making his way to the front of the room to introduce their feature. Eponine straightened her posture and kept her attention fixed on the stage.

“Hey guys,” Grantaire mumbled into the microphone. Despite the low buzz of excitement in the room from the minor celebrity addressing them, Enjolras’ scoff was clearly audible. Grantaire cleared his throat and spoke more clearly. “This better, babe?”

“Much!” Enjolras called.

“My nagging husband, everyone.” Grantaire feigned a long-suffering expression, but broke off into a snort. “Sorry. Anyway, hey. Thanks for coming out. I promise to stick around after the poetry for as long as it takes to sign everyone’s books, and while you’re getting things signed you should consider getting one of Jean’s books if you haven’t already done so. Guy’s fucking brilliant. Makes my scribbles look like absolute shit in comparison. So yeah. Everyone get ready to be fucking dazzled by Jehan-fucker. I mean Jean Prouvaire. Seriously, you can start clapping now. Fuck, I suck at this.”

He looked disgruntled when he left the stage, but the poet seemed to appreciate his introduction, as he was laughing too hard to begin his reading.

Once Jean calmed down he immediately won the hearts of the locals with his meek, yet sweet greeting. “Hi everyone! I’m going to read pieces from the book, of course, but before I get going I want to read a piece I just dashed off on the way over here. It’s a little rough, so the next time you hear it, it might be a completely different poem. This one’s about death…oh dear. Courfeyrac, I swear the fact that I wrote it while I was on my way to visit you does not mean I think of death when I’m around you. I just think about death kind of a lot in general. Anyway, here’s the poem. Ahem:

These days I'm thinking
life is like

a lobster trap.

You get in

and make a big show

all snip snap clack

and red plates roiling

thrashing up quite a wake.

But you've still gotta wait

to be pulled up

for some unknown

to set you free."

The crowd looked a bit bewildered as they clapped for the poem. Grantaire and Enjolras traded a significant look, then both started giggling at something private between them. Though they both later professed to greatly enjoy Jean’s poetry, no one sitting near them failed to notice that they spent the brunt of the feature scribbling notes and doodles back and forth to each other.

It took hours to clear the café after the poetry reading was through. Grantaire felt like he was at a con with how many books he signed and how many pictures he posed for. Thankfully, the night seemed almost equally productive for Jean, who made himself quite a few new fans. He sold the entire stock of books he’d brought with him and gave out impromptu “business cards” he scribbled on napkins so the latecomers could order them online.

Though it was undoubtedly a profitable night, Eponine was glad to lock the doors on the last of the customers and turn to face a room of friendly, familiar faces. “How are the kids?” she asked.

“Mostly asleep. Cammy and Emma are still buzzing, but all the others konked out,” Gavroche informed her.

“Hm. You think you can carry one of the boys to the car without waking them?”

Gavroche openly laughed at that, and Little R rudely shuffled past him to get one of his nephews.

With that, the group dispersed to put on coats and scarves, trade hugs and pecks on cheeks, and go their separate, yet intricately entwined as ever ways, out into the cold New England night.

Chapter End Notes
The untitled poem Jean reads at the open mic was written by a friend of mine, M.p. Carver. You can find her professional page on facebook. She should have a book coming out in the near future, though it's seen some significant delays already. Jehan's poetry and the open mics in the fic were entirely shaped by M.p.'s work, so you might be interested in checking her out: https://www.facebook.com/pages/MP-Carver-Poet/529163013770876

Speaking of facebook, some of you have already learned that I'm an absolutely abysmal e-mail correspondent. In the absence of a tumblr (which I still haven't developed a taste for) the best way to keep in touch with me is probably my Facebook page. My professional pen name is Valerie Myers, and my Facebook page is here: https://www.facebook.com/valerie.maiers

I'd love to stay in touch with you guys, so feel free to add me and make sure you introduce yourselves by telling me your AO3 name :)

I've also got an e-book out, so if you've enjoyed my scribbles please consider heading over to Amazon and checking out The Necromancer's Folly.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!