**Per Ardua ad Astra**

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**Summary**

"Through adversity to the stars"

He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is gaining power in Britain, and all of Wizarding Europe fears for its safety. Jean Valjean flees Montreuil-sur-Mer after the fateful trial at Arras, and is re-arrested by the respected (and feared) Auror, Javert. It is on their way to the Palais de Justice that they are attacked by a group of Death Eaters, and become embroiled in a conflict that is bigger than both of them.

**Notes**

I'm going to establish right off the bat that my update schedule is likely to be erratic - I am currently in school, and that has to be the priority. That being said, I will do my best to have some kind of consistency.
EDIT: I am doing my best to update once every weekend. So far, that's been working out!

This weird brainchild started last summer, and has been simmering on the back burner ever since. I am happy to finally present the first installment of what is for me a merging of my two favorite fandoms. I hope you enjoy it as much as I do.
Chapter 1

The Sunday upon which Jean Valjean was rearrested was a quiet one. It was early morning still when the Auror called Javert caught up with him in a little hamlet outside Montreuil-sur-Mer; the sky was grey and overcast, and the old convict had hoped that the low-hanging fog would provide him cover. It did, after a fashion, but the long and short of it was that Javert had a wand, and Valjean did not. He surrendered easily, hopelessly, aware that to run would only earn him a jinx in the back.

It was two days since Arras, two days since the Mayor of Montreuil, Madeleine, had confessed before the local court that he was, in fact, the escapee from Azkaban, Jean Valjean. He had turned over his wand to the presiding magistrate before going back once more to Montreuil, leaving the courtroom in a state of shock. Since then, Valjean had managed to evade Javert at the hospital; he did not believe he would be so lucky a second time.

Javert, for his part, was taking no chances. When at last he had Valjean cornered at the end of a deserted alley, he kept his wand trained on him closely.

“Valjean, you are under arrest and will appear in the Palais de Justice to answer to a list of charges, not the least of which includes absconding from Azkaban Prison,” he said. “You are advised to cooperate.”

The Auror regarded him coldly as he removed a set of spelled handcuffs from within his deep navy robes. It came in two pieces, like small pillory boards, only made of bronze and with holes which shrunk to hold fast the wrist of the offender. Valjean watched apprehensively as Javert gave a flick of his wand, and the two pieces sailed over to clamp Valjean’s hands tight behind his back. Then the two pieces fused into one, leaving him no way to pry the thing off. Valjean knew from experience that if he tried, it would only squeeze him tighter.

“Come,” Javert ordered. “There may be Muggles about; we will not Disapparate here.”

The Auror gestured emphatically with his wand, and Muggles or no Muggles, Valjean did not doubt that Javert would use magical force if he thought his prisoner likely to make a break for it. Bowing his head, Valjean walked with resignation in the direction the Auror indicated.

They turned right onto the main street, which was as empty of passersby as the alley had been. The tiled roofs of the village houses loomed through the mist, casting eerie shadows over the silent pair. A prickling sensation caressed the back of Valjean’s neck.

They had gone perhaps a block when he spoke.

“How far do you intend to walk?” asked Valjean.

“Be still,” Javert returned shortly.

Valjean closed his mouth, but the feeling of uneasiness continued. Perhaps the occupants of the hamlet were simply engaged with their morning Mass, but surely there ought to have been someone out and about, or a sign of life through any one of the windows. Instead, there was nothing, only stillness, the cars parked along the curb equally empty and unmoving.

The street down which they passed led under a stone arch into a central courtyard. In the middle was an old well, while a series of shops lined the perimeter of the plaza, and at the opposite end was a second, identical arch. As with the street preceding it, the shops were dark, and the plaza
abandoned. Valjean paused at the first archway, but Javert gave him an impatient prod in the back and so he continued walking. He had made it a few steps beyond the well before a flash of motion caught his eye and he turned to look.

When the explosion happened, it shook the very stones beneath his feet.

The force of the blast threw Valjean across the courtyard, where he collided with a stone wall and collapsed. Ears ringing, bruised and battered, he struggled to sit up, a proposition made all the more difficult by the handcuffs holding his wrists tight behind his back.

*What happened?* he wondered. One moment, he had been trudging along quietly, and the next... Through the settling dust, Valjean could make out two figures, both of them quick and lean. They were bending over something in the middle of the street.

A breeze passed through the courtyard, clearing the air enough to reveal the subject of their attention, and Valjean sucked in a breath. There was a small crater in the center of the plaza, and within it, the form of Javert was lying prone. Evidently, he had caught the greater portion of the explosion’s shock. Perhaps he was dead, struck down by whatever force had rent the ground apart. Valjean’s eyes darted to the side. With the ruthless Auror indisposed, he had the chance to escape. The two by the crater seemed entirely disinterested in him; it was a miracle he could not afford to waste.

Rolling onto his knees, Valjean stood shakily, pressing his back against the wall until he caught his breath. He was about to sidle around the corner and bolt when the taller of the two turned, their robe swishing around their ankles, and Valjean caught a glimpse of a skeletal mask. His blood ran cold as the implications caught up with him.

*Death Eaters,* he realized. No wonder the courtyard was so empty of villagers. In his haste to put Valjean behind bars, Javert had walked straight into a trap. It was all the more reason to get out of there, for Valjean was both bound and defenseless, but in the crater, Javert was stirring. Not dead, then, merely concussed.

The second, shorter figure knelt and grabbed a thin rod from the edge of the shattered pavers - they had confiscated the Auror’s wand. Valjean swallowed. He should run, he thought. He should run while they were still distracted. The idea looped through his head again and again in a panicked litany as he stood rooted to the spot.

Javert’s fingers twitched in a grasping motion, looking for a wand which was not there. The taller Death Eater laughed coldly, drawing their own wand from within their robe.

“*Crucio!* ” they spat, gesturing in the Auror’s direction.

Javert’s back arched, but before he could scream, the second Death Eater made a slashing motion with their wand.

“*Silencio!* ”

No one would hear him cry out and come to the Auror’s rescue, provided that there was even anyone left alive in the village to raise the alarm. Valjean trembled, and again he eyed the archway in the courtyard wall which would take him to the main road and away from danger, but he was quite incapable of flight. He could not abandon someone to such a horrible end, even if that someone would be happier for him to spend the rest of his life in Azkaban.

The Death Eater had broken off their curse, and even at that distance, it was clear Javert was in no fit state to fight back. Valjean sized the pair up; it was doubtless that he was stronger, but they had
wands. If he attacked, they could stop him easily with magic, and torture was not an idea Valjean relished.

The convict grit his teeth. He would just have to hope he could surprise them.

Lowering his head, Valjean charged as fast as his legs would carry him. He barreled head-first into the taller Death Eater before they could turn, and together they fell on top of the other one. Valjean hit the ground in a writhing pile of bodies. Someone spat out a curse; he felt the hiss of heat as the spell rocketed past his ear. Striking out with knees and elbows, Valjean did his utmost to keep the wizards occupied.

Then, providence - the shorter one dropped their wand, and Valjean’s fingers scraped across broken stone until they met smooth wood. Twisting, aiming blindly, Valjean gasped, “Stupefy!” as a hand grabbed him around the throat. The hand went slack, and he twisted again, trying to angle his back towards the second Death Eater long enough for his trapped hands to point the wand in the right direction.

“Stupefy,” he repeated, but the red light of the spell missed its target. Jerking his wrist against the handcuffs, he tried again. “Stupefy! Stupef-

The Death Eater struck him across the face and grabbed for the wand, but Valjean would not relinquish his weapon that easily. He thrust his knee forward and the Death Eater choked on an exclamation as bone connected with a tender spot. Valjean shoved them again and they fell.

“Stupefy,” Valjean managed, and this time the red light found its mark.

Mercifully, the courtyard was quiet again.

With his foot, Valjean nudged aside the Death Eaters’ masks. The shorter of the two was a man, and the other a woman. Even in unconsciousness, both had a sneer of superiority plastered across their features. The woman had a mole just below her nose.

Valjean bit his lip. This was a bad business all around. Kneeling beside the man, Valjean searched haphazardly through the pockets of his robe until he found Javert’s wand. The woman’s had clattered to the street nearby, and so Valjean collected that one as well. Then he stood again and turned.

In the crater, Javert appeared to have been rendered similarly senseless. His eyes were shut and his breathing was ragged. A nasty cut across his temple was bleeding, but that worried Valjean less than the tremor racking the Auror’s narrow frame. They needed shelter, and quickly.

Frowning, Valjean tried to turn a borrowed wand against the bronze shackling his wrists.

“Alohomora,” he hazarded. No lock sprung, nor did the fused metal break back into two. “Finite. Finite incantatem.” The cuffs remained stubbornly closed, and he sighed. No doubt they were enchanted to resist such basic attempts to open them. If he could not carry Javert, spellwork would have to do. It was not difficult to levitate him, though Valjean felt distinctly conspicuous making his way through the plaza with a body drifting alongside.

On the other side of the wall, the streets were no less empty. Doors hung open on their hinges, and many of the windows were broken. At the end of the street was a house which seemed at least to be somewhat more intact, and so Valjean pushed his way inside.

Having first checked that the place was unoccupied, Valjean floated Javert up the stairs, trying not to scrape the tall Auror’s head on the ceiling. At the end of the hall was a ransacked bedroom. The mattress had been ripped from the bedstead and lay in the corner, a mess of springs and foam.
Dropping Javert to the floor as gently as he could, Valjean muttered, “Reparo,” and the mattress knit itself back together. It was not as clean a job as Valjean would have liked, but, he reflected wryly, Javert would not be pleased by his help had he managed to take them to the finest hotel in France.

Levitating the Auror again, Valjean deposited him on the mattress. Then, he knelt on the floorboards and allowed the handful of wands he clutched to drop where he could examine them. There was Javert’s, which he knew well enough to recognize on sight. It was a long hornbeam wand, so light in color as to be almost white, and was perfectly straight. The wood itself was as unyielding as the man who had its allegiance. The other two were shorter, closer to the length of Valjean’s forearm. The one belonging to the woman Death Eater looked to be blackthorn in its make, while the man’s had the distinct coloration of cherry.

Valjean sighed and sat back on his haunches. He would have given a great many things to have his own English oak wand back in his hand - its absence left an ache in his chest - but there was no help for it. Nudging the cherry wand to the side, he kicked at the other two until they rolled against the wall. Then he grabbed hold of the cherry and stood, praying that it would consent to work with him. Less temperamental than blackthorn, maybe, but even so, Valjean was not about to trust a Death Eater’s wand for any but the simplest of spells. Disapparation was out of the question. As for the hornbeam... The very notion of Javert’s wand cooperating with him was laughable, and he dismissed it immediately.

Valjean crossed to the window and looked out on the street. For the time being, there was nobody there, but he did not count on it remaining that way.

“Cave inimicum,” he murmured, allowing a protective haze to issue from the tip of his stolen wand. “Fianto duri. Repello inimicum.”

He continued in this vein until the whole room was warded, and then he turned back to Javert. Approaching the bed tentatively, Valjean saw that the Auror’s trembling had largely subsided. He pursed his lips. If he got moving, he could be as far away as Amiens before Javert came to.

A voice from outside distracted him; returning to the window, he peered down at a group of four wizards congregating in the road. One of them looked up, and in spite of the concealment charms he had cast, Valjean took a step back. The wizard’s mask was identification enough: more Death Eaters. Plainly, the absence of their two fellows had been missed.

He would be caught for certain if he left now. He had taken the two in the courtyard purely on luck and surprise; these four, on the other hand, would not be ignoring him. Dueling four Death Eaters at once would be tough enough were he in possession of his own wand. Handcuffed, he was not so arrogant as to think he stood a chance.

Once again, he eyed where Javert lay unconscious. Valjean grimaced to himself, but he walked back to the bedside. Twisting his wrist against the shackles, he gestured his wand hand in the Auror’s direction and muttered, “Rennervate.”

The red glow sank into Javert’s chest, and a moment later, the Auror’s eyes flickered open. He looked around cautiously, and then he caught sight of Valjean.

“You,” he snapped, sitting up. “Where am I? What’ve you done to me?”

Valjean took a step back, if only to appear less threatening. “We were attacked by Death Eaters out in the town square.”

Valjean spoke quickly. “There were two. I was able to grab one of their wands and stun them, and then brought you here. It's just down the street,” he went on as Javert continued to look at him through narrowed eyes. “I didn't trust the wand to Disapparate with.”

“You woke me,” Javert said. “Why didn't you run instead?”

Valjean inclined his head toward the window. “There are more of them out there now - four, at least. I've warded the room, but if they find us, I can't fight them all. Especially not handcuffed,” he added pointedly.

Javert snorted. “If you think I'm going to let you go...”

Valjean winced, shifting where he stood. “I wasn't counting on it,” he replied, though his heart sank.

Putting a hand to the cut across his temple, Javert stood. “Where is my wand?”

Valjean jerked his head the other way toward where the shaft of wood lay on the floor.

Javert looked at the wand and then back at Valjean. “Are you just going to let me take it?”

Raising an eyebrow, Valjean answered, “Unless you would rather challenge the Death Eaters to a round of fisticuffs.”

Evidently suspicious, Javert edged around the room until he could kneel and retrieve his wand from the floor. No sooner was it in his hands than he leaped to his feet.

“Expelliarmus,” he growled, and Valjean's stolen wand was wrenched from his fingers, flying through the air to land in Javert's hand.

“But -!” Valjean protested.

“No,” said Javert, bending smoothly to collect the blackthorn wand as well, which lay near his feet. “You are still under arrest, and are not permitted by law to carry a wand. You know that perfectly well.” Pocketing the confiscated pair, Javert turned back to look at his prisoner. “You and I have a court date.”

He held out his hand, presumably to grab Valjean by the arm and vanish from the scene, when they heard the sound of a door creaking open somewhere below them, along with a muffled voice. Valjean had the sudden, distinct impression of being watched by something invisible. Then both men froze as the sound of footsteps echoed up the stairs.

Javert set a finger to his lips, not that Valjean needed to be told, and took up a position between Valjean and the door. A moment later, the hinges opened with a squeak, and a woman entered the room. She had blonde curls piled on top of her head, and green eyes which were bright and alert as she surveyed the space.

“There's no one here,” she called down the hall. “The spell must've been faulty.”

Her eyes swept the room again and settled on the bed. A puzzled expression crossed her face, followed by what resembled amusement. Valjean inched backwards, experiencing a vague premonition of danger, but not fast enough.
Lashing out suddenly with her wand, the woman exclaimed, “Bombarda maxima!”

There was a flash of white light, and Valjean let out a cry of alarm as the floor collapsed beneath his feet. He fell as the second-story bedroom caved in, and was cognizant of hitting the ground below, a tremendous, jarring pain lancing through his legs.

Valjean was next aware of laying on the kitchen floor, half-covered by splintered planks and plaster dust. The pain in his legs was still present, but lessening; he did not think he had broken anything. He sat up, coughing, and discovered two Death Eaters regarding him smugly. One was the woman who had blown apart the second story - indeed, above them was a large hole where the bedroom had been - and the other a second woman, this one with black hair. Javert lay off to his left, apparently unconscious again. It was no wonder, as there was half a beam lying across his chest.

Valjean dug his way out of the shattered boards as best he could and sat up to face his attackers. No sooner had he done so than they were joined by a third Death Eater, this one a man. He had chestnut hair and a mustache to match, and he was murmuring frantically to one of the women.

“- found them up the street,” he was saying. “- alive - bring these -”

The blonde woman chuckled. “Well, well, well,” she said, taking a step toward Valjean. “You are in deep now, aren't you?” She tilted her head in consideration, even as she kept her wand pointed at him steadily. “You should have run while you had the chance. It was that one we wanted,” she added, gesturing at Javert. “You could have left. Now, of course, we have to kill you both. More's the pity, we could use a man of your talents.”

Valjean shook his head vehemently. “I wouldn’t work for the likes of you. How did you know we were there?”

The woman winked. “I sacked this house myself. I can guarantee you I didn’t leave that mattress in one piece.”

“You -?” Valjean blinked. “Then that’s what happened to the villagers. They’re all dead. You people killed them.”

“All of them Muggles,” the woman sighed. “Absolutely useless creatures, and a plague on our society. It’s really better for the world that we eradicated them. And now it’s your turn.” She gave him a calculating look, followed by, “Crucio!”

The curse struck Valjean square in the torso. His bones were on fire, it was the only conceivable explanation. He felt himself double over, hands grasping desperately at the sides of his robes as he sought anything by which to reassert control. He panted, and his eyes slid out of focus, but then the curse broke off.

The woman was still regarding him with curiosity. “A stubborn customer,” she remarked to the other two. “You don't often get ones that don't scream. Let's try that again, shall we?” She aimed her wand, but Valjean's attention had been captured by Javert, who had opened his eyes to glance at Valjean and give a small turn of his head, a clear sign meaning “come here”. Then Valjean saw that underneath the debris, Javert still had a tight hold on his wand, and so as the Death Eater let go another curse, Valjean rolled out of the way and Javert grabbed him by the shoulder.

Immediately, there was a familiar wrench in his stomach, and the house disappeared into a squeezing blackness. If it had been possible to breathe in that vacuum, Valjean might have sighed with relief. Javert had elected to Apparate them both out.
When the world rematerialized, any relief Valjean felt evaporated the instant he took in the cour d'honneur of the Palais de Justice.

"Javert," he gasped as soon as he caught his breath, "Javert, see reason -"

He was cut off by the Auror shoving him up against the stone wall of the chapel wing, wand pointed at his throat.

"Be quiet and answer me," said Javert, his voice dangerously calm. "What happened while I was passed out in the courtyard?"

Valjean's face creased. "I don't -"

The Auror took a deep breath through his nose. "You led me to believe that the Death Eaters attacked the both of us. But that woman at the house said they were only interested in me. So, which is it?"

And then, Valjean understood. "You heard her talking," he said slowly. "When she blew the floor up, you were only pretending to be unconscious."

"Answer the question."

Swallowing, Valjean tried to look Javert in the eyes. "The street exploded, as you said - probably with that same detonation spell, even - and you were... stunned, hit your head, something. I'd been thrown maybe ten yards away. The Death Eaters... they weren't paying me any attention until I went after them. They were torturing you," he finished uncomfortably.

The Auror's mouth thinned. "How come you did not say so in the first place?"

At that, Valjean let out a puff of laughter. "Because I knew you wouldn't believe me."

Javert looked angry, which was unsurprising, but there seemed also to be confusion mingled with his expression. "You didn't leave me there - why? You would be free right now."

Valjean tried to assemble a response. How, though, to put his jumbled thoughts to words? In the end, all he could manage was, "I would not leave anyone to that fate."

The Auror stared at him. For all of one moment, his face was awash with warring emotions until he re-exerted his usual impassive exterior.

"You should have left me," he said baldly. "It would have done you more favors. This way, now."

So saying, he dragged Valjean toward the Palais de Justice.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

In retrospect, I should have done this in the Chapter 1 notes, but I would like to give a shout-out to my friend and roommate, Awake-Jin, for acting as my beta on this story. I've never had a formal beta reader before, and her advice has already proven invaluable.

Additionally, as of this morning, I have the whole story outlined; I'm looking at about 19 chapters of content, although that number could increase as plot elements develop. Thanks everyone for the warm reception this has been getting so far!

Check out the end notes for my ramblings on how I'm developing this narrative.

The Palais de Justice was an imposing complex settled on the Île de la Cité, surrounded on all sides by the River Seine. With its Gothic arches and Neoclassical columns, the structure was as representative of law and order in the wizarding world as it was in that of the Muggles. Bordering the cour d’honneur on the left was the Sainte-Chapelle, and Valjean cast a fearful glance towards the colorful glass iconography, mouthing a prayer as Javert marched him into the palace. The intricate tracery was surely stunning on the chapel’s interior, but outside a shadow masked the ancient glasswork, hiding the Passion from view.

To the right was the Conciergerie, accessible to Muggles only as a museum that highlighted the key political prisoners of the Reign of Terror. France’s magical citizenry, however, were aware that the Gothic prison remained in full operation, housing those convicted in the Grand Chambre du Parlement until such a time as their sentence could be carried out. Valjean eyed this building as well, aware that he would be held there until he could be returned to Azkaban.

Valjean and Javert crossed the cour du mai, ascending the flight of stairs which led up to the wide front landing. They passed through the Doric columns to a trio of main doors, above each of which was carved one of the words, Liberté, Egalité, and Fraternité. Ahead of them, an elderly Muggle couple pushed open the center door and stepped into a nearly empty gallery. The door swung shut, and Javert discreetly tapped his wand against the handle. It opened to again reveal the gallery of the Palais, bustling with robed witches and wizards. The Muggles were nowhere in sight.

Valjean shrank back, but the Auror pulled him along impatiently. None of the other occupants spared them more than a passing glance as they went by. Gilded columns projected from the walls on all sides, and as Javert hustled them down toward the corridor at the far end, Valjean looked upward toward the vast, vaulted ceiling. It glimmered like it, too, was lined with gold.

The long corridor to which the Auror led him stretched on for the length of a city block, and yet as they walked down it, Javert tight-lipped and silent, Valjean increasingly sick to his stomach, the end of the hallway did not appear to get any closer. Instead, they passed an unlikely number of doors leading down to the various magical courts; Valjean expected with each passing chamber that they would stop, and yet they did not. Soon, they had left the délit courts behind, which left only the chambers for the settlement of serious felonies.
Valjean looked over at Javert. Was that where his break-out had landed him, that he was now to be tried like he was a Dark wizard? Before he could say anything, though, the Auror stopped in front of a door, this one ajar.

“There is a trial in session,” he said. “Yours will be next. You will be assigned a defense by the state, as a matter of course. I am to advise you to speak with them before your appeal commences.”

Valjean blinked. “Appeal?” he asked. “Doesn’t that usually come after a trial has taken place?”

Javert regarded him impassively. “The Parlement has already determined your guilt. You must be given the opportunity to speak for yourself, hence this formality, but it really is only a formality.”

Lightheaded, Valjean said, “That isn’t fair. You can’t -”

“All of this comes from above me,” Javert interrupted. “I am only following orders. Get in there now, or you’ll run out of time to prepare.”

“Hello, Monsieur l'Inspecteur,” came a voice from behind them. Valjean looked up to see a woman in black velvet dress robes, with dark hair and a fascinator hat to match. There was a mole below her nose, and Valjean paused as something about her struck him as familiar.

“Ah, Madame Perrier,” Javert replied. “What brings you here today?”

Mme. Perrier smiled, but it seemed to Valjean that it did not reach her eyes. “Oh, I always take interest in the cases the Grand Chambre is hearing,” she said. “It’s good to know how we are handling the more... pressing issues, particularly in this difficult political time.”

Javert nodded. “Naturally. Well, don’t let us keep you, Madame.” He held open the door, and Mme. Perrier dipped her head graciously as she walked into the courtroom.

When the door shut behind her, Valjean turned to the Auror. “That woman is a Death Eater,” he said.


“She is,” Valjean insisted. “I was sure I recognized her. She was one of the ones to attack us - you - in the courtyard this morning.”

The look Javert gave him was severe. “Madame Élodie Perrier is a respectable witch from an ancient and noble family. Your accusation is not only false, it is absurd. Stop playing for time, and get mov-”

He was cut off when the door opened and a dozen or so witches and wizards came pouring out, chattering amongst themselves about the trial in which they had just been engaged. One of them was another Auror, his navy robes matching Javert’s.

“Ah, Inspecteur,” he said, nodding politely.

“Chevallier,” Javert returned.

“What brings you here?” asked Chevallier, and then he noticed Valjean. “My God! So you caught him, then?” Javert nodded tacitly, and the other Auror laughed. “The dementors will be pleased, at least. They were absolutely furious to lose a prisoner.”

“Perhaps you might escort him in?” Javert inquired. “I am sure the Procureur will want me to
testify, and I ought to speak with him before we start.”

“Very well,” came the reply. “It’s Valjean, isn’t it? This way, please.”

Valjean followed after Chevallier numbly, all thought of Death Eaters having been driven out of his mind the moment dementors were mentioned. Stepping through the door let them into a small, wood-panelled vestibule, and then they took the door opposite to enter into the courtroom used by the Grand Chambre du Parlement.

It was a long, rectilinear space with elevated benches on three sides and a dias in the middle, upon which sat a lone chair. The parquet flooring echoed the pattern of the coffered ceiling above, while delicate white plasterwork ornamented the walls. There was no view to the outside, but high clerestory windows allowed sunlight to filter down into the space.

On the benches sat perhaps thirty witches and wizards of varying ages and appearances. They spoke quietly to one another, and only a few looked up as Chevallier urged Valjean along to the top of the dias.

The Premier Président of the court was one of these, seated in the center bench, and he called out a “Good morning,” to the Auror, and then, “Is this one your work, Chevallier?”

“No, Your Honor,” the Auror answered. “Monsieur l’Inspecteur Javert caught him. He’s having a word with Grenier before we get started.”

“Oh.” With that, the Président returned to his conversation, which, Valjean noticed distantly, he was having with Mme. Perrier.

He did not have time to dwell on it, however, as Chevallier took that moment to remove his wand, a light aspen one, from his pocket.

“Handcuffs,” Chevallier instructed, and obediently, Valjean turned so that the Auror could tap the bronze shackles binding his wrists. Whatever nonverbal spell he used, the metal broke back into two and fell apart; collecting the pieces, Chevallier then motioned to the chair. “Sit,” he said.

Valjean did not have a choice. He sat.

Chevallier tapped the chair with his wand, and just like that, Valjean was frozen in place. He could breathe, and he could speak if he chose, but otherwise an invisible force kept him constrained, motionless. His breath came faster as panic threatened to overwhelm him entirely.

Behind him, Valjean could hear the door reopening, and he recognized the sound of Javert’s stride. Sure enough, the Auror appeared and stood on the floor near to the benches. He did not look at Valjean, but stared straight ahead.

A handful of others trailed into the courtroom, including a short, grey-haired man who stood behind Javert in the prosecutor’s stand, and an auburn-haired witch who took the same place in the defendant’s spot. Mme. Perrier took her seat, not among the members of the Parlement, but in a chair near the door. She watched Valjean with a keen interest, but he had scarcely taken note before the Président approached his podium and the room quieted.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the Grand Chambre,” the Président addressed the assembly, “my apologies for keeping you past your lunch hour. It would usually be my wish to schedule such an appeal as this well in advance of when it is to take place. However, given the current political climate, it seems most prudent that we deal with this matter immediately. You are all familiar with how eight years ago, the convict, Jean Valjean, escaped Azkaban prison, where he was being held in cooperation with the British Ministry of Magic, as is procedure in such cases. It would appear
that, at long last, this dangerous man has been recaptured.”

A low murmur swept the room at this pronouncement, and several members of the Parlement craned their heads forward to get a better look at where Valjean sat.

The Président continued, “The man’s guilt has already been determined. Unless this appeal should bring to light new evidence in his favor, his sentence will be carried out to the will of the court. At this time, would Monsieur l’Procureur Grenier call his witness to the stand?”

The grey-haired man nodded, approaching his podium.

“I call the Auror Javert, Inspecteur First Class, to the witness stand,” said Grenier.

When his name was called, Javert turned and took his place, facing the rest of the Parlement.

“Inspecteur,” Grenier began, “would you tell the court how you came to know the accused?”

Javert inclined his head. “Years ago, I served on the commission of Aurors who were, at times, sent into Azkaban Prison to assess the conditions there. It was in this capacity that I first came to know of him. He was infamous among those inmates still capable of speech for his brute strength. When he escaped eight years ago, I was one of those assigned to the case.”

Grenier thumbed through a thick dossier of reports. “It says here that after the first year, the other Aurors on your team had given up the search as a lost cause, but you did not. Is that correct?”

“It is.”

“You mention the strength of the accused. It has been the understanding of this court that Valjean succeeded in his escape attempt by using a small, handmade chisel to carve his way through the rock and out of his cell, whereafter he swam to shore. What do you make of this assertion?”

Javert appeared to consider this. “I am aware of these findings. They seem to fit with the facts of the case, and from what I have seen of Valjean’s capabilities, I believe it is plausible he could have succeeded in swimming that distance.”

Humming to himself, Grenier turned another page in the dossier. “Monsieur l’Inspecteur, would you summarize for the court your experiences in Montreuil-sur-Mer?”

“I was transferred there four years ago,” Javert replied. “Not long after I arrived, I witnessed Valjean, under the alias Madeleine, lift a Muggle vehicle off of a man. His strength struck me as peculiar, but Valjean had changed enough in appearance that I did not recognize him at the offset. Then ‘Madeleine’ was appointed the mayor of the town, and it became difficult to reconcile my suspicion with his position as my superior.”

“And yet this past month, you still saw fit to denounce the man to this very court?”

“I did,” Javert confirmed, and where he sat, Valjean tasted bitterness in his mouth. He only watched as Javert went on, “I will freely admit that I did so in anger with Madeleine’s behavior, but I did not act without evidence.”

“And you were ultimately proved to be justified in doing so,” said Grenier, “but not before you were informed by the court that another Jean Valjean had been located, and was to stand trial.”

“Correct.”

“Did the accused appear at that trial?”
“I have it from the very carriage driver who conveyed him to the courthouse in Arras that he did.”

“And the accused revealed himself to the court as the escaped convict?”

“So it appears in the court record.”

Grenier frowned. “Why would Jean Valjean turn himself in to save this other man from taking his place?”

At that, Javert snorted. “I can think of no reason, save to spite the law yet again by denouncing himself and then running.”

Unable to keep quiet any longer, Valjean interrupted. “That’s not true!”

Everyone turned to look at him; where he stood on the floor, Javert raised a single eyebrow.

“The accused will not speak unless spoken to,” said the Président, leaning forward at his podium with a frown.

“But I -”

Across the room, Javert met eyes with Valjean for the first time since the appeal had begun and gave a small jerk of his head “no”.

“You will be able to respond to the testimony of the witness later in the proceedings,” the Président continued. “Inspecteur, you were saying?”

“I was quite finished,” said Javert. “Unless Monsieur l’Procureur has additional questions?”

“Actually, yes,” replied Grenier. “I am given to understand that, upon learning the mayor had denounced himself as the convict, you immediately sought to arrest him, but you were unsuccessful. Is that the case?”

Javert nodded. “It is. I found him at the local hospital, tending to a deceased Muggleborn witch. He refused to accompany me, at which point he struck me with the leg of a chair and bolted. I have spent the last two days tracking his movements, and ultimately arrested him several miles south of Montreuil-sur-Mer.”


The Président inclined his hand toward the woman at the opposite stand. “Madame Sarkozy, please present your defense.”

The woman stood and pursed her lips. “Regrettably, Your Honor, the defendant did not have time to develop a defense prior to the beginning of this session. We have nothing to present.”

Valjean opened his mouth to protest, but before he could, there was a quiet cough from the floor. All eyes turned to Javert, who had raised his hand politely from his position.

“Permission to speak, Your Honor?”

“Permission granted,” responded the Président, an expression of vague confusion crossing his face.

“Madame Sarkozy,” said Javert, sounding quite resigned, “if you are in need of a witness, you may call upon me to speak.”
A rushing murmur broke out among the members of the Grande Parlement.

“Inspecteur, this is highly irregular,” said the Président, leaning over the edge of his podium. “Do you mean to say you are available for cross-examination?”

Javert raised his hands in what might have been a shrug. “If that is what Your Honor would prefer to call it, then by all means, do so. The truth of the matter is that I have not entirely finished my testimony, and I believe the remainder of what I have to say might be of interest to the defense.”

The Président stroked his white stubble as he deliberated. “Very well,” he agreed finally. “Given your relationship to the accused and your record as an Auror, I will concede on this point. Proceed as you will.”

“Thank you, Your Honor.” He bowed and crossed the floor to stand in front Mme. Sarkozy. “I will not retract anything I have said already,” said Javert. “The facts I have given have been accurate, and the man is undoubtedly guilty in the eyes of the law. However, there is an... anomaly I must disclose, for to fail to do so would be to lie by omission, and that I will not tolerate.”

The defense attorney gestured for him to go on. From his place on the dias, Valjean squinted, trying and failing to find any indication of Javert’s intentions in his face or posture.

In the same monotonous, level tone as before, Javert explained, “An incident occurred this morning, following the arrest of the accused.”

“Can you estimate the time?” Sarkozy asked.

“I believe it was just after eight o’clock,” Javert replied. “Whilst exiting the village where I arrested him, the street suddenly exploded around us. In the immediate aftermath, I was barely conscious, and can relate little of what transpired. I woke up elsewhere, in a ransacked house, with... him beside me. He stated that the explosion had been the work of Death Eaters.”

The change in atmosphere was palpable. Faces paled and grew still. Suddenly somber, the whole chamber appeared to be listening with greater focus.

“Death Eaters?” repeated a woman from amongst the Grand Chambre. “In broad daylight, and in the middle of a village no less? They will have grown bold indeed if that is true.”

“What proof is there of its truth?” a man countered. “We have the word of an escaped convict - hardly trustworthy evidence.”

Sarkozy cocked her head. “I do not believe the Inspecteur has finished speaking,” she said.

“Thank you, Madame.” Javert took a breath and continued. “I admit, I was skeptical myself, until a second group of Death Eaters entered the house and attacked us.”

Holding up her hand, Sarkozy stopped him speaking with a frown. “A second group? What happened to the first, the ones who blew up the street?”

Leaning forward as much as the binding spell would allow, Valjean wondered what Javert was thinking. The man could not possibly mean to defend him - why then reveal what Valjean had done on his behalf?

Javert closed his eyes, and for one fraction of a second, Valjean saw before him the same man who would confess to a superior that he had done him wrong and beg for dismissal. The Auror was ruthless, yes - but also ruthlessly honest.
“I was given to learn from this second group of Death Eaters that the first had been incapacitated by none other than Valjean himself.”

“And why would he do that?”

The faintest trace of a smirk played over Javert’s lips. “His reasons are unknowable to me, I can assure you. As I stated, it was an anomaly. However, it was made clear to me that I was the intended target of the attack, and Valjean intervened, probably saving my life in doing so.”

There was absolute silence in the courtroom. Sarkozy’s eyes had gone quite wide with astonishment, and Valjean did not doubt that most of the room’s other occupants looked the same. Still, he could not tear his gaze from Javert; how could the man state Valjean was guilty and also his savior immediately afterwards?

Sarkozy looked up at the dias. “Valjean,” she said. “Is this true?”

Valjean swallowed. “It is, Madame,” he replied.

“How is it you incapacitated the Auror’s attackers? You had no wand, if records are accurate.”

Valjean dipped his head. “No, Madame, I did not. They were not interested in me, however, and so I was able to overtake them by surprise. Then one of them dropped their wand - I was able to grab it and Stun them.”

“Are their bodies still there? It would help confirm this story.”

Valjean dipped his head again. “Madame, you could certainly check, but it is doubtful. The second group of Death Eaters were there in part to look for their missing members. I believe they probably revived them.” With a twist to his mouth, he added, “The whole town had been razed, though, if the death of Muggles is worth the attention of this court.”

Sarkozy nodded thoughtfully and turned to the Président. “There you have it, Your Honor,” she said. “There is little proof of this story, true enough. But in all his years of service, Monsieur l’Inspecteur has never been known to speak falsely, nor for that matter to offer the slightest aid to a criminal. I believe the court can take this testimony as a matter of fact.”

The Président pursed his lips, rubbing his hands together.

“It is a difficult position you put us in, Javert,” he sighed. “If it were not for the state of things, your ‘anomaly’ might carry some weight. However, as you yourself have only just reminded us, the Death Eaters grow in their power by the day. There are reports from Britain stating that the followers of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named walk openly now in London - we risk the same in Paris if we do not take the appropriate precautions.”

On the floor, Javert bowed humbly at the waist. “To be certain, Your Honor.”

“Therefore,” the Président continued, turning to the other members of the court, “I call the Grand Chambre to a vote. Those in favor of acquittal?”

A smattering of people raised their hands; it was more than Valjean had expected, but still not nearly enough.

“Those in favor of conviction?”

Though it was not a unanimous agreement, it was plain to see which group had the majority. The
Président looked around, counting, and then asked, “Those abstaining?”

A single wizard in the back of the courtroom raised his hand.

“Very well.” The Président turned back to face Valjean. “Jean Valjean, this court finds you guilty as charged, and sentences you to death by the Dementor’s Kiss, to be carried out by three o’clock today.”

Valjean blanched, barely hearing the gavel fall on the podium. His vision blurred as panic returned in full measure, and though a chattering filled the courtroom with the close of the appeal, he heard it as if through a fog. Down on the floor, Javert was saying something to the assembly, but Valjean had stopped listening. For him, everything had stopped except for the harsh pounding in his chest.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. Dimly, Valjean recognized the Auror, Chevallier, from before. The Auror removed the binding spell from the chair, and in its absence, Valjean sagged forward. Chevallier pulled him up from the seat, and Valjean was conscious of handcuffs returning to his wrists. Briefly, he considered resisting. There was surely nothing to be gained by such an act, however, for no sooner would he make a break for it than a half-dozen spells would have him on the floor.

Chevallier led him from the room; the Auror’s expression was not mocking, but neither was it sympathetic. In Valjean’s heart, the fog of despair pressed in closer, dulling his senses and numbing his movements. There were moments where he nearly stumbled; lightheadedness had returned with the panic.

Valjean stared unseeingly at his feet as Chevallier guided him down the convoluted passages of the Palais; he noticed neither the narrowing of the corridors, nor the change in stone, but when they at last came to a stop, it was outside a wooden door.

The Auror stopped, and Valjean glanced up. The groin-vaulted ceiling was almost cathedral-like, but the solid iron bars across the door slats told him all he needed to know: he had been taken to a cell in the Conciergerie where he would be left to await his end.

Chevallier pushed open the door and propelled Valjean inside. It closed behind him with a heavy thud, followed by the damning sound of a key turning a lock. Valjean took a hesitant step forward, though now that he was alone, he trembled.

He did not make it even another step before he sank to his knees, and wept.

Chapter End Notes

Irrelevant to the story itself but perhaps interesting from a writer's craft perspective - typically in fics, I have employed the English translations of characters' titles (e.g. Inspector, Secretary, etc). For the purposes of this story, I have altered that somewhat. Since in the narrative, I have been referring to Javert as "the Auror", I elected to use "Inspecteur" as a title only in the dialogue. I therefore used the French spelling, and for consistency’s sake, have applied the same rule to other formal titles. I have also generally used the French spellings for place-names and other proper nouns.

I am experimenting with a variety of things here, the use of French being one of them. I've also invented a government body for Wizarding France; it is inspired by
the canonical Wizengamot, and also by traditional French courts of law. We'll see if the second Fantastic Beasts movie creates a canon for the French government or not - I'd be interested to see if mine matches up at all!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I'll jinx myself the moment I say this, but I think I can stick to an update schedule of once a week on Sundays. It's all dependent on how busy school keeps me at this point.

How much time had passed? That was the question, but it was not one Valjean possessed an answer to. The grim figure of three o’clock weighed heavily on his thoughts.

The cell in which Valjean had been imprisoned was built of solid limestone, and for light there was only a tiny, barred window high on the back wall. Below this was a rough wooden bed, little more than planks and a straw-stuffed mattress. A table made up the room’s only other furnishing. In truth, it was not the worst cell in the complex, a luxury he was surely only afforded because he would be dead before the day was out.

No, not dead. Valjean lay on the bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. Worse than dead. To be Kissed by a dementor was to be obliterated, to be utterly erased. It was a final and absolute destruction of the soul. The body would live, but empty of any cognition. Valjean crossed himself fervently. There was a time when he had put little stock in his own soul, but it was not so anymore.

What would the Bishop have said of such a thing? The thought brought a fresh pang of hurt to Valjean’s chest.

Eight years prior, half-starved and frostbitten, Valjean had stumbled upon the doorstep of Bienvenu Myriel, a Muggle Bishop. Too exhausted by rejections uncounted to make up some pretense, the Bishop had no sooner opened the church door than Valjean confessed all - that he was an escaped convict, and a user of witchcraft no less. Still, the Bishop Myriel did not bat an eye. He embraced Valjean as a brother, and it was the Bishop who assured Valjean that whatever the Bible might say of such matters, there was room enough in heaven for wizards alongside Muggles.

The gentle old man had been a balm on Valjean’s hardened heart, but not before he had nearly endangered his freedom a second time. Had it not been for the Bishop’s quick thinking and forgiving nature, Valjean would have found himself locked in a Muggle prison, and from there, it would have been only a matter of time before the Aurors descended upon him.

Valjean sold all the silver from that night - wands were expensive, doubly so if one lacked the proper paperwork - except for the candlesticks. Those he kept, and he cherished and feared them in equal measure.

Now they were lost to him, tucked safely away in a hiding place beyond the borders of Montreuil-sur-Mer. There they would remain, to turn dusty and tarnished, forgotten. He supposed he ought to be grateful; it was at the Bishop’s behest that he had attempted to make his soul one worthy of forgiveness, and he could not stand the thought of any vestige of Myriel witnessing that soul be rent apart irreparably.

Curling in upon himself, Valjean shivered. He heard the distant sound of a bell tolling the hour,
but it was so faint that he could not be certain whether it was reality or his own fevered imagination. Any moment, the door would open, and it would be over for him.

Somewhere, beyond Paris, a little girl was left bereft of a mother, and had no one to shield her from the coldness of the world. Valjean had made a promise to protect that child; it seemed that was to be a promise he could not keep. His hands balled into fists at his sides at the sheer injustice of it.

No - he did not accept that, he could not. If only for Cosette’s sake, he had a duty to free himself. Sitting up, Valjean considered the window above his head. If he stood on the bed, he was just tall enough that he could reach the sill. Dragging himself to his feet, he stretched as high as he could until his hand caught.

Muscles strained as he pulled himself up the wall. He only got a quick look at the window before he let himself drop, but it was enough to know he would not be getting out that way. The bars were as thick as his thumb, and even if he had had a file with which to remove them, it would require days, perhaps weeks, and that was time he did not have.

Taking a deep breath, Valjean turned his attention instead to the door. The dark wood was solid, and it was with ill humor that Valjean recalled the iron reinforcement on the door’s exterior. Still, the situation was grave, and so he took a running start, throwing his shoulder and his weight against it. The heavy door leaf barely shuddered in its place.

Charging it again and again, Valjean beat upon the door with mounting frustration, but the Conciergerie had been built to withstand revolutions, and its facilities were disinclined to yield to prisoners. Furious - with Javert, with the court, with himself - Valjean turned away from the door and kicked the table instead. The leg he struck buckled, and the little table sagged toward the floor.

Standing in the middle of the cell, despair took its paralytic course through Valjean’s veins. Was it hopeless after all, then? He was a man who was used to escaping, but never had he been so utterly devoid of options.

His eyes closed of their own accord, fatigue seeming to weigh them shut. In the dark behind his eyelids, a flash of inspiration struck, the sort which occurs only to the very desperate. The idea was a foolishly dangerous one, with no wand as a catalyst to guide his magic, but surely any consequence was preferable to what a dementor would do to him.

Wandless magic among the wizarding folk was common enough as an accidental occurrence, but to perform it deliberately was nearly impossible for most. Wandless Apparition was nigh-on unheard of, and of those rare few who managed it, fewer still brought all their limbs with them. Valjean pushed all this from his thoughts and cast about for a place, any place, settling on a quiet little street he knew of, hidden on the outskirts of Paris. With this in mind, he sucked in a deep breath of air and concentrated as hard as he could, willing himself to feel the same crushing vacuum and breathless void which had enveloped him earlier that day.

His eyes, still closed, squeezed even tighter in his focus. Without faltering, Valjean took a single step forward and pivoted, hoping against hope that he might be whisked away to safety.

He knew before he went to look that it had not worked. There was no vacuum, no change in the air to signify he was outside. Nevertheless, he kept his eyes shut a moment, if only to preserve a little longer the illusion painted by the part of him which had dared think he might succeed.

The moment passed. Valjean opened his eyes, and his breath was not quite a sob. He was surrounded by the same thick stone walls as before, standing in the center of the cell. He had not
managed to budge even an inch.

Then there was the sound of a key in the lock, and Valjean spun around in a panic. He was not ready, had not prepared himself for the inevitable, but the door was pushing inexorably open anyway. Entering through the door frame was Javert, cold and composed as ever, his navy robes swishing around his ankles.

Valjean froze. The Auror also stopped, the door swinging back shut behind him. He was alone, or so it seemed, and when no icy chill crept up his spine, it dawned on Valjean that Javert had not brought the dementor with him, either. Panic replaced itself with anger.

“What are you doing here?” Valjean demanded. “Have they made you executioner as well, now?”

Javert looked at him with some distaste. “The matter of your sentencing will be carried out by a professional. My duties do not extend to such things.”

“Then why are you here?” Valjean asked again.

Javert crossed his arms. “As a witness,” he replied curtly.

“A witness,” Valjean repeated. “A witness. You aren’t content to leave me to die, you have to be here to watch? Is that what you wanted, Javert?”

The Auror pursed his lips. “Do not blame me for the consequences of your own actions.”

“The consequences of my actions?” said Valjean incredulously, his voice climbing in pitch to something near hysterics. “Javert, do you understand what they’re going to do to me?”

“I spoke with the Président following your appeal,” Javert answered him. “It seems that in order to better manage the threat posed by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, the Grand Chambre has elected to deal with all dangerous witches and wizards in this manner until such a time as order is restored.”

“Of course,” Valjean laughed bitterly. “I would be the one they call dangerous.”

Javert continued as if he had not heard. “I agreed with the Président that strong measures needed to be taken to discourage further Death Eater activity, but expressed my concern with the safety of bringing a dementor into a public building. He in turn suggested I observe the procedure to satisfy myself with its suitability.”

Shaking his head in disbelief, Valjean sank onto the bed. It was said that to watch the Dementor’s Kiss was nearly as unbearable for the observer as it was for the victim; was that true of Javert, or would he be as unfeeling as ever? Somehow, Valjean was inclined to believe the latter, though he was not sure if that was better or worse than the alternative.

“This isn’t right, Javert,” he said. “I know you couldn’t care less, but it’s not.”

The Auror looked as though about to respond, but then the door opened for the second time that afternoon, and with it came a cold wind, like the first frozen gust of a winter storm. Javert turned and stepped to the side, revealing two figures standing in the passage outside. One was a human witch, but Valjean only had eyes for the other.

For those who have never seen a dementor, a description cannot convey the experience of being in the presence of one. They are spectral wraiths, draped in black robes, their faces obscured by their hood, but it is not their appearance which makes them so universally feared, nor is it the bone-chilling cold that accompanies their every move.
Javert was speaking, but a silence had dampened Valjean’s ears. The dementor glided forward, and the world fell away, until nothing was left but the silence, and the dementor, and the cold. The cold was everywhere; in his fingers; in his arms; stealing into his chest and taking what warmth was kept there. Valjean exhaled, and his breath turned into a crystalline white mist as the temperature dropped.

The Dark creature approached, and Valjean felt the beat of his heart skip; fear made it erratic. And then, trapped in the creature’s thrall, the memories started. Everything faded, except for that.

His sister, already thin and wasted by her last pregnancy, was draped over his shoulder, weeping. Her husband was dead, frozen to death while out in the cold searching for more firewood. He had been Valjean's friend, too, since childhood, and he mourned his loss and what it would mean for his seven little nieces and nephews. The biggest of them came up only just past his waist, and they were all lean, even the baby. The winter had been hard on everyone.

The night he stole the bread started with an argument. No amount of magic seemed to multiply what little food they possessed into enough for everyone; he did not think his stomach had been full in months. There was no work to be had in Faverolles, though, not for a pruner, and he had not found a tree worthy of selling for wand wood in over a year.

If only he had not used magic to break the window; this one thought he repeated over and over again to himself, but by then it was too late. The government noted his use of magic on a Muggle shop, and every Auror within five miles arrived on the scene. He tried to run, of course, but to no avail - a thick rope materialized out of the air, wrapping around his legs and his torso and his neck. He fell, tasting blood as his chin hit the pavement. Valjean's last conscious thought was for the baby, who would now surely starve.

Vaguely, Valjean recognized that the dementor was approaching him. It stopped inches from where he sat, seeming to regard him curiously. Then it leaned down closer.

Like the creatures which inhabit it, Azkaban is not a place that can be described. It can only be felt. Once the fortress of a particularly twisted Dark wizard, Azkaban was nothing but floor after floor of tiny cells, where in some bygone age, the wizard had tortured Muggle sailors to their deaths. Their tormented souls haunted the place still, not as ghosts, but within the very walls of the place. From that anguish was born the dementors, deathless, and with an insatiable appetite for human misery.

The dementor reached out with a frozen, rotted hand, and clamped it around Valjean's throat. His skin burned where it touched him, and his breath stopped, cut short by the pressure of the thing’s grip. He wanted to scream, to struggle, but he could not.

Valjean was put in chains to contain the strength he inherited, and they threw him into one of the prison cells. Left there to rot, he languished alongside the worst of the wizarding world for the mere crime of hoping to feed his family. The screaming there never stopped; sometimes it was the inmates, sometimes the wind, and sometimes it seemed the place rang with the echoes of screams from those long-since dead. Madness descended upon him slowly.

The dementor raised its other hand. It was almost gentle in its touch as its crusted fingers ran down Valjean’s jawline; then it grabbed him by the chin, and forced his mouth open. The dementor’s hood fell back, revealing a necrotized head, eyeless, noseless, faceless, except for a gaping, black hole where its mouth should have been. The fraction of Valjean that was still aware of his surroundings knew this was the end. He did not have the presence of mind to pray as the thing lowered its head towards his own.
There was a flash of bright, white light, and Valjean knew nothing more as he fell into blackness. It seemed he was falling for a long, long time.
Valjean awoke slowly, to the taste of chocolate on his lips.

It was difficult to think around the pounding in his head, and a chill seemed to have crept all the way to his core, but the part of his consciousness beginning to flicker back to wakefulness grew aware of rough floorboards pressed against his cheek. Chocolate blossomed again across his tongue, bringing with it a trace of warmth, and Valjean's eyes blinked open. In the space of the same moment, his gaze met Javert's, who was kneeling on the floor next to him.

Valjean tensed immediately, struggling to sit up enough to slide himself away. Javert’s impassive expression was as unsettling as anything; Valjean backed up until he struck against a chair and stopped warily. The Auror raised his hands in a gesture of truce, and Valjean then noticed the candy bar he was holding.

“Please be calm,” Javert said, sending the candy bar sliding across the floor to come to a stop near where Valjean was crouched. “Eat that, it will help. Chocolate is the only known antidote to the side effects of an encounter with a dementor.”

At the word “dementor”, Valjean felt himself go pale, and he reached impulsively for the chocolate. Nibbling at it returned feeling to his numbed extremities and cut through some of the fog muddling his thoughts.

“Javert, what happened?” Valjean asked. "The last thing I remember is that... thing coming towards me. Why - why aren’t I...?"

The Auror grimaced. "It's... complicated." He got to his feet, Valjean watching apprehensively. Apparently Javert noticed the look on his face, because he rolled his eyes. "I am unarmed," he said, crossing the room to take a mug down from a shelf. "If you choose to strangle me, then I suppose it will be my own fault. My wand is in my coat pocket."

He inclined his head toward the door, on the back of which hung his greatcoat. Frowning, Valjean took better stock of their surroundings. The whitewashed walls were plain and told him little, but they held the appearance of cheaper construction than that of the Conciergerie. The room played host to a small assortment of sturdy but aging furniture, and the automatic way in which Javert navigated the space suggested a deeper familiarity than might be had with a workplace.

“Is this... your apartment?” Valjean asked, standing cautiously, lest his legs fail to support him.

The Auror turned long enough to look at him like this should have been obvious.

“Take a seat,” Javert said by way of a reply, indicating the same chair Valjean had knocked into. It was one of a set of four, pulled around a table.

Uncertainly, Valjean sat.
Javert joined him a moment later, holding two steaming mugs. One he set in front of Valjean, and the other he took to the opposite chair. The Auror sat down, and there was an uncomfortable silence as the two men stared at each other.

Lifting his mug to his nose, Valjean asked, “Coffee?”

Javert nodded. “Instant.”

“Is that another antidote for dementors?”

The Auror barked a humorless laugh. “No,” he said. “But you can drink it instead of talking to me if you like.” So saying, he took a long draught of the black liquid before returning the ceramic glass to the table. “You want to know what happened?”

Valjean inclined his head, sipping his own coffee with some hesitation. He had to admit in spite of himself that it was a welcome distraction.

Pursing his lips, Javert stared at a spot on the wall somewhere behind Valjean's left shoulder. “As I said,” he began slowly, “it's complicated. How much do you recall after our... disagreement?”

Valjean looked at a crack in the wood of the table top. “You mean after the bit where I shouted at you? Very little,” he replied. “All that comes back is... what the dementor showed me.”

Javert nodded like he expected that answer. “When the door opened, my expectation was that there would be a dementor accompanied by an Auror. That is the standard procedure for carrying out sentences like yours.” If Javert noticed the way Valjean's fingers twitched at that, he made no comment on it. “However, while there was indeed a dementor present, a fact which no doubt attracted most of your attention, the woman accompanying it was not an Auror.”

Javert was definitely avoiding Valjean's gaze now, even as Valjean was leaning forward slightly in his chair, his hunger to know more gradually replacing his anxiety.

“Who was it, then?” Valjean asked.

“Madame Élodie Perrier.”

Thunderstruck, Valjean felt his eyes widen. He was unsure whether he wished to laugh or to simply say, I told you so. If the downwards turn to the Auror's mouth were anything by which to judge, then Javert had a good idea of what was running through Valjean's head, but he continued without comment.

“I was of course surprised to see her. I informed her that these sorts of things were meant to be carried out only by experts. Madame Perrier replied that she had special dispensation from the Premier Président; she even had the court order to prove it.” Javert took another drink of coffee, and Valjean fought the impulse to hurry him along. “She directed the dementor forward, and it moved in your direction.”

Swallowing, Valjean strove not to think about a creeping, icy paralysis, and instead interjected, “But something stopped it?”

For a moment, Javert did not seem to know how to respond. “Not at first,” he said. “But Perrier was not finished talking. She... smiled at me, and then she said how unfortunate it was that the Président had agreed to let her handle the dementor. ‘After all,’ she said, looking so damnedly smug about it, ‘they're notoriously difficult to control. Who will suspect a thing when I tell them that there was no way I could stop it from finishing off the great Inspecteur Javert after it got rid of
the accused?"

At this point in his retelling, Javert was gripping the handle of his mug so tightly it was liable to crack, the sheer weight of his fury barely contained by a more professional facade. Valjean exhaled slowly as the missing pieces fell into place.

“She tried to kill you, too,” he murmured. “Or rather, she tried to kill you again. Do you believe me now, when I say that woman is a Death Eater?”

“I do not think I have any choice,” the Auror growled. “Certainly not after she left, locking us - me! - in the cell with a dementor.” He went to take another drink, but realized he had finished his coffee.

“But how did we get away?”

Javert made a face. “I only had a few seconds to come to a decision. I am still not sure I made the right one,” he added pointedly. “However, given Perrier’s meddling in your execution, and the fact that she spoke with the Président before your appeal... I could not rule out that the Death Eaters had succeeded in influencing the decision of the Grand Chambre, in which case, sentencing you to the Dementor’s Kiss would not necessarily be in keeping with civil justice.”

For a fraction of a second, Valjean recalled frozen fingers wrapping around his neck and he shuddered, forcing the memory from his thoughts.

“If that ruling was made under the influence of the Imperius Curse or some other coercion,” Javert continued, “then it was my duty to intervene. I cast a Patronus Charm.” Here he paused. “I am not good at that spell,” he admitted. “Abysmal, actually - the result was pathetically incorporeal. It was only enough to push the dementor back for a moment, but I grabbed your arm and Disapparated, and... here we are.”

Valjean breathed deeply as he processed that information. “Thank you,” he said. “I am grateful to not be - well, I am grateful.”

Javert said nothing. With his explanation finished, he simply looked at Valjean in quiet contemplation.

“But Javert,” Valjean said with a frown, “won't you be in hot water yourself for rescuing me?”

At that, the Auror scoffed. “I doubt it,” he said. “I am an Auror, First Class. I'm sure that as soon as I explain what happened, I'll be completely exonerated.”

“But,” Valjean pressed, “what about Perrier? When she finds out the dementor didn't kill us, surely she’ll make some move to prevent you from exposing her?”

Drumming his fingers on the table top, Javert said, “Perrier is only a noblewoman. Her influence does not extend to the Aurors.”

“Doesn't it?” Raising an eyebrow, Valjean said, “You already suspect her of interfering in my appeal; if she can go that far, what is to say she cannot discredit you, too? Who knows how many Death Eaters have infiltrated the Palais!”

“Now, just one minute,” Javert interrupted, scowling. “France’s law enforcement is some of the finest in the world. We do not simply allow Dark wizards to slip through the cracks!”

Ignoring him, Valjean muttered to himself, “Perrier would have waited around to be sure the dementor finished the job. She would re-enter the room to find us gone, and then what would she
do?"

“I need to speak to Chabouillet,” said Javert, pinching the bridge of his nose. “He will have thoughts on how to proceed, I’m sure.”

“She would want us found,” Valjean said, heedless of all else. “And found by other Death Eaters.” He looked up. “Javert, why did you bring us back to your apartment?”

Javert appeared startled by the question. “It was the first place I thought of,” he replied. “Why?”

Valjean stood and walked over to the door, listening at the seam of the jamb for a moment before turning back. “You're used to being the hunter, not the hunted,” he replied. “But you have to realize, these Death Eaters want you, specifically, dead, not just any Auror they happen to encounter. They sought you out before, they'll do it again, and your apartment is an obvious target for the exact reason you gave me - home is the first place people think of going.”

Forehead creased in consternation, Javert stared at him. “And what do you propose? Is this where you suggest we split up to make ourselves harder to track down?”

Crossing back to the table, Valjean looked Javert in the eye. “I am not so naïve as to think you would fall for that. But I am telling you we have perhaps minutes before half a dozen Dark wizards come bursting through that door, and I don't even have a borrowed wand to defend myself with. To put it plainly, I've almost died enough times today, and I'm not counting on my luck to hold out much longer.”

Javert's eyes narrowed. “What do you propose, then?”

“Apparate us elsewhere, obviously,” answered Valjean. “There is a place here in Paris that might work - it's cheap, but it's clean, and it's out of the way.”

“Where?”

“A place called the Gorbeau House, on the Boulevard de l'Hôpital. I've been renting a room there for months.”

The expression Javert wore was hard, but he did not refuse.

“Why should I trust you?” he asked instead, folding his arms to his chest.

“I am not exactly thrilled about being tortured and killed by Death Eaters, either,” Valjean told him wryly.

“If this proves to be a trap, you'll wish I had left you to the dementor,” Javert warned, walking to the door and pulling his greatcoat off the hook.

“If the Death Eaters catch us, we both might wish that,” retorted Valjean, going to join him.

Donning his coat, the Auror removed his wand from his pocket.

“The Boulevard de l'Hôpital?” he repeated, and Valjean nodded.

Grabbing Valjean by the wrist perhaps more tightly than was necessary, Javert turned on his heel, and for what felt like the umpteenth time that day, the world disappeared into oppressive blackness.
The Boulevard de l’Hôpital was quiet in the gathering twilight. Street lamps flickered with a fluorescent glow, and down the road, a single Muggle woman was taking out her trash bins.

Valjean breathed the cool air with relief. If it hadn’t been for the stone-faced Auror at his side, he might have been wholly relaxed. The small neighborhood was the most normal thing to happen to him all day, and he took comfort in that.

“It's that building, there,” he said, pointing to a long, low apartment complex made of mottled brown and grey brick. Divided by thick masonry columns, each segment of the building housed four units, with iron staircases leading up to the front doors. As promised, it had the look of being mediocre, but not badly maintained.

Javert eyed their surroundings with misgivings, but when nothing emerged to meet them besides a lanky black and white cat, he loosened his hold on Valjean’s arm.

“Well?” he asked, gesturing towards the apartments.

Valjean nodded. He walked up to unit No. 4, and fished under the doormat for the key. No sooner had he undone the lock than Javert put a hand on his shoulder to stop him going forward. The Auror pushed the door open himself, his wand held at the ready. Valjean looked at it, puzzled. For a second, it seemed as if... but no, surely he was mistaken.

“Homenum revelio,” said Javert. A moment passed. When nothing happened, he opened the door the rest of the way. “After you.”

Valjean stepped into the apartment unit, made cautious by Javert’s continuing suspicion. He entered the small living room, behind which was the kitchen. A narrow hallway led back to the bedroom, and through it, the bathroom. The furnishings were sparse, but it was quiet and out of the way. Hopefully it was out of the way enough to avoid attracting attention.

No sooner had Javert followed him into the flat than he closed the door and locked it behind them. The Auror then proceeded to investigate every room, muttering spells under his breath as he went. The air shimmered where he walked, as wards and charms of concealment fell into place. Valjean stood near the couch, watching things unfold. He tried reminding himself why this had been a good idea, but in his head all his reasoning sounded hollow, and he could not shake the anxiety making itself at home in the pit of his stomach. It felt like it had been there for days. Perhaps it had been there longer.

When Javert emerged from the back bedroom, having finished securing it, Valjean turned to look at him. The Auror stopped, returning the look.

Valjean spread his arms. “Are you satisfied?” he asked.

Raising an eyebrow, Javert countered, “Satisfied that you haven’t talked me into a trap?” His gaze shifted around the living space. “Somewhat. It will suffice, I suppose.”

“Good,” said Valjean. “Are you hungry?”

“There is no food in the kitchen,” Javert pointed out. “And I am not about to send you grocery shopping.”

Valjean shrugged. “We could order a pizza,” he suggested.

The Auror stared at him blankly. “Do what?”

“Order a... nevermind,” Valjean sighed. “I’ll take care of it, there’s a phone in the kitchen.”
Javert gave a jerk of his head which Valjean presumed to be a nod, and walked past him into the living room. There was a picture window to the right of the door, and Javert pulled back the cheap vinyl blinds to look up and down the street.

Valjean slipped into the kitchen; it was white, but not quite sterile. The old fixture on the ceiling cast a weird yellow glow over everything, and its occasional flicker distorted the shadows. To the left of the stove, the phone sat on the counter, along with a copy of the telephone directory. Valjean leafed through it, looking for anything close by. Beyond the pass-through in the wall that opened onto the living space, he could see Javert turn away from the window to sit in an armchair instead. The Auror was not watching him, per se, but Valjean was still conscious every so often of a glance in his direction.

A page of text caught his attention. Having found what he was looking for, Valjean picked up the phone and dialed the number.

“Hello,” he murmured, “Yes, could I please order a medium pizza with…” What would Javert want? He had no idea. “Cheese and sausage,” he settled on. “I’ll pay cash. The address? Yes. Apartment number four, on the Boulevard de l’Hôpital. Thank you.”

Putting the receiver down, Valjean looked up. “It’ll be probably twenty minutes or so,” he said.

The Auror blinked. “Alright,” he replied.

Valjean exited the kitchen and sat on the couch opposite the Auror. The kitchen clock ticked in the quiet; Valjean folded his hands in his lap and waited.

It was Javert who broke the silence. “Perrier will raise the alarm when she realizes her ploy failed.” He inclined his head and continued, “If it is as you said, and the Death Eaters think to break into my apartment, they will probably do so sooner rather than later. There are documents there that I will require for an investigation into their affairs - those will have to be recovered.”

Valjean cocked his head. “I will help if I can.”

Javert looked away. “The nature of your involvement will have to be settled, yes.”

A tapping noise came from the direction of the window, and Javert looked back over his shoulder. Behind him, Valjean could see a black barn owl pecking impatiently at the screen.

In apparent surprise, the Auror stood and went to the door. “Chouette?”

“Is that your owl?” asked Valjean, standing as Javert let the bird in. She flew up onto the Auror’s shoulder and perched there, much to Javert’s obvious unamusement.

“Yes,” he answered back, giving the bird an acidic glare. “And a more misbehaved, foolish creature I cannot begin to imag-”

“What a beautiful girl,” Valjean crooned, crossing the room to see better for himself. Chouette stepped off Javert’s shoulder onto Valjean’s proffered arm after some apparent consideration, and was happy to allow him to scratch behind her head. Chocolate and charcoal feathers puffed up in appreciation.

“Well, I never,” said Javert.

“She must have followed you here,” Valjean commented. “Funny the way they know things, isn’t it?”
“Her timing is convenient, if nothing else,” Javert agreed. “I need to compose a letter to Secrétaire Chabouillet.”

“A letter?”

“He needs to be made aware of the present situation.”

Disbelievingly, Valjean looked the Auror in the face. “Do you have any sense of self-preservation?”

If the sour twist to Javert’s mouth was an indication, Valjean was inclined to think, “probably not”, but the Auror asked stiffly, “What do you mean?”

“Letters can be intercepted. The Secrétaire might not believe you, and if he doesn’t -” Valjean cut himself off, aware that his true reservation lay in the fact that the Chabouillet would doubtless want him returned to a jail cell, a sentiment he was sure Javert shared. “Just... leave the address out of the letter, at least,” he finished.

"Fine,” Javert said shortly. “But I will be sending a letter.”

Valjean shook his head and walked away. Outside the window, a car pulled up along next to the apartment complex. The red and blue logo on the door marked it as the pizza delivery; Valjean watched as a young woman, probably a university student, got out of the car, only to look up at the apartment with confusion written on her face.

"Oh, drat," said Valjean as the realization struck him.

"What?" Javert demanded.

"She can't see this apartment," Valjean reminded him. "Not after you warded it."

As Valjean strode over to the door, he heard Javert's "Where do you think you're going?" behind him, but he ignored it. Outside on the landing, he waved until he caught the attention of the delivery girl. For a second, she seemed to startle, and then her eyes sort of glazed over. Climbing the steps with a pizza box balanced on her hip, she squinted through her glasses at the receipt.

"Medium cheese and sausage?" she asked.

Valjean was cognizant of Javert standing behind him, watching his every move. "That's us," he replied. "What do I owe you?"

"It's forty francs," the delivery girl told him.

Valjean nodded and withdrew his wallet. He counted out five twenty-franc pieces and passed them off to her.

“Keep the change,” he said, taking the pizza box. She smiled and put the coins in her pocket; a moment later, her eyes seemed to slide off him, and she looked around dazedly.

“The fuck am I doing here?” she muttered to herself, before turning around and heading back down to her car.

Javert waited until she was out of earshot before he said quietly, “Valjean, I swear to God, if you think I will just stand aside and let you walk out of here any time you please -”

“It’s just pizza, Javert,” Valjean groaned, pushing his way back into the apartment. “I, for one,
have not eaten all day, so unless it is your intent to starve us, let’s just have dinner and be done with it.”

“Pizza,” Javert grumbled. “This is what my life has come to.” The Auror followed him into the apartment, watching Valjean set the box on the counter. “It smells alright, at least,” he conceded.

Valjean loaded a pile of slices on each of two plates; they were lukewarm and greasy, but it was food, and that was what mattered. Javert accepted his portion with poor grace. He sat at the kitchen table and pulled a piece of parchment from his pocket, scribbling on it furiously.

“Don’t burn a hole in your paper,” Valjean muttered, though he stopped talking when the Auror frowned at him.

It was rare within recent memory that Valjean had eaten with such gusto as to forget his table manners, but he knew still what it was to go without, and the day’s events had left him hungry, weary, and frightened. He dug into the pizza, and paid little attention to the sauce that stuck to his stubble.

Chouette fluttered onto the tabletop, her talons clicking on the laminate surface.

“Shoo,” said Javert without looking up.

Valjean pulled a piece of sausage off a pizza slice and held it out to the little owl; she gulped it down greedily. This earned him a scowl from the Auror.

“That bird is going to be spoiled rotten by you,” he said. “I won't be able to get her to do anything.”

“She’s hungry,” Valjean replied. “Feeding her won’t do any harm.”

Javert signed off on his letter and folded it into thirds. He addressed it, and then held it out to Chouette, who grabbed hold of it with her beak.

“Fly quickly,” the Auror instructed her, “and stay out of sight.”

The owl hopped up onto Javert’s arm, and he took her to the door. Standing, Valjean cleared the plates off the table, dropping them in the sink. He paused a moment, leaning forward against the cool countertop, and a quiet sigh escaped his lips. He was tired, deep to the marrow of his bones.

A prickling sensation crossed the back of his neck, and he raised his head to see Javert stopped on the other side of the room, watching him. The two men stared at each other, Valjean resigned, Javert stern.

“I was just thinking of going to sleep,” said Valjean.

The Auror said nothing.

“Considering all that has happened today, I thought I should probably rest while I could.”

When Javert still did not respond, Valjean hesitantly offered, “If you would like the bedroom, I can sleep on the couch.”

The Auror continued only to regard him for a long moment, and Valjean shifted his weight in discomfort. Then Javert said, “Sleep where you will. I mean to stay awake.”

Valjean frowned. “All night?”
“Yes.”

“Surely you are tired.”

The Auror reached into his robes and withdrew a small phial of electric blue potion. This he drank, gave Valjean a meaningful look, and then said, “Not anymore.”

“Very well.” Valjean glanced in the direction of the hall and then back. “I’ll take the bedroom, if you truly don’t want it.”

Half-hidden within the folds of his long sleeves, Javert’s grip on his wand tightened. “Do not forget, Valjean, that you remain under arrest. If you attempt to leave, I will know about it.”

Valjean shook his head. “And go where?” he asked. “I would no sooner leave than I would be running from both you and the Death Eaters. I do not have a death wish.”

“Even so,” warned Javert, “should the urge arise, it would not be the Death Eaters who would catch you first.”

The ceiling fixture flickered, and Valjean rubbed his forehead as a headache began to build in his temples. “I am not going anywhere but the bedroom,” he responded. “If something happens, wake me, won’t you?”

He did not give Javert the chance to reply before he made for the hallway. The Auror stepped aside to let him pass, and Valjean was conscious of the Auror’s eyes following him into the bedchamber.

The room was drab in the growing darkness, and when Valjean pulled the curtains closed, it grew darker yet. The room’s furnishings consisted of a bed, a dresser, and a mirror, with a door in the corner that led into the matchbox of a bathroom. He performed his ablutions quickly, and then, without having a dressing gown of any sort, he kicked off his shoes and dropped onto the bedcovers.

For a long while, he lay motionless, arm wrapped around his pillow. There was no knowing what the next day held; there was every chance he would be back in irons by sunrise. This was not a comforting truth, and it was some time before his eyes fell shut.

Sleep came, but it was not restful. It was the kind of sleep that invoked unsettling dreams, unabated exhaustion come morning, and a stubborn heaviness in the bottom of the stomach refusing to be dislodged.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

This chapter switches back and forth between Valjean and Javert's POVs for narrative purposes; transitions between characters are marked as such.

Valjean

With the morning came the sun. Wakefulness was slower to arrive, and when Valjean’s eyes blinked open, they stung with the grit of an uneasy sleep. A groginess hung about him in a haze, and it was on unsteady legs that he stumbled out of bed.

Valjean flattened his hair perfunctorily in the mirror and straightened his shirt. The outfit was the same as he had worn the day before, and there was only so much he could do to make it presentable. He came shortly to the conclusion that the wrinkles were there to stay, and so he made his way to the door instead. He steeled himself as he opened it, unsure of what the day held for him.

Javert was standing in the center of the living room. It was possible he had been standing there all night. The Invigoration Draught of the evening before had lent him borrowed energy, but the deepening shadows under the Auror’s eyes showed that his vigil had taken its toll nevertheless. There was a parchment clutched in one hand, and then Valjean noticed Chouette sitting on the back of the armchair. Javert had received his response, it appeared. His expression as Valjean entered the living room suggested it was not good news.

“Good morning,” said Valjean.

“You are up,” came the reply. “Finally. We have an appointment with the Secrétaire.”

“Have we?” Valjean asked, a pit of nausea forming in his stomach.

Wordlessly, the Auror held out the parchment. Valjean took it, opening it gingerly. The letter read:

Javert,
You will bring the accused to my offices first thing in the morning. We will speak about your tremendous lack of judgement at that time.
- Secrétaire de Préfecture Chabouillet

The terse message weighed like a stone in his hands, a fact made worse by the tight coldness on the Auror’s face. He made to speak, to say anything in his defense, but the words caught in his throat.

“So,” Javert said evenly, “we are to return to the Palais.”

Valjean repressed a shudder. “Are you sure that’s wise?”

Javert’s frown deepened. “I have my orders. It was because I allowed myself leniency in the first place that my superior officer is now displeased.”
“You believed it was possible Perrier could have meddled in my sentence - if the Secrétaire
doesn’t see it that way -”

“- then I will yield to my superior’s authority,” the Auror snapped. “I ought to have gone directly
to him yesterday.”

Valjean inhaled slowly. “Would you honor me one request?”

“I think I have done you quite enough favors.”

“It is not for me,” Valjean pressed. “You may recall, when you sought to arrest me at the
hospital...”

Javert ground his teeth. “If you ask me again about that insufferable woman’s brat - !”

“Please!” Valjean implored him. “She is a child! And she will suffer - perhaps die - should no one
intervene.”

Javert glowered at him. “Your attempts to stall are starting to get repetitive.” He held out his hand
impatiently. “Badger the Secrétaire with it instead, see how far it gets you.”

Fists clenched at his sides, Valjean said quietly, “They will kill me in cold blood and you will say
nothing, provided your superior approves it!”

“Insolent!” Javert’s nostrils flared. “I do not have to listen to this. You will accompany me, and
whatever decision the Secrétaire comes to, we shall both abide by!”

Javert made to grab him by the collar, but Valjean stepped away. “I will go with you,” he said,
because I have no choice, but you need not treat me like chattel.”

The Auror’s eyes were narrowed to slits as he snatched Valjean’s wrist instead, his barely-
suppressed anger making itself manifest in the violence with which the pair Disapparated.

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Javert

Rematerializing in the gallery of the Palais, Javert took a moment to ensure that Valjean was still
well under his control before he marched not in the direction of the courtrooms but to the lifts. The
fight seemed to have gone out of the convict, aware as he was that Javert had magic on his side.

Subconsciously, Javert ran his thumb along the shaft of his wand, searching for the aberration he
knew lay in the wood. Even to think of it made his mouth twist, and the less Valjean knew of the
matter, the better. He was fairly certain the convict had been too preoccupied to notice anything of
it, a state of affairs Javert meant to uphold.

The gates of the lift were gilded and patterned with the fleur de lys, and they opened of their own
accord at the Auror’s approach. He waited until Valjean shuffled inside to step in and say, “Third
floor”. The gates closed, and the small box of space began to rise. In the silence, Valjean stared at
his shoes, and Javert wondered if he had, in fact, given up, or if his apparent submission were a
ruse to lure the Auror into a false sense of security. As the gates reopened on the third floor, Javert
resolved to watch the convict all the more carefully.

It became apparent this floor played an administrative role the moment one stepped off the lift. A
plush red carpet ran the length of the hall, and paintings were dispersed throughout, hanging
between each office door and the next. The Auror made a beeline for the third door on the right,
on which was emblazoned in gold script Secrétaire de Préfecture Chabouillet.
Knocking sharply, Javert waited for a response. After a moment, the door opened inwards, and he tightened his hold on Valjean’s arm. Javert steered the convict into the office of M. Chabouillet, relinquishing his grip only once they were both ensconced inside.

The Secrétaire’s office was an illustrious one; a carved wooden desk sat atop another rich carpet, while the plasterwork on the creamy walls sparkled and shone with gilt where the light hit it. Behind the desk sat M. Chabouillet himself, arranged in simple black dress robes, his ginger hair pulled back from his face. A ruffle at his neckline added a touch of fashion to his attire. Javert bowed as he entered, and the Secrétaire looked up.

“Ah, Inspecteur,” he said. “It was good of you to arrive so promptly.”

Rising, Javert replied, “It is my honor to serve, Monsieur le Secrétaire.”

Chabouillet rose from his seat and circled around the desk.

“So this is him, is it?” he asked, looking Valjean up and down.

“Yes, Monsieur.”

“Hmm.” Chabouillet raised his wand dispassionately. “Incarcerous,” he said, and ropes flew from the tip of his wand, binding around Valjean hand and foot. Valjean stumbled and fell to his knees, even as a third rope wrapped around his mouth, muffling his speech. The Secrétaire looked back up at Javert, a sort of paternal affection in his expression.

“Really, Inspecteur, I am surprised at you - I would never have expected to see you leave such a dangerous criminal without handcuffs, but then I suppose it is just one more item to list under your deviant behavior in the past twenty-four hours.”

The Secrétaire’s tone was not harsh, but Javert still felt the keen sting of chastisement. He lowered his gaze, and replied, “Discipline me as you will, Monsieur. I can only offer my explanation, and -”

Chabouillet cut the Auror off midway through speech, waving away his words with a smile.

“Truly, Javert, there is nothing you need explain,” he said. “As it so happens, I am fortunate - the truth has come to light.”

Javert blinked in surprise. “Monsieur?”

Chabouillet nodded. “When I received your letter last night, I knew something to be terribly wrong. If my reply to you was brief, then it was only due to it being written in haste as I sought to clarify the situation.”

His interest quickened, Javert asked, “Then Madame Perrier - you were able to confirm she is a Death Eater?”

“Oh Javert,” sighed the Secrétaire, shaking his head. “I am afraid the situation is even worse than I thought. Madame Perrier,” he elucidated, “is not a Death Eater, nor has she ever been. She is a fine, upstanding woman.”

His face creasing, Javert said, “But then... why...?”

Chabouillet returned to his chair, leaning over his desk conspiratorially. “That one,” he said, with a pointed look at Valjean, “has had you under a very powerful Confundus Charm.”
The Auror went rigid. “That’s... not possible,” he said, also glancing in Valjean’s direction.

“Isn’t it?” asked Chabouillet gently. “Think about it, Inspecteur. Death Eaters attacked you on a city street - fair enough, there is evidence of some sort of magical blast happening there, but your next memory after that is of the convict with a wand. Do you not see how this happened?”

Javert wet his lips, thinking back through the events of the day prior. “The other Death Eaters - the second group to show up -”

“Illusions,” Chabouillet asserted. “Products of the Confundus Charm, no doubt fed to you by Valjean himself. There are documented cases of such charm work.”

Faintly, Javert heard himself say, “And Madame Perrier?”

“Never went near the Conciergerie,” the Secrétaire confirmed. “I can attest to that myself - I was in a meeting with Gisquet at the scheduled time of the execution, along with a number of our more generous donors, as you know the Perriers have always been. She was sitting with us when all this nonsense allegedly happened.”

“Then,” Javert began, taking a breath to steady himself, “then who did accompany the dementor to Val - the accused’s cell yesterday?”

Chabouillet peered down at his notes. “Blanchard,” he replied. “His office is in the basement, if you would like to speak with him.”

“Yes. Yes, I will do that.”

“You don’t look well,” the Secrétaire said, his concern evident. “And no wonder, that must come as quite a shock. Perhaps I shall accompany you to see Blanchard, and get you something to drink as well.”

Javert shook his head. “Thank you, Monsieur, but I will manage.”

“I insist,” said Chabouillet, raising his hand. “At the very least, a potion to rid your system of the effects of the spell is in order, wouldn’t you say?”

Conceding on that point, Javert inclined his head. “Monsieur is too generous with his time.”

“Never mind all that,” Chabouillet chuckled fondly. “You have done us a grand service, Javert, truly. Not any Auror is capable of capturing a wizard so corrupted by Azkaban, and that you fell victim to his spell work indicates no fault of your own. I will have him transferred to an appropriate holding cell, and then we shall get you that drink.”

Chabouillet tapped a small bell on his desk with his wand, and from the hall outside a distant echoing chime could be heard. It took less than a minute for the door to open, and two witches entered, dressed in the vestments of the Aurors.

“Monsieur l’Secrétaire?” asked the first witch, a blue-eyed brunette named Diane.

Chabouillet indicated where Valjean was curled on the floor. “Assist the good Inspecteur by transferring this one to a cell down in the dungeon.”


They hauled Valjean to his feet, and as they led him out of the room, the face he gave Javert could be described only as pleading. Javert looked away, and said nothing.
“Very good, Inspecteur,” said Chabouillet. “Now let’s see if Blanchard will join us for that drink.”

Valjean

The Aurors were forced to remove the rope joining his legs together in order to permit Valjean to walk between them, but it was plain the gesture was made out of necessity, not empathy. They led him back up the hall to the lift, and then ordered it down to the lowest level of the Palais.

Valjean was not sure that he felt anything; the numbness settling in his skin was absolute. What sort of dream had he allowed himself that Javert would believe him over the Secrétaire? It was lies - all of it, every word Chabouillet spoke, bald-faced lies - but the Auror had stood there drinking it up like honey. Valjean felt that he might scream, but the rope lashed across his mouth prohibited it.

The dungeon of the Palais was darker than the Conciergerie. Torches flickered intermittently on the walls, between which were rows of shallow stone cells, iron bars separating them from the corridor. The second witch, taller, and whom Valjean learned went by Aimée, drew open the door to the first of these.

“In,” she ordered, her wand pointed at Valjean’s chest.

The decision to run was sudden and immediate. Valjean bolted, flying down the hallway as fast as his legs would carry him. He heard the witch cry out “Impedimenta,” and there was no time to change course before he ran into what felt like a solid wall of air. It knocked the wind out of him, and he fell back onto the floor.

His eyes blinked open to see both Aurors standing above him, wands drawn.

“How long did he have until someone brought along another dementor? His back pressed against the cool stone of the wall; it was rough through the fine linen of his shirt. He did not think he could weep; the heaviness of his despair overwhelmed tears. Instead, he sat motionless. An observer might have thought him sleeping, but there was too much anguish in his heart to afford that.

He refused to think of Javert. He wanted to be angry, and perhaps he even was, but whenever his battered emotions brushed against the subject, all he felt for his trouble was an engulfing wave of betrayal. It was illogical - he had known all along that he remained the Auror’s prisoner - and yet there had been a moment, sitting one across from the other, drinking coffee, that he had dared hope they had some sort of understanding. There was a moment, too, where he recalled waking to the taste of chocolate and the warmth that accompanied it. It was a memory he could have done without.
Valjean’s thoughts turned instead to Fantine, for whom no magic was able to heal her broken spirit. She had passed but a few days ago, and yet it felt like ages. He had tried everything - Healers, Muggle doctors, spells, potions - but in the end it was not enough. The one thing she wanted, needed, he had not been able to provide her, and without Cosette at her side, she wasted away. But to think about the hospital was to think about Javert, and that he wished more than anything to avoid.

Behind his back, Valjean toyed with the rope binding his hands. It was thick, abrasive material, and it chafed where it gripped his skin. However, the more he felt out the knot, the more he grew to realize it lacked in the skill with which it had been tied. Had Javert been the one to cast the spell, he would have been in a predicament, but Chabouillet, it seemed, did not place the same attention to detail in his spellcasting.

Trying to unravel it was tedious, and he had to squeeze his wrists even closer together in order to have enough slack to work with, but gradually, he was able to tease apart the first half of the knot. The second half was still more difficult, and he was growing impatient, but he forced himself to use short, calculated movements. Finally, the rope slipped away, and he was able to pull off the one gagging him as well.

To be certain, it was an improvement. Valjean rubbed feeling back into his fingers and shifted his jaw, easing it where it ached. He had been sitting like that for some time when he got the feeling he was being watched. Opening his eyes, he saw Mme. Perrier standing on the other side of the bars, a slight smile playing over her lips.

“You,” Valjean spat vehemently, getting to his feet.

“Unhappy to see me?” Perrier asked. “I can’t imagine why.”

“This is your doing,” he said. “What did you do to convince the Aurors that you were in a meeting while you were trying to kill us?”

Perrier tilted her head. “Funny thing about Confundus Charms - they really do work,” she replied. “All the more so when your target is in a rather suggestible state, and Chabouillet is painfully easy to manipulate. All those officer types are - they are so used to taking orders, you just have to get them to take orders from someone else instead.”

“And now?” Valjean demanded. “You want to be rid of me, I’m sure.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about you,” Perrier replied with a laugh. “I’ll take care of you later. It was Javert I wanted out of the picture before you butted in. I never did thank you for the bruises you gave me when we fought in the courtyard, by the way.” She eyed him thoughtfully, before raising her wand and flicking her wrist; Valjean flinched as what felt like a whiplash fell hard against his back.

“There’s more where that came from,” promised Perrier. “First, though, I need to go check in on Monsieur l’Inspecteur.” She allowed herself a final smirk as she turned away. “He won’t be coming to Apparate you away from here this time.”

Mme. Perrier disappeared down the passage, leaving Valjean to stare after her in her wake. She was going to murder Javert; she had only just said as much. The bitter irony of it all was almost laughable.

*He deserves it.* That was the thought, like a whisper, which snaked through Valjean’s head, repeating in a mantra. Javert deserved it for his cruelty, for being so easily misled by his prejudices, for being so prepared to throw away the lives of others; in the end, it was poetic
justice.

Valjean pressed his face into his hands, a quiet sigh escaping his lips. He knew perfectly well he was wrong; perhaps it was Javert's notion of justice, but that was a far cry from the real thing. And yet, what was he to do? He was trapped, and Perrier was right - no-one was coming to help him.

He studied the iron bars blocking his way out, something the Auror Diane had said stirring the beginnings of an idea. If the bars were not spelled to resist being bent...

Valjean pulled off his leather belt and wrapped it around the flat of his palms so he could grip the metal without sliding. Grappling the bar closest to him with both hands, he struggled to pull it out of shape. Sweat beaded on his forehead, all his muscles straining.

With his thumbs at the fulcrum point, it could be done, or so he told himself. Valjean pulled harder, finding within a source of strength he had not had cause to tap in many years. The bar slipped in his grip - or had it? Taking a step back, it seemed to Valjean that it had perhaps given way, just a bit. Reapplying himself to the task with greater vigor, he was optimistic that he could widen the gap enough to slip out.

He only hoped he could do so in time.

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Javert

Chabouillet was insistent on taking time out of his afternoon to accompany him, and Javert was not about to reprimand the Secrétaire de Préfecture, so he found himself back in the lift headed down to the basements, standing side-by-side with the senior Auror.

It was strange, he reflected to himself in the silence. He had been certain from the owl he had received that the Secrétaire was angry with him, and yet Chabouillet seemed to be in an almost genial mood. Of course, if it were a Confundus Charm to blame for all the recent madness, then Javert was not entirely culpable, even if privately he felt he still deserved some manner of disciplinary action, not having recognizing the spell for what it was. Taken altogether, he felt uneasy, though it was a concern without a target, a suspicion he could not name, rooted in nothing but intuition.

Javert was glad when the lift reached its destination. Chabouillet directed him down a long corridor to an office full of cubicles, only about a third of which were occupied; the bulk of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was occupied in the field with tracking down and arresting the growing population of Dark wizards. Photographs of known Death Eaters were pinned to the wall, the photos’ subjects scowling, screaming, or making obscene gestures as the mood struck them.

The Secrétaire headed for the center of the room, exchanging greetings with those he passed. Javert followed after him, speaking to no-one.

The desk that had Chabouillet’s attention was an untidy one; three half-empty mugs of coffee sat amidst piles of newspaper and printed reports. A small flock of paper airplane memos hovered in the air, circling lazily. Leaning back in his chair, shuffling through a pile of photos, was a short, apparently exhausted, wizard whose hair matched the cubicle in its sense of order. He looked up as the Secrétaire approached, and rose to attention.

“Monsieur,” he addressed Chabouillet. “What may I do for you? I have the latest from the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts division - five more household appliances caused deaths and injuries this week. One instance we can safely attribute to poltergeist activity, but the others appear to have
links to Dark magic.”

The Secrétaire nodded along. “Very good, Blanchard,” he said, “just compile that for me if you would.” Then he laid a hand on Javert’s shoulder, drawing him closer. “Blanchard, I was hoping you might speak to the Inspecteur about the incident yesterday, clarify for him what happened.”

Blanchard’s eyes widened. “Monsieur l’Inspecteur,” said the Auror, “I regret that our meeting is over such bizarre circumstances, your work is an inspiration.”

Javert tilted his head slightly. “Go on, then.”

“Well,” Blanchard began, glancing nervously between Javert and the Secrétaire, “I had been tasked with overseeing the Dementor’s Kiss - after several years running inspections at Azkaban, I have some experience dealing with those creatures - and no sooner had I opened the door to the cell than you, well...”

“Yes?”

Blanchard rubbed his neck uncomfortably. “Well, Monsieur, you seemed to think I was someone else. You started shouting nonsense, attempted a Patronus Charm, and then grabbed the accused and Disapparated.”

Javert ran his thumb over the irregularity in the hornbeam wood of his wand again and licked his lips.

“I see,” he said. Internally, he could make no sense of it. Blanchard’s story matched Chabouillet’s, and yet he knew what he had seen, and that was not it. It had always been to Javert’s benefit to trust his senses - could they have betrayed him so absolutely?

Chabouillet clapped him on the back. “Confundus Charms - nasty work in the hands of the right spellcaster.”

“So it would seem,” Javert muttered. “Perhaps that is an element of our training program we ought to stress more heavily.”

“What say we get you the proper antidote? I’m sure you are eager to have this mess behind you.”

Javert agreed. Blanchard declined the Secrétaire’s invitation to join them, evidently intimidated.

The pair returned to the corridor. They went back the way they had come, passing the lifts, and then the stair that went down to the dungeons. At the far end of the passageway was a heavy metal door, flanked on either side by narrow cupboards.

“This will do well,” Chabouillet pronounced. “It’s quiet and rarely used - you’ll have it to yourself to recuperate.”

Javert raised an eyebrow. The door, he knew, led to one of the rooms where Aurors might question suspects. “Surely an office would be more comfortable.”

Chabouillet winced. “I wish I could say yes,” he said, “but with the growing threat the Dark Lord poses, we’ve had to take on new hires. Even my own office is frequently bombarded with people. You will find it more to your benefit to stay here - I daresay you don’t want every green-horned Auror in the Palais pestering you for advice!”

The Secrétaire’s logic was sound enough; Javert’s patience for beginners was strictly limited on the best of days. Even so, he found it difficult to shake the nagging feeling that something was not
quite right. As Chabouillet opened the cupboard to the left of the door, which was filled with a wide array of potions and tinctures, Javert muddled through it all, trying to put his finger on just what was giving him pause.

Chabouillet rummaged in the cupboard for several minutes, until he emerged with an “Ah-ha!” and a tiny phial of potion. “This will do it,” he said, holding the glass aloft. “Though I should warn you,” he added, as Javert took the phial from him, “that curing the effects of such a strong Confundus Charm is unlikely to be pleasant. Just sit and wait for the symptoms to abate - you’ll feel far more clear-headed after the fact.”

Perhaps that was it, Javert thought to himself as the Secrétaire held open the metal door for him. If he felt any uncertainty, then it was likely nothing more than the vestigial traces of the enchantment he had been under. It was humiliating to think Valjean had held such a firm sway over him; certainly, he had been right not to trust the convict with a wand.

The room was one of many, and the Auror was well-familiarized with its use. In the center of the flagstone floor was a chair. There was no other furniture in the room, but the walls were lined with panels of mirrored glass, so that everything reflected back upon itself. On the far side of the room was a second door. The space was lit by a sourceless light; as they entered, Chabouillet waved his wand, and the light dimmed.

“Much better,” he said with apparent satisfaction. “Have a seat, and then meet me in my office when you’re feeling more yourself. We can discuss your next assignment then.”

“As you say, Monsieur,” Javert agreed demurely.

He sat. The chair was not comfortable, but that was to be expected. As Chabouillet made his exit, Javert unstoppered the tiny bottle. The potion within it was a cloudy lilac color, and smelled vaguely floral. Tipping it back into his mouth, Javert swallowed and made a face. It tasted like bitter herbs, a strange, earthy flavor that lingered on the tongue. Then he sat back in the chair and waited.

He could not deny that the place was quiet. Far removed from the daily bustle of the Palais, and even from the Auror Offices, the room was silent and cool. It was soothing for his frayed nerves, and his eyelids drooped as he looked off into space.

The potion’s effects were not immediate, but as he gazed vacantly at the floor, a change came over his vision. At first, it was most noticeable when he blinked, a blur in the outline of things. He tossed his head, wondering if it was tiredness, but before long it was no longer just a blur, and was more of a ripple, distorting his surroundings.

Dizzy, Javert cradled his head in his hands. It was not the worst antidote he had ever taken, he reminded himself, and he supposed he ought to be grateful it was not Skele-Gro. Still, the weird double-vision it produced was a bit nauseating, especially coupled with the mirrors: the doubles multiplied, and the multiples doubled, until it grew impossible to fix his attention on anything and be certain it was solid.

An inarticulate groan rose in his throat. He shifted in his seat, spots swimming before his eyes. Maybe something was wrong after all.

The door behind him opened with a quiet hiss; had Chabouillet sent someone to check on him? Javert was turning to see who it was when he heard suddenly, “Javert, duck!”

The Auror reacted purely on instinct, falling to the ground and rolling away from the chair, just as a spell flew like lightning past where he had been sitting moments before. Through the legs of the
chair, he saw Élodie Perrier standing behind him in the second doorway, wand raised.

“Defodio!” she cried, her arm slashing a path through the air.

Fumbling for his wand, Javert barely had time to cast “Protego” before the spell struck him; it ricocheted off the Shield Charm and hit the floor instead, where the stone tile exploded into shards.

“My God!” A hand reached down to help Javert off the ground, and the Auror was only just coming to realize it was Valjean - how he was there, Javert had no idea, but it had to have been him to shout the warning. And Perrier - Javert’s eyes squeezed shut as it dawned on him how thoroughly he had been duped - unless he was seeing things. Was she really there?

“Javert?” Valjean dropped to the floor as he dodged another jinx. “Javert, are you alright?”

A kaleidoscope of colors and images danced in Javert’s line of vision; the stone underneath him felt like it was rocking.

“Ah...” the Auror half-gasped, “I am going to have to say ‘no’.”

Perrier strode forward, her wand now trained on Valjean rather than Javert.

“How did you get here?” she asked disbelievingly. “That isn’t possible!” With a hard jerk of her wand hand, she threw Valjean backwards against the wall. The mirror shattered where he struck it, raining down in a storm of glass shards.

“As for you,” she added, standing over Javert, “the Secrétaire really did a number on you, didn’t he?”

Raising himself up on his elbows, Javert forced out a “Stupefy!” Perrier sidestepped the red jet of light easily.

“Face it, Inspecteur, you’re finished,” she sneered. Whatever curse she was about to utter, it was cut off as Valjean, having staggered back to his feet, slammed into her. They fell to the ground in a tangle, Valjean trying to wrench the wand out of her fingers.


Valjean fell back as though burned, reddish welts spreading across his hands. Perrier, leaping to her feet, towered above him. Lashing out in her fury, Valjean jerked as the Death Eater struck him with another spell. He struggled to get up, but Perrier struck him again and he faltered under the barrage.

Javert, bracing himself against the chair, worked his way back onto his feet. As Perrier whipped her wand a third time, the Auror brandished his own, spitting out, “Protego!”

A shimmering force field of energy erupted between the Death Eater and Valjean, and Perrier’s curse rebounded. With a sharp cry, she stumbled back as it hit her in the chest. Even as Valjean was standing, Javert felt it happen: a tremble, and then the crack of wood splintering. His eyes closed, unwilling to look down at the damage he knew had been done.

Not prepared to surrender, Perrier shouted, “Expelliarmus!”

The Auror’s wand was ripped from his fingers, but as it went whizzing through the air, Valjean intercepted it, catching it deftly. There was a moment where he looked down at the thin instrument and then back up, a wordless question written in his face, that Javert realized the convict had seen
more than he ought to have.

There was no time to dwell on it - Valjean dashed to his side, thrusting the wand back into Javert’s hand with a low, “Disapparate, now,” - but as the Auror grabbed Valjean by the arm, willing the world to dissolve into blackness around them, he knew he could hide his secret no longer.
Chapter 6

Valjean landed flat on his back as they reappeared in the apartment. From the look of things, Javert had compensated no better, their frantic escape from the Palais de Justice obliterating any control they had over how in the living room they rematerialized.

Across the room, Javert sat up slowly, muttering “Christ” to himself and rubbing his temples.

“How do you feel?” Valjean asked, pushing himself up on his elbows.

“Like I was poisoned,” came the irritable response. “I don't know what Chabouillet gave me, but...”

“The Secrétaire?” Valjean asked, not particularly surprised. When Javert looked at him, Valjean explained, “Perrier has some kind of hold on him - it's possible he's under the Imperius Curse.”

Javert snorted. “That figures.” He squinted in Valjean's direction. “And you,” he said, “how did you fare in all this?”

Shrugging slightly, Valjean replied, “Better than you, it would seem, though not for lack of trying.” When Javert continued to look at him searchingly, he went on, “After they locked me up, Perrier stopped by long enough to pay her respects, and she as good as told me she would be after you next. I broke out, and caught sight of Chabouillet going up the hallway by himself, so I figured you had to be nearby. Fortunately, I was right.”

There was a decidedly interrogative slant to the Auror’s mouth as he asked, “You broke out? How?”

“Iron bends,” Valjean answered tersely, not eager to address the matter further. “What happened to your wand?”

He knew it was the wrong question the moment he asked it.

“Nothing,” Javert replied tightly, getting to his feet.

Following suit, Valjean’s mouth puckered. “I saw it, and it’s not nothing.”

“Mind your own business.”

“I imagine you are well-aware,” said Valjean, “but I once was a woodcutter. Occasionally, I even cut wand wood. I do know something about the subject, you might at least let me look.”

“There is nothing wrong with my wand!” Javert snapped. He swayed where he stood and leaned back against the kitchen knee wall, still not quite steady on his feet.

Valjean considered this for a moment. “If you say so,” he said calmly. Then he walked into the kitchen and dug through the cabinets until he found a glass, filling it in the sink with tap water.

“Here,” he said, returning to the living room. Holding the glass out to the Auror, he continued, “Drink that, you need it.”

Javert took hold of the glass with some stupefaction; as Valjean moved to sit in one of the armchairs, he caught the Auror out the corner of his eye examining the contents suspiciously. Apparently it passed whatever standard Javert was holding it to, and he took a sip.
After a moment, there came a begrudging, “Thank you.” Javert removed his wand from his robes, looking it over critically. “Fine,” he said, pulling a face. “See what you make of it.”

Crossing towards the other armchair, Javert handed off the wooden instrument and took a seat. Valjean held the hornbeam wand carefully, aware he was being scrutinized. It was slightly longer than his forearm, and so he guessed, “Thirteen and three quarters?”

“Fourteen,” Javert responded stiffly.

“Hmm, close enough.”

The whittling was entirely without ornament, a simple handle on one end, tapering toward a point at the other. When Valjean had picked it up the day before, the bone-colored wood had been totally blemishless. Now, there was a narrow crack in the shaft near the hand-hold. It was not much more than a hairline split, but there was a suggestion of it widening toward the center.

“The wood doesn’t seem brittle at all,” Valjean said to himself. “You keep it well-oiled, I assume?”

“Of course,” said Javert with a scoff.

“When did you notice it had cracked?”

The Auror frowned. “It seemed to happen when I cast the Patronus Charm yesterday,” he replied pensively. “Perhaps I am even worse at that spell than I thought.”


Mulish, Javert shook his head. “I’m certain it was the charm.”

“Well,” Valjean said, leaning forward enough to hand the wand over, “the good news, anyway, is that a crack that small should not affect the performance. Keep an eye on it, though - if it splinters all the way down to the core, you could start getting interference in your spells.”

The Auror did not quite snatch it back, but Valjean was left with the distinct impression that he did not like it being out of his hands - in that, Valjean felt he could sympathize. Wands were tied intimately to a wizard’s identity; they were not something to be shared lightly. Or perhaps, he thought to himself, Javert just did not like his wand being in Valjean’s hands. It would not surprise him if that were the case.

Tucking the wand back into the folds of his robes, the Auror threaded his fingers together. The way he held his head, turned slightly aside, suggested he was weighing some question against itself. Valjean waited, aware that eventually, Javert would tell him what he had decided.

As it happened, Javert spoke sooner rather than later. “Much as we both might wish it were otherwise,” he began, “we appear to be stuck with one another.” His face said plainly how he felt about that state of affairs.

“Chabouillet is in some way under the influence of the Death Eaters, which makes my position precarious. You are a wanted criminal, easily recognized from the posters. I am of half a mind to restrain you by magic and leave you here while I deal with the situation at the Palais. However - you have twice now saved my life. I think I made it clear after the first instance that playing the Good Samaritan would earn you no special treatment, and yet you did it a second time. I am therefore entertaining the idea of allowing you to assist me.”
Valjean attempted to keep his expression unaffected by the array of emotions washing through him.

“How do you mean?” he asked.

“I need to return to my apartment,” the Auror said. “There is documentation there - among it, I have reports that should allow me - us - to draw some conclusions about what the Death Eaters are planning. If you help me, you are to do what I say without hesitation - you have seen how dangerous the enemy can be. I am trained to fight them, and you are not.”

“I want to help,” said Valjean. “But if I am to do that, I will need something from you as well.”

Javert narrowed his eyes. “What is it?”

There was no point beating around the bush. “I need a wand, Javert,” Valjean said. “My strength is only good for so much where magic is concerned. Without the ability to defend myself, I’m a liability to us both.”

The Auror raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps I should leave you here, then,” he said.

“You need me,” Valjean countered. “As an ally. You would not have even considered the idea otherwise.”

Leaning back in his chair, Javert said, “Anyone else in my position would know it would be the height of idiocy to just hand you a wand.”

Exasperated, Valjean replied, “There you are mistaken, but I know you must feel that way.”

“It so happens,” Javert said slowly, “that I had anticipated your... petition.”

Now it was Valjean to narrow his eyes. Surely Javert was not agreeing?

The Auror reached into his robes; when he withdrew his hand, he was holding a wand.

Something about it struck Valjean as familiar.

“Is that...?” He looked closer, flabbergasted. “But it can’t be. Javert, is that my wand?”

The Auror nodded once, his expression absolutely neutral.

Valjean shook his head as if to clear it of astonishment. If he were engaged in a chess game, then Javert was surely drawing him into some gambit.

“But... but they snapped it,” Valjean stammered. “I - I turned it in, in Arras, and -”

“No,” Javert interrupted. “They did not snap it. I confiscated it. This wand is evidence. Disposing of it pre-maturely could have compromised the prosecution’s case, had it been required in making a point to the court. Seeing as your sentence was never actually carried out, I have not yet taken it to the Wand Permitting Office for disposal.”

Valjean stared across the room at the thin stick of wood Javert was now turning over in his fingers; it was someone else’s idea of kindling, but at that moment, there was nothing he wanted more in the world than to have it back in his hands. A wand was freedom. With it, he could rescue Cosette, he could start over, he could -

“What do you want from me?” he asked hoarsely. “You have conditions, I’m sure.”

The Auror allowed himself a small smile. “I have three,” he said. “And you will swear to them.”
Valjean looked at him uncertainly. “You mean to take me at my word?”

“I won’t have to,” Javert replied. “Not if you make an Unbreakable Vow.”

Valjean closed his eyes. *Ah. So that was it.* Javert had made his bid for endgame. He wondered how long the Auror had been planning this, if it were a recent development, or if he had had it in his mind all along as a contingency.

“Your terms?” Valjean asked again, eyes still closed.

“First,” Javert pronounced, “you will remain my prisoner, and make no attempt to escape my custody. Second: you will not use any magics I disallow. And third: when all is said and done, you will return with me to Azkaban Prison.”

So it was that Valjean realized just how well he had been cornered. He had always known Javert to be clever, but it had not been impossible to out-maneuver him. At last, however, the cat had the mouse by the tail, and both of them knew it.

Valjean steepled his fingers together, resting his forehead on his hands as he ran through his options. To refuse would leave him wandless and captive; it also might very well lead to his death, as well as to Javert’s, no matter how much the Auror pretended not to need help. Still, to Vow to return to Azkaban... The thought made him sick.

Several minutes passed in silence as Valjean thought it over. Then, another idea occurred to him. Raising his head, he said, “I have a condition of my own.”

Javert leaned forward. “Have you?”

“Yes.” His voice was firm, though his hands shook. “I will accept your terms,” Valjean said. “But...” and here he felt a fierce determination rise in his chest “- you will Vow to ensure Cosette is given a loving family.”

Javert’s forehead creased; whatever he had been expecting Valjean to say, that was not it.

“Again with the girl?” he asked. “I cannot decide if you are serious in your desire to see the whelp protected, or if you are just trying to spite me now.”

“I made a promise to her mother,” Valjean said. “And though this may come as a surprise to you, I do not have to be forced to make an Unbreakable Vow to keep my promises.”

Javert appeared to mull this over. His expression bespoke his distaste for the idea, which Valjean did not doubt came in part from his unwillingness to allow Valjean any sort of concession.

When the Auror still appeared skeptical, Valjean pressed. “Think, Javert, it is me that you want. To set the girl up with a proper guardian will be no hardship for you, and I... I will be at your disposal.”

Pursing his lips, Javert finally capitulated. “Done,” he said, “but you will swear to your part first.”

“Agreed.”

Javert stood and tucked Valjean’s wand out of sight. Then he approached where the other man sat. “It is required that we hold hands for this.”

Valjean rose to meet the Auror; though he could not escape the dread which filled him, if this was
what it took to keep Cosette safe, then he would not hesitate, no matter what it cost him.

Javert’s fingers were cool against his wrist as they brushed over his pulse point; Valjean felt his heart beat faster as the two joined hands. Javert raised his wand, holding it just above where their palms touched. The Auror met his eyes in a silent challenge, as though he still expected Valjean to pull away and forfeit. Valjean held his gaze unwaveringly, and after a moment, Javert spoke.

“Will you, Jean Valjean, swear not to make any attempt, by mundane or magical means, to escape my custody?”

Licking his lips, Valjean said, “I will.”

At his response, a thin ribbon of fire issued from the tip of Javert’s wand and wound around their hands like a chain.

“And will you use your magic only in the ways I do not prohibit?” Javert continued.

His voice was harder when Valjean answered back, “I will.”

A second tongue of fire poured from the wand and coiled around their conjoined hands.

“And, when it is decided by the court that you are to return to Azkaban, will you go without offering resistance?”

“‘I will,” said Valjean, “provided you, Javert, also swear that, to the best of your ability, you will ensure Fantine’s daughter, Cosette, is taken in by a good and loving family.”

A beat passed, but then Javert answered, “‘I will,” and the third fiery ribbon issued from the wand to join their hands. The three ribbons fused and glowed brighter, a single binding matrix of red flame, and then the magic sank into their skin, leaving no trace but the memory of its presence.

Javert released his grip on Valjean's arm. “Subject to revision upon my say-so,” he began, “you shall not use your magic with the intent to harm or incapacitate me in any way, nor shall the use of Unforgivable Curses ever be permissible, is that clear?”

“It is,” Valjean confirmed, “though I should have thought that by now you would see such a measure is not necessary.”

Javert withdrew Valjean's wand again from his pocket and held it out, his mouth turned down in what was already regret for the agreement.

Unable to stop himself trembling, Valjean reached out to take it. His fingers closed around the handle, and no sooner had he done so than the wood warmed affectionately to his touch. Drawing it close to him, he turned it around, re-familiarizing himself with every little detail, from the honey-colored wood to the grotesque of a lion’s head carved into the end.

He turned, pointing his wand at the coffee table.

“Engorgio.”

The coffee table swelled, doubling in size.

“Reducio,” Valjean said, watching appreciatively as the coffee table shrunk again to its previous state.

“If you are satisfied,” the Auror began, “then we ought to get moving.”
“Yes,” Valjean agreed. “Your apartment?”

Javert nodded. “Do you have an Apparition License?”

The question caught Valjean off guard. “I did once,” he said cautiously.

“So long as you don’t Splinch yourself,” Javert said. “Though I am qualified to perform healing magic, you should know that I am disinclined to be sympathetic.”

“It will not be an issue,” Valjean assured him.

“Momentarily, then,” said the Auror. “Apparate into the hallway outside of my front door. If the Death Eaters did indeed go looking for us there, they may have left a trap in the event one of us returned.”

Valjean nodded; Javert turned on his heel and vanished like he had stepped around a corner, only it was into thin air. Pleased to travel under his own power again, Valjean held his wand with the gentleness of a parent. He too, Disapparated, and No. 4 was left empty.

Valjean reappeared with a quiet pop in a dim hallway. Javert stood next to him in front of a white-painted door. Something of the way the Auror looked at him said that he was half-surprised Valjean had, in fact, turned up. Valjean hoped his own expression conveyed some sort of confidence; it was possible that the prospect of earning Javert’s approval - or at least avoiding his disapproval - was more nerve-wracking than the threat the Death Eaters posed.

“Well?” Valjean asked, gesturing at the door. “What do you suggest we do?”

The Auror opened his mouth to answer and then closed it, frowning. He leaned down, looking carefully at the lock.

“Someone has been here,” he said quietly. “See - the door is unlatched.”

Valjean blinked, and then he saw what Javert had noticed: though the door was pulled almost snug, it was open just enough to prevent the latch from sliding into the brass strike plate.

“They could still be here,” Valjean warned as the Auror passed his wand over the door.

“They could,” Javert agreed. “So keep your guard up. Incapacitate anything that moves, ask questions later.” As he moved his wand, ghostly fire flickered on the door’s surface. “That could be problematic,” he muttered. Looking up, he added, “The door is definitely cursed. When I open it, it will burst into flames. Be prepared to help extinguish them.”

Valjean nodded, gripping his wand nervously.

Standing back, Javert flicked his wrist. “Reducto.”

The spell hit the knob, and the door flew open, instantly erupting into flames.

“Aguamenti!” Valjean said, a fountain of water streaming from his wand in response. The fire hissed and spat where the water struck it, struggling against the attempt to quell its ferocity. The Auror added a spell of his own, and a thick cloud of steam rolled into the hallway.

“So much for the element of surprise,” Javert said through gritted teeth.

Water puddled on the floor, pooling around their shoes. Valjean grimaced as it seeped through the
soles of his boots.

All at once, the flames guttered out, the strength of the spell exhausted by the onslaught. As the steam began to clear, Valjean said softly, “Evanesco,” and the puddled water Vanished.

Lifting his head, Valjean found Javert standing as if transfixed in the doorway. Looking past him, he saw why. On the other side of the door, the contents of the Auror’s apartment had been totally ransacked. Broken pieces of furniture lay scattered on the floor amidst papers torn to shreds. The kitchen cabinets hung off their hinges, and a fire smoldering in the hearth suggested that other things had been burned.

“Oh,” Valjean whispered, taking in the extent of the destruction. “Javert, I’m so sorry.”

The Auror’s voice was emotionless when he replied, “It doesn’t matter,” though Valjean could see his hands shaking slightly. “It is a warning,” he went on, “and a taunt. The curse on the door was just a calling-card - this is the real message, that they have the power to reach us anywhere, regardless of how many wards are on a place, or whether -” He cut himself off. “It doesn’t matter,” he said again. “It is possible, however, that they destroyed the records we need. We will have to search.”

Without looking back at him, Javert strode over to the fireplace, crouching and examining the contents. Valjean followed after him more slowly, trying to not step on the strewn papers or broken china, but finding it difficult. In the center of the room, where the dining table had sat before, he stopped to survey the damage. Truly, the small space looked as though a bomb had gone off within it: the wooden chairs were reduced to splintered pieces, and the table lay on its side halfway across the room.

“As I suspected,” said Javert from where he knelt by the fireplace, “there are the remnants of parchment pieces here. It is probable that they burned anything that might provide us with information.”

Valjean turned in place, casting his eyes around for anything that had been left untouched, but to no avail. “What if we were to -” he began, but then his eyes found the wall to the right of the door, and he stopped. “God above.”

At that, Javert stood, raising his wand in apparent alarm. When he saw what Valjean was staring at, he cursed under his breath. Joining Valjean in the center of the room, the pair looked in mutual disgust at the sigil scrawled across the plaster. Outlined crudely in a congealed, rusty fluid was the image of a skull with a snake in its mouth.

“Is that... blood?” asked Valjean breathlessly.

“It looks like it,” the Auror replied, grim-faced. He walked up to the wall, inspecting the drawing closely. “It does not smell acidic,” he said over his shoulder, “so it probably is not dragon’s blood. Otherwise, it’s hard to say what the source is, though human seems likely.”

Queasy, Valjean looked away. “Maybe we ought to clean things up,” he heard himself suggest. “There could be reports here that they missed.”

“I’ll check the bedroom,” said the Auror. “You see what you can do with this mess.”

Valjean nodded, crouching down and muttering, “Reparo.” The scraps of paper before him rose into the air and spun in a tiny cyclone until they found their missing pieces and fused back into one. He repeated the spell, and a few more pages reassembled themselves, along with a broken chair leg. He bit his lip - there was so much to fix, and at the rate he was going it would take
hours. He was about to try again when Javert stepped out from around the bedroom door.

“Valjean,” he said, “you had better come and take a look at this.”

Rising, Valjean crossed the room and braced himself; whatever Javert wished to show him, he doubted it was anything good.

The Auror held open the door to let him pass, and Valjean stopped in horror. The bedroom was in no less disarray than the rest of the apartment; drawers were rent apart, and the mattress looked as though some great beast had taken it between its jaws. Among the wreckage, a body lay prone on floor, covered in blood. It was that of an older woman, wearing slacks and a Christmas sweater, though it was March. A pair of gold-framed spectacles had fallen at her side, her throat slit open in a gaping wound. The room stank; Valjean’s stomach churned in response.

“I daresay we know where the blood on the wall came from,” Javert said dryly.

“Who is she?” asked Valjean, feeling faint.

“My landlady.” The Auror sighed. “Muggle. Probably heard the commotion and came to see what was going on.”

Valjean knelt beside the corpse. Amidst the mess on the floorboards, he could just make out the outline of a bloody footprint. The closer proximity raised another alarming question - at that angle, he could see the landlady’s throat had not so much been slit as it had been torn apart.

“No spell did this,” Valjean said quietly.

“I had come to the same conclusion,” Javert nodded. “It is possible a loup-garou was involved—rumor has it the Death Eaters have been recruiting among them, much as they have been with the other Dark creatures.”

Sitting back on his haunches, Valjean asked, “Did you find what you were looking for?”

“No,” Javert replied bitterly. “They certainly made a thorough job of it.”

“I tried to fix things,” Valjean said, “but,” he went on helplessly, “there was so much.”

For a moment, Javert's expression seemed to soften somewhat. “Come with me,” he said. “It may take us both together.”

Valjean followed the Auror out into what had been the kitchen.

“On three,” Javert told him. “One, two -”

“Reparo,” they said in unison.

The difference was immediate. All the debris collectively rose off the floor and reassembled: chairs pieced themselves together shard by shard, parchment scraps were made whole, cabinets straightened themselves. Valjean looked on in wonder; plainly, Javert's predilection for order threaded its way through his magic as well.

After several minutes, the living space was set more or less to rights. A stack of papers sat on top of the kitchen table, now standing vertical. Valjean made his way over to sift through them, though Javert shook his head.

“Read them if you like,” he said, “but I doubt any of it will be relevant. I am going to fix the
bedroom as best I can, and try to figure out what to do next. Without those reports, we are blind to what they may be planning.”

The Auror left, and Valjean stood quietly leafing through the parchment. Javert was correct - the pages that had not been burned were all accounts related to quite elementary matters. There was an issue of illicit trafficking in Venomous Tentacula seeds, a case of Underage Magic (the young wizard in question had apparently hexed a Muggle bully, turning his ears into kumquats), and several instances of Apparition without a license. None of it seemed at all connected to Dark wizardry.

As Javert re-entered the room, Valjean hummed in frustration.

“Nothing?” asked the Auror. “I did not find anything in the bedroom, either.”

“Nothing,” Valjean agreed.

“Here,” Javert said, holding out a small pile of clothes. “I would rather you didn’t wear the same thing every day, and I suppose you may enjoy a change of apparel yourself.”

“Thank you,” Valjean said in surprise. He accepted the clothes with gratitude; the Auror was correct to think he might wish to wear something different.

“I expect they will not fit you well,” Javert told him, “but you can alter them with magic.”

Valjean tucked them into his robes, shuffling again through the stack of reports. One page caught his eye, and he paused, frowning. The last report in the stack was curious. It was brief and uninformative, only describing how a Muggle family of four was found dead in their home. The address was given, but little else. “This is strange,” he said.

Javert came to look over his shoulder at the document.

“I had forgotten about this,” the Auror murmured, taking the page from him. “No-one else thought it worth investigating, but I flagged it. The report is woefully lacking - there is nothing in it to even suggest magic was involved - but why would our office have received a report if there was not?”

“You think it's a cover-up?” Valjean asked.

The Auror pursed his lips. “I cannot make a judgement based on such minimal information,” he replied, “but it is out of place, I will admit. The Death Eaters did not see fit to destroy the page, though, which makes me question how useful it is to us.”

“Or perhaps,” suggested Valjean, a hint of reproach in his voice, “they suspected wizards would not concern themselves with the deaths of Muggles.”

Javert looked at him sidelong. “Perhaps,” he acknowledged. “It is a tenuous lead, make no mistake, but it is the only lead we have. What was the address?”

Looking down at the parchment, Valjean read off, “Number twelve-hundred, apartment twenty-four, the Rue Morand. I wonder where that is at.”

“The Eleventh Arrondissement. We should go there and find out what we can.”

Valjean’s gaze shifted to the bedroom. “What about her?” he asked.

“What about her?” Javert returned, uncomprehending.
“We shouldn't just leave her there.”

The Auror raised an eyebrow. “And what do you imagine we do, then?”

“Well,” Valjean spluttered, “we should close her eyes at least, wouldn't you say?”

Javert exhaled slowly. “I suppose you may do what you must,” he said, “though your ministrations will make her no less dead.”

**Callous,** Valjean thought, but he was glad that at least the Auror did not mean to stop him. The bedroom, when he entered it, looked decidedly improved. Everything was back where it belonged, with the exception of the unfortunate landlady. Javert had Vanished the mess on the floor, and with a wave of his wand, Valjean cleaned her clothes of blood as well.

He bowed his head, a wordless prayer on his lips. For several minutes, Valjean stood in silence. He wondered if she had a family to miss her, or if his brief vigil would be the only remembrance she received.

Bending down, Valjean reached out a hand to close the woman’s eyes. The moment he touched her, a sudden, deafening shriek rent the air. Clamping his hands over his ears, Valjean stumbled backwards in surprise.

Javert burst into the room behind him.

“Damn!” he swore. “Caterwauling Charm. We have to go, they must have lookouts posted -”

He was interrupted by a crack in the air behind him as a trio of masked Death Eaters Apparated into the apartment. The nearest sent a curse flying through the open doorway at the Auror’s back - a quick Shield Charm from Valjean sent it rebounding off-course.

Javert cast a series of jinxes over his shoulder, and their attackers dove out of the way; one jet of light found its mark, and the Death Eater it struck fell to the floor. In the ensuing confusion, the Auror grabbed Valjean by the arm and Disapparated; casting a final Shield over their disappearing forms, Valjean was pulled along into the void. He could only hope that where they went, the Death Eaters would be unable to follow.
Hello, all. I'm updating tonight instead of tomorrow so I don't have an excuse to further procrastinate my homework. Also, it has come to my attention that Ao3 occasionally inserts random spaces into sentences that contain italics. I have tried to correct this, but may have missed some instances. Thank you to those who have left kudos and reviews, I thrive off of attention. ;)

*Ten points to Ravenclaw for anyone who spots the architectural reference I inserted in this chapter, solely because it amused me.

When the world around them grew solid again, it was in a small park surrounded entirely by trees. 


“I’m sorry,” said Valjean. “I had no idea when I touched her that it would -”

“It was my fault,” Javert interjected. “I should have thought - I should have known -” His fingers curled into fists at his sides, frustration written in every line of his posture.

Valjean rested his hand awkwardly on the Auror’s shoulder. “It’s alright,” he said. “We’re alright.”

“Yes,” Javert said, exhaling slowly, “thanks to some quick thinking.” He looked down at the hand on his shoulder, and then up at Valjean. Valjean pulled his hand away.

“Where are we?” he asked the Auror.

“The Square Jules Verne.”

Valjean took in the sight appreciatively. A tall fence enclosed the park, and the trees cast a long shadow across the greenspace. It was a tiny oasis in the city, the spring buds crisp against the hard lines of the buildings beyond. In the corner, a wisteria plant was draped in delicate cascades of purple flowers.

“The Rue Morand is just across the street,” Javert went on, “but it was safer to Apparate here than on the sidewalk.”

Valjean nodded his comprehension. So early in the season, the park was abandoned. A paved path ran to the front gate, and it was to this which Javert directed his attention. Side by side, the pair walked through the dappled afternoon sunlight and out into the bustling neighborhood.

At the intersection, mid-rise apartment complexes grew out from all sides of the street, and cars trundled by one after another.

“That's the building, there,” said Javert, indicating the apartments on the opposite corner. “We can enter, but will doubtless be stopped by the receptionist. Should it be necessary, I am prepared to use magic, despite this being a largely Muggle district. I would advise you not to follow suit.”
“Is that a suggestion, or an order?” Valjean asked, only half-joking.

Javert considered this for a moment. “A suggestion,” he settled on. “We do not know what we are getting ourselves into here.”

The traffic light changed, and they crossed the street. In so doing, Valjean eyed the Auror's robes, the edging on which glittered gold in the sunlight.

“You know,” he commented, “you might have dressed more inconspicuously.”

Javert looked down and snorted. “It doesn't matter what the Muggles think. If we meet a wizard, I want them to know who they're dealing with.”

Valjean shook his head, but refrained from comment. On the far side of the street, Javert motioned him along. Row after row of apartments stacked above the narrow lane, their balconies projecting over the sidewalk. A rider on a moped scooted past down the one-way.

The Auror came to a stop outside of a pair of sliding double doors. Potted plants sat on either side, softening the concrete cityscape.

Turning to Valjean, Javert said, “Stay close, and keep your wits about you.”

He approached the doors, holding out his hand to pull the nearest open, but it slid out of the way automatically. Javert startled, regarding the doors with a certain degree of suspicion.

Leaning forward, Valjean muttered, “They’re supposed to do that. Just walk in.”

Though he appeared unconvinced, Javert stepped over the threshold, and Valjean followed behind. The doors shut automatically after them, a red sensor light blinking above.

The lobby of the apartment was a plain, unassuming sort of space, with white walls and some chairs near the door for visitors. An older man with wispy white hair sat behind the front desk, idly reading the newspaper. He glanced up as they entered, doing a double-take when he saw Javert. Inwardly, Valjean groaned. A little less melodrama on the Auror's part might have served them better.

“Afternoon, Messieurs,” said the man at the desk, laying down his newspaper. “What can I do for you?”

“Afternoon,” Javert returned smoothly. “We are here on account of a Monsieur...” He consulted the parchment claimed from his apartment as if to confirm a name. “...Archer Regnier, and would speak to him if possible.”

At that, the receptionist’s eyes widened. “Oh no, Monsieur, haven’t you heard? That’s not - well, it’s - ah - I hate to speak of it, truth be told.”

Cocking his head to one side, Javert assembled an expression of ignorance. “Please, if you would, Monsieur, ah, Hebert,” he began, glancing surreptitiously at the man’s name tag, “I have this document here -” he gesticulated with the parchment “- that I had been hoping to get some clarification on. Is something the matter with Monsieur Regnier?”

With a pained look, the receptionist explained. “I am sorry to have to be the one to inform you, but Regnier is dead, Monsieur, and his family as well.”

Apparently shocked, Javert repeated, “Dead? When?”
“About... a week and a half ago? Maybe two?” Hebert shook his head. “Awful, Monsieur, just awful. The scene haunts me at night, I can tell you. Archer and Ellie, and their two little ones, all sitting around the dinner table, stone-cold.” He shuddered.

“What happened?” asked Javert, drawing closer to the desk.

“Now, now,” said Valjean, adopting a demeanor of concern which was only acting in part. “Can’t you see the man is distraught?”

Hebert, in point of fact, seemed to experience a certain thrill at the sordidness of the affair. He nevertheless took Valjean at his word, nodding vigorously and drawing a handkerchief from his pocket to dab at his eyes.

“I will tell you, Monsieur, I will tell you,” he said. “Well, there I was one evening - I was working the night shift then, but ever since I’ve refused to do it, gives me the heebie-jeebies. Anyhow, there I was, sitting at my desk, when I heard knocking on a door upstairs. It went on and on and on, and then -” He broke off, as if lost in thought.

“And then?” Valjean prompted.

“And then one of the tenants, Thérèse, came down to say she was wanting to talk to Ellie - the two were friends, and I daresay Thérèse has few enough of those, poor dear - only Ellie wasn’t opening the door. She knew they were home, and she was starting to get worried. ‘Well, alright,’ I said, ‘I’ll put a call up.’ I did so, and got no response. Now I was getting worried, too, Messieurs. It wasn’t all that late yet - Archer had walked past me, home from work, not but an hour before! - and there was no reason they shouldn’t pick up the phone.”

“I see,” Javert murmured. “Go on.”

“Yes, well,” Hebert obliged, leaning forward, “I told the girl I'd go upstairs and see what was what.”

The Auror frowned. “Do you not have building security?”

“We do, Monsieur,” the receptionist replied emphatically. “But LeMessurier wasn’t answering on his walkie-talkie - we discovered after the fact that he was knocked out cold in the basement! No sign of injury, either, very strange. If he were the drinking type, I might think... but he isn't, and anyway, there was no smell of alcohol on him.”

“Strange indeed,” Valjean said mildly, glancing to the side. The Auror met his eyes and nodded.

“What happened when you went upstairs?” Javert inquired. His tone was earnest, affecting that of one caught up in the spectacle of the tale, but the glint in his eyes was one Valjean recognized. At last, they were getting to what they had come for.

In a hushed voice, Hebert explained, “I got out the master key - we have to have one in case of emergencies - and headed up the stairs to the second floor. I stopped when I got to the landing - it was dead quiet up there, really eerie, Messieurs, let me tell you. Two apartments on that floor with kids, and absolute silence. There's nothing like it.”

“Regnier had children,” Javert recalled. “Which was the other apartment?”

“Thérèse’s,” Hebert told him. “Three boys, and a bundle of trouble most days. She calls them her little cubs. Must’ve put them to bed early that night.”

“I suppose so,” agreed the Auror.
“Thérèse had followed me up the stairs. I unlocked Archer’s door, pushed it open, and -” He broke off for a moment, eyes wide. “- there they were. All four of them, sitting at the dinner table, lights on, turkey half-eaten, dead as a doornail.” He leaned further across the desk, his voice dropping to a low whisper. “I’ll never forget the looks on their faces, Messieurs, not ‘til the day I die. They were frozen in the most hideous screams imaginable. It was terrible.”

Valjean reached out a hand sympathetically, which Hebert accepted. “The police were called, I imagine?”

“Oh yes,” Hebert nodded. “Thérèse was so upset, poor woman. The police came, and useless as they are, they couldn’t find anything wrong with the bodies, as if they had up and died like magic. Well, they eventually ruled it a gas leak, and the whole building had to be evacuated and tested. Took several weeks, and they never did find anything conclusive. Bastards. If it was a gas leak what killed the Regniers, I'll eat my hat.”

“Thank you,” Javert said. “The information is very helpful.”

Hebert waved this away. “Of course, of course.” As Valjean and Javert prepared to go, he asked, “Where did you gentlemen say you were from again?”

Before Javert could answer, Valjean replied, “The bank.”

Hebert nodded sagely. “Only natural,” he said. “Though I'm surprised you weren't notified when they died.”

“Oh, I'm sure other departments were,” Valjean hurriedly clarified. “We're with -”

“Obliviate,” Javert interjected. Hebert’s expression turned vacant and dreamy. He slouched down to lean on his elbows, staring off into space.

Valjean frowned at the Auror. “You didn't have to do that,” he said. “A man of his age, you could hurt him.”

“He will be fine,” said Javert. “If anyone else shows up around here asking questions, he won't be able to answer them. That's safer for everyone, him included.”

Shaking his head, Valjean said only, “If you say so.”

“The Regniers were killed by Death Eaters,” pronounced the Auror. “The Killing Curse is the only one by which Muggles might have been left in such a state. That in and of itself is not unusual as of late. What is unusual is this.”

He stood next to Valjean, holding out the parchment that they both might look it over.

“This report is incomplete,” Javert said. “There is a strange lack of detail - for instance, no mention of the expression found on the Muggles’ faces, which indicates the possible use of the Cruciatius Curse - but most notably of all, the name of the Auror who wrote the report is omitted. Such an oversight would be unprofessional under good circumstances. Considering what we are dealing with, however…”

“A cover-up is looking likely,” Valjean concluded.

Javert scowled. “I dislike to entertain the thought, but it does seem increasingly possible. No analysis of the scene, no theories on who the culprit might be based on the modus operandi, and no name to trace the report back to in order to seek elaboration. I do not care for the implications.”
Behind them, the doors slid open with a gust of air. Turning to look, Valjean saw a short woman with mousy brown hair enter the lobby. She was dressed in no fewer than seven shawls pulled over a tunic and sweatpants. A tie-dyed headband scarcely kept her mess of curls in check. She stopped short when she saw the two men standing near the desk, her eyes fixed on Javert. She bore an expression Valjean recognized all too well: fear.

“Mademoiselle,” Valjean said kindly, “whatever is the matter?”

She backed up towards the doors. “Please,” she begged, “I haven't said nothin’ to no-one, I swear it!”

Javert turned as well, more puzzled than anything. “Mademoiselle?”

“We aren’t going to hurt you,” Valjean said softly. “You don’t need to be afraid.”

“Then...” began the woman, her voice harsh. “why’ve you got one of them with you?” She inclined her head in Javert’s direction.

There was a silence, and the two men regarded her in mutual bafflement. It was a hunch, obvious the moment it occurred to him, which led Valjean to say, “You are Thérèse, aren’t you?”

The woman nodded, frozen in place.

Javert exhaled slowly. “I am not the first Auror you have met, am I?” he guessed.

Thérèse shook her head no, and the other shoe dropped.

“Of course,” the Auror sighed, “Mademoiselle. I believe there has been a misunderstanding. You have, perhaps, been threatened to ensure your silence. Whomever it was to have distressed you in this way, I am unaffiliated with. I would - we would - like, however, to talk to you.”

Thérèse composed herself somewhat, but wariness hung about her all the same. “We had better be goin’ upstairs, then,” she said. “Follow me.”

She passed them both, and headed for the stairs. In so doing, Valjean noticed her eyes, which were a startling gold color. He drew breath sharply as he realized what that meant; Thérèse looked askance at him, no doubt aware of what he was thinking.

She bid a good morning to Hebert, who returned it, still obviously in a daze.

“Such a polite girl,” he muttered, talking to the wall. “Shame about the jaundice, though...”

Thérèse climbed the stairs, Valjean following after her, the Auror bringing up the rear. As they walked, Javert leaned in close to the back of Valjean’s head.

“Did you see...?” he said in undertones.

“Yes,” Valjean replied.

Even in the wizarding world, to have golden eyes was to be unnatural, or more precisely, Valjean corrected himself, it was to be super natural. Years of reading material had only ever come to one conclusion on the matter, and it was this: that those with the yellow eyes were possessed by the spirit of the wolf; that is to say, they belonged to the ranks of the loup-garou.

At the top of the stairs, Thérèse fumbled with her keys, struggling to open her apartment door.
Within such close quarters, Valjean could see that she trembled. At last, the lock clicked open, and she pushed her way inside.

“Please, come in,” she called to the pair behind her. “Can I get you somethin’?”

“Perhaps some mugs of tea all around would be wise,” Valjean suggested, ducking under the doorway.

Thérèse nodded her acknowledgement and crossed what Valjean supposed functioned as the salon to the kitchen, where she put on a kettle of water. Javert, too, stepped inside and shut the door behind him.

The apartment was the homiest place Valjean had seen in some time. Rugs covered the wooden floor, while bundles of dried herbs hung from pegs near the ceiling. An honest-to-goodness fireplace was built into the wall near the couch; somehow, Valjean doubted that feature came standard in the building without a bit of magical intervention. A black cat was sleeping curled up in front of the flickering flames.

The kettle whistled, and Thérèse poured the steaming water into mugs. Incrementally more at ease in her home than in the hall, she moved carefully but with a fluid grace, and she was nearly silent when she walked. Valjean marveled at it, for such creatures were rare.

Loup-garou were classified as a sub-species of werewolf; unlike their more prevalent cousins, loup-garou were born, not made, and the gene ran through families, sometimes skipping several generations before showing up again. Whereas the werewolf transformed under the full moon, loup-garou were capable of shifting their forms at will, keeping their human minds while in their animal state. Some magizoologists had proposed that loup-garou were, therefore, a natural form of Animagus, but these theories were largely unpopular with politicians. Among wizards, they were easily recognized by their gold, canine eyes.

A little boy came running down the hall, holding aloft a toy airplane and making the appropriate sound effects. He stopped short when he saw the visitors standing in the salon, and turned to his mother questioningly.

Thérèse knelt down and put a hand on her son’s shoulder. “Jacques,” she said quietly, “this be one of those times where you need to do as I say. Please take your brothers and play quietly in the bedroom. I’ll come tell you when you can come out, you understand?”

Jacques nodded seriously and treated the visitors to another uncertain look before disappearing back into the hallway.

Thérèse carried the mugs into the salon balanced on a tray, which she set on the coffee table. “Have a seat,” she said, gesturing to the couch. She waited until both Valjean and Javert were sitting before dropping herself into the armchair adjacent to Valjean. Then she reached for a mug, sipping from it nervously. Valjean took a mug as well, holding the warm cup in his hands. The Auror declined to take a drink, a fact which was lost on no-one.

Thérèse cleared her throat. “Maybe you gentlemen might start with introducin’ yourselves.”

“Of course,” said Valjean. “Jean is my given name.”

Thérèse gave him a shy smile at that. “My youngest’s name be Jean.” She looked hesitantly at the Auror.
“Javert,” he said.

The woman’s face paled considerably, and she clutched at the hem of her shawl.

“It’s alright,” Valjean said softly.

“But -” Thérèse licked her lips. “If you say so.”

“Mademoiselle,” Valjean began, “could you tell -”

“‘Madame’, please,” Thérèse interrupted. “Or just Thérèse. I’ve not been ‘Mademoiselle’ in... not in a long time.”

“Madame, then,” Valjean tried a second time.

“Thérèse,” Javert interjected, his voice turned cold. “Surname?”

“M-Marie.”

“Thérèse Marie,” the Auror repeated. “You are, I trust, listed on the Registry kept by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures?”

Valjean closed his eyes in dismay.

“Yes!” Thérèse’s voice was defensive, but the panic had returned to her eyes. “I can give you my registration number if need be.”

“And were I to look up that number,” Javert said slyly, “would I find the address associated with it to be one in Paris?”

Caught, Thérèse did not speak, merely stared at her lap. Her lower lip quivered.

“You do know,” Javert went on, aware already of the answer, “that to move without notifying the department of a change in address is grounds for arrest, do you not?”

“Javert!” Valjean exclaimed, turning to look incredulously at the Auror. “Is this really the time?”

Javert glared back obstinately. “The Death Eaters are recruiting from among the werewolves and the loup-garou alike. Their locations are on record for a reason.”

“It’s just -” Thérèse explained, growing increasingly hysterical, “- I hate it, Monsieur! I hate that I can’t get a job, that the moment I don’t wear contacts, somebody’s gonna have me thrown out of any shop I walk into, and on top of it all, I live my life as a number! Do you know what that feels like, Messieurs, to be nothing to no-one but a number?”

“Yes,” Valjean said simply.

There was a very pregnant pause, and the only sound was the gentle crackle of the fire. Seeing he was serious, Thérèse’s face softened. Valjean could feel Javert’s eyes on him, but he did not dare look, afraid to know what renewed condemnation his expression held.

It therefore came as a shock when the Auror said resignedly, “I suppose that, to my... companion’s point, this is a discussion that could wait. Thérèse - Madame - perhaps we should begin again.”

Thérèse swallowed. “Do you mean it, Monsieur?”
“We came here to investigate a certain matter,” Javert said as Valjean sipped at his tea. “Anything you could tell us would be appreciated.”

She nodded, touching the star-shaped pendant at her neckline.

Taking up the narrative, Valjean went on, “We spoke already to Monsieur Hebert downstairs, regarding an incident involving your neighbors, the Regniers.”

A frown puckered Thérèse’s lips. “I’ve talked to a couple Aurors already about it...” she said.

Valjean nodded. “So we had gathered. And I do not think it is your own account of matters which is in question.”

“Indeed.” Javert sat forward, laying the parchment out on the coffee table. “This is the only record the Auror Office has of the incident.”

Thérèse looked over the paper, and her frown became more pronounced. “But that be impossible,” she said. “The first man I spoke to, I told him e’rything I knew. ‘Twas far more than what’s written here.”

Valjean and Javert glanced at one another. “We wondered about that,” said Valjean. “Someone, it seems, is trying to obscure the truth, and we mean to find out who. If you could, would you be willing to say one more time both what you know about the Regniers and about the Aurors who spoke to you before?”

Thérèse took a deep breath. “I will,” she said. “Even if they k-kill me for it, I’ll tell.” She set down her empty mug and collected her thoughts.

“Archer, Ellie - the whole family, as far as I know - was Muggles. Ellie and I, we were friends. She’d come over sometimes, said she liked the energy of my place, wantin’ for me to give her card readin’s. I predicted the birth of their son that way, saw it in the cards before the doctor did.”

She beamed with pride for a moment, before noticing the look on Javert’s face. Hastily, she went on, “None of them really knew nothin’ ‘bout magic, it was just Ellie liked the mystery of it, I guess. I never minded, she was sweet, and her kiddos kept my boys company.”

A beat passed, and when she spoke again, her voice was tinged with sadness. “I don’t know how they made them mad, Messieurs, I don’t. And maybe they didn’t - maybe the servants to the Dark Lord only killed them for sport. All I know be that one afternoon, two weeks ago, e’ry oracle in the house turned dire. The horseshoe fell off the door, my malachite cracked in half, and no matter how many times I shuffled my tarot deck, ‘twas always the Death card I pulled off the top. Well, I was in a twist, Messieurs, as you can imagine. I Floo’ed the boys to stay with their aunt and then sat in the dark, waiting to see what came of it.”

“And then?” Valjean whispered.

Thérèse met his gaze. “And then they came. You know who I mean,” she added, looking at Javert. “You put their faces on posters, ‘cause that’s the closest you can get to catchin’ them. They wear hoods, and masks like skulls, only they went maskless that night. I s’pect they thought the whole building was nothing but Muggles, and that they wouldn’t be recognized. I heard a window break.”

The woman shuddered. “I creeped out in the hall, but didn’t hear anything else. They must’ve cast Silencin’ Charms. All at once, there was this great green flash from the crack around their door, and I knew they were -” Her shoulders shook, and Valjean poured her another cup of tea.
“I’m sorry,” he said. “Truly.”

She sniffled. “Well, Messieurs, I couldn’t not do somethin’ about it. I borrowed an owl and wrote that somethin’ real bad had happened. Within an hour, I had a knock on the door from an Auror.”

Keenly, Javert asked, “Who was it?”

“A man name of Marquet.”

The Auror’s brow furrowed. “Is that so?”

“Monsieur?”

Javert shook his head. “Marquet was found dead in his home on Tuesday. It may be unrelated, but somehow I doubt it.”

Thérèse’s eyes fell to the floor. “Sorry to hear it,” she said. “He was nice. Didn’t say nothin’ ‘bout me bein’ what I am, neither.”

If this last was somewhat pointed, then Javert did not acknowledge it. He merely asked, “What did you tell him?”

“Same thing I just told you. He took a bunch of notes, and then had a look at their apartment. Oh, it was awful. The mess, Monsieur, you can’t imagine, and there they were –” Her voice cracked, and Valjean rested a hand on her arm.

“We’ve already heard from Hebert,” he said. “You don’t need to describe it.”

She nodded gratefully, and wiped her nose on a shawl.

“You say Marquet was ‘nice’,” Javert said musingly, “but my presence in your lobby frightened you. Who else came to you here?”

Thérèse took a deep breath. “Two days after,” she began, “another Auror showed up. He said his name was Vidocq.”

“Vidocq!” Javert exclaimed. “That snake - it is a mystery to me why he was ever hired.”

“Who is he?” Valjean asked, turning where he sat to look at Javert.

The Auror crossed his arms. “A wizard charged with multiple accounts of larceny. He only got off after he claimed he wanted to turn informant - he gave the Aurors who apprehended him a few names, and they made more arrests. He was kept on after that, and eventually they promoted him to Auror, Third Class. I’ve never trusted him.” Looking back at Thérèse, Javert asked, “What did Vidocq do when he arrived at your apartment?”

“Asked a lot of questions,” Thérèse replied. “He seemed to know what I’d told Marquet, but he thought there was more to the story, kept askin’ if I’d recognized any of the folks what done it. I told him, I didn’t have a clue, didn’t see no-one’s face, but he didn’t seem to believe me. I was sweatin’ bullets, Monsieur. At first I thought he was just really determined to track those people down, but now I’m not so sure. I don’t know if I ever convinced him I been tellin’ the truth, but finally he said that I was to keep my mouth shut and not discuss the matter with anyone else, even other Aurors, and that if I did, then he w-would have me arrested for how I was registered.”

Her voice broke on the last word, and Valjean reflected that it was no wonder she had panicked upon seeing them. Not, he thought to himself, that Javert helped matters any.
Javert shifted in his seat. He looked as though he wanted to say something, but thought better of it.

“Thank you,” Valjean said. “I’m sure that was hard to tell.”

Thérèse shrugged this off. “What will you do now, Monsieur?” she asked. It was unclear to which of them she was directing her question.

The Auror was the one who elected to answer. “Our purpose here was to learn what we could of the Regniers and the events surrounding their deaths. We have accomplished that much, and I am willing to call that sufficient for the afternoon,” he said.

Thérèse’s shoulders slumped in relief as she perceived what Javert was getting at. “You mean... you won’t report me, Monsieur?” she asked tentatively.

Javert regarded her unreadably. “Not today, Madame Marie,” he responded. “Though I would strongly advise you to update the Registry with your current address. I can only speak for my patience, not Vidocq’s.”

She nodded her understanding. “Would you care for anything to eat?” she asked. “I know it be early yet for supper, but...”

Javert dipped his head. “We have not eaten, Madame, so I think we may accept your invitation.”

Thérèse smiled timidly at that. “There be stew,” she said. “Beef and vegetable. I will tell the boys as well.”

Standing, Thérèse waved her wand, and a chorus of pots, plates, and utensils began to organize themselves in the kitchen. She disappeared down the hallway, only to be rejoined minutes later by a small gaggle of children. The youngest was barely toddling on his little legs, and clutched a blanket to his chest. His eyes, Valjean noticed, were gold like his mother’s.

Immediately charmed, Valjean went to kneel among the little ones and talk to them. Javert, slower to get to his feet, made his way into the kitchen. He surprised Thérèse, picking up a plate and handing it to her. They spoke quietly, and where he was seated on the floor, Valjean could not hear what was said.

The middle boy, who Valjean learned was called Garrett, handed Valjean a building block. A quiet swish and flick of his wand made it hover, much to the boys’ collective delight. This lasted until baby Jean swung his hand and knocked it out of the air.

A clatter of plates and spoons on the table indicated that dinner was ready. It took a fair minute to wrest the boys into their seats, but then Thérèse served the stew, which was delicious. Valjean ate gratefully, and tried his best to keep up with the boys’ running commentary, which spanned such expansive topics as “The Merits of Kicking Your Brother Under the Table” and “Do Slugs Study Philosophy?”. Javert alone was quiet, almost introspective, and from time to time Valjean would glance his direction wondering what he was thinking.

Dinner passed quickly, and when he had finished his bowl, the Auror muttered a terse, “Thank you,” to their hostess before abruptly getting to his feet and going to stare out the salon window.

Valjean stared after his receding figure, but Thérèse shook her head.

“I do not think he liked what I had to tell him,” she said privately as she began clearing the table. Valjean helped her, gathering the silverware.

“What did you say?” asked Valjean.
Thérèse laid a finger to her lips. “That be for him to know, to choose to share or not,” she said. “He’s not so bad, though, your friend.”

Valjean’s mouth twitched at the use of the word “friend”. “I’m not sure I would call him that,” he said wryly.

The look Thérèse gave him in return was appraising. “I s’pose not. Now you,” she went on, carrying a pile of dishes to the sink and turning back around. “You aren’t like him. You have Wild magic runnin’ in your veins, as I do, haven’t you?”

Valjean froze and looked up at her. “How did you -”

“I have the Gift,” she replied. “Or so they say. And if you like, I will tell you your future.”

Valjean gave a weak sort of chuckle. “I’m not sure I want to know my future,” he said.

Thérèse nodded gravely. “Knowing can be terrible,” she said, “but it can be a relief, too.”

Toying with a dish towel, Valjean asked, “If I wanted you to tell me, what would I do?”

A secretive smile on her face, Thérèse pointed to the tray upon which the now-cool mugs of tea rested. “Choose yours,” she said.

Valjean reached for his mug, and looked inside. All that remained was a pile of soggy tea leaves at the bottom and a cold bit of liquid. He looked up at her quizzically.

“Swirl the cup three times ‘round sunways,” she instructed. When Valjean had done so, she held out the saucer to him. “Now turn it upside down on this.”

Valjean almost reconsidered. He was not even sure that he wholly believed in Divination. Still, whatever she had said had left Javert unsettled, and that was not an easy thing to do. Before he could think better of it, he turned the cup over on the dish.

Thérèse picked up the cup and beckoned him closer. Valjean looked inside of it; the same soggy tea leaves were now spread down the walls of the cup. It meant nothing to him, but Thérèse was looking at it with great concentration.

Quietly, she began to speak, her voice nearly trance-like. “You are bound by an oath you do not fully understand the repercussions of. There is... great pain written here, I am sorry for that, but there is... a light, too. It is... small, and vulnerable, but find a way to nurture it, and it may overcome even the deepest darkness.”

She met his eyes then, and for one instant, Valjean felt what it was to stare down the twisted length of the threads of time. Thérèse nodded slowly and said, “If you remember nothing, remember this: there is no magic more powerful in this world than love.”

Her face cleared, and Thérèse blinked rapidly. Valjean opened his mouth to ask her what she meant, but she shushed him.

“I can’t remember my predictions, and I can’t explain them,” she said. “You’ll have to do your best at guessin’ its meaning.”

Valjean nodded mutely.

“You may be wantin’ to join the Auror over there,” Thérèse added, inclining her head towards the salon. “I think he be gettin’ impatient.”
With a snort, Valjean said, “Not that it takes much.”

To his surprise, Thérèse leaned forward and wrapped him in a hug before stepping away. “Thank you, Jean,” she said. “For what it be worth, I hope you stop the ones that did this.”

“We’ll do our best,” said Valjean, humbled.

“If ever you be needin’ anythin’, don’t hesitate to come by. May the Old Ones go with you.”

Valjean nodded, before making his way out to the front of the salon where Javert stood with his hands in the pockets of his coat. His expression did indeed speak of impatience, but there was something pensive, also, in the way he looked down at the street.

When Valjean stopped at his side, the Auror glanced over and huffed a breath. “Did she have something clever and humiliating to say to you, too?” Before Valjean could reply, he continued, “I suggest returning to your apartment for the remainder of the evening. There is nothing more to be learned here, not without getting ahold of Vidocq. I have some loyal contacts - I can put out feelers tonight, and by morning, we should have some idea of where we can find him.”

“And when we find him, then what?”

Javert’s eyes narrowed. “Then we interrogate him.”

Valjean wondered if he ought to feel badly about that. He thought of how Vidocq had frightened Thérèse, and of the innocent family murdered, and decided he would not.

“After you,” said Valjean. “I will follow.”

Javert nodded and Disapparated. Valjean turned to wave a final goodbye to Thérèse; she waved in return, and then he, too, Disapparated.

No. 4 was quiet when Valjean reappeared in the living room. Javert stood in the kitchen, laying sheets of parchment on the table. Chouette sat fluffed up on the back of the couch, a pile of droppings underneath her.

Wrinkling his nose, Valjean Vanished the mess, and then entered the kitchen.

“You are planning to sleep tonight, aren’t you?” he asked, watching as the Auror began copying the same note out on each of the pages. “Potions are no substitute for sleep.”

“I know that,” Javert responded without looking up. “And I do not need you to remind me of it. I will sleep.”

“Take the bedroom, then,” Valjean insisted. “You will rest better.”

He would have sworn Javert rolled his eyes at that. “Who do you think you are, my mother?” he asked. “Fine, I will take the bedroom. Where will you sleep?”

“The couch,” Valjean replied.

Javert paused. “Very well,” he said.

Valjean leaned over the table, reading the nearest note.

A favor: request last known location of Vidocq. Destroy this parchment, it read. There was no
addressee, nor any signature.

"Are these the ‘feelers’ you spoke of?" Valjean asked.

The Auror hummed in response. "Chouette will deliver them to my contacts across the city. Fortunately, most of them are literate. They provide information, the Aurors provide sanctuary. It is a costly investment, but often a worthwhile one."

"They're criminals, then?" Valjean asked, quirking an eyebrow.

The look Javert gave him said, *don't be silly*. "Hardly. Just poor folk, usually ones likely to be targeted by gangs and the like. A few are Muggles who got on the wrong end of a badly-cast Memory Charm."

"I see," Valjean murmured. He took his coin purse from his pocket and withdrew a handful of Sickles, placing one on each letter.

"What are you doing?" asked Javert, exasperated.

"Time is of the essence, is it not?" Valjean returned. "And Vidocq is an Auror. They may be reluctant to speak of him."

"This is bribery," Javert complained.

"Yes," agreed Valjean, "it is. You're a little past getting to have qualms, Javert."

The Auror looked like he wanted to argue, but what could he say to that when he himself was being aided by one he thought better off in Azkaban?

Valjean folded the notes to contain the silver coins, and Chouette flew under the pass-through into the kitchen, landing on the table.

Javert tied the bundle of messages to her leg. "You know who to take these to?" he asked.

The owl chirruped in reply, which Valjean took to mean, "yes."

Apparently, Javert felt the same way, as he said, "Good," and then carried the bird to the front door. Letting her outside, he waited until she had flown out of sight before closing the door again.

Turning back to the room, Javert crossed to the couch, where he sat down to wait. He was soon joined by Valjean, who took the seat next to him. A quiet fell over the apartment, but it was not so uncomfortable a quiet as some of the others they had shared. The Auror eventually shrugged off his greatcoat, which he folded and laid on the arm of the couch next to him, and then he shut his eyes. Valjean supposed he was thinking.

Valjean was thinking as well. Thérèse’s prediction, if it was true, was not a happy one, but nor was it as bleak as it might have been. Even so, her final bit of advice gave him pause; he had not loved anyone or anything in a long time. He was not sure he even remembered how to.

Looking up, Valjean realized that Javert’s chin had dropped, his head lolling slightly to the side. He had fallen fast asleep where he sat.

A breath of laughter passed Valjean’s lips, and he got to his feet, careful not to disturb the cushions. As an afterthought, he picked up the Auror’s coat and draped it over the man’s lap. Amused, he made his way to the window, where he stood waiting for Chouette’s return. The news she brought them, for good or ill, would dictate their path forward.
What did the future hold, he wondered, and would they be ready for it when it came?

Chouette was a long time in coming. The sun fell behind the horizon, painting the sky pink and purple, and the stars were emerging when he decided he, too, ought to rest. Stretching out on the floor was not the most unpleasant place he had ever made his bed. Closing his eyes, Valjean allowed sleep to creep over him.
School has been kicking my butt this week - I think I'll have done 30 hours of homework just this weekend by the time today is over - but I was fortunate enough to get to see Les Mis in Chicago yesterday, and it was INCREDIBLE. It never ceases to amaze me how every single iteration of canon brings some new nuance to the story.

Chapter 8 and Chapter 9 were originally going to be one chapter, but the story ran away from me a bit. That's probably just as well, really, because with all my schoolwork, Chapter 10 has been sitting on a bit of a stand-still. Hopefully things will even out a bit after Tuesday and I can get back to writing!

_Javert_

The first thing which Javert noticed upon waking was how stiff he was. Rubbing the back of his neck, he sat up and ignored his body’s complaints. Apparently, he had fallen asleep on the couch. His coat was also laying across his lap, when he would have sworn he had folded it the night before. Nonplussed, he ran a hand over the heavy wool material.

On the other side of the living room, Valjean was stretched out on the floor, half-hidden behind the coffee table. He was sound asleep still, one arm draped over his eyes. Perplexed in a way Javert could not quite describe, he got to his feet, crossing the room to look down on his long-time adversary.

Unaware of the world around him, the lines of Valjean’s face lessened, stripping away some of the reservation usually held there. His breathing was slow and measured, more at ease than he ever was awake. Javert supposed he looked content, or at least, as content as one could be when sleeping on a floor. The Auror snorted; why had the fool not just taken the bed?

What an enigma he was. Valjean had every cause to hate him, but he did not especially seem to, at least not outwardly. Javert would even have thought it natural should Valjean wish for his death, but he did not seem to do that, either. A fragment of his exchange with Thérèse returned to him, and Javert grimaced, pushing the memory from his thoughts.

Where he lay, Valjean curled in upon himself, fingers grasping at a blanket that was not there. Javert looked down at the greatcoat bundled in his arms. With a heavy sigh, he leaned over and dropped the garment across Valjean’s sleeping form.

Straightening, Javert felt an embarrassed heat rise in his cheeks. Suddenly eager to leave, he turned and made his way down the hall to the bedchamber, and the bathroom beyond.

Along with the handful of things he had given Valjean while at his apartment, Javert had reclaimed some of his clothes for himself. He disrobed, pausing when he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. His whiskers were pushing the limits of acceptability, and his hair did not bear speaking of. A shower was definitely in order.

The water took little time to heat up, and before long he was standing under it, letting the warmth draw the tension from his back. Some of it was residual stiffness from his night on the couch, but
some of it was the product of the past several days; he did not think he had been at his ease since Arras.

Another sigh escaped him, longer and more drawn out. Arresting Valjean should have made things easier, not harder, but every new set of events only served to complicate matters further. And Thérèse - Javert tried to remind himself that he could not have turned her in, regardless of her registration status, with Chabouillet under the Imperius Curse. He would no sooner have tried than his own superior would have handed him over to the Death Eaters. Nevertheless, he could not shake the feeling that something was wrong with him for not trying, all the more so after their conversation.

Even as he rinsed his hair, Javert’s mouth tightened. Thérèse had some disturbing theories, to say the least. He had sought to learn more under the guise of offering to help with dinner, but what little he had been told had not been to his liking.

Decisively, Javert turned off the water. The woman had no way to know what she was talking about, he told himself. So what if her guess hit somewhat near the mark? It was still only a guess, an attempt to distract him.

Stepping out of the shower, he toweled off, tying the terrycloth around his waist. A quick Severing Charm reduced his facial hair to something more presentable. Dressing, Javert removed the wrinkles from his robes with a flick of his wand and pulled them over a clean button down and slacks. His final act was to draw his hair back in a queue.

Javert leaned against the vanity top. In review, he looked put together, regardless of whether he felt it or not. It would do.

Returning to the living room, the Auror redirected his attention to the door; outside on the landing, Chouette sat with a single scrap of parchment clutched in her beak. When Javert drew open the door, she puffed up her feathers in indignation.

“I know you’ve been waiting,” said Javert. “I did not intend to fall asleep before you returned. Come inside.”

The bird scuttled to the doorway, hopping over the threshold. Spreading her wings, she flew up onto the back of the nearest armchair, where she looked back at the Auror haughtily.

“Letter, please,” Javert said to her, holding out his hand.

Chouette opened her beak, allowing the parchment to fall to the floor. With a curse, Javert knelt to retrieve it. He could only be grateful that no one else was witnessing the impudence of his owl.

“Some of us have reputations to maintain, you know,” he said as he stood. Chouette scratched her head, and the Auror wondered why he bothered.

He unfolded the note, smoothing the creases from it. The handwriting he recognized clearly; it belonged to one of his oldest contacts in the Ninth Arrondissement. A lack of response from the rest did not matter, Magne had not failed him. Examining the spidery script, Javert read:

*I’ll admit, I was surprised upon receiving your letter - I never expected to see a day where you would be the one greasing my palm, but I suppose desperate times call for desperate measures, don’t they?*

*The one you seek will not be easily found. A week ago, you might have seen him frequenting a certain windmill in the red light district, but he has since gone underground. You may have to go underground yourself in order to catch up with him.*
If what I’ve heard is true, you’ve found yourself a rather interesting colleague. A word of advice: it is easier to look ahead when you have someone else looking behind.

Regards,
O.M.

P.S. Have you been to the Observatoire of late? Truly a magnificent place. If you get the chance, you might stop by.

Contemplative, Javert read the cryptic message for a second time. Succinct as it was, and clearly written to obscure the meaning to an outside observer, it was nevertheless informative. Perhaps nothing was more telling than the last paragraph; if word had reached Magne that Javert was accompanied by Valjean, then chances were good that the information was being shared deliberately. He would not have put it past the Death Eaters to spread it with the intent of smearing his good name.

One sentence gave him pause, however. Was it Magne’s intimation that he should trust Valjean? That was none of his concern.

As if aware that he was being thought of, Valjean stirred where he lay on the floor. Lifting his head, he discovered the coat covering him, and a small smile touched his lips. Javert turned away, very intently rereading the message again.

Behind him, he could hear Valjean slowly working his way onto his feet. A moment later, the man appeared at his elbow.

“Thank you,” he said warmly, holding out the greatcoat.

His voice gruff, Javert took it and replied, “I don’t have any idea what you’re talking about.” Valjean’s smile only widened, a spark of mirth in his eyes, and so the Auror went on, “Why did you not just sleep in the bed?”

Valjean blinked. “I expected you would want to take it when you woke up.”

“I might have, had I not slept through the night on the couch.”

“Oh,” Valjean chuckled. “That worked out well, then, didn’t it?”

“Brilliantly.” The Auror gestured in the direction of the hallway. “There should be plenty of hot water if you would like to wash up.”

“Thank you, yes.” Valjean shifted his weight. “Are we... going anywhere first thing this morning?”

Catching on to what he meant, Javert looked at the floor. “I am not going to haul you back to the Palais, if that is what you mean.”

Valjean tipped his head. “I only meant in general,” he said, though he looked relieved.

“I see no reason to rush,” the Auror replied. “Chouette brought us a response - we can discuss our next move over breakfast.”

“Alright.” Valjean smiled again, his face glowing in the early sunlight. He left for the shower, and Javert looked in the direction of the kitchen.
What, he wondered, did he have to do to get his hands on some eggs?

Valjean

Valjean emerged from the bathroom refreshed. His borrowed clothes, as per Javert’s expectation, had not fit him, being too narrow in the shoulder and too long at the waist; fortunately, it was not difficult to alter the dimensions magically, and so he returned in a crisp, clean outfit. Did Javert enchant his shirts so that they were always pressed? It seemed a fitting assumption.

Stopping in the kitchen doorway, Valjean was brought up short by the sight of Javert standing at the stove with a skillet, frying eggs. The Auror flipped one over and looked up. For a second, Valjean thought he was going to speak, but then his eyebrows pinched, and Javert turned back to the stove.

Valjean glanced down at his attire self-consciously. He did not think he had forgotten anything; he had even re-tied his cravat. Disconcerted, he sat down at the table. A moment later, he was joined by Javert, who set a plate of eggs on toast in front of him.

In thanking him, Javert replied, “It will be under-seasoned, but I daresay it is cooked, at any rate.” The Auror sat down with a plate of his own, cutting into the toast with a fork. His eyes flicked again towards Valjean. “You look... well,” he said.

Totally confounded, Valjean only stared at him.

Javert, focusing on his plate, continued, “I think it is the first time since...”

He faded out, returning to eating, but Valjean thought he understood what Javert was trying to say. Valjean had been rather unkempt ever since his flight from Arras; being on the run had afforded him few opportunities for personal grooming. If Javert was somewhat discomfited by him now that he was properly dressed, then it was perhaps because the Auror was reminded of an authority figure to whom he had once answered.

Surreptitiously glancing down at himself again, Valjean did not feel he looked particularly like the austere Monsieur Madeleine, but apparently it was close enough for Javert to be thrown by it.

Without further comment, the two men ate their breakfast, mutually subdued. As the sun rose higher in the sky, the morning light intensified, filling the living room beyond with a soft blush of gold. As he finished, Valjean looked through the wall opening, watching the light creep over the furniture. How many more mornings would he get like this, he asked himself, ones which were slow and quiet and peaceful?

Across the table, Javert set down his fork and withdrew a small piece of folded parchment. He slid it across the tabletop, and Valjean opened it carefully.

“This is the only response Chouette brought?” asked Valjean, reading it over.

Javert nodded. “Despite your ‘generosity’, people were naturally reluctant to say anything that might get them on the wrong side of an Auror, and if Vidocq is indeed involved in a cover-up, it makes all the more sense that my contacts would be unwilling to share. It is one thing to speak against a low-level Auror to his superior, but quite another to speak against one allied with the Death Eaters.”

“But Javert,” said Valjean with a frown, “this doesn't tell us anything.”

“That is where you would be wrong.” He held out his hand, and Valjean returned the letter. “This
was sent by a man called Magne. He is a Squib who lives near the Pigalle, and I have personally
saved his life on at least two occasions.”

“So we can trust him.”

The Auror nodded. “If his message reads as nonsense to you, then it is because he has coded it,
much like a riddle. That way, had the letter been intercepted, it would be unclear to an outsider
who or what it is about.”

“So what does it mean?”

“The first part is fairly straightforward,” Javert said. He read aloud, “‘A week ago, you might have
seen him’ - that refers to Vidocq - ‘frequenting a certain windmill in the red light district’. Obviously,
the Moulin Rouge. Vidocq has been looking at prostitutes. I knew there was a reason I
do not like him.”

Valjean leaned forward. “It says after that that he went underground, does it not?”

“It does,” Javert confirmed.

“How does that help us any?”

Drumming his fingers on the table, Javert hummed to himself. “I'm not sure,” he said. “Possibly
the clue lies in the post-script: the Observatoire.”

“You think he could be there?”

“He could be,” said Javert, though he did not sound wholly convinced. “Magne would not have
included it if it was unimportant.”

Valjean gathered his dishes, standing and carrying them to the sink. “We can start there, then,” he
said. “There is a park on that campus I have been to, the Jardin de l’Observatoire. We could
Apparate inside, there are enough trees that we would go unnoticed.”

“Very well,” Javert replied. “We can reconnoiter the Observatoire and see what we learn.”

Valjean withdrew his wand. “Shall we, then?”

The Auror nodded; Valjean set the dishes to washing themselves, and Javert returned the letter to
his pocket. As one, the pair Disapparated.

Javert

The Jardin de l’Observatoire de Paris was a wide grassy plot lined by tall shade trees. A looping
gravel path circled around the center, and the occasional flower bed dispersed color throughout the
gardens. Across from the park, a hillside sloped up to the great limestone observatory building,
where astronomers both wizard and Muggle charted the movements of the stars.

Valjean stood beside him in the grass off the path. He took in the greenery happily, and Javert was
reminded again of the fact that once the man had been a pruner. The clear blue sky spoke of
spring, and though the air held a chill, the sun was warm.

“Should we climb the hill?” Valjean asked, gesturing in the direction of the Observatoire.

“We won’t be able to see anything from here,” Javert retorted, and so they started for the gate, and
More trees covered the hillside, and at the top, saplings lined the path leading to the front steps. The Observatoire was a boxy complex made up of a main building and two smaller wings. Its windows sank into deep stone walls, and a delicate relief composed of planets and scientific instruments was carved above the doors. On top of the Southeast turret was a white stone dome. Except for a few cars in the staff parking lot, the campus seemed to be deserted.

“I suppose if he was looking for a place to lay low, this is as quiet as anything,” Valjean commented.

The Auror narrowed his eyes, looking up at the windows. “I suppose,” he said, “though I do not know what this place would offer him besides that.”

“No idea.” Valjean looked over at him. “Now what?”

“Now we wait,” Javert replied. “If anyone comes out, we question them as to whether they have seen someone matching Vidocq’s description.”

“I see.” Valjean sat down in the grass, leaning his back against a tree. Javert remained at attention, scanning the building for any sign of movement.

Several minutes passed, and Javert was falling into a familiar routine when Valjean spoke again. “How is your wand holding up?”

The Auror felt a stab of annoyance. “I am not in the habit of making small talk while running an investigation,” he replied. There was a murmured apology, and Javert returned to watching the observatory plaza.

Several more minutes passed; Javert ran his thumb along the wood of his wand, now that Valjean had drawn attention to it. The split was no different than the day before, which was good. He could not afford his spells backfiring on him. The very thought caused him a pang of horror; in the wrong moment, such a misfire could be deadly. It occurred to him that perhaps it was for that very reason Valjean had been asking. He himself would never have let an Auror accompany him who was not in possession of a proper wand.

As the silence stretched, Javert breathed out slowly. He did not feel guilty for having told Valjean to be quiet, but neither did he feel entirely justified in his response.

Finally, he bit out the words, “It is the same.”

Valjean nodded, evidently disinclined to say anything more, a fact which should have been for the better. Still, as he continued to fiddle subconsciously with his wand, Javert was reminded again of the loup-garou, and almost wished for a bit of conversation to distract him.

You stand at a crossroads. Those were her words to him. There be a rift in you, she had continued. I think you feel it. It will rip you apart if you let it. Thérèse had nodded over to where her boys were crowded around Valjean, all vying for his attention. Talk to the little ones, she said. They will tell you the fables of La Fontaine, of the reed and the oak tree.

A rift, he repeated to himself. He did not think he could deny that much. Whether Thérèse knew what she was talking about or not, the fact remained that something had started in him, something he did not know how to handle.

Doubt. That was the trespasser corroding his every thought, every action. The seed had been planted when Valjean rescued him from the Death Eaters the first time, and every time thereafter
served only to water its thorny vine. It was as though the world was upside down, a world where
the Secrétaire drugged him and Valjean was the one to offer him a glass of water, a world where
Valjean, though he had had no wand, threw himself bodily between the Auror and a mad
noblewoman. Nothing fit together the way it had before, the way it was supposed to.

It dawned on Javert that he had stopped paying a wit of attention to his surroundings, which rather
defeated the purpose of a stake-out. Schooling his thoughts into submission, he returned his focus
to the task at hand. No one had gone in or out, nor did he think there was any motion behind the
windows.

All was quiet but for the distant sounds of traffic, and so when Valjean said, “Oh no,” Javert
started, having nearly forgotten the man was sitting at his feet.

“What is it?” the Auror asked through his teeth.

“I’ve had a thought,” Valjean replied, picking himself up off the lawn. “The letter from your
contact - may I see it?”

Silently, Javert held out the letter.

Valjean skimmed over it, his mouth moving as he read noiselessly aloud. “A-ha!” he exclaimed. “I
thought so.”

“What is it?” Javert asked again impatiently.

“Listen to this. ‘You may have to go underground yourself in order to catch up with him.’”

Javert’s forehead creased. “It is a warning, to go after Vidocq with caution.”

“But is it, though?” Valjean reread the letter again excitedly. “Javert, you were right, the comment
about the Observatoire was not made without purpose, but we are looking in completely the
wrong place.”

“What do you mean?” the Auror asked irritably. “Speak sense, would you?”

Valjean took a deep breath. “The comment about the Observatoire is only to give us the right
neighborhood,” he said, barely containing the enormity of his revelation. “We have to go
underground to catch up with him - Javert, what is there not even a ten minute’s walk from here?”

Javert closed his eyes, realizing what Valjean meant. “Stupid, stupid, stupid,” he growled to
himself. “Of course that would be it - the catacombs!”

“Yes!” Valjean exclaimed. “That has to be where he’s hiding - they are the perfect place to
disappear, and a wizard would have no trouble bypassing the Muggle security.”

Javert sucked in a breath. “We need to find out what Vidocq knows,” he said, “but the catacombs
are treacherous - I do not relish the idea of going in there.”

Valjean shook his head. “I cannot imagine it is a pleasant place, to be sure, and the entry will be
full of tourists, but Homenum Revelio will find him if he is there, and then, as you so simply put it,
we can interrogate him.”

For better or worse, Valjean was correct. Javert nodded his assent and said, “We will need to
disguise ourselves. As you pointed out, there are sure to be tour groups on a Tuesday morning. A
Disillusionment Charm ought to do it.”
Reaching out, he first tapped Valjean and then himself on the head with his wand. A weird sensation, like runny egg yolk, trickled down his back as the spell transformed his appearance. In front of him, Valjean, too, was changing, acquiring the color and texture of everything behind him like a human chameleon. Before long, Javert could only tell where Valjean was standing by watching for a subtle shimmer in his surroundings as he shifted positions.

“Good?” Valjean asked.

“Good,” the Auror confirmed. It was not perfect invisibility, but so long as no one ran into them, they would be impossible to see in the dimly lit catacombs. “Apparate to the Place Denfert-Rochereau. We’ll tag along the back of a tour group and slip inside.”

Valjean murmured his agreement, and with his wand held tightly in hand, Javert stepped into blackness.
Just wanted to issue a general reminder that I am periodically updating the tags on this work as things get written and fleshed out. Please do also let me know if I haven’t tagged for something which you think ought to be tagged.

I have gotten so many sweet reviews in the past week - you're all amazing! I'm never sure whether it's good form or bad form to reply to reviews, but know that I see them all, and it really makes my day. <3

Grey, scalloped cobblestones made up the intersection of the Place Denfert-Rochereau. Unlike the Observatoire campus, this part of Paris was alive with people. Cars and bikes sped down the street, passing historic buildings on every side. Most of them were now tenant spaces for shops and cafes, each one being built of the same yellow limestone, which itself had once been quarried from the very mines into which they were about to descend.

Valjean Apparated onto the sidewalk, pressing his back against the wall of a crepe shop, lest some passerby walk into him. He could barely hear it over the traffic, but as Javert materialized just up the block, he hissed, “Valjean!”

A sort of shadow on the sidewalk betrayed the Auror’s otherwise hidden presence. No-one else noticed it, however, and Valjean exhaled, reassured. The Disillusionment Charm was a strong one.

He edged his way over to where Javert was waiting, narrowly avoiding being sniffed out by a woman’s curious dog. Javert was standing with his back to the wall, much as Valjean was, and though Valjean could not make out more than the vaguest suggestion of his face, the Auror appeared to be seething.

“There are too many people,” he said in a low voice. “Someone will catch us for certain.”

Valjean shook his head, not sure if Javert could see him or not.

“Look there,” he whispered, pointing across the street. “That little building, the one with the people waiting in line? That is the one we want.”

The Auror drew in a breath. “Quickly, then, while no one is coming.”

They darted across the street, coming to stop outside the building Valjean had indicated. It was painted a pine green color and was little more than a decorative shed. A sign to the right of the door read “Entrée des Catacombes”.

“They open at ten o'clock,” Valjean said, reading further down on the signage. “Everyone lined up must be here for the first tour of the day.”

“That is well,” Javert quietly replied. “It should mean fewer people inside.”

The door to the little building opened, and a man stepped out, waving the crowd to attention.
“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to Les Catacombes de Paris...”

As the man, who seemed to be a guide, continued talking, Valjean got as near to the door as he could manage without being in the way. Soon, the guide began ushering people in. He punched tickets as tourists walked by, and Valjean held his breath as they trickled past him into the shed.

After a number of minutes, the last family passed, and Valjean straightened; at his movement, a little girl looked up at him in confusion. For one tense moment, Valjean held still. Apparently noticing nothing else amiss, the girl followed her parents through the door.

Quickly, before the tour guide could shut them out, Valjean slipped inside, Javert at his heels. Within the shed, the air was hot and stuffy. A staircase led down below ground, while electric bulbs cast a hard light over the floor. The tour group stood in a hushed huddle against the wall, whispering, and in some cases giggling, amongst themselves.

The guide made his way to the front of the pack, and carried on his narration.

“Established in seventeen-thirty-eight, the ossuary was first commissioned here to account for a problem of cemetery overcrowding. The remains of over six million people are buried in these mines. As we go down the stairs and into the catacombs, we will pass through what is known as the Barrière d’Enfer. Please watch your footing.”

The tour group filed down the steps; Valjean hung back, waiting until they had all disappeared, before turning to Javert.

“Do we go in after them?” he asked.

“Yes,” the Auror confirmed. “Any spell we cast above ground will be confused by all the people nearby.”

Valjean nodded. “I’ll follow your lead.”

Javert crossed the room and looked down the shaft. Coming up behind him, Valjean could see that the tourists had already dispersed, and so the Auror carefully descended. The staircase was slick with condensation; it led into a subterranean stone chamber that was lit, but only dimly. The air was much cooler beneath the earth.

On the far side of the chamber was an arch, with no other way to go but forward. Keeping close to the wall, the pair slipped silently through the arch and into the catacombs.

The space opened into a large cave with a pillar in the center. Tunnels led off from the cave in a myriad of directions, and the sound of the tourists chattering issued from the next cave over. As his eyes adjusted to the light, Valjean frowned, tracing the wall with his fingertips. It was a bizarre structure, pitted and pockmarked, interspersed with carved globes. Then he took another look and the picture rearranged itself into something far more gruesome.

Valjean ripped his hand away as though burned, clapping it over his mouth instead to muffle his sharp intake of breath. The entire wall was built out human bones. They were carefully stacked and arranged, femur atop ulna, with a whole row of skulls grinning in a vulgar approximation of decoration.

In front of him, Javert murmured, “I have heard stories, but I did not imagine...”

Valjean did not reply, only stared. The longer he looked, the more bones he saw. They covered the entire room but for a single cross-shaped plaque. “Who did this?” he whispered.
Javert gave an amused snort. “Find the tour guide, no doubt he could tell you.”

Holding his hand just above the surface of the wall, Valjean watched in a fascinated sort of disgust as the Disillusionment Charm caused it to take on the appearance of the stacked members behind it. When his knuckles acquired the likeness of a skull, he cringed and looked away.

“Can we keep going, please?” he asked.

Javert turned over his shoulder, a funny sort of look on his face. “There is nothing to fear in bones, Valjean,” he said. “The dead are dead. It is the living who ought to concern you.”

Valjean took a breath. It was not Azkaban, he knew that. The deceased of Les Catacombes were not tormented, merely old and tired. Fortifying himself, Valjean shook his head the affirmative. “Go on,” he said.

Javert laid his wand flat on his palm. “Point me,” he said. The wand spun, pointing to the left. “North is that way,” asserted the Auror. “Keep track of that. Homenum Revelio.”

A few seconds went by, and then ghostly greenish figures began to appear. The majority of them were clustered off to the Northeast, with a few stragglers nearby.

“The tour group,” Javert muttered. “Then where...?”

“What is that?” asked Valjean. To the Southeast was a lone figure, hazy and poorly defined.

“That,” said the Auror, “is someone not where they should be. I think we may have him.”

Valjean pointed to the opening in the wall ahead. “To the right, then.”

Javert strode foreward, the clip of his footfalls and a sourceless shadow the only clear signs of his presence. Valjean hurried along after him, pushing skulls and bones from his mind. They were there to find Vidocq, that was what was important.

Turning right down the corner, it was not long before they came to another junction.

“Left,” said Javert, and they turned left.

They continued in that manner for some distance, alternating right and left turns to slowly work their way in a Southeastern direction. The bones continued for much of the way, though the farther in they went, the more sporadic the ossuaries became.

Eventually, the pair came to the end of the visitable section of the mines. The passages ahead of them were roped off and unlit.

“Point me,” said Valjean. His wand turned in his hand, stopping so that it pointed behind him. They were facing South.

Javert considered this, and the tunnels before them. “Homenum Revelio.” The figure produced by the spell had grown clearer in its definition, and was now more East than South.

“We will take a left,” the Auror said matter-of-factly. He stepped around the rope barrier, ignoring the “No Trespassing” sign, and added, “Lumos.” The tip of his wand lit up, radiating a white light.

Valjean ran his tongue over his teeth, the dark tunnel conjuring up images of dementors and all manner of Dark creatures lurking outside of what he could see, but he tamped down on his nerves. Javert clearly did not think there was anything to worry about.
Heading into the tunnel, the two walked nearer together to stay within the radius of the wand light. As they went, the effects of the Disillusionment Charm began to wear off, and slowly the disembodied magical glow acquired a source, Javert’s familiar silhouette coming into focus. A corner of Valjean’s mouth lifted at that; it was not a common occurrence for him to be the one doing the following.

Around them was nothing but silence. The bones were behind them, leaving the bare stone walls of the tunnel. As they walked, the passage narrowed, and Javert had to watch that he did not scrape his head on the low ceiling.

Heart fluttering, Valjean did his best to ignore his growing claustrophobia. He stepped lightly, his ears straining for the sound of anything or anyone following them. There in the blackness below the city, it was all too easy to imagine Death Eaters creeping up on them from both sides, cornering them in the middle. With greater and greater frequency, he looked back over his shoulder, though nothing was ever there.

He did not realize Javert had stopped before he ran into him.

The Auror turned and put a finger to his lips; Valjean swallowed, trying to breathe more shallowly. Javert leaned toward him, such that Valjean could feel the susurrus of air as he whispered, “We are getting close. I think I see a light ahead.”

“What do we do when we find him?” asked Valjean, barely speaking aloud at all.

Javert glanced around. “It depends on if he is alone or not,” he replied. “If he is not, we will monitor the situation and see what is happening. But if he is alone...” He leaned even closer, and Valjean held perfectly still as a few of the Auror’s long strands of hair fell against his face. When Javert spoke, it was directly into his ear. “You will provide a distraction. I will Apparate in behind him and disarm him if necessary. We will restrain him, and then question him. Do you think you can do that?”

Valjean’s mouth hardly moved as he replied, “Yes.”

Javert pulled away and gestured for Valjean to follow. Muttering, “Nox,” the wand light went out, and Valjean swallowed again as the tunnel was plunged into total darkness. Only, he registered after a moment, it was not total. Perhaps fifty feet ahead of them there was a faint orange glow. It was towards this which the Auror was pacing, and Valjean trailed after him closely, emphatically disinterested in being left behind in the dark.

As they got nearer, Valjean could see that the glow issued from an opening in the tunnel wall; Javert slowed as they approached, holding out his hand to stop Valjean from going ahead, not that he needed any encouragement. With a gesture, the Auror indicated that Valjean should wait.

Treading silently across the floor, Javert snuck up alongside the opening and peered inside. Valjean did not dare move so much as a muscle. In reality, only a minute passed before the Auror withdrew and returned to his side, though to Valjean it felt like an age.

“It’s Vidocq, alright,” Javert confirmed with cold satisfaction. “By himself. You can keep his attention?”

Valjean nodded once, slowly. The look Javert gave him was dubious, but nevertheless he stepped aside, waiting against the wall for the opportune moment.

A distraction. Valjean could only think of one, and he prayed to God it worked, because if it did not, Javert would lose what little faith he had in him. Repressing fear and self-doubt, Valjean
squared his shoulders and adopted the hardest expression of which he was capable.

No longer bothering to be quiet, he took wide strides down the tunnel to the opening which had been cut in the wall like a doorway. On the other side was a small cave, lit by a collection of torches mounted on the walls. It was clearly meant to be someone’s living quarters; a makeshift bed had been assembled in the far corner, and a mismatched collection of chairs were drawn into a gathering near the door. There was also a desk, at which sat a middle aged man with grey-blond hair cut short. Valjean stopped in the doorway, and the man looked up with a start.

“Who goes there?” the man, who could only be Vidocq, asked, reaching for the wand that lay on the desk beside him.

Dropping his voice an octave, Valjean uttered a harsh laugh and said, “Don’t pretend you don’t recognize me.”

Vidocq’s eyes narrowed. “I’ll admit, your face rings a bell.”

“From the posters, obviously,” said Valjean, crossing his arms.

Clearly suspicious, Vidocq asked, “What are you doing here? How did you find this place?”

Internally, Valjean winced. This was where he had to hope his bluff held. “Madame Perrier sent me,” he replied. “Wanted me to check in on things.”

He kept his face blank of any reaction as Javert appeared noiselessly in the back of the cave. The Auror slunk towards where Vidocq sat, even as the man leaned forward across his desk.

“Perrier?” he asked. “Ha, I might’ve known. That interfering old bat.”

Formidable in his bearing, Valjean said, “You had best mind your manners. She won’t like it if she hears you were talking about her that way.”

Vidocq sneered. “She’s not top dog these days, Lestrange, him and his new wife, they’re the favored ones now.” He turned his wand around in his fingers. “You can tell Perrier I don’t have to kowtow to her every whim anymore.”

“I’m sure she’ll be terribly disappointed,” Javert spoke up. “Expelliarmus!” Before Vidocq had time to react, his wand was dragged out of his hand, flying backwards through the air. Javert caught it, adding, “Incarcerous,” as Vidocq tried to get to his feet. The spell pulled him back into his seat, ropes materializing out of nowhere and lashing him to it.

“Shit!” Vidocq swore. “Goddammit, Javert, I might have known. And you!” he added, looking daggers at Valjean. “You must be that convict he’s been toting around. What was your name?”

“Stupefy,” said Javert, sounding almost bored. The bolt of red light hit Vidocq squarely between the shoulders, and he slumped forward, unconscious, head hitting the desk. Looking up at Valjean, Javert added, “Not exactly what I had expected, but as diversions go, I suppose your idea worked well enough.”

Valjean inclined his head in acknowledgment, watching as Javert pulled back his robe. Stitched into the inner lining was an assortment of pockets, all holding little potion bottles. He selected one, withdrawing it carefully and holding it up to the light; the contents were clear as water. It crossed Valjean’s mind to wonder whether he would have accepted breakfast from Javert if he had known the Auror carried Veritaserum on his person.

Javert popped the stopper on the bottle and tipped Vidocq’s head back. He allowed three drops of
the potent Truth Serum to fall in the man’s mouth, and then returned the bottle to his pocket. The Auror looked at Valjean as though daring him to make something of it; Valjean did not rise to the silent challenge, though privately he did wonder whether Javert’s position gave him leave to use the potion as he thought appropriate, or if technically he was supposed to have sought permission first.

Still, Vidocq had already confirmed by association that he had connections to the Death Eaters. That alone was enough to prove finding him had been worth their while. Valjean crossed to stand next to the desk as Javert said, “Rennervate.”

Vidocq stirred where he sat tied to the chair, blinking dazedly.

Javert looked him in the eyes. “Do you know who I am?” he asked.

“Auror Javert, Inspecteur First Class,” Vidocq replied, his voice turned dull and monotonous.

“Did you speak with a woman name of Thérèse Marie following the death of her neighbors?”

“Yes.”

With bated breath, Valjean waited to hear what he said next. Javert seemed to share the same sense of anticipation. Intently, he continued, “What do you know of that incident?”

Vidocq spoke slowly. “We received an owl from the woman, Marie, saying that she believed a group of Death Eaters had attacked a Muggle apartment. Marquet was the first one to respond; he went out and investigated, returning with a report confirming the woman's story. Four Muggles - two adults, two children - dead in their home by apparent means of the Killing Curse.”

Javert scribbled a few notes on the back of Magne’s letter. “And you spoke to Thérèse after Marquet had made his report?”

“Yes.”

“Who authorized that?”

Vidocq smiled in a hazy sort of pride. “Gisquet asked for me personally.”

Javert frowned, and Valjean did the same. The name Gisquet was not unknown to him, but he could not place it.

Noting his confusion, Javert explained, “Monsieur le Préfet de Préfecture, Henri Gisquet. Superior to Chabouillet, among others.” Turning back to their erstwhile prisoner, the Auror demanded, “What did the Préfet want with you?” There was an affronted tone to his voice, and Valjean hid a smile; could it be that Javert was jealous?

In the same monotonous tone as before, Vidocq answered, “He wanted me to destroy all copies of the report and ensure those involved did not speak anything further of it.”

The mirth faded from his face as a cold chill of foreboding ran down Valjean’s spine.

“He what?” Javert asked incredulously.

“He wanted me to see to it nobody pursued the matter. The woman was easy, a few well-placed threats shut her up tight as a rock. Staging an accident for Marquet was harder, but I handled it.”

Javert looked like he had been struck on the head. “Do you mean to tell me that Monsieur Gisquet
intended for you to not only interfere with an investigation, but to actually bring about the death of another Auror?"

With what little he could move, Vidocq shrugged. “It was all necessary for the plan to go forward.”

“What plan?” Javert’s grip on his wand had tightened, his knuckles white and bloodless.

“I don’t know,” Vidocq replied, now sounding almost petulant. “Gisquet won’t tell me yet, but he will. Taking care of Marquet was a trial. He’ll make me a lieutenant for my work, and then you’ll be sorry you never gave me a chance.”

“Javert,” Valjean said cautiously, as the Auror was beginning to turn purple in the face, “perhaps we ought to leave it at that.”

Javert gave a choked sort of laugh. “Absolutely not,” he said. “We need to know everything. He has more he can tell us.”

Valjean bit back a response, his mouth thinning instead. Whatever Vidocq had to say would no doubt further their inquiry, but if it caused Javert to snap, he was not convinced it was worth it.

Looking down with renewed hostility, the Auror said, “Tell us what connection you have to the Death Eaters.”

Oblivious to anything happening around him, Vidocq responded, “I meet with them sometimes. The servants to the Dark Lord are busy people, so they rely on me to manage the administrative business. I falsify reports, and alert them to any movements the Aurors plan to make against them.”

Javert glowered. “That would explain the fiasco at the Arc de Triomphe last Thursday,” he said under his breath. “Do the Death Eaters meet you here?”

Vidocq shook his head. “Only sometimes,” he said. “They don’t like frequenting one place too often. Their position in France is not as strong as they would like yet.”

“Small mercies,” muttered Valjean.

“How many in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement are acting as double agents?” Javert asked.

Noncommittally, Vidocq grunted. “Hard to be sure,” he said. “Only a few that I know of, though that’s going to be changing.”

“And exactly what,” Javert began implacably, “does Monsieur le Préfet have to do with all this?”

In his years of knowing him, Valjean could think of only one other instance where he might have described the Auror as looking unhinged, and that was on what he had come to refer to as the night at the hospital. Now Javert shook - with anger or distress, Valjean could not be sure - and there was a wild light in his eyes.

“Monsieur le Préfet?” Vidocq repeated with a mechanical laugh. “He was the one to approach them. They can get him what he wants, and he can get them what they want. They’ve been in communication for weeks.”

“No.” Javert spoke as though far away. “No, that cannot be. Gisquet would not - he wouldn’t -” Unsteadily, the Auror put a hand to his head. Valjean stepped forward, offering his arm, but Javert
pushed him away. “I do not believe it!” he said.

“Javert,” Valjean said, his voice gentle, “you know it is impossible to lie under the influence of Veritaserum.”

The Auror shook his head vigorously. “That’s not true!” he exclaimed. “A skilled enough Occlumens could do it - or -” He laughed, a broken sort of a sound. “Veritaserum can only make you say what you think is true. Gisquet could be under the Imperius Curse, how would Vidocq know?”

“I suppose he wouldn’t,” Valjean replied carefully.

The look Javert gave him said that he knew full well Valjean was humoring him. “It cannot be true,” he said more quietly. “It just cannot be.” There was something downright alarming about Javert’s expression, like he was a man drowning in the air rather than breathing it.

Valjean could not believe he was about to voice aloud the suggestion which rose in his throat, but he did so anyway, knowing of no other way he might help. “I would go with you to the Palais,” he said. “If we were careful, we could make it in unseen, and learn one way or the other what the truth is.”

At Valjean’s words, something changed in Javert's face. “Yes,” he said, and Valjean got the impression that Javert was clinging to the shred of hope the suggestion offered him. “Seeing Gisquet in the flesh - that is the only way to know for certain.”

“You are more familiar with the place than I,” Valjean said, a touch uncomfortably. “Do you know where we could go without being caught?”

Composing himself by degrees, Javert considered the query. “Gisquet will be in his office this time of day. Getting upstairs in the lift should be doable. Once we are on the third floor, however...” He trailed off thoughtfully.

“Can we get close enough to overhear what he says?” asked Valjean.

Javert opened his mouth, but it was Vidocq who answered, still strung out on the Veritaserum. “If you want to spy on his office, you could try the room behind his. There is a hidden passage between the two.”

“How do you know that?” Javert asked sharply.

“Well, Paulette and I were looking for an open room after the last Christmas social, and -”

“No,” interjected Javert, clapping his hands over his ears, “that's all the more I want to know, thank you.”

“- when Gisquet suddenly came out of nowhere to tell us off, because he could hear us in his office,” Vidocq finished, nodding along to his speech.

“How do you access this hidden passage?” Valjean asked him, even as Javert was pinching the bridge of his nose in disgust.

“Dunno,” Vidocq replied. “Just know that it's there somewhere.”

“A great deal of good that does us,” muttered Javert.

“It gives us something to go off of, at any rate,” Valjean pointed out.
“Disillusionment Charms will be required,” said the Auror. “A Silencing Charm or two wouldn't go amiss, either.” He looked at Valjean, the lines of his face severe. “You do know what it will mean for me if we are caught spying on the Préfet, don’t you? At best, I will be completely disgraced.”

Valjean said to him dryly, “I think I know perfectly well the dangers of being caught in the Palais.”

Javert studied him for a moment before laughing a little. “Yes, I suppose that you would.”

“What do we do with him?” Valjean asked, nodding his head towards Vidocq.

At that, Javert’s lip curled slightly. “Much as I would like to leave him tied to the chair, it would be more prudent to wipe his memory and let him go. If no-one knows we were here, we will have the advantage.” So saying, his flicked his wand hand and added, “Diffindo.”

The ropes binding Vidocq fell apart. Without them to hold him up, the man sank in his seat, too affected by the potion to sit straight.

Turning to Valjean, Javert said, “Do the spells, will you, while I erase his memory of the past half-hour.”

Valjean raised his wand to his temple, letting the clammy sensation of a Disillusionment Charm run down his back. He flexed his fingers as they again took on the appearance of the surrounding cave.

“Obliviate,” Javert muttered in front of him. Vidocq went, if it were possible, even more slack than before.

The Auror held still as Valjean tapped him with his wand. It was a novelty, Valjean reflected. That Javert should not only allow, but request, he place him under any sort of enchantment was a change, although it was not as though even the intractable Auror could suspect him of attempting to do him harm after the Vow they had made. Valjean put a stop to that train of thought before he could dwell on it any further; the last thing he wanted to think about was the nature of the terms he had agreed to.

The enchantment spread, and Javert blended into the cave wall.

“That will do,” he said. “You will have to Side-Along Apparate with me - only agents of the government are able to Apparate directly into the gallery of the Palais de Justice.”

Valjean extended his hand in response; Javert looked at it for a moment and then back up before he reached out, clasping his hand around Valjean’s. It was a peculiar circumstance, linked together only for the sake of a common goal. There was neither animosity, nor possessiveness, only the curl of fingers around fingers.

The Auror cast a last disdainful look at Vidocq, and then stepped forward. Valjean walked in line with him, and the catacombs vanished.

His final fleeting thought before the cave disappeared entirely was, *Falling from Charybdis...*
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I'm usually a brick canon kind of girl, but there's a nod to the 2012 movie in this chapter. You'll know it when you see it. Also, Chapter 11 will be breaking the 50k mark, which is always an exciting milestone. I am currently anticipating the final word count to fall somewhere between 80k and 100k.

...to Scylla.

The gallery of the Palais de Justice hummed with activity; Javert had the good sense to Apparate them against a wall, out of the way, but no more than ten feet ahead of them swarmed Aurors, office clerks, and others, all on their way to and from their daily tasks.

Javert’s voice was a grumble in Valjean’s ear as he said lowly, “Got here right as everyone is headed out for lunch, of course.”

Valjean held still against the wall, praying the gallery emptied before the Disillusionment Charms began to weaken. Ahead of him, a witch with a wide pink hat containing an ostrich feather strode past, talking animatedly with a wizard as wide as he was tall. Valjean’s eyes swept the hall, searching for Élodie Perrier, but fortunately she was nowhere in sight. Even so, after questioning Vidocq, it was clear that no-one was to be trusted. Any of the people filing through the gallery before them had the potential to be a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

A well-known sense of agitation filled him, and every instinct screamed at him to flee. There was no part of Valjean which was comfortable in that place, but Javert was beside him and had not yet released his hand. That should only have heightened his anxiety, and why would it not, when every memory he had pertaining to the Palais was of being dragged somewhere against his will? And yet, in that moment, the slight pressure was grounding; they had come here at Valjean’s own suggestion, and it was Javert who needed help, either to prove the innocence of the Préfet or, as seemed to be the more likely scenario, to prove the Préfet’s guilt.

Clearing his head, Valjean murmured, “The lifts are on the other side of the hall, correct?”

“Mmm. There is always a lot of activity around them, hence why I Apparated us over here.”

Valjean nodded, looking for a break in the crowd. Finding one, he tugged lightly on Javert's hand and led him to the right, away from the main doors and towards the back wall of the gallery. It was a voluminous space, longer than it was wide, and the lifts they needed were on the far end.

As Valjean began to move, there was a degree of resistance from the Auror, but when it became clear Valjean was succeeding in avoiding the throng, he quickened his step to keep pace. Valjean plotted out a course to the back wall that would let them stand in the sheltered nook alongside a column; weaving through the other occupants took all his concentration, but they made it without incident, marginally closer to their goal.

“You have a knack for that,” said the Auror as they huddled against the column.

Valjean smiled crookedly, though Javert could not see it. “I've had to develop one,” he said.
It was easier to scoot their way along from there, as most of the crowd was concentrated away from the edges of the space, and it was too hectic and noisy for anyone to notice a few extra footsteps, or a faint shadow or two out of place. When the lifts came into view, Valjean went to approach them, but Javert held him back.

“Wait,” said the Auror. “If anyone sees a lift decide on its own to go up to the third floor, they are bound to suspect something is wrong. We will have to slip on with someone, or wait until the gallery empties.”

“I do not think our enchantments will last that long,” Valjean replied in undertones. “And we cannot possibly get into an occupied lift without anyone noticing.”

“Not necessarily,” Javert said. There was a smug turn to his voice, which meant the Auror had an idea. He pointed across the hall; Valjean could barely follow the outline of his arm, but he figured Javert had to be gesturing at a tall, balding man now making his way toward the lift gates. “That,” Javert explained, “is Monsieur Bourdillon. He is a magistrate for the délit courts, and works in the Northeast wing of the third floor.”

The crowd parted, and the Auror hastened toward the lifts after M. Bourdillon. Valjean ran to keep up, still failing to understand how Javert thought they were going to board without the man figuring out he was not alone.

Bourdillon stopped and pressed the button to call the next carriage; stopping as well, Javert waited for another wizard to pass them by, and then he flicked his wand and said under his breath, “Confundo.”

The effect was obvious. The lift chimed as the carriage arrived, and Bourdillon walked face-first into the gates before they opened. He looked around, plainly wondering if anyone had seen him, and then stepped inside the carriage. Javert went after him, as did Valjean, not without misgivings.

It was clear as Valjean flattened himself against the side of the little car that Javert’s gamble had played out in their favor. Bourdillon was far too disoriented to notice them enter, and he pressed the button for the second floor twice before managing to press the one for third.

The carriage rose silently, and a disembodied voice said, “Second floor,” as the lift approached it. The gates opened, and Bourdillon stumbled out. Realizing his mistake, he turned, only to curse as the gates closed before he could re-enter.

The carriage continued to rise, and Javert, crossing his arms, made some indistinct remark about Confundus Charms and their apparent fashionability. Valjean glanced at him, wondering whether the Auror’s thoughts had also returned to the Secrétaire. Certainly, their last experience upstairs had made an impression in Valjean’s mind, one which he was consciously trying not to return to.

“Third floor,” announced the voice, and the gates rolled open again. Checking first to make certain the hallway was empty, the pair exited the carriage, only to stop short as the next lift over dinged, and Bourdillon disembarked into the corridor. He staggered, still addled by the spell, and eventually stumped off in the opposite direction.

Valjean let out a breath he had not realized he was holding, and Javert said quietly, “This way.”

Their route took them down the same long hall as the day before. The office doors lining both sides of the passage were all shut, and everything was silent except for Valjean’s own breathing. Even their steps were deadened by the thickness of the carpet.

Javert hesitated a moment as they passed Chabouillet’s office, but he shook off whatever notion
had taken hold of him. Valjean would have been happy to give the room a wide berth, and so he made to do exactly that, only he was still creeping past when the door began to open.

Valjean froze where he stood. Javert, hearing the turn of hinges, paused as well. Valjean thought perhaps the Auror was looking back at him, but he could not make himself move, not when the Secrétaire himself was the one coming through the door.

He would be found. That Valjean was sure of; his breath was too loud, too panicked, and Chabouillet was looking in his direction. All the Secrétaire needed to do was take a few more steps forward, and he would walk straight into where Valjean was standing, petrified. Something unseen clamped over Valjean’s mouth and nose, and suddenly, he ceased to issue any sound at all. A tiny movement to his left caught his eye: Javert had cast a Silencing Charm.

Chabouillet took a fleeting look down at his pocket watch and turned in the direction of the lifts. Several strained minutes passed before he had gone out of sight entirely, and then Valjean’s shoulders fell, shaking.

Crossing over to him, Javert said quietly, “Finite,” and the force holding back his voice dissipated.

“S-sorry,” Valjean whispered breathlessly. Now that the danger had passed, and the adrenaline was draining from him, he was sure he must have seemed immensely childish to the Auror. He was as good as invisible, and the odds of Chabouillet recognizing he was there were minimal. “Silly of me,” he added.

There was a queer lilt to Javert’s voice when he responded, “Do not apologize to me for that.” He continued, “Come on, we are nearly there.”

Préfet de Préfecture Henri Gisquet, declared the writing on the very last door of the hall. The door was shut, like the others, but rather than stop there to listen, Javert turned around the corner and went on. To the left was a row of windows looking out on the Sainte Chapelle, and on their right was the same wallpaper as the corridor. It stretched on for some ways, and then the hall turned to the side again, revealing a bank of offices which were the mirror image of those they had already passed.

The Auror stopped at the first of these; there was no name on the door, and Valjean realized that this room had to share its rear wall with that of Gisquet’s office.

“Alohomora,” Javert said, tapping his wand to the knob. The door clicked, and he pushed it open. The inside of the room was dark, and if the dust was any indication, it was infrequently used. A cold stone fireplace drew the eye to the back, with a desk standing in front of it. The number of chairs shoved in the middle of the room suggested that if the office was used at all, it was as a storage closet.

Valjean made his way over to the fireplace. “Incendio,” he said, and flames flickered forth from the hearth, casting a warm glow across the furniture. He was conscious also of the Disillusionment Charm fading, and before long, he could see himself again.

Shutting the door behind them, the Auror muttered, “Colloportus,” the lock switching back into place. He turned into the room, surveying the back wall thoughtfully. “You check that side, I’ll check this side,” he said, waving Valjean toward the right half of the room.

The Auror made his way around the chairs to the wall, and Valjean followed suit, staring at the smooth plaster. Somewhere, a secret door was there, concealed from their view. To his left, Valjean could hear Javert repeating “Revelio,” over and over again, tapping different points with his wand.
Valjean closed his eyes and tried to think. Surely something as important as a hidden passage would be marked. He ran his hand and eyes over the wall, searching for a word, a symbol, anything out of the ordinary. Nothing jumped out at him.

Valjean backed up against the edge of the desk, taking in the wall as a whole. The perspective did not tell him anything he did not already know. There was a fireplace, and there was a wall.

Chewing his lower lip, that pair of facts inspired the vague outlines of a thought.

“Javert,” Valjean said slowly, “is there a fireplace in Gisquet’s office as well?”

The Auror turned to look at him. “Yes, now that you mention it. Why do you ask?”

Without answering, Valjean walked up to the mantle, looking it over critically. As with most of the building, the fireplace was built out of limestone. Decorative corbels carved with scrollwork held the mantelpiece, while Greek pilasters adorned the rest of the surround. Javert was watching him, having grasped what was on his mind.

Getting onto his knees, Valjean examined the surround. There was plenty of fine detailing, but it all seemed ordinary enough. He was about to abandon the idea as a mistake when he noticed a small shadow cast by the light of the fire on the very back of the firebox. Squinting, Valjean picked out what seemed almost to be tiny letters engraved in the stone.

“A-apertus?” he read aloud.

There was a quiet groan from within the stone, and then the entire fireplace, hearth and all, swung slowly out into the room like one large door.

Javert’s eyebrows lifted. “Neatly done,” he said.

Behind the fireplace was a dark opening that could not have been more than five feet in depth. It ended in solid stone. Cautiously, Javert stepped around the fireplace into the opening; after a moment, he indicated for Valjean to follow.

Climbing to his feet, Valjean examined what he had found. The passage was cut squarely through the wall, and was not much lower than the ceiling of the room.

Whispering “Lumos,” a small light glowed from the tip of his wand. “What do you suppose this was put here for?” Valjean asked, looking around.

As Valjean entered the passage, the open fireplace turned back into position with a dull thud. At the opposite end, visible in the wand light, Javert was scrutinizing the blank stone face separating him from Gisquet’s office.

Looking up, the Auror replied, “The whole building is probably riddled with them. With a position of command, there is a greater associated risk. These were likely intended as a security measure of a bygone age. In the event the Palais was attacked, the higher members of government had a way to escape their offices.”

The passage was barely wide enough for the two men to stand abreast of one another, and so as Valjean came to the far end, his shoulder brushed against Javert’s. The Auror pointed silently at a small peephole cut in the stone, through which a pinprick of light was visible. It had to fall roughly in the center of the fireplace chimney, disguised from view as a part of the moldings. Valjean nodded his comprehension, keeping quiet. Bending his head, Javert peered through the hole, and a quiet tsk escaped him.
“Monsieur le Préfet is not even in his office at the moment,” Javert said. “He must have gone to lunch with the rest.”

Laughing slightly, Valjean shook his head. “Well,” he said, “I suppose we have a wait ahead of us, then.”

Javert straightened. “I do not intend to stand about twiddling my thumbs,” he replied. “If I am going to investigate my own superiors, then by God, I will at least be thorough about it.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” Valjean said under his breath as the Auror set his shoulder against the back of the Préfet’s fireplace.

Leaning into it, the stone shifted, rotating open as the other side had done. Javert skirted around the corner and out into the office. Valjean made to follow, but Javert stopped him.

“Keep the passageway open,” the Auror told him. “If someone comes in, I will need to hide quickly, and we cannot be sure that this side opens with the same incantation the other does. Besides, if I am the only one to get caught in here, then you will not be...” A strange expression passed over his face. “Better not to put all the eggs in one basket,” he finished.

Valjean nodded, staying put in the opening. He shifted in place, adjusting his collar. It could not have been that Javert meant to suggest Valjean should stay hidden so he would not risk being re-imprisoned. No, it was a strategic move on the Auror’s part; so long as one of them was free, they could assist the other in the event of capture. Javert may not have been convinced of Gisquet’s guilt, but to Valjean it was not difficult to imagine, and if the Préfet was in fact working in league with the Death Eaters, the Auror would have more concerns than disgrace if someone found him digging for information.

Looking around, Valjean mentally tallied what he could see of the office from where he was stationed. The fireplace blocked his view to the right, but to the left of Gisquet’s desk was a wall of bookcases. At that distance, the books appeared to be texts of law and procedural matters. A leather armchair sat near the door. Otherwise, it looked very like M. Chabouillet’s office, only larger.

Ahead of him, Javert rifled through the files spread out on Gisquet’s desk. The Auror made no comment on their contents, so presumably there was nothing out of the ordinary. His hand hovered over the top drawer for a moment before he drew it open.

Nervously, Valjean asked, “Are you certain there are no enchantments in here which might alert the Préfet to intruders?”

Keeping his back turned as he picked through the drawer, Javert emitted a sardonic sort of snort. “Of course there aren’t,” the Auror replied. “What sort of witless lunatic would make the mistake of breaking into the offices of the Préfet de Préfecture himself? The person in question would have to be bent on proving himself a complete and total moron.” It was hard to say whether it was relief or frustration coloring his voice as he added, “There is nothing here - Vidocq has to have been mistaken.”

Javert dug through the second drawer with increasing mania. Valjean found himself inclined to wonder whether the Auror had ever investigated him this way in Montreuil-sur-Mer; it was easy enough to picture Monsieur l’Inspecteur hunting through Madeleine’s desk while he was out about town. After a moment, he discarded the thought. Javert’s sense of propriety surely would have prevented such a thing, especially as he had had no hard evidence of Valjean’s identity beyond his own suspicions.
Shutting the drawer, Javert stepped away from the desk. His stance had shifted toward the bookshelves when there came the sound of voices in the corridor. Stiffening, Javert listened for a moment. Then he turned, hastening back to the passageway, and Valjean stepped aside to admit him. The fireplace had only just shut when they heard the office door opening.

“Nox,” Valjean whispered, hurriedly putting out his wand light.

There was a silent contest of wills as Valjean and Javert both vied for the peephole. Valjean surrendered in defeat, backing away, and the Auror situated himself so that he could watch the goings-on. Instead, Valjean put his ear to the seam where the back of the fireplace met the wall, straining to listen.

“- is all I’m asking, Travers,” an unfamiliar male voice was saying.

“Apologies, Monsieur le Préfet,” replied a second, lower voice. “We are doing the best that we can, but information is thin right now. Our last lead got us nowhere.”

There was a sound like a hand hitting a tabletop. “I don’t care if you have no leads at all, get somewhere. These Death Eaters are making our department look like fools!”

“Yes, Monsieur,” Travers said. “I will regroup my team. Perhaps reviewing the details of the Valjean case will turn up some new lines of inquiry.”

Where he stood hidden, Valjean did not miss the little glance Javert made in his direction at that, and he sighed internally. The Aurors, it seemed, were still considering him to be some manner of Dark wizard.

“You had best hope it does,” Gisquet was replying. “You will inform me the moment you learn anything.”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

There was a pause, and then the sound of the door opening and closing again. Travers had taken his leave.

All was silent for a moment. A rummaging noise preceded the sound of a quill scratching on paper. Valjean could picture Gisquet sitting at his desk, composing some missive.

Perhaps it was possible the Préfet was under the Imperius Curse. It was certainly the theory Javert was favoring, and after the conversation they had just overheard, Valjean was forced to concede it could be the case. If Gisquet were cooperating with the Death Eaters of his own volition, surely he would not be urging his Aurors to track them down?

Nevertheless, Vidocq’s testimony could not be discounted. The renegade Auror may not have been the most intellectual of sorts, but it seemed unlikely he would miss it if the man he answered to was working under the power of another. Besides, had not Vidocq stated that it was Gisquet who reached out to the Death Eaters first, and not the other way around? Valjean’s face pinched as he tried to riddle through the possibilities.

The faint sound of a bell drew his awareness back to the present. It reminded him of the ringing noise the Secrétaire had produced in his own office to summon assistance, and sure enough, it was not long before there was a knock and the door opened again.

“Monsieur?” said a voice.

“Ah, Richard,” Gisquet responded. “Good. I have read through Fiona’s report on the incident at
the Arc de Triomphe, and have added my recommendations. Will you take this down to her?"

“Certainly.”

Valjean could hear footsteps, followed by the exchange of papers.

“And how is your own investigation going?” the Préfet inquired.

“We are close to a breakthrough, I think,” said Richard. “Vidocq gave us the names of two wizards who might have been involved, both of them Muggleborn.”

“Muggleborn?” Gisquet repeated. “Well, well. That is a switch.”

“Indeed, Monsieur. We will be bringing them in for questioning as soon as the paperwork processes.”

“Very well. Keep me informed.”

Richard left with the reports, and the Préfet returned to writing.

Next to where Valjean stood eavesdropping, Javert straightened and stretched, the strain of bending over at the peephole getting the better of him. In his absence, Valjean took his place, squinting through the opening into the office.

A grey-haired man sat at the desk, the back of his head making up most of what Valjean could see. He was intent on his work, a white feather quill gliding smoothly across a roll of parchment. At that angle, Gisquet’s shoulders obscured from view the nature of what he was working on, and Valjean felt a surge of impatience. They needed answers, not this ambiguity.

Javert touched a hand to his shoulder, and Valjean only stopped himself from jumping just in time. Sheepishly, Valjean stepped aside to let the Auror back to his place. Some of his impatience must have showed, because Javert eyed him with amusement.

“You look just like the trainees do when they receive a first assignment,” he said softly. “Be patient. These things take time.”

So saying, he put his face back to the peephole and continued to watch the Préfet. Valjean resigned himself to not knowing what was going on, and leaned back against the stone wall. He would hear, at least, if something happened. Increasingly bored, Valjean found himself making a study of Javert instead.

The Auror was a hard man to read, but the years in Montreuil-sur-Mer had taken a little of the mystery from it. The current set of his shoulders and the downward slant to his mouth was a look Valjean recognized. It was rarely difficult to pick out when Javert was feeling particularly determined, whether it was due to a criminal he could not quite lay hands on or because he disagreed with Madeleine on some matter of policy. What were harder to discern were the man’s other emotions.

Anger Valjean was used to. Derision, even more so. Even deference he knew to recognize, for in Montreuil the Auror had never shown him anything but. Increasingly, however, there was something else in the way Javert treated him, something which Valjean could not quite seem to define. It was not kindness; Valjean did not think Javert had ever in his life been kind to anyone, and he suspected that few enough had ever been kind to him, either. Still, the absence of blatant aggression was an improvement, and he wondered if, perhaps, the Auror was getting used to him in spite of himself.
Valjean’s musings were interrupted by a sound. It was dull and hard to make out, but Javert seemed suddenly alert, and then he heard Gisquet’s voice saying, “Enter.”

Hinges turned, and Valjean could picture the office door opening for the third time that afternoon. Javert’s eyes narrowed; Valjean looked at him inquisitively, and the Auror beckoned him over.

There was hardly room for two at the peephole, but Javert showed no signs of moving, and so Valjean squeezed in close. The little opening was right at his eye level, and through it he could make out a man standing in front of Gisquet’s desk. The man was tall and thin, and garbed in expensive emerald dress robes. He had tawny hair, and a beard which ended in a point at the bottom of his thin face.

“Rodolphus,” the Préfet said. “Good afternoon.”

“Good afternoon,” Rodolphus returned. He held his wand in his fingers, one of a medium-brown wood. At that distance, Valjean could not be certain what variety it was.

Next to him, Javert said under his breath, “Rodolphus Lestrange, head of a family as long in its lineage as the Perriers.”

On the other side of the fireplace, Gisquet was standing. “Do not mistake me, Monsieur, I am not displeased to see you, but I had thought we had agreed that you would not meet with me here.”

Rodolphus dipped his head in acknowledgment. “We had indeed,” he replied. “But there was some concern from the others that you might be... reconsidering.”

“Reconsidering?” Gisquet’s tone had gone from polite to cold in a matter of moments. “Who is suggesting that?”

“No matter who,” Rodolphus said smoothly. “Suffice it to say there was concern. I was asked to find out if you still intended to meet tomorrow night.”

Gisquet snorted. “I have not said anything to the contrary, have I? Truly, Monsieur, I fail to understand.” Cutting himself short, the Préfet pivoted and stared at the fireplace. “Did you hear that?”

Hidden within the passage, Javert had overbalanced, as he was both leaning forward slightly and standing in close proximity to Valjean. He had caught himself on the back of the fireplace, but the result was the production of a quiet thump, which had attracted Gisquet’s attention. Valjean sucked in a breath as the Préfet took a step towards them.

“I heard nothing,” Rodolphus said dismissively. “Are you so paranoid that you jump at every creak this drafty old building makes?”

Stopping his advance, Gisquet frowned. “Not in the least,” he replied. “And yet, I could have sworn...” His forehead was still drawn in consternation as he turned back to his visitor. “No matter. I say again to you that the meeting goes forward. Did I not tell you it should be held at my apartments?”

“You did,” Rodolphus acknowledged, bowing his head. “Forgive my presumption in asking otherwise.”

“It is just as well,” the Préfet said with a turn of his head. “Question me your compatriots might, but all the pieces are falling into place. Go now, allay their fears, and I will see you tomorrow.”

Rodolphus seemed to consider Gisquet for a moment. “Very well, Monsieur,” he said.
“Tomorrow, then.”

The nobleman left the way he had came. With the office empty but for Gisquet, the Préfet turned and looked again contemplatively at the fireplace. Guessing what was on the man’s mind, Valjean grabbed Javert by the sleeve and tugged him backwards.

“What -?” Javert whispered sharply.


On the other side of the wall, Gisquet said imperiously, “Apertus!”

The wall shuddered as the fireplace opened on invisible hinges, light pouring suddenly into the dark space. At his side, Javert took hold of Valjean’s arm with one hand and raised his wand with the other.

In the now open passageway door stood the Préfet de Préfecture, his wand held aloft in front of him. Valjean inched closer yet to Javert, wishing he had had the foresight to cast wards around them sooner. Javert was still as a statue, his gaze fixed on Gisquet, who was in turn examining the secret passage through narrowed eyes.

After a long moment, the Préfet muttered, “Paranoid, indeed.” He backed away, and the fireplace closed again under its own power.

Thrust back into the sudden darkness, Valjean sighed softly. Javert seemed to realize he was clutching at Valjean’s arm; he released him, muttering something that might have been an apology.

“Lestrange?” Valjean asked in a whisper. “Wasn’t that...?”

The Auror nodded. “You remember correctly, that was the name Vidocq gave you.”

“And he is meeting with Gisquet tomorrow night?”

Though it was hard to make out his face, the tightness in Javert’s lips was apparent in the way he said, “So it would seem.”

Frowning, Valjean turned this over in his head. He had never been overly inclined to trust nobles, even less so after Mme. Perrier. Vidocq described the Lestranges as the “favored ones”, though favored by who, he had not said. That wealthy, powerful families might be influencing the decisions of the police was unsurprising, but if there was more to the story... He inhaled slowly. Was the Préfet de Préfecture staging a meeting with Death Eaters?

Cautiously, Javert re-approached the wall. He peered through the opening, and not long thereafter, Valjean sat down next to him on the cold stone floor where he could rest while he listened. He felt suddenly weary, exhausted by conspiracy and the ever-looming threat of danger.

The remainder of the afternoon passed quietly. Every so often, the Auror would have to stand and stretch, and in those moments, Valjean would take up his post, but there was little to see. Gisquet sat at his desk, alternately reading or writing. He took no other visitors, merely made his way through the stack of paperwork on his desk.

It was early evening when Gisquet concluded his business for the day. Valjean heard the sound of a chair scraping against the floor, and then that of the Préfet gathering his things. Javert rested one hand on the wall and put the other to his head in vexation.
“Nothing conclusive,” he muttered. “Damn.”

“This meeting which shall occur tomorrow night...” Valjean began.

“Yes, we shall be in attendance,” Javert replied. “And I suppose a proper stakeout is in order, to ensure that if there is context to be had, we do not miss it.”

“He said it was to be held at his apartments; you know where that is?”

“I do.” The Auror glared at the back of the fireplace, as though it was the stone’s fault they were still lacking in information. “I have on occasion been asked to make my reports there. You yourself once asked something similar, when we were in...” He shook himself. “We have a location, but no time, save that it be evening. Tomorrow will be a long day for us both, I think.”

“That may be so,” Valjean agreed. Hesitantly, he went on, “What do you expect to learn tomorrow?”

Javert frowned at the question. “I shall not hypothesize on conjecture,” he said, “but if the Lestranges are involved in the business of Dark wizardry, then perhaps Gisquet means to catch them at it. He has not behaved today like a man bewitched, but if he is in fact under the Imperius Curse, then it is equally as possible we might see evidence of it. Time will tell.”

Valjean wanted to reply, a dozen half-formed theories swirling in his breast, but he found the words lodged in his throat. Though Vidocq had stated that morning that the Préfet was working with the Death Eaters, it was also true that Valjean had no particular reason to believe him beyond intuition; it was not impossible the man could have been mistaken. Nothing they had observed spying on Gisquet and his office ran directly counter to the Auror’s belief that if the Préfet were involved, then it was against his will. Valjean was forcibly reminded, too, of the look on Javert’s face standing in Vidocq’s cave, like the ground had suddenly crumbled beneath his feet. He had no desire to see such an expression on the Auror’s face again.

Instead what he said was, “We ought to make ourselves ready, then.”

“Yes,” Javert agreed. “It will be easier to get back down to the gallery than it was to get up. Most people will have left by now, or will be leaving.”

They took a last look at Gisquet’s office, now dark without its occupant, and then they returned the way they had come through the other end of the passageway.

In the unused room, Valjean waited for the fireplace to swing back shut, and then he raised his wand at the enchanted flames still dancing in the hearth. “Aguamenti,” he said, and a jet of water extinguished the fire.

Javert seemed lost in thought as they returned to the lifts, but it did not matter. True to the Auror’s prediction, the Palais had largely emptied of people, and it was a relatively simple matter to get back to the first floor.

It was the first time Valjean had seen the gallery empty. Their footsteps echoed too loudly on the polished floor, but no-one was there to hear. They were not far removed from the lifts when Javert held out his hand, and Valjean took it automatically. In a rush of void, the Palais vanished.

Javert returned them to the living room of No. 4. The pair appeared out of nowhere, and Chouette, who was in her favorite place on the back of the couch, ruffled her wings in alarm. Seeing who it was, she let out a miffed hoot, and took to preening her feathers.
No sooner had they settled into place than Javert was releasing his hand, striding toward the kitchen.

“We will need a concrete plan of action in order to succeed at this,” he said, stopping at the table and beginning to empty the contents of his pockets onto it. “Gisquet’s place is full of Dark Detectors, and so if we are to hear anything which is said, it will demand ingenuity. No sooner would we get up to the front door wearing a Disillusionment Charm than we would set off at least two Sneakoscopes and a Secrecy Sensor.”

Valjean, stopping briefly to scratch Chouette on the head, made his way over to join Javert at the table. He looked curiously at the array of items the Auror had laid out, which included bottles of potion, assorted pouches, and a rosary made out of jet black beads.

“You kept it,” Valjean said wonderingly, his fingers tracing lightly over the beaded string.

Javert glanced at the rosary, and then back to a pair of phials he was comparing. “I did,” he acknowledged.

Valjean could not help but ask, so he said, “Why?”

Keeping his eyes fixed on his work, Javert answered back, “It was a gift from a superior. It would have been rude not to keep it.”

Valjean nodded. “Of course.”

“Murtlap Essence or Essence of Dittany?” Javert asked, clearly intent on changing the subject.

“Dittany,” Valjean replied. “It’s more versatile.”

“Mmm,” Javert agreed, setting the Dittany bottle to the side. “Gisquet’s apartment is in the Quartier Les Halles, on the Rue de Prouvaires. It is a third-floor apartment.”

“With no convenient secret passageways, I imagine?” Valjean asked with a rueful huff.

Javert smiled slightly at that. “Not to my knowledge,” he said.

“What of the surrounding buildings?” Valjean wondered aloud. “If there were a roof or something from which we could watch, that could get us in close enough to cast a Listening Charm.”

The Auror tapped his fingers against his thigh as he considered the question. “I do not know about the rooftops, but there are balconies across the street that may give us the right vantage point.”

“Balconies,” Valjean repeated. “Yes, that could work. It will be chilly, if we are to be there for a while. We ought to bring blankets.”

“I will be fine,” said Javert. “I’ll have my coat to wear. Not my robes, though,” he added, looking down at his attire regretfully. “If something goes wrong, I would not want to be arrested in uniform. That would just be embarrassing.”

So saying, he repacked a few choice items - the Dittany, Veritaserum, and other essentials - into the pockets of his greatcoat. The rest he left on the table. His hand paused a moment over the rosary, but he left that, too.

In the refrigerator, Valjean located the cold remains of the pizza he had ordered. There were a few slices left, so he took one, his stomach happier for the food. He offered a slice to Javert, but the Auror turned him down.
“I am going to retire to the bedroom,” he said. “I need to finish the preparations.”

“Is there any way I can help?” Valjean asked.

Javert blinked at him. “No,” he said after a moment. “I will manage.”

“As you like,” Valjean said obediently, unable to source his slight disappointment. Turning from the kitchen, Valjean walked over to where Chouette was still seated on the couch.

“Hello, little one,” he murmured, the owl nuzzling her head against his hand. “Would you like out tonight? You must need to hunt.”

So saying, he carried her over to the door. Watching her fly off into the gathering dusk produced a sharp pain in his sternum, as though someone had wrapped an iron band around his chest. It was a pain full of regret, and of a life he had no power to change.

Valjean had tried his best not to think of the Unbreakable Vow he had made ever since the fiery bonds sunk into his skin, for the knowledge that he would never be free again cut like a knife. Now, he could not avoid the reflections; his life was forfeit to save Cosette’s, and while he could feel no compunctions about that, he could not help but wish things were different. Valjean wanted suddenly to run, and to keep running, but he knew if he did, he would die.

It was a strange realization, to think that stepping out his front door would cause him to drop dead, but it could, and it would, so instead Valjean just stood in the door frame and let the cool breeze tease at his curls. If he could only pretend none of it was real, it might be easier to bear. His thoughts skittered away also from the memory of Javert’s little smiles, and the way the Auror’s breath felt against his ear. There was only so much inner turmoil a man could stand.

The sky was dark when Valjean turned back inside, locking the door behind him. He was conflicted, painfully so, but if he had been asked why, he did not think he could have articulated a response. Still hungry, he returned to the kitchen to retrieve a second slice of pizza.

Stopping short of the refrigerator door, Valjean stared at the dining table, until it dawned on him what was different. Discarded items still littered the surface, but the rosary was not among them. Javert had taken it with him after all.
Chapter 11

Valjean

Valjean awoke the next day not quite falling off the couch. From the way the light was streaming in through the window, he judged it to be mid-morning. The distant sound of running water likewise told him that Javert was in the shower.

Stretching, Valjean sat up and shook the sleep from his head. Part of him hoped they might eat breakfast again, to which the other part replied, *You should be so lucky.* Getting to his feet, he took a moment to look out the window, pulling back the blinds. There was no sign of Chouette on the landing, which doubtless meant she was still enjoying her time to herself, roosted up in a tree somewhere.

Facing back into the living room, Valjean meandered his way over to the kitchen. It seemed that either late the night before or early that morning, Javert had cleared the rest of his things from the tabletop. Valjean was betting on the latter of the two; his sleep had been light and restless, and he imagined he would have heard had the Auror been creeping around in the dark. A glance in the refrigerator told him they were out of eggs, and his stomach pinched unhappily.

The thought of more pizza made him ill, so Valjean abandoned the kitchen. His feet turned toward the bedroom, the door to which was propped open. The sound of water had stopped, but the light was still on in the bathroom. A slight twinge of his conscience was not enough to prevent his trespass on the space, and he looked around with interest.

Javert had slept in the bed. This was clear only from how neatly it was made, every crease in perfect alignment. He had certainly done a much finer job of making it than Valjean had earlier in the week. The only other sign of the Auror’s inhabitance was his set of robes, which were folded no less neatly than the duvet, and which were laying near the footboard.

Taking a step closer, Valjean felt the press of his conscience more strongly. He himself had encouraged Javert to take the bedroom, and had no right to go poking through his belongings. Still, it was difficult to resist the urge to snoop, when there was a chance it might offer some further insight into the man with whom he had been landed.

The navy robes had the look of silk to them, but with a heavier weight. Though the shades were still drawn across the window, the fabric held a faint luster in what sunlight there was. Valjean resisted the urge to reach out and touch, if only to keep from mussing the cleanly pressed fabric. He could not, however, keep himself from leaning over to look more closely at the gold filigree lining the edges.

It was not, as he had thought, a purely geometric pattern. There was lettering, too, a very fine calligraphic script repeated over and over again along the borders of the design.
“Per ardua ad astra,” Valjean read aloud. At his words, the filigree shimmered, every line lighting up with a soft glow. In surprise, Valjean stepped back, and the glow faded.

“‘Through adversity to the stars,’” came Javert’s voice, and Valjean looked up with a start. The Auror stood leaning on the bathroom door frame, dressed in his trousers and a button down. Valjean had not even heard the door open. “It is the maxim of the Auror Office.”

Valjean stammered an apology, but Javert dismissed it with a wave of his hand. There was nothing accusatory in his expression, Valjean was relieved to note, just placid neutrality.

“Were you looking for something?” the Auror asked.

Valjean shook his head. “Not really.”

Reaching into his pants pocket, Javert withdrew his rosary, little bright spots reflecting off the black glass beads. “It’s a strange thing about gifts,” he said, letting the strand play through his fingers. “They are remembered most for who gave them to you, and when, and why.” Valjean said nothing as Javert turned the cross over in his palm. Looking back up, the Auror asked, “Why did you give me this?”

Taken aback, Valjean struggled for an answer, but what was there to say? That it seemed the thing to do at the time? That it was the closest Madeleine could come to conveying he was trying to make things right? Finally, he said the only thing that felt right, which was, “I wanted you to have it.”

Javert met his eyes, and Valjean was suddenly conscious again of the fact that the Auror was only in his shirtsleeves; he looked somehow different without all his layers, more like a man and less like an authority figure. Heat rose to Valjean’s face, and a faint pink blush on Javert’s cheekbones made him wonder if the Auror had traced a similar vein of thought.

Then Javert said, “Hmm,” and tucked the rosary back into his pocket.

Walking to the door, Javert took his greatcoat from where it was hanging on the back and donned it, fastening the garment up to his chin. When he turned back, he was the Inspecteur again, though the pink had not fully faded from his cheeks.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked Valjean.

Thinking ruefully of the winter coat he had left behind in Montreuil-sur-Mer, Valjean nodded his head. “As ready as I’ll ever be,” he replied.

“Meet me on the Rue Saint Honoré,” Javert instructed. “The Préfet’s building is on the corner.”

Valjean readied himself, fixing the location in his mind’s eye. Javert Disapparated, and a moment later Valjean followed suit.

Javert

The Rue Saint Honoré appeared in a riotous flash of color. This close to the city center, the earliness of the hour did nothing to dissuade the traffic, vehicular and pedestrian alike. Javert had re-materialized just inside a narrow alley, and he waited a moment before slipping out onto the sidewalk in order to avoid giving a passing elderly woman a fright.

The Quartier Les Halles was a thriving little district, and Javert could certainly understand why Gisquet chose to make his home there. Close to such attractions as the Louvre, and with no
shortage of opportunities for dining and shopping, it had the added benefit of being very near the Île de la Cité; Gisquet was well-known for his habit of walking to work every morning, even in inclement weather. The trendy apartments lining the street were occupied on the ground level by shops and restaurants, while above, decorative balconies projected in front of every window. Few of them were actually deep enough to stand on, being decorative, but every so often there was an exception to the rule.

Valjean was waiting for him at the corner. As there were no panicking Muggles on the scene, Javert was left to assume that the man had also chosen to Apparate somewhere more discrete. He smiled as the Auror approached, bright and genuine, and Javert was proud of himself for not faltering, as well as irritated by the fact that that was even a consideration. Valjean’s smiles continued to be a source of perplexion for him, which was surely due to the fact that he could not comprehend where they came from.

Putting the matter out of his mind, Javert merely nodded his head in acknowledgment and pointed to the building across from them. An amalgam of concrete, limestone, and brick, the apartment block was shaped like a truncated triangle, its stunted point situated on the corner of the intersection.

“Gisquet’s rooms face out to the Rue des Prouvaires, but the entry to the building is down the block from here,” Javert said. “If we intend to keep our stakeout on some balcony - and I do not see a particularly promising alternative - then I would suggest using these.”

He gestured above them; coming off a white stone building was a narrow terrace cordoned off by delicate wrought iron rails. It projected over a streetside grocer’s like an awning, wrapping around the Southeast corner. “We will have a view of Prouvaires, and to a lesser degree of Saint Honoré. I believe it will do.”

Valjean looked around, apparently considering the Auror’s words. Javert was unsure if it rankled that Valjean might question his judgement, or if he was glad to be cooperating for once with someone who was experienced in the art of concealing himself. It was with not a small amount of chagrin that it occurred to him Valjean would make a decent Auror - if not, he added to himself, for the man’s criminal record and general commitment to leniency.

“It will need a lot of wards,” Valjean said, “but yes, I agree that is the best solution.”

Glancing around to be certain no Muggles were watching, Javert cast a Bedazzling Hex on the balcony. The spell rippled around the railings like a wave of heat before it settled into place. “On my mark,” Javert began, “Apparate up there and start strengthening the enchantments. I will join you presently.”

Valjean nodded the affirmative, looking up at the balcony intently. Turning to the street, Javert eyed a passing car. A subtle flick of his wrist produced a loud bang, as of an engine backfire; passersby up and down the block turned to look, and Javert tapped Valjean on the shoulder while they were distracted.

“Now,” he said, and Valjean disappeared.

Studying the lay of the land, Javert muttered “Cave inimicum.” When Gisquet’s guests arrived, perhaps they would have some warning. The spell cast, shuddering along the length of his wand before shimmering out into the air. Javert’s brows drew together in consternation; that had never happened before.

A little bit rattled, Javert Disapparated, reappearing up on the balcony. To his left, Valjean was
busy bespelling the guardrail.

“Salvio hexia,” he was muttering. “Protego maxima.”

Joining in, Javert waved his wand over the wall of the building to their backs. “Repello inimicum. Salvio hexia...” As he worked, Javert could not help but notice he had to put more effort behind each ward than was usual; it felt, almost, as though he was pushing in order to expel the enchantments from his wand. The Auror bit down on the inside of his cheek, glancing a moment at the crack in the wand’s shaft; was it possible the damage was starting to affect its performance?

A noise from Valjean dismissed his concerns for the time being. Turning, Javert found Valjean bent over the railing, watching a grey-haired figure on the pavement below.

“Is that not the Préfet there?” he asked.

Looking, Javert nodded and said, “He is leaving for work.”

“And we are keeping watch here.” It was a statement, but it came out of Valjean’s mouth a question.

“Yes,” Javert explained, attempting to quell his usual impatience. “Gisquet will sit in his office as he did yesterday. We could tail him, and perhaps we would learn something of use. However, it makes more sense to hedge our bets and wait. If the Lestranges have some relationship to the Death Eaters, and our conversation with Vidocq suggests that they do, then someone may show up to place spells on the apartment in anticipation of the meeting tonight.”

Tilting his head, Valjean asked, “Spells? You mean like wards?”

Javert frowned. “Possibly, but probably not. As I told you, the Préfet’s place will be littered with Dark Detectors. If a Dark wizard wished to make it inside without discovery, they would have to disable or confuse the devices.”

“I see,” said Valjean. “So we are more likely to learn something here than at the Palais. I will make no secret of the fact I am glad not to be going back there.”

Letting out a huff of air, Javert replied, “Somehow I did not expect you to object.”

Valjean folded his arms and leaned against the railing. “What if no-one shows up?”

“You ask a lot of questions.” Javert said the words automatically, with more dryness than any real rancor, but he could not fail to miss the shadow of a wince that passed over Valjean’s expression. “My apologies,” the man said.

Javert sighed inwardly. “I only meant,” he responded, “that I am unaccustomed to conversation. It is unusual for me to work with anyone who is not also an Auror.”

Valjean dipped his head in recognition.

“You are an oddity to me,” Javert went on, unable to quite stop talking. “If you would only act as you should -!” Cutting himself off, he stared hard at the window directly across the street. It was empty, and too dark to see much inside, but it was a welcome diversion.

“And how is it that I should act?” Valjean asked, his face expressionless.

Without turning to look at him, Javert barked a laugh. “Sullen?” he suggested. “Apathetic?
Valjean’s brow creased, and his lips puckered as he asked, “Truly, Javert, you would prefer that?”

Scoffing, Javert replied, “It would make more sense than acting like my company is anything but intolerable.”

Valjean stared at his hands, lacing them together. “It’s... Your company is not intolerable, Javert - at least not usually. Much as I know you must dislike me, I do not see why you insist that I should be unpleasant to you in return.”

Javert’s fingers curled into his palms, and he suppressed the urge to laugh. Valjean thought he disliked him. A needling thought suggested that perhaps this was not strictly the case, but he refused to examine it. After all, it was not a matter of Valjean simply failing to return his dislike.

“You are missing the point,” the Auror said. “It is the natural order of things that you should behave coarsely towards me. Why you persist in not conforming, I do not understand.”

“Oh, that much is obvious,” Valjean said under his breath. He did not say anything else, watching the activity on the street below. Javert likewise turned his eyes back to the focus of their stakeout.

From the balcony, it was just possible to see into the windows of Gisquet’s apartment, though at that distance, the details were difficult to make out. Javert found himself wishing he had a set of binoculars; instead, he made do with recalling to mind the last time he had had cause to visit the Préfet. He was certain that the two windows nearest the corner looked out from the salon. The third window he gauged to be the bedchamber, while the kitchen and dining room were on the opposite side. If anyone passed in front of the glazing, they would see the movement. Otherwise, a Listening Charm would be required to tell them what was going on.

As for the Préfet’s security, Javert remembered there being a Secrecy Sensor adjacent to the door. In the presence of hidden or untrustworthy enchantments, the thin golden rod would emit a droning hum of noise. There was also a Sneakoscope Gisquet kept on his mantelpiece, a device which looked like a child’s top. It, too, would whistle and spin in the presence of deceit, magical or otherwise. When Javert had commented on it to the Préfet, the man had alluded to keeping a second by his bedside. A Death Eater would be hard-pressed to disable any such devices before being caught, unless they were to do so while Gisquet was at work.

He checked his pocket watch. The time was just after nine o’clock. Javert settled in to wait, well-used to the long days and nights an investigation sometimes required. At least the weather was fair. The sun was shining, and despite the lingering chill of winter in the air, his heavy wool coat kept him warm. A glint from down below attracted his attention, but it turned out to be nothing more than light glancing off the clasp of a woman’s handbag.

At his side, Valjean shifted his weight, looking preoccupied. It was difficult to tell whether the object of his attention was the sidewalk he was gazing fixedly at, or if something else was on his mind. Javert was almost inclined to ask, but he stopped himself. What did he care what Valjean was thinking about?

The minutes ticked by slowly; the narrowness of the balcony left little opportunity for a change in posture, so Javert stood at attention, and Valjean leaned on the railing, both of them seemingly riveted in place. The morning passed in this fashion, and no-one entered or left the apartment complex.

By the time the city bells were tolling noon, clouds had rolled in over Paris. With them came a stiff wind. It streamed past the tall stone buildings, catching the tails of Javert’s coat and tugging on
them. His only response was to drop his chin into his collar, withdrawing further into himself.

Valjean tucked his fingers into his armpits. He said nothing, but in his light jacket, he had to feel the chill. Javert recalled dimly something the man had said the night before about blankets; Javert had paid little attention to it at the time, but now he thought perhaps he should have. Winter had not truly relinquished its grip on the country, and it hardly seemed fair for him to stand there in relative comfort while Valjean shivered.

“Valjean,” he said finally. Valjean looked up, and he asked, “Are you cold?”

Valjean glanced down at himself and then back up. “A bit,” he admitted. Hurriedly, he added, “But I’ll manage, Javert, I want to be here.”

The Auror smirked slightly. “I had not been going to suggest you leave,” he said. “Here.”

Waving his wand, Javert conjured a small ball of blue fire. It floated in midair, fueled by nothing except magic. Another flick of his wrist sent the magical flames sailing in Valjean’s direction.

“It is cool to the touch,” Javert told him, “but it will keep you warm.”

“Oh!” Reaching out, Valjean cupped his hand around the little fire and drew it closer. “Thank you,” he said.

Javert did not care to try and put a name to the emotion in Valjean’s eyes, nor did he wish to think on the fact that the spell, like the others, had been more difficult to cast than it ought to have been. Instead, he shrugged and said, “You will not be of much help to me if you freeze to death.”

Valjean only laughed, and Javert looked away, a bit disquieted by himself. On the Rue Saint Honoré, the main door to the apartment building opened and a woman appeared on the sidewalk. Javert squinted down at her in interest, only to let out a disappointed grunt as she appeared to be a Muggle tenant.

“This Rodolphus Lestrange,” Valjean said suddenly. “What else do you know about him?”

Javert considered this. “Less than I would like,” he replied. “The Lestrange family château is located in the Loire Valley, or so I have heard said. They have long been involved in affairs of the state, though there have been rumors... I have always dismissed them as hearsay.”

“Rumors?”

Javert shook his head. “Do not ask me for details, for I know none, but there have been stories of... disappearances and the like in the surrounding countryside. No one has ever filed an official report, though, so I did not put any stock in such things.”

Valjean pursed his lips. “Maybe people were just too scared.”

Javert’s exhalation hissed through his teeth, and he did not reply.

The sky continued to darken as the afternoon progressed. Around four, a fine, misty rain began to fall, and even Javert edged closer to the warmth of the bluebell flames. He was trying not to let it get the better of him, but he felt increasingly perturbed. Though hours yet remained until nightfall, it struck him as peculiar that they had seen neither hide nor hair of any suspicious characters hanging about. A handful of people had gone in and out of the building, but they drove cars and had the look of Muggles. Surely Rodolphus was not so artless as to think he could enter Gisquet’s home without consequence, unless of course his business was legitimate.
There was one other possibility. It made him ill even to consider, and yet that did nothing to prevent the spectre of doubt from rearing its head again. It simply could not be that the Préfet would knowingly involve himself with Dark wizards; he was an Auror of skill and learning, and he had achieved his position on the basis of great merit. Still, the exchange between M. Gisquet and M. Lestrange had been troubling. Javert was a poor liar, even to himself, and he could not deny that the conversation cast both men in a poor light.

And then there was Valjean. He was a thief and an escape artist who had succeeded in breaking out of the highest security prison in the wizarding world, and yet he apologized for things which were not his fault and smiled when Javert did not deserve it. Like a talisman, Javert’s fingers brushed over the pocket where he had stowed the rosary. He had not meant to take it, but something felt wrong about leaving it on the kitchen table. Valjean’s face when he saw it that morning, the way he flushed when Javert caught him staring...

Javert cursed whatever confused feeling it was twisting in his breast, as well as the heat on his face. He wondered abruptly if perhaps he had been too hasty in establishing the terms of their Unbreakable Vow, but that was preposterous - he had done exactly what was right and proper for a man of his position. It did not matter how pleasant a face Valjean could put on. It was still his responsibility to...

Javert was shaken from his reverie by a low buzzing noise. At first he was stymied, looking in vain for the source of the sound, until he realized it came from the spell he had cast that morning. Someone of note was approaching the apartment.

“There,” Javert said, pointing down the length of the street. Valjean craned his neck, and the two saw M. Gisquet returning from work.

The buzzing faded as Gisquet entered through the main doors. A few minutes passed as he climbed the two flights up to the third floor, and then a figure passed by the salon windows; the Préfet had retired to his rooms.

“That is Gisquet,” Javert said slowly, “so now -”

“Wait!” said Valjean as the buzzing started up again. “Look there!”

Javert squinted down the street. After a moment, he saw what Valjean was pointing at, and his heart sank. A group of three people were walking towards the building. In the center was unmistakably Rodolphus Lestrange. There was also a witch, who he did not recognize, though if the way she was hanging off Rodolphus’ arm was any indication, it could only be his new wife. The third member of the party was a wizard, and Javert did not recognize him, either. He was only just shorter than Rodolphus, and had long hair, so blond as to be almost white.

The three reached the main doors and disappeared inside; growling, Javert removed his wand from his robes. He brandished it in the direction of the apartment, and let the incantation for a Listening Charm fall from his mouth.

Two actions occurred simultaneously in result: first, he heard Gisquet’s voice as clear as a bell in his ear saying, “Come in, please,” and second, his wand seemed to groan like a tree caught in a storm. Then there was a sickening crack, and Javert knew what had happened before he even looked down.

Beside him, Valjean gasped in horror, and reluctantly, Javert let his gaze drop. The nigh-invisible split was invisible no longer, and it had lengthened in its jagged path almost to the tip of his wand.

“Oh,” he said. “Well.” There was a ringing in his ears, and he thought maybe Valjean was
speaking to him, but the only thing which registered was the knowledge that no wandmaker in the country was capable of repairing such damage. Numbly, he returned the wand to the inner pocket of his coat and silenced Valjean with a look.

“Do not forget why we came here,” Javert said. “We have a meeting to observe.”

Valjean

The moment Javert’s wand fractured further was only one in a series of concurrent disasters. On the street, others were convening on the apartment building, including Mme. Perrier. Valjean recoiled upon instinct when he saw her, and then again when the blond wizard put his face to the window, peering suspiciously out into the growing dark. Fortunately, their wards seemed sufficient to hide them from view; the wizard did not so much as glance at the balcony.

Carried to them by means of the Auror’s charm, Valjean heard Gisquet’s voice say, “Can’t get the blasted thing to shut up, I am afraid,” he said. “I would get rid of it, but people like me are expected to keep such devices around the house.”

That was when Valjean noticed, above the murmur of voices, a fine humming not unlike that of a tuning fork.

“Do not worry about that,” came a voice Valjean recognized as belonging to Rodolphus. “Throw a blanket over the thing and it will not trouble us.”

There was a rustling, and the humming faded. Valjean glanced at Javert; the strangled expression on the Auror’s face suggested that this was as bad of a sign as he had thought it was.

“Have a seat, Madame,” said Gisquet. “You as well, Madame Perrier. Is the fire sufficient?”

“Turn it a little higher, won’t you, Monsieur?” said another male voice; this one spoke French in slow, stilted phrases, and clearly had an English accent. “We have come a long way, and my wife will be furious with me if I let her sister catch cold.”

“Certainly.”

After a moment, the light in the window flared, and it was easier to make out the people inside. Gisquet stood with the blond wizard near the fireplace, Perrier next to them in an armchair. Valjean could make out the profiles of the Lestranges on the settee, a small collection of other witches and wizards gathered silently in the back. With mounting dis-ease, Valjean noticed that Vidocq was among them.

The chatter in the room died, and all Valjean could hear was the crackle of the fire.

Then Gisquet said, “Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining me this evening.” A chorus of nods went around the room. “Before we begin, I do believe congratulations are in order. Madame Lestrange, a pleasure to meet you in person at last.”

“Monsieur l’Préfet,” the woman on the settee replied, getting to her feet. She had thick, dark hair, and the sort of beauty which accompanied a lightning strike, or a viper. “The pleasure is mine. You may call me Bellatrix.” She, too, spoke with a slight accent, though her French was more evidently practiced.

“Bellatrix,” Gisquet breathed, raising her hand to his lips. “She is bewitching, Rodolphus.”

“Bella,” said the blond wizard, “Stop showing off and sit down.”
The witch wheeled around. “Silence, Lucius,” she snapped. “It is right that the Préfet should greet me. The Dark Lord himself has given us the task of seeing to matters here!”

“You are not the only one of the faithful in the Dark Lord’s favor,” Lucius said quietly. “Arrogance is not becoming in you, Bella. Remember, too, that I am here as a favor to Narcissa only - you do not command me.”

Bellatrix laughed, and the sound made Valjean’s skin crawl.

“Narcissa is happy for Rudolph and I,” she hissed. “And she knows that the work we are doing is critical. With France on our side, all of Europe will bow before us!”

Lucius made as if to reply, but Gisquet interceded.

“The lady is quite correct, and happily she brings us back to the subject of tonight - *Patria.*”

To his right, Valjean was aware of Javert gripping the top of the railing with all his strength, the tendons straining sharply against the back of his hands.

Bellatrix returned to her seat within the apartment, seeming almost regal in her bearing. Gisquet continued, “We have spoken at length about strategy, and now comes the time for execution. The reports I have received suggest that the campaign in Great Britain proceeds according to plan - perhaps Monsieur Malfoy can tell us more?”

Lucius lifted his chin. “The Ministry of Magic has fallen to its knees. A few troublesome members of the Order of the Phoenix remain, but even as we speak there are agents working to uncover their locations. I predict we have a few more months of minor conflict, and then the rebellion will be crushed entirely. We have a new inside source who has proven most useful.”

“This is good news,” said Gisquet, clasping his hands. “It is my hope that the transition in France shall go just as smoothly.”

“So you intend to go through with it, then?” asked one of the wizards toward the back. He had a mustache, and Valjean thought he recognized him as one of the Death Eaters who had attacked him several days ago.

Gisquet inclined his head. “The preparations are all in place. Next Tuesday, we shall launch our assault on the Hôtel Matignon, and I myself will kill the Premier Ministre.”

Valjean felt his blood turn to ice, a state of affairs which had nothing to do with the weather. It was a pittance compared to Javert’s reaction; he staggered back physically, breath coming in staccato bursts.

“Javert?” Valjean asked quietly, but the Auror gave a sharp jerk of his head “no” and returned to stand at Valjean’s side, arms folded tightly across his chest.

In the salon, the discussion continued as calmly as though the Préfet de Préfecture had not just suggested committing high treason.

“Your Aurors suspect nothing?” It was Rodolphus who spoke, leaning forward with interest.

There was a smile in Gisquet’s voice as he replied, “I have been exceedingly careful. They have no idea, I can assure you.”

“What about that Inspecteur of yours, Javert?” Rodolphus asked slyly. “The last I heard, he was still at large.”
At that, Élodie Perrier leapt to her feet. “I will track him down, Monsieur,” she said. “Give me your leave and I will find him, and that dog of a convict he has befriended.”

“Madame Perrier,” Gisquet said coolly, “you have now had no fewer than three different opportunities to finish them off. You have failed on all three accounts. Forgive me if I leave that small pleasure to someone more competent than you.”

At a loss for words, Perrier collapsed back into her seat.

“It is true that Javert has not been removed from the picture as I would like,” Gisquet said slowly, addressing not only Rodolphus but the entire room. “But it makes no difference. Jean Valjean has seen to that.”

On the balcony, Valjean started.

“The man is no Dark wizard - it was not magic which got him out of Azkaban, merely a prodigious natural strength - but he has nevertheless proven to be an effective scapegoat. My people believe the Inspecteur to be his captive, no doubt under numerous layers of enchantment. Even if Javert were to discover our plans, he would never succeed in convincing the others that it was anything but Valjean’s trickery.”

“How dare he,” Valjean said indignantly. “How dare he pretend -!”

Javert touched a hand to his arm and Valjean quieted. That did not stop it smarting that the Préfet was using him to cover up his actions, and his jaw tightened in disgust.

“And if Javert chooses to interfere himself?” Rodolphus asked. “That was your original concern, was it not?”

Gisquet sighed. “It is a shame,” he said. “If his dedication to his role were not so absolute, he might have made a good operative for us. As it is, I would no sooner invite him to join us than his morals would compel him to try and stop me. I do not see him posing much of a threat, but I will concede that he could prove an annoyance if he gets in the way.”

“If he does, what do you want us to do about it?”

“My instructions have not changed,” said the Préfet. “If Javert interferes, kill him.”

Javert flinched; Valjean reached out, putting a hand on his shoulder, and for once, the Auror did not pull away. He could feel Javert shaking through his coat.

“I want to do it,” Bellatrix was saying. “Leave him to me.”

“Patience, my dear,” Rodolphus said softly.

Gisquet coughed politely, and the crowd returned its attention to him. “The only question remaining is location - we will need a place from which to stage our operations.”

“The Château de Lestrope is available,” said Rodolphus. “And it is far enough from the city not to attract attention.”

“Perfect.” Gisquet clapped his hands. “Masson, Garnier, Le Gall - gather your people. You will report to the Château de Lestrope tomorrow by nightfall, is that clear?”

The wizards, who stood among those behind the couch, saluted the Préfet.
“Vidocq,” Gisquet added, “Be a good man and fetch our guests some refreshments.” Quiet chatter broke out across the room, the atmosphere almost celebratory.

Beside him, Javert began to laugh, first softly, and then with growing hysteria.

“Javert?” Valjean asked, a little wary.

Spinning to face him, the Auror grabbed Valjean by the lapels of his jacket. “Is everyone,” he snarled, “I have ever worked for a criminal?”

The implicit accusation stung. Firmly, Valjean took Javert by the wrists and pried his grip off of his coat. Javert did not offer much resistance, choosing instead just to stare at him. His stare was as accusatory as his tone, but, Valjean realized, he also looked terrified. Valjean’s retort was therefore not as sharp as it might have been.

“I do not think,” he enunciated, “that it is fair of you to lump me in with the likes of that. Petty theft is hardly equivalent to murder.”

Javert chuckled darkly. “Of course you would call that unfair,” he said.

“Yes, I would,” said Valjean levelly. “The world isn’t split into good people and Death Eaters. No one is perfect, Javert, and we all make mistakes - I made mistakes - but that is not the same as being evil.”

“Certainly, that is easy for you to say,” Javert said quietly. “And why shouldn’t it be? How many times over do I owe you my life? - and I have only abused your goodwill in return. But...”

Tentatively, Valjean reached out again, placing his hand over the Auror’s elbow. Javert balked slightly at the touch, but after a moment he allowed Valjean to draw him closer. Then it was Valjean who stilled as Javert leaned his forehead against his shoulder; Javert was trembling, and Valjean wrapped his arm around his shoulders in what little comfort he could offer.

The heart in Valjean’s chest beat high and fast, and it seemed to him that something unfurled in his soul which had been long-since withered. They stood that way, the one supporting the other for some time, until the Auror’s trembling subsided somewhat.

Straightening, Javert asked, “Will you Apparate us out of here? I would do it myself, only, well...”

“Of course,” Valjean said immediately. He glanced across the street at the apartment. The cordial atmosphere seemed to be continuing, a tray of crystal glasses passing between guests. “What about them?”

Javert grimaced as he followed Valjean’s eyes.

“Leave it,” he said. “They will sit around and partake of the Préfet’s fine spirits for some hours yet. I think they have spoken all of business that they mean to.”

“Let’s get out of here, then,” Valjean replied. Holding his wand in one hand, he took hold of Javert’s arm with the other, and concentrated on the living room at the Gorbeau House. Closing his eyes, he Disapparated, bringing Javert with him through the dark.

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Javert

The bedroom was dim, lit only by the little lamp next to the bed. Javert sat on the edge of the mattress, thinking. In the background, he heard the shower running; Valjean had retreated to the
hot water in order to return the feeling to his cold limbs. All this he was aware of, but only vaguely.

On the bedside table rested his wand. The incandescent glow served only to highlight the break in the wood, casting a stark shadow over where it had splintered. Javert had been staring at that shadow for several uninterrupted minutes.

Moving with a sudden fluidity, Javert leaned forward and plucked the wand from where it rested, lifting it to where he could examine it more carefully. Upon closer review, the break was not so extreme as it had first appeared. At the very least, there was no sign that it had cracked all the way down to the silvery unicorn hair core.

Lifting his head, Javert pointed the wand out into the bedroom and said, “Avis.”

A trio of canaries shot from the tip, rising on yellow wings to circle around the room and twitter. A minute passed, and Javert waved his wand, dismissing the spell. The illusory birds vanished.

This experiment told the Auror a number of things. One of these was that his wand was still functional, at least, although it would probably not take kindly to another split. Also significant was the fact that he had not experienced the strange disturbance he had felt while casting spells earlier in the day. A hard line became his mouth as he frowned at the carpet.

Javert had told Valjean that the first crack in his wand appeared when he cast a Patronus Charm between the convict and the dementor. This was true. It was also true that he had felt strongly at the time that the crack was a direct result of the spell. What he had not told Valjean was that the crack had widened defending him from Perrier. This made Valjean the common denominator in at least two instances of the wood’s failure.

Frowning still more heavily, Javert shifted and considered his actions over the course of the day. His magic had been hampered first when trying to ward the balcony, and second when keeping Valjean from catching a chill. The Listening Charm caused the wand to split further apart, a spell which he would normally abhor to cast against a superior. To use such a charm to spy on the Préfet, in his private home no less, ought to have been unthinkable.

Javert held his wand in both hands before him. The fine grain and density of the wood made it as inflexible in temperament as he was; it was with a loathsome, impending comprehension that Javert recalled the uncertainty which had besieged him of late. He was inflexible, he was unyielding, he was pitiless - and he was also very, very afraid that he was in the wrong.

Thérèse’s words to him rose once more unbidden in his mind.

“‘It will rip you apart’,” Javert murmured aloud. He buried his face in his hand. “Damn it!”
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Miraculously, I am only one day late with this update; since my Thanksgiving break starts tomorrow afternoon, I am hopeful that I can resume my regular schedule.

All this chapter has me thinking about now is how hilarious a Planes, Trains, & Automobiles AU would be. Hmm... May be something to add to the list.

Valjean slept heavily, dreamlessly, and woke feeling no less fatigued than he had been upon laying down for the night. The couch, he was half-convinced, was beginning to conform to the shape of his body, a reflection on the cheapness of the furniture. Wishing for a watch to tell him the time, Valjean yawned and dragged himself upright. The gentle glow of street lights outside told him it was still early.

Down the hall, the bedroom door was shut, but there was light visible through the crack at the bottom. Frowning, Valjean studied the light. Javert seemed to make a habit of waking up before he did, but this was getting a bit extreme. Had the Auror slept at all the night before?

Shaking his head, Valjean ambled into the kitchen. It was dark, and he blinked owlishly as he turned on the light. There was a pile of dishes in the sink; he could have set them to washing themselves with magic, but the thought of hot, soapy water was soothing, a comforting bit of domesticity.

Valjean put the stopper in the drain and let the sink fill. Before long, the routine of scrubbing and rinsing had taken over, and some of the restlessness left him. Drying a plate with a dish towel he conjured out of thin air, Valjean hummed a little tune to himself. He returned the dishes to their proper cupboards, puttering about, only realizing he was making a fair amount of noise when he heard footsteps behind him.

Javert dropped into a dining chair heavily, running his fingers through his hair.

Apologetic, Valjean said, “I’m sorry if I disturbed you.”

The Auror shook his head. “I was already up,” he replied.

Without wanting to seem like he was staring, Valjean continued to wipe at a plate long after it was dry, taking appraising glances in Javert’s direction. He looked bone-tired, the dark circles under his eyes starkly visible against skin which was paler than usual. He had not even commented on the fact that Valjean was obviously done with the plate, simply looking down at his hands, which were folded on the tabletop. There was a slight crease between his eyebrows, and Valjean got the impression that whatever Javert was thinking about, it was not the grease stain near his thumb.

Abandoning pretense, Valjean set the plate down on the counter and asked, “How did you sleep last night?”

“I didn’t,” came the terse response, confirming Valjean’s earlier intuition.

“Ah.”
Before Valjean had to think of something else to say, Javert looked up. “Do you know anything of a man called La Fontaine?”

Valjean cocked his head. “Certainly I know of him,” he replied. “His children’s fables are classics.”

Slowly, Javert asked, “Is there one about an oak tree?”

“Do you not know it?” Of all the things Valjean had thought Javert might inquire of him, that could not have been further from his mind. Truly, it seemed that the Auror’s train of thought was even more distant than he had imagined.

“My mother...” Javert began, and then stopped. A moment passed, and then he continued with a slight shrug. “My mother was not the maternal sort. She was never much for storytelling.”

“I see.”

Not quite meeting his gaze, Javert asked, “Will you tell it to me?”

“The story?” Valjean sat down at the table, pursing his lips thoughtfully. “I have not read it in some time,” he warned, “but it was a simple enough moral.”

Javert just regarded him expectantly, and so, confused but obliging, Valjean narrated the tale. “There was once an oak tree and a patch of reeds which grew on the same riverbank. The oak, being compassionate, offered to shield the reeds from an oncoming storm, but the reeds politely declined.”

Valjean hesitated, but now that he had Javert’s undivided attention, he could not very well stop. “The storm hit, and though the reeds could bend with the lashing winds, the oak could not, so it was broken in two.”

Javert’s eyes widened, and then he laughed once, bitterly. “Yes,” he said, “of course that is how that story would end.”

If asked, Valjean would have said he was concerned - no, worried - by the Auror’s strange behavior; it did not appear to be Valjean’s fault that Javert was out of sorts, and yet he could not help but feel a certain responsibility. He fumbled for the right phrase, something with which to draw out whatever it was that had the man in such a black mood, but Javert stood suddenly, pushing in his chair.

“Excuse me,” he said, and practically bolted from the room.

“Javert!” Valjean called after him. “Javert, wait!”

He got to his feet, and heard the bedroom door slam shut. Going to follow, Valjean forced himself not to rush. It would not do to make Javert feel cornered.

At the end of the hall, he stopped, thinking carefully about his next move. No sound issued from within the room, but Valjean doubted Javert had Disapparated; even if he trusted his wand to do so, he could have just as easily vanished from the kitchen as anywhere else.

“Javert?” Valjean asked softly, rapping against the wood with his knuckles. He was met with silence. “Javert, I know you’re in there.”

It was too quiet; the Auror was waiting for him to give up. Listening keenly, Valjean detected a
creak of the floorboards, and the image rose suddenly in his head of Javert standing just on the other side of the door, leaning back against the leaf to hold it shut. That would not stop Valjean, not in an emergency, but somehow he got the impression Javert would not thank him for ripping the door off its hinges without good cause.

“Whatever it is that’s wrong, I can help,” Valjean offered. “I want to help.” When Javert still did not answer, he went on, “I am as stubborn as you are, you know. I can stand here and wait all day for you to talk to me.”

It was that threat which seemed to do the trick. A moment passed, and then he heard a very tired, “Go away, Valjean.”

“I’m not leaving you here by yourself.”

There was a trace of his old anger in the way Javert snapped, “Let it go. I am not one of your charity cases!” The tiredness returned as he added, “And anyway, you can’t fix this.”

“You could let me try.”

“Just leave,” Javert sighed. “Please.”

Valjean narrowed his eyes at the faded wood veneer. “And what if I don’t want to?”

“You must be sick of this apartment by now,” said the Auror. “Take a walk.”

Valjean let out an involuntary laugh. “I don’t think I can do that after the Vow that we made.”

“Surely it doesn’t count as trying to escape if I am telling you to leave.”

A little testily, Valjean replied, “That might be a risk you are willing to take with my life, but I am not.”

“That isn’t - it’s not -“

“Or perhaps,” Valjean continued, aware he was goading Javert, and not entirely sure whether it was helping or hurting, “that is what you want. Would it be easier for you if I just left and never came back?”

The door opened. Javert stood in the frame, looking at him levelly.

“Enough,” he said. “Come in, for all the good it may do you.”

He pulled the door open wider, and Valjean stepped past into the bedroom. Javert turned around, arms swinging loosely, as though he could not quite settle himself. Valjean, for his part, perched on the edge of the bed, looking the Auror over uncertainly.

“So,” Valjean said, “you have a broken wand -“

“Not broken,” Javert interrupted. “Just badly damaged. It will function, but I hesitate to use it for anything but necessary spellwork.”

Valjean tipped his head in acknowledgment. “A damaged wand, then,” he conceded. “But I do not think that is the only thing troubling you.”

“Not in the least,” Javert muttered, and then scowled when he realized he had been made to respond.
“Then won’t you say what is?” Valjean pressed. “If it is about the Préfet -“

“Oh no,” Javert sneered, “the Préfet de Préfecture, the guiding light for law enforcement in France, has only committed himself to the Death Eaters. Why should that trouble me?”

“Is that all there is to it?”

It was evident in the way his fingers balled up at his sides that Javert was desperate for the conversation to come to an end, but whether it was because he did not lie, or because he could simply no longer keep his thoughts to himself, he did not give Valjean some pretense of an excuse. Instead he exhaled, long and slow, and finally spoke.

“In the span of a week, everything has fallen to pieces,” he said. “The Secrétaire is Cursed, the Préfet is staging a coup d'état, and I do not think I can even trust my own judgement anymore. I therefore find myself having to ask - what is the point?”

“The point?” Valjean repeated, and realized with a start that the question was not rhetorical; Javert was genuinely searching for an answer. “The point,” he said, “is that right now, in this moment, we are perhaps the only people in France in a position to do anything about it. Gisquet believes you would try to stop him if you knew what he was planning - prove him right, don’t let him succeed.”

“And you will offer to continue helping me, I suppose?”

“Of course.”

“Even though, should we prevail, I will have no option but to arrest you?”

Valjean felt his jaw tighten, but he said, “Yes, I believe that is the arrangement I agreed to.”

Javert stared at him for a long minute, and then said, “You are like no-one I have ever met, Jean Valjean.”

“Well,” Valjean snorted, “I think that feeling is mutual.”

Javert paced over to the bed. The mattress dipped as he sat next to Valjean, leaving a healthy gap between them. “We will be on our own in pursuing this,” he warned. “It is not my policy to walk into a hostile situation without a full accompaniment of Aurors, but you heard Gisquet - it is not worth the effort it would take to persuade them we are telling the truth.”

Lifting his shoulders, Valjean replied, “We have to try. If we do not, innocent people will die.”

“If we go straight to the Premier Ministre, we may be able to convince him of the danger,” Javert pondered aloud. “But it means nothing without having any of the details.”

“Then let us get some,” said Valjean. “You said the Château de Lestrange is in the Loire Valley?”

Javert inclined his head. “So they say, although I do not know that for sure. I certainly do not know the precise location.”

Valjean hummed, turning the problem over in his mind. “We could take the train to Tours,” he suggested. “Perhaps someone out there could tell us more.”

“Is in Montparnasse,” Valjean supplied.

“I know where it is,” Javert snipped back. “I was only thinking...” He trailed off a touch uncomfortably, and it was then that Valjean recalled the Auror’s general lack of exposure to Muggle technology.

A casual note to his voice, Valjean said, “I’ll take care of the tickets, shall I?” He patted the pocket of his trousers which held his wallet. “I quite like taking the train,” he went on, “though I have yet to ride this one. It’s new.”

Javert just nodded. His thoughts had drifted off again, not that Valjean minded. The expression he wore now spoke more of gears turning than the hopelessness which had beset him earlier. It was a decided improvement; if the Auror remained focused on investigating, perhaps it would keep him from dwelling too much on other matters.

“I will wear my robes today,” Javert announced suddenly, “under my coat. You should find something warmer to wear as well - we will doubtless have to do some walking.”

Standing, Javert made his way into the bathroom, leaving Valjean where he sat on the bed.

*Something warmer?* Valjean thought, looking down at his fraying coat. *Easy for him to say.*

In the end, Valjean decided to try altering the garment with magic, an affair which first caused it to smoke alarmingly, and then to change several different colors, including a hideous shade of ochre yellow. Finally, it was black again, and also made of wool. It felt heavier as he pulled it back on, which he was fairly certain was a good sign.

Javert re-emerged looking immaculate as ever. He wrinkled his nose at Valjean’s attempt, saying, “Well, that won’t do at all.”

Valjean gestured at it helplessly. The finer points of men’s fashion were lost on him.

With a considering look, Javert waved his wand, and the coat twitched around Valjean’s shoulders as it twisted and grew longer, coming down past his hips. A few more buttons popped into existence, and Valjean was reasonably certain his jacket had not had pockets on the front before, either. Ragged ends knit themselves back together, and the wool, which Valjean had thought rather scratchy, softened into a black felt. In less than a minute, it was like he was wearing a brand new coat.

“That is... outstanding,” Valjean murmured, looking himself over in the mirror. “I do not require anything so fine as this, you know. Thank you.”

Javert gave him a crooked smile. “We will both look less out of place if we are dressed similarly. Now we could be business partners traveling together.”

Valjean chuckled. “I suppose in a way, we are,” he said. When Javert did not correct him, he looked up again, meeting the Auror’s eyes in the mirror. Javert still had a trace of a smile on his face, and Valjean felt his stomach do a sort of flip.

Heat rising in his cheeks, Valjean looked away and asked, “The Gare Montparnasse?”

Javert nodded, immediately refocusing. His hand hovered over his wand pocket, but Valjean interceded.

“I can Apparate us both,” he said. “You should save that for if we run into any trouble.”
“I believe I have figured out what is causing it to fracture,” Javert said. “It will not happen again.”

Even so, he did not argue as Valjean extended a hand toward him, and the pair Disapparated.

Later, Valjean would reflect back and think that he might’ve packed more carefully, had he known that was the last he would see of his apartment for some time.

Overhead, the sun was beginning to rise above the skyline as Valjean and Javert appeared just up the road from the train station. The Gare Montparnasse was a glass behemoth of a building, and for all he claimed to like trains, even Valjean was a bit intimidated by the number of people milling about. Busses crowded the parking lot, and inside there was a lengthy line at the service desk. Fortunately, it was not difficult to work his way near the front with a few well-placed bribes.

He rejoined Javert not long thereafter, two tickets in hand. The Auror had seated himself on a bench, where he was defending himself from passersby by looking as irritable as possible; this appeared to have backfired, as a Muggle woman had taken it upon herself to cheer him up by telling him about her knitting patterns. Valjean smothered laughter; tempting as it was to just stand there and watch, the vein ticking in Javert’s forehead suggested the woman was one granny square away from getting hexed.

As that would result in any number of problems, Valjean stepped forward.

“‘We are taking the Atlantique,’” said Valjean, holding out the Auror’s ticket. “‘We ought to go now to be sure we aren’t late. Excuse us, Madame,’” he added, nodding to the woman.

As they made their way to the terminal, it was hard to tell whether Javert’s expression was grateful or just supremely annoyed. Passengers surrounded them on all sides, and a good number seemed to be headed toward the same terminal for which Valjean and Javert were destined.

“The Atlantique is one of the new Trains à Grande Vitesse,” Valjean explained. “‘They are said to travel at over two hundred kilometers an hour - isn’t that incredible?’

Javert glanced at him. “‘Are you certain that is safe?’” he asked. “‘People aren’t meant to go that fast, surely.’

Valjean tossed his head. “‘Well, unless you would rather fly a broomstick all the way to Tours...’”

Apparently unamused by the suggestion, Javert grumbled, “‘Not in the slightest.’

Boarding the train turned out to only be a little bit of a trick; Valjean just copied what the rest of the passengers did, and Javert copied him in turn. Before long, they were seated, Javert next to the window, and Valjean at his side.

Secretly, Valjean was relieved. He was not as confident a passenger as he had made out; most of his journeying he was used to doing at night, or in disguise. To have purchased tickets on a legitimate mode of transportation was somewhat outside his wheelhouse.

The train pulled away from the station, and Valjean relaxed into his seat as they picked up speed. Javert watched the city fly past through the glass. It seemed like no time had gone by at all when they left Paris behind for the surrounding suburban towns.

The train was quiet. Across the aisle, a man read the newspaper, pages rustling occasionally, while the couple seated in front of them shared a bottle of water. The normalcy of it was disconcerting. None of these people had any idea of the menace stalking France at the very highest levels.
Or perhaps, Valjean thought, that was not entirely true. A photograph in the man’s newspaper, a copy of *Le Moniteur*, had caught his attention. It was a fixed, printed image, but he doubted whether it would have shown any movement had a wizard developed it. He recognized the plaza, and the broken-in windows and doors of the houses beyond it. It was the same plaza where Javert had arrested him, the same plaza where they had first been attacked by Perrier and one of her compatriots.

It was inevitable, really. Not even the wizarding government could cover up the ransacking of an entire town. The Muggles may not have known Dark wizards were at fault, but they had to be aware of the growing danger, and of the miasma of fear enveloping Europe.

A spattering of rain fell from the clouds as the Atlantique pulled into the Gare du Mans, and the man with the newspaper got up to leave. Valjean stared after him, half-inclined to offer to buy it. The man disappeared before he had the chance to say anything, however, and the train took off, continuing West.

The sun was well and truly risen when the train came to a stop at the Gare de Saint-Pierre-des Corps. Valjean went to tug on Javert’s sleeve, for they had arrived at their stop, only to see the man had fallen asleep leaning against the window. Valjean breathed a laugh, and tapped him on the shoulder instead.

“Hmm?” Javert grunted.

“We’re here.”

“Mmm.”

Rubbing his eyes, Javert got slowly to his feet. It was plain as they detrained that he was still muddled by exhaustion. On the platform, he patted down the pockets of his robes.

“Blast,” he groaned. “Why did I ever take the Invigoration Draughts out of here?”

“I think you were consolidating,” Valjean replied. “Come, we can get a cab into the city and find a coffee shop. I think we would both appreciate that.”

Finding a coffee shop in Tours did not prove to be a difficult task. A little bistro situated just off the Boulevard Heurteloup was pleased to furnish them each with a bagel and a cup of coffee; it was also, as Valjean had pointed out, conveniently close to the Office de Tourisme.

“I still don’t know what you think we are going to find in here, Valjean,” said Javert, looking the glass facade over skeptically. “What is a little Muggle office going to be able to tell us about the Lestranges? I say we give this up and go to the local Palais de Justice. Speaking with the Aurors of Tours is surely a more efficient way to learn where we are going.”

“We may be outside of Paris, but that does not mean it is safe to speak to the authorities,” Valjean answered him. “Trust me on this.”

Javert did not reply, but he did follow as Valjean pushed his way inside.

A woman looked up from the counter as the two men entered, smiling cheerily. “Good day, Messieurs,” she said. “May I help you?”

Valjean flashed her a smile in return, gesturing toward Javert. “My friend and I are in the city for a few days on business,” he said. “And we were hoping to do a bit of sightseeing in our downtime. I was just telling him how lovely the châteaux in this part of the country are - I don’t suppose you would have a comprehensive list of them all, would you?”
“Of course,” the woman, whose name tag read Brigitte, replied. “Give me one moment.” She shuffled through a stack of papers, retrieving a pamphlet from among them. “Here,” she said, laying it out on the counter. “There are over three hundred châteaux in the Loire Valley, many of which also have chapels and extensive gardens in close adjacency. Was there any one in particular you had a mind to visit?”

Stepping forward, Valjean and Javert examined the pamphlet. A map of the valley was littered with dots, and true to the woman’s word, there were dozens of names listed to the side. At her question, Valjean glanced at Javert. The woman seemed to be a Muggle, but that did not mean it was wise to tell her who they were looking for.

Javert gave a slight shrug of his shoulders, and so Valjean said, “There was one I was reading about.” Looking down at the handout, he added, “I don’t see it on your list, though. It was called, if I remember correctly, the Château de Lestrange.”

Brigitte frowned in consideration. “The name doesn’t ring a bell to me,” she said. “Let me go get Aaron. He’s our expert on the châteaux - it’s a personal interest of his.”

She disappeared into the back, reemerging a minute later. Valjean had expected Aaron to be an older gentleman, maybe a scholar of some persuasion, but the man following after Brigitte was more of a boy to Valjean’s eyes. He had curly brown hair tucked under a hat, and a loose-fitting vest over a tee-shirt.

“Hello, Messieurs,” said Aaron. “Brigitte tells me you are interested in a rather obscure château. What was the name of it?”

“Lestrange,” Valjean said again, and the boy hummed.

“I see what you mean, Brigitte,” he said. “Definitely an obscure name. There is a Château de Loches - could that be it?”

Valjean shook his head. “I don’t think so,” he said back.

Tapping on the counter as he thought, Aaron asked, “Do you know anything about the place besides the name?”

Valjean tentatively replied, “Well, I think the family is quite an old one.”

“If it’s old you’re looking for, give the Château de Langeais a try, it has a keep built way back in nine-ninety-four. Just about anything from prior to the tenth century is all ruins now, so it’s pretty remarkable.”

“Ruins?” Javert spoke up, raising an eyebrow. “That could be interesting,” he added, touching a hand briefly to Valjean’s elbow in a sign just to play along. Valjean did not interrupt; something had clearly struck a chord with the Auror.

“Yes,” Aaron nodded vigorously. “They don’t attract the same attention as the châteaux, but there’s some beautiful examples. If you go to the town of Beaulieu, there’s a ruined abbey there which is very well-preserved - or the Château de Lavardin! That one has -”

“Perhaps something a little more off the beaten track?” Javert suggested. “Not the kind of place tourists tend to go. Something with a story to tell.”

“Well...” Aaron appeared a bit discomfited. “I did just think of one place... but it’s nothing that I’d recommend going to see, there’s much better sights in the valley than that.”
“Do tell,” said Javert, smiling a little. It was not the same sort of smile he had given Valjean that morning. This was sly, cold, and calculating; it was the sort of smile the Auror tended to reserve for miscreants he was interrogating, and Valjean was glad not to be on the receiving end of it.

“Well, that is to say, uh -" Aaron stuttered, “i-if you were to drive out to Les Essards, and then go a mile or two north, there’s some pretty good ruins out there, but there aren’t any guides to take you around, and there’s not much to speak of in town. The place has gotten kind of a bad rap in the last couple years - some disappearances out in the woods, and then there’s those who will go so far as to say it’s haunted. I would recommend sticking to the higher profile places, Monsieur - safer that way, and you’ll see a lot more, even if it feels a bit touristy.”

“I see,” said Javert, though his expression was probably not reassuring to the young man. “Thank you for the tip.”

Valjean took the pamphlet from Brigitte and said, “I quite like the sound of Langeais place, perhaps we will try that tomorrow.”

Thanking them both again, Valjean nodded meaningfully toward the door, and the pair left.

Back on the sidewalk, Valjean shook his head at Javert. “You scared that poor young man half to death,” he said.

“But we got what we wanted,” the Auror replied, visibly unrepentant.

“You think that’s it, then, that the Lestrange’s place is in Les Essards?”

Javert nodded. “It has all the right signs. It is relatively remote, shrouded in strange occurrences, and the ruins - ruins can be a tell-tale mark of a Muggle Repelling Charm. The château could be hidden under a spell.”

Laid out in that way, Valjean had to agree it sounded promising. “How shall we get there, then? I have never been, I would not know where to Apparate to.”

“I have an idea,” said Javert. “You aren’t going to like it.”

“I don’t like it,” said Valjean. “Javert, it’s a bad idea.”

They were standing in a narrow alley to the side of the Palais de Justice, a much smaller and more compact building than its Parisian equivalent. More precisely, Valjean was standing, and Javert was kneeling. The Auror was crouched next to the stone wall of the Palais, tapping at different bricks with his wand.

“Come on,” he muttered, “It is right around here somewhere.” He tapped another stone, and it produced a grinding noise, sliding back and out of the way. It was followed by another, and then another, until a doorway had opened up in the wall.

Javert tsked. “The back entrances are always such a pain to find.” He turned to Valjean. “It is a perfectly reasonable idea, considering our only other option is to walk forty kilometers. Or have you got an alternative you’ve neglected to mention?”

“I haven’t,” Valjean admitted, “but surely someone will notice the brooms are missing.”

Javert peered inside the doorway. Seeing an empty hall beyond, he motioned to Valjean to follow. “Any Auror is permitted to sign out broomsticks, provided that it is for a work-related cause. I am an Auror, and I daresay preventing the murder of a member of government is as work-related a
“Yes,” Valjean said urgently, “but should someone realize it was you who took the brooms -” he hurried after Javert, who was now striding down the hall “- if they know it was you, won’t they guess what we are up to?”

Javert held up his hand, and they both stopped. From somewhere ahead of them came the sound of footsteps. After a moment, the sound faded, and Javert continued on toward an intersection. Torches flickered in their sconces, illuminating the hallway, and Valjean hoped against hope that no-one ran into them. There were no places to hide, and the hall was well-lit.

“It will be a non-issue,” Javert insisted. “Look.” He pointed down a hallway to their left. Following with his eyes, Valjean saw a door in the stone made of iron bars. Through them, half a dozen broomsticks were visible leaned up against the wall.

Javert strode up to the door. “Now, all I have to do is...” He tapped the handle, and after a moment the lock thunked. Door swinging wide open, Javert stepped into the little closet and handed first one, then two broomsticks to Valjean.

“You see?” said Javert. “It is fine. I know you do not care for buildings of law, but surely you cannot object to an appropriate use of resources.”

Valjean remained quiet, but could not shake his misgivings. Nevertheless, the brooms - first-generation Cleansweeps, by the look of them - were of moderate quality. They would get them where they needed to go.

“We should wait until dusk falls,” Javert was saying. “With the cover of darkness, we can fly down the River Loire and into Les Essards.”

“Very well,” Valjean agreed reluctantly. “But you can figure out where to hide these until we are ready to leave,” he added, lifting the broomsticks for emphasis.

“Done and done,” said Javert.

Nightfall came early that time of year, and Valjean was awash with nervous anticipation. Javert had concealed their borrowed brooms down on the quai, and they stood there again as a red sunset blazed over Tours. The water of the Loire was quiet and still, and the quai was empty of visitors. It was time to go.

“This is good,” said Javert, nodding in approval. “According to the map, Les Essards is thirty minutes West of here; the sun may be a bit in our eyes, but the same will be true for anyone else who might look our way.”

He motioned for Valjean to mount his broomstick, and moments later they were dark figures gliding above the surface of the water. Javert flew well, but perhaps that was to be expected of an Auror. Valjean possessed enough grace not to fall off his broom, and that was the extent of his skill.

It was a calm evening. The rain from that morning had not repeated itself, and though the air was still temperate, it carried a hint of chill, which would grow more pronounced as the sun disappeared below the horizon. The wind whistled past his ears, and Valjean was grateful for the alterations to his coat.

The Loire bent towards the South, interspersed with the occasional island and the more-than-occasional bridge. In those instances, they flew beneath, and any travelers the bridge may have
held were unaware of their passing.

Eventually, the river dumped them outside the city and into the countryside. They continued to follow its silvery path so long as the land around them remained inhabited, but not long after passing Luynes, the scenery gave itself over to forest, only interrupted by the occasional scattering of houses.

“This way,” Javert called out, and they peeled back from the river. Angling toward the West, Javert rose higher and led them across the top of the forest canopy, mindful of any clearings they came across. Farther up, the air was colder, and Valjean’s breath hung around him in a cloud.

Some length of time had passed when Javert said, “There,” pointing to a patch of open hillside ahead of them. “I believe that is Les Essards.”

“Good,” replied Valjean. “I think my fingers have frozen to the handle of my broom.”

“We had best land outside of town,” the Auror went on. “If there are Muggles here, it would not do for them to see us.”

So saying, he spiraled down towards the road, Valjean following somewhat more timidly behind. As the ground came up to meet him, he shot his legs out in alarm, and the broom jolted to a stop a few feet above the grass. Losing his balance entirely, Valjean slid off sideways and hit the ground with a thud.

“Oof,” he said, a pile of tangled limbs.

Unsympathetic, Javert ignored him as Valjean staggered back to his feet, instead retrieving both brooms and stashing them in the undergrowth to the side of the road. A Bedazzling Hex concealed them from prying eyes, and then the pair turned their attention toward town.

Following the strip of pavement through the woods, Valjean and Javert approached the outlying houses. The road on which they had landed appeared to be Les Essards’ only road; it bisected the little village, with buildings on either side. Everything was built of stone, with quaint, slate tiled roofs. A few taller structures near the center of town demarcated what little business Les Essards had to offer.

“We should look for a hotel,” said Javert. “The proprietors will be able to tell us what there is to know about this place.”

In silent agreement, Valjean fell into step, and the pair made their way up the street. The crunch of their footsteps was the only indication of their presence in the stillness of night.

There were no street lamps; the only light was that which spilt out of windows. Hidden in the sleeve of his coat, Valjean kept a close grip on his wand. If they were right, and the Château de Lestrange was indeed hidden somewhere in the woods beyond, then they required every ounce of vigilance the two of them had to spare.

They walked by a grocer’s, closed for the night, and a barber shop, but the biggest building in the center square was the one toward which Javert was veering. The lights were on, and the door stood open. It was an inn, just as the Auror had hoped for. Valjean cast a last glance at the empty street, and then followed Javert inside.

The entry led into the great room, a large, white-washed space with wooden tables and chairs situated around a substantial fireplace. Pleased by the warmth, Valjean stepped away from the door and waited for the blood to return to his extremities. To the immediate left was a counter. The proprietor, a fat, balding man, sat behind it on a stool, where he had dozed off. At the sound of
Javert’s knock on the counter, however, he sat up in surprise.

“What’s that?” the man said. “Ah, good evening, Monsieur,” he added, focusing on Javert. “It is not often we get out-of-towners here. What can I do for you?”

Javert nodded in Valjean’s direction and said, “My companion and I are in need of lodgings for the night,” he said. “We were passing by when -”

“When our car broke down,” Valjean interjected. “On the main road. We walked up the rest of the way here hoping to find a place to stay until it can be fixed.”

Javert only looked somewhat surprised at that story, which was better than Valjean had expected of him.

“Yes,” the Auror said. “A room, please, and supper if you have it.”

The innkeeper squinted at him for a long minute. “Well,” he said, “we got rooms with two beds and rooms with one. Don’t worry about gossip, old Faure here values his customers.”

Choking on a snort at the implication, Valjean spoke up. “Two beds, if you please, Monsieur.”

The proprietor nodded like it was all the same to him. He dug around for a key, which he handed off to Javert, and said, “I’ll have my wife bring out dinner in about ten minutes, if that’ll suit. Can’t call anyone about your car, I’m afraid, they don’t run us telephone lines out here.”

“What?” said Javert, and then, “Oh, it is no trouble.”

“Your room is upstairs to the right,” said the innkeeper. “Breakfast starts first thing in the morning.”

Valjean motioned to the steps and the pair climbed up to the landing above. The floorboards gave a bit underfoot, but the walls seemed snug and relatively free of drafts.

Their room was at the end of the hall; Javert jiggled the key in the lock and it popped open.

Looking in distaste at the old doorknob, the Auror touched his wand to it and said, “Reparo.” A few tumblers clicked as they fixed themselves. “Someone has tampered with that lock,” he muttered. “I don’t think much of this place’s security.”

The room, at least, seemed comfortable, and was larger than Valjean had expected. Two twin beds stood against the wall, while a large window overlooked the forest.

Valjean eyed the bed, tired enough almost to lay down without eating, but Javert seemed to guess what was on his mind.

“It will be better,” he said, “to speak to the innkeeper first thing.”

Valjean nodded, allowing himself one last regretful look at the bed, before asking, “Dinner, then?”
Right, well, I'll stop pretending to know when my updates will happen and will just return to calling my schedule "erratic". Ideally, I'll still post once a week, but with the semester wrapping up, it's hard to know exactly how much free time I'm going to have. Thank you all so much for putting up with me.

**Valjean**

In their absence, M. Faure had stoked the fire back up to blazing. Valjean descended the stairs, and the smell of food rising from the kitchen reminded him he was hungry. Javert pushed past him, heading straight for a table in the back corner of the great room and sitting where he could watch the door. Not in any rush, Valjean brought up the rear. A haze of smoke filled the air with the smell of a campfire.

Pulling out the chair opposite Javert, Valjean sat, leaning on his elbows. At first glance, the Auror appeared relaxed, but there was an intensity in the way he took in every detail of the tavern which bespoke his concentration. A handful of others - locals, it seemed like - were trickling into the great room for the dinner hour. Emerging from the kitchen, the innkeeper scurried over to take their orders.

“Ready to eat?” Valjean asked, the corner of his mouth lifting.

“Hmm?” said Javert, not paying attention.

Valjean shook his head. “Never mind.”

Soon thereafter, a woman, presumably Mme. Faure, came out of the kitchen bearing two trays of food along with glasses of wine. She deposited a plate in front of first Javert, then Valjean, before going to see to the rest of her customers. Valjean regarded the food appreciatively; the bagel that morning had tided him over for a while, but the inn’s pork chops on a bed of vegetables looked to be by far the most substantial meal he had had in days.

Even as he dug in, he noticed the innkeeper plodding in their direction. Faure dropped into the chair between the pair of them, regarding them both with sleepy interest.

“Where are you two from, then?” he asked.

Valjean’s eyes flicked over to meet Javert’s. The Auror inclined his head by a degree and said briefly, “Paris.”

“Oh, the big city,” the innkeeper replied, plainly impressed. “You’re a ways off from home, then, aren’t you?”

“A bit,” Valjean agreed.

Faure leaned back in his chair, watching as they ate. “Can’t beat my wife’s cooking,” he said. “Best in the country, I’m telling you.”
Valjean nodded, both out of politeness and because the food was, in fact, quite good.

“‘Course, you can’t beat the scenery, either,” continued Faure. “The Garden of Paris, they call this place.”

“There is more forest here than I’ve seen in a long time,” Valjean said. “It’s pleasant to be around trees again.”

Faure smiled sagely. “Good for the soul.”

Javert raised his glass in a toast and took a drink. “I hear,” he said, setting his glass back on the table, “that you even have your share of historic sights around here.”

The innkeeper first looked startled, then smiled uneasily. “Ah, you must mean at Langeais,” he said. “Very pretty, and not too far, either, though you folks would want to wait ‘til your car is fixed - it’d be a six or seven mile walk.”

“Is that the nearest thing?” Javert asked, feigning an innocent curiosity. “I was told there was an old ruin right here in town.”

Faure scowled. “Now who did you hear that from?” he asked. Without waiting for an answer, he went on, “Nothing of the sort in Les Essards, I’m afraid.”

Internally, Valjean felt the thrill of victory. The innkeeper was obviously lying, and there was no cause for him to do so unless it was because Dark wizards had bought his silence. Not saying a word, Valjean removed his wallet from his pocket and withdrew a bank note of sizable denomination. Laying it on the table, he looked back up at M. Faure.

The innkeeper stared. It was possible he had never seen such a sum of money in his life. His eyes darted between Valjean and the bank note, until at last he extended a hand and snatched it up. He tucked the bill into his vest, bowing his head.

In a low voice, Faure explained, “What you have to understand is that we have sworn not to speak of the place to outsiders, or even amongst ourselves.” He tipped his head toward Javert. “You are correct, Monsieur, there is a ruin here. It is a faery fort, and the faery lords who reside there are terrible in their power. Laugh at me if you will, but take my advice - do not seek it out.”

“I’m not laughing,” Javert said.

“People who anger the faeries are never seen again.” Faure shuddered. “Even the birds don’t go there.”

In between bites, Valjean considered this. “Have you seen these faeries for yourself?” he inquired.

What little color there was drained from Faure’s face. “Only once,” he said, “though my father told me of more occasions than that, before he disappeared. They took him, the faeries did, for telling the customers about them.”

Raising an eyebrow, Javert said, “Perhaps we ought to stop talking, then.”

Faure nodded fervently. “Probably for the better,” he said. “Never know if they’re watching.”

“I doubt it,” said Javert, but quietly, and Faure did not hear him.

“In fact,” the innkeeper went on, pulling himself to his feet, “I had better get going - lots to be getting on with, you know.” So saying, he hurriedly pushed in his chair and made off toward the
kitchen, beckoning his wife over. He whispered quietly in her ear, and the two of them vanished through the kitchen door.

Setting down his fork, Valjean sighed in contentment. “Good, isn’t it?”

“Mmm.” Javert leaned across the table. Quietly, he said, “Faure’s story confirms it - this has got to be where we will find the Lestranges. I say we wait until dawn and then follow the road North. When we find the place, we can scope out the defenses and sneak inside.”

“What about the other villagers? Should we try talking to them?”

The Auror wrinkled his nose. “Rodolphus has always had a Pureblood’s mentality regarding Muggles. I doubt there is anyone here left alive that could tell us more than the innkeeper.”

Behind them, the door to the inn opened, the fireplace guttering in the draft. Javert looked up at the noise, taking stock of the newcomers, and the shadow of a frown crossed his face.

“What is it?” Valjean asked.

Javert turned his head, still frowning. “I think perhaps I recognize one of those men,” he said. “But I cannot place him.”

“Perhaps he is one of the wizards Gisquet told to report to the château?”

“Maybe,” replied Javert. “It will come to me, I am sure.”

“If it is one of the Death Eaters,” Valjean murmured, “perhaps it would be wise to retire for the night. The middle of a Muggle hotel seems like a poor place to pick a fight if we can avoid it.”

Javert sucked in a breath, narrowing his eyes as the watched the men. “Much as I would like to find out what they are doing here, I have to concur,” he said. “Walk in front of me; my coat does not entirely hide my uniform.”

Valjean stretched and stood, apparently casual as he shielded the Auror from view. Javert followed him as he crossed to the stairs, and Valjean took the opportunity to look over the recent arrivals, who had selected a table near the door.

There were three men digging into plates of meat; Faure had re-emerged, and was standing at attention next to them, hands gripping the front of his vest tightly. One of the men was bald. The second had a shock of red hair, and the third was dark of both hair and beard. They did not look up as Valjean passed, and he let Javert go first up the stairs, so that he continued to conceal the view of the man’s back as they climbed.

Once back in their room, Valjean locked and bolted the door behind him. Only when he had tapped his wand to the knob and muttered, “Colloportus,” did he truly feel at ease.

Removing his jacket, Valjean dropped it onto the dresser near where Javert had laid his own greatcoat. The Auror peered out the window, towards the black of the forest beyond.

“Somewhere out there,” said Javert, tapping on the glass, “Dark wizards are plotting to take over the government. We cannot let them,” he added, turning to face Valjean.

“I don’t want to see them succeed any more than you do,” Valjean said. “We must have faith, and do the best we can.”

Javert looked at him for a moment before laughing softly. “The government has never done a
thing to assist you, nor have I, and yet here you are anyway.”

Valjean shrugged, a little self-consciously. “It is human nature to want to help others.”

“I have seen enough of human nature to know that isn’t true,” Javert said, facing back toward the window, “but it does seem to be your nature, and I think I should tell you I am... grateful for that.”

Valjean opened his mouth to respond and stopped. Had Javert just complimented him? Feeling rather dazed, he said, “Well... thank you.”

The Auror took a deep breath. “You may shower if you feel so inclined,” he said, “though from the look of the facilities, you are probably cleaner already than you would be after getting out. In either case, I would suggest sleep.”

Valjean waited, but when Javert said nothing further, he meandered into the dingy bathroom and turned on the water. The shower pipes emitted a high squeal, then produced an ice cold spray. It did not show any signs of warming up; a minor charm on the pipes seemed to remedy that somewhat.

He re-emerged not long after, hair damp, to find Javert reclined on the farther of the two beds. The Auror’s hands were folded on his stomach, and he was looking blankly at the opposite wall. The slant of his mouth did not suggest his train of thought was an especially happy one.

Hearing him approach, Javert looked up. He did not smile, exactly, but his mood seemed to lighten.

“I’ll take this side of the room, if you do not object,” he said.

Valjean pulled back the covers on the bed adjacent to the bathroom. “I don’t mind,” he replied.

“In that case, goodnight.”

Valjean reached for the lamp. “Goodnight, Javert.”

Valjean

It was pitch dark, and someone was shaking him. Valjean woke, drowsily at first, and then all at once as he realized something was wrong.

“Javert?” he whispered.

A hand covered his mouth, shushing him, and then Valjean winced as a white light erupted from out of nowhere.

As he rubbed the spots from his vision, he saw Javert standing to the side of the bed, holding his wand aloft. It was this which produced the light, shining on the Auror’s serious expression. Valjean lifted an eyebrow in a silent question, until he noticed the noise.

Coming from the direction of the door was a quiet scraping sound, like metal rubbing against metal. Javert looked pointedly from Valjean to the door and back, and then jerked his head toward the window.

Nodding his comprehension, Valjean slipped out from under the covers. On the other side of the wall, the would-be intruder dropped their lock pick and cursed softly. With Javert standing guard, Valjean hurried over to the window, where he pulled back the curtains. Outside, a sliver of light
from the kitchen illuminated the ground directly below. Otherwise, all was darkness but for a few stars; it had to be the middle of the night.

Valjean undid the window lock, prying the bottom sash up. A blast of cold air poured into the room, and Javert glanced back over his shoulder.

Regarding the opening skeptically, Valjean drew his wand. He muttered, “Engorgio,” flicking his wrist. The window expanded outward, until it reached a size Valjean thought he could fit through.

Turning, he motioned for Javert to go first, and snatched their coats off the top of the dresser. The Auror backed towards him, keeping his wand trained on the door, only for the both of them to freeze as more footsteps sounded in the corridor outside.

“This is their room?” asked a man’s voice.

“It is,” came the reply, and with a pang of dismay, Valjean recognized the tones of M. Faure. “Can’t get the damn knob open.”

“You were right,” a third voice said. “There was no sign of a car anywhere on the main road.”

“Out of the way,” the first man snarled, and Valjean sprang back into action.

Pulling Javert by the wrist, he dashed for the window, swinging first one leg over, then the other, letting himself drop. He hit the ground hard, but rolled with the fall enough to disperse some of the impact. Getting back to his feet, Valjean found himself bruised but otherwise unhurt. Javert landed on his feet beside him, having slowed his descent with magic. A loud bang from above suggested the door to their room had been blown in.

“Into the woods, quick,” Javert hissed, and they jogged across the back of the lot. Valjean did not dare turn back to see if anyone was staring after them through the open window, though he could make out muddled voices. The pair hopped a rickety wooden fence, and then the mowed grass surrendered to the forest undergrowth.

Pausing for breath once they were secured in the trees, Valjean leaned his back against a trunk. His hands shook slightly with adrenaline, and he felt the blood pound in his ears as the shock caught up with him. Javert crouched where he was sure to be out of sight, peering back through the vegetation toward the inn.

“Can’t make out their faces, but they have to be searching for us,” he said under his breath, leaning forward to get a better look. “It could be just some run-of-the-mill thieves, but somehow I doubt it.”

“Faure sold us out,” Valjean said. “Not that I imagine he had much of a choice, living practically on the Lestranges’ door step.”

The Auror squinted up at their room. “I do not think there was more than the three of them. If we were to catch them by surprise…”

He was interrupted by several human silhouettes, which appeared from out of thin air just inside the window.

“Damn!” he swore.

The wizards, for that was the only logical explanation, appeared to be engaged in an agitated debate. It was not difficult to infer the subject; like the men who had broken down the door, they could only have been interested in the apprehension of the hotel room’s occupants.
Valjean was about to speak when one of the silhouettes raised its arm. A light flared inside, and as one, all of the silhouettes disappeared again.

“What -?” asked Valjean, his eyebrows drawing together, but in seconds, his question was answered as a fire engulfed the hotel room, spreading quickly to the neighboring units as well.

“Death Eaters,” Javert spat. “Where do you suppose they went?”

Valjean shrugged off his jacket. “Don’t worry about them. What about the people in there?”

The Auror looked at him disbelievingly. “You can’t put out a fire like that with *Aguamenti*.”

Pushing back the vegetation, Valjean hacked his way in the direction of the fence. “You’re right,” he said, “but you only need a Flame Freezing Charm to carry people out.” It had worked in Montreuil, and it would work again; he would not stand idly by as townsfolk burned to death.

Without looking to see if Javert was coming with him or not, Valjean hurried toward the inn. By now, the flames were shooting out the open window, licking up the walls. Valjean ran forward, pulling out his wand, but even as he approached the back door, he heard a great snap and then a crash from up above him.

Craning his neck, Valjean saw that the roof had buckled, falling in on itself as the fire devoured the wooden rafters. Horrified, he could do nothing but watch as sparks shot up in the air in a tumultuous flurry. Too late came the shouts of neighbors calling for a bucket brigade.

Arriving on his heels, Javert put a hand on Valjean’s arm.

“We should go,” he said softly. “There’s nothing you can do here, Valjean. Leave it to the Muggle authorities.”

“But the innkeeper,” Valjean protested.

“He’s dead,” Javert replied baldly. “The Death Eaters would have ensured that for letting us escape.”

Valjean crossed himself, still staring into the red flames. He did not resist as the Auror led him away, and they disappeared into the trees again. In their absence, the fire crackled and popped, continuing in its work to leave nothing behind of the inn but an empty stone shell.

Valjean followed Javert blindly through the woods. He paid only enough attention to his surroundings to avoid tripping, unable to quite wipe the image of leaping flames from his mind’s eye. Javert kept close to the forest edge as it ran parallel to the road, which prevented them from walking in circles.

When the firelight was no longer visible behind them, and the trees pressed in more closely, the Auror stopped. “We won’t get far wandering around in the dark,” he warned. “Or worse, we’ll get lost.”

“We can make camp here,” said Valjean. “We must be past the outskirts of town by now.”

Some searching soon turned up a small clearing, relatively flat and big enough to lay down in. Leaf litter covered the ground in a blanket, providing some measure of buffer against half-buried rocks. Together, Valjean and Javert wrapped the space with protective enchantments.

Sitting, Valjean also conjured a dancing ball of light about the size of an orange; it hovered several inches above the ground, radiating heat. He held his hands up to it as Javert finished inspecting
their wards, rubbing the feeling back into his fingers.

When the Auror was satisfied, he turned and gave Valjean a wry smile. “I hate to sound foolish, but I do not think we set an auspicious precedent the last time I said ‘goodnight’.”

Clucking his tongue, Valjean replied, “In that case, all I will say is, get some sleep.”

“I’ll do my best,” Javert muttered. He laid down on the opposite side of the light, regarding the leaves with distaste as they immediately stuck to his coat. Valjean laid back as well, drawing his jacket closer around his shoulders. Though the ground near to his glowing orb was damp with thaw, the cold March night had cast a spell of hoarfrost over the rest of the clearing. Valjean tucked his hands under his armpits, and decided he could make do.

In the minutes that passed, Valjean found sleep pulling hard at his eyelids. The adrenaline had left him, replacing itself with fatigue. He was nodding off, when he heard a rustle.

Immediately, he was alert again. Perhaps the Death Eaters had spotted their lamp in spite of the wards, or maybe some wild animal was encroaching on their camp. He looked around for the source, only to realize it was Javert. The Auror had scooted closer to the heat, where he was curled facing away, and it was the crunch of leaves which had disturbed him. Shaking his head, Valjean laid back down.

The second time, sleep was slower in coming. Once the thought had occurred, every creak or snap in the forest had the potential to be an enemy in hiding. An owl hooted, far off in the distance, and he twitched in surprise. That was approximately the same time he noticed Javert’s teeth chattering.

Rolling onto his side, Valjean studied Javert’s back. “Are you cold?” he asked.

“Yes,” came the tight-lipped response. “The temperature is practically zero.”

Patting the ground beside him, Valjean said, “Come here.”

Javert’s shoulders tensed. “What?”

“Come here,” Valjean repeated. “Laying back to back will keep us both warmer.”

Javert looked over his shoulder at him, a suspicious light in his eyes which had been mostly absent for the last couple of days.

“If you are about to make some wild accusation,” said Valjean, “I will have you know that it is the middle of the night, and I would just like to go to sleep.”

Turning over to look at him directly, Javert frowned and shook his head. “I wasn’t -“ he began, but whatever he had been going to say, he thought better of. “Alright, fine,” he said instead. “Fine.” He shuffled around the light, coming to sit awkwardly next to Valjean without quite touching him.

“Lay down,” said Valjean, “and go to bed. Goodnight, Javert.”

So saying, he flopped onto the leaf litter, curling away from the Auror. After a moment, Javert gingerly laid down as well, and Valjean felt the tentative press of the man’s back against his own. Valjean’s words about wanting to sleep deserted him, and he felt suddenly flustered without knowing quite why. There was vulnerability in that sort of closeness, he decided. It was difficult not to construe as being something other than practicality.

Flustered or not, he was undeniably warmer, and Javert’s teeth were no longer chattering. Trying
to calm his racing pulse, Valjean shut his eyes and fell at last asleep again.

_**Javert**_

The grey dawn crept over the forest slowly, accompanied by a dense mist that floated no more than a foot above the ground. Javert woke feeling perversely well-rested, considering he had spent the night on the ground. His hands were cold, but not so much as to have turned blue, and behind him Valjean’s presence was solid and warm.

Overnight, Javert had relaxed into their sleeping arrangement; he found himself nestled to fit against Valjean’s broader shoulders in a way which was almost cozy. An embarrassed flush threatened to spread over his cheeks - “cozy” was not a sensation he was accustomed to. Moreover, the ease with which he had been talked into sharing a leaf pile seemed indecorous, at the least.

Javert also found that he was loathe to move. Judging by the faint snores, Valjean still slept, and there was surely no harm in waiting a little longer to disturb the quiet moment; no harm at all, except for the way his mouth turned dry every time he recalled who he was sharing the clearing with. Worst of all, he did not think the dryness of mouth was a product of fear.

That realization settled him. He sat upright, dispelling the conjured lamp with a gesture. Beside him, Valjean mumbled incoherently but did not otherwise stir, and Javert got to his feet.

They were camped closer to the road than it had seemed in the dark. Through the trees, he could just make out the thin strip of asphalt. He was also in time to see a small group of shadowy figures creeping alongside it.

The Auror’s eyes narrowed like a cat’s, and he stole back over to Valjean.

Shaking his shoulder, it took a minute to capture Valjean’s attention, but finally the other man blinked up at him sleepily. Feeling an eerie sense of déjà vu, Javert inclined his head toward the road.

“We are not the only ones with plans to move at dawn,” he murmured.

Valjean just looked at him for a moment before understanding emerged in his expression. Javert helped Valjean up, and the pair of them looked off in the direction of the road.

“Keep quiet,” Javert whispered. “We’ll follow them, and they’ll lead us right to the manor house.”

Stepping softly, Javert picked his way toward the curb, careful not to let branches snap underfoot. Standing behind a tree for cover, he watched the figures converge. There appeared to be six, and once they had congregated, they moved as a group farther up the road. Motioning to Valjean, Javert trailed after them.

The group was not moving quickly, unhurried to arrive at their destination, and so Javert was able to close the distance between them. As he approached, he could make his quarry out more distinctly. Of the six, four wore the telltale masks of the Death Eaters. The other two were unmasked, and their robes were of a shoddier quality.

All at once, the six wizards veered off to the far side and into the forest beyond. Javert felt his heart leap in excitement; surely that meant the Château de Lestrange was in that direction. Valjean had stuck close, and now the Auror turned to him.

“We cross the street here,” he said. “Continue to follow them, but keep your distance. Above all,
do not engage them unless they attack you first. Two against six makes for poor odds.”

Valjean clutched his wand tighter and nodded in response.

Eyeing their surroundings for any sign of movement, Javert braced himself and then darted across the road. It felt wider than it looked, as he ran across it with no cover. Once inside the edge of the opposing tree line, Javert waited for Valjean to join him, and then they both turned in the direction the wizards had disappeared.

Javert touched a finger to his lips and crept forward, looking keenly from left to right. He was searching for a flash of cloak, or the glimmer of a Death Eater’s mask. In spite of his attentiveness, he almost ran into one as they came suddenly upon a clearing, not twenty feet in from the road.

The wizards stood in a circle around the clearing, each looking a different direction. Fortunately, Javert did not think they had noticed his approach, but something still filled him with a sense of dis-ease. Why would the Death Eaters make such of a production out of gathering in the forest, only to stand around as though waiting for something?

Oh.

Javert turned frantically to Valjean, pointing at the ground and mouthing, “Down!”

Valjean’s eyes widened, and he dropped to the ground without hesitation. Javert ducked as well, just as a curse went flying by above their heads.

Whipping around, Javert beheld six more Death Eaters appearing behind them, each of them brandishing wands.

“Valjean,” Javert said calmly, “run.”

Scrambling to their feet, the pair took off like a shot, dashing through the trees even as spells slammed into the ground behind them. All Javert could think about was how tremendously transparent the trick had been, in the end. Use half the group to lure them out, and have the other half close in from behind; it was textbook.

“I’m getting old,” he growled through gritted teeth, leaping behind a tree as a ball of violet light whizzed past. He heard Valjean pulling ahead of him and let him go on, sticking his head out and around the tree trunk.

“Petrificus totalus!” he exclaimed, and felt a mote of satisfaction as he heard a body thump to the ground.

Dodging around some bushes, a voice screamed the Cruciatus Curse at him, so he dodged again. Javert then leaped over a dry stream bed, and said, “Impedimenta!” He heard another thump, followed by a cry of pain, as some Dark wizard tripped on the enchantment and fell in the gulley.

A cold sense of amusement filled him as he sent another Death Eater flying, and then he was running, and running unpursued. Elated, flush with the thrill of being alive, he pictured their campsite in his mind, preparing to Disapparate. It was only when he looked around for Valjean that he realized something was wrong. The man was nowhere in sight.

“Valjean?” he called out. “Valjean!”

He did not receive a reply. The absence of other opponents, which only seconds before had been a relief, now made the hairs on the nape of his neck prickle.

Distantly, Javert heard a shout, and focused in on it. He started towards the noise, cautiously at
first and then with greater urgency as the sounds of a fight reached him.

Climbing over the crest of a hill, Javert beheld a fierce duel raging on the other side. Valjean was surrounded by no fewer than eight Death Eaters, who were battering him under an absolute deluge of spells. He was only just holding his ground, Shield Charms repelling the worst of it, but it was clear he was flagging.

The wizard across from Valjean brandished his wand and cried, “Confringo!”

The fiery explosion struck the center of Valjean’s Shield Charm, breaking through the membrane of protective energy and throwing him backwards. He struggled to sit up, only to be hit with several jets of red light as the others cast “Stupefy”. Javert did not understand precisely how it happened, but Valjean seemed to absorb the red light without noticing; he was still conscious, at any rate, and he dragged himself to his feet.

Whatever power had spared him, it did nothing to help as the apparent leader of the bunch said, “Expelliarmus.” Valjean’s wand was pulled from his fingers, sailing over to the Death Eater who disarmed him. The Death Eater caught it, and the circle around Valjean tightened.

On the hill, Javert was having a crisis. Every instinct compelled him to flee; there was no chance of incapacitating the entire group, and he knew too well what would happen if they caught him. The Death Eaters would torment him until he died, as if he were a plaything to be disposed of. Besides, Valjean would want him to run.

That line of thinking provoked anger. What did it matter what Valjean wanted, anyway? The convict had no place in his thoughts except for disdain - that was how it was, how it had to be. If Javert was smart, he would turn around and Disapparate, leaving the criminal to the criminals.

Javert screwed his eyes shut. As old as that argument was, it was hollow of any conviction, and he knew it. Were their positions reversed, Valjean would have run to the Auror’s aid without a second thought - he had proven as much many times. Javert did not deserve to so much as ask him the time of day.

Steadying himself, Javert ran a loving hand along the cracked shaft of his hornbeam wand. Then he emptied his mind of all thought, save one: he would not wait around for Fate to rip him to pieces at its whim. He would do it himself, possessing full knowledge of the consequences of his actions.

Javert raised his wand, pointing it down the slope of the hill. At the bottom, the Death Eaters had Valjean pinioned, bound fast with rope. The man struggled, but a handful of curses knocked the breath out of him.

Taking careful aim, Javert enunciated, “Bombarda maxima.”

Time seemed almost as if to stop as the spell detonated, sending Valjean’s attackers flying, and Javert did not even bat an eye as his wand shattered entirely in his grip. He felt it, on some visceral level, as the over-strained wood fragmented down to its very core.

It did not take the Death Eaters long to collect themselves, and it took them even less time to collect Javert. He did not try to escape, just stood on top of the hill unmovingly. Someone, and Javert recognized him faintly as the red-haired man from the inn, confiscated his ruined wand and tied his hands behind his back.

Eventually, he was led down to where Valjean stood, held captive at wand point.

“Javert -!” Valjean started, but the wizard keeping guard prodded him harder in warning and he
Valjean looked terrified. Javert could not say he blamed him - he was fairly certain there was an uncontrollable panic welling up somewhere inside himself as well - but he also found he could not think much at all through the foggy stupefaction numbing his senses. He tried to smile reassuringly, but it came out a grimace. Valjean seemed a shade comforted regardless; possibly, Javert’s ill humor was enough of a constant to warrant that.

The Auror shifted as another wizard grabbed hold of the back of his collar, keeping a tight grip on him.

*What is he doing?* Javert wondered vaguely. They would kill him. He would let them. In his head, he had accepted this inevitability. There was no need to be so rough.

Another Death Eater approached, and Javert was distracted as he thought he recognized Vidocq. Then the masked figure spoke, and Javert seethed as his intuition was confirmed.

“Look who it is,” Vidocq taunted. “I knew you would turn up, sooner or later, Monsieur l'Inspecteur.”

Javert spat on the ground between them. “Going to kill me yourself, Vidocq?” he asked. “You always were desperate for promotion.”

Vidocq laughed shortly. “Oh no,” he said. “It’s regrettable, but the small pleasure of finishing you off has been reserved by a higher power, whom you will meet shortly.”

He beckoned the other Death Eaters closer. “Form up,” he said, “and watch these two carefully. We are to take them at once to the Château de Lestrange.” Vidocq met Javert’s eyes and added, “I believe you are expected.”
I'd like to issue a general suggestion that people may want to review the tags on this fic before reading through this (and the next few) chapters - if explicit description of violence is likely to be troubling to you, proceed with some caution.

That aside, I love my readers! <3 Those of you who are HP fans, I'm so glad that you're enjoying this fusion; I thought the two stories would mesh well, and it's great to hear that you agree! And for those of you who aren't HP fans but decided to read this anyway, I'm super flattered that you're here even if it's only 50% in your fandom - you guys make my life!

Valjean

The air was cool and damp as they plodded alongside the road. Behind the clouds, the sun’s weak attempt at rising provided only a washed-out glow, but Valjean did not need any light at all to see the situation was dire. Javert walked silently at his side, his hands tied in the same manner Valjean’s were. Around them marched the Death Eaters, who had closed ranks enough to prevent either of them from running, not that Valjean was likely to try. He was disarmed, and as he had told Javert once, physical force would prove of little use against magical foes.

The wizard directly behind him was paying especially close attention. No doubt each member of the party had been warned of the consequences should either one of them manage to slip away again. The result was that Valjean did not dare test the strength of the cord around his wrists, lest they see fit to replace it with something stronger. If he bided his time, he would surely have the opportunity to try later. That was, if they lived that long.

Except for the crunch of boots on gravel, the forest was totally still. True to Faure’s description, Valjean did not see so much as a lark flitting among the branches; they had to be approaching the manor. Valjean felt his stomach clench with nausea. Though his head was lowered ostensibly out of submission, his eyes scanned left and right as he prayed for something, anything to use as a distraction.

Even as he looked, Valjean’s gaze lingered a long moment on Javert. Perhaps sensing as much, the Auror glanced sideways at him before turning his head forward again. A single question tumbled around Valjean’s thoughts in a persistent cycle: why had Javert come after him?

When he had lost sight of the Auror during their flight through the woods, he had feared the worst and hoped for the best. It was not inconceivable that Javert could have escaped, and Valjean would have gone down fighting gladly if it kept the Auror out of harm’s way. Instead, Javert had come back, and though the attempted rescue warmed his heart, it was also terrifying to think that now they were both in danger.

As if to underscore the point, the Death Eaters chose that moment to veer away from the road, moving to the left and up a steep slope. The trees were denser there, and it was slow going through the brush. Valjean let himself catch on the undergrowth deliberately, willing to try anything which impeded the Death Eaters’ progress. The strategy did not last. Quickly, he was herded onto a dirt track, and then he had no excuse to falter. The track had been invisible only
It was not long before he got his answer. The earthen rut widened and became properly a path, and then the path turned into cobbled stones. Trees almost seemed to bend out of the way of the stone lane, shifting in the corners of his vision but standing still when he looked directly at them. It was a weird, disorienting effect, and it was evidently getting under Javert’s skin, if the glower on his face were any indication.

Valjean’s breath hitched as they came around a bend and the Château de Lestrange appeared out of the trees before him. The path led straight to the gatehouse, a forbidding stone structure flanking tall iron gates. Beyond the gates was the manor, and Valjean thought to himself that he had seen cathedrals less grandiose in scale.

As Vidocq approached the gatehouse, he called out a greeting. An answering voice hailed him, and a moment later, the gates swung open seemingly of their own volition. Valjean realized with mounting alarm that once inside the walls of the complex, it would be nearly impossible to escape undetected, even should he get free of his bonds. Nobody walked in without being seen, and neither did anyone leave without the gatekeeper’s permission. Stopping in his tracks, Valjean’s mind churned for a solution, but a wand jabbed him in the back of the neck.

“Keep moving,” the wizard guarding him growled.

Left without a means of recourse, Valjean trudged forward. Javert’s face was ashen, and the Auror did not look at him as they stood side by side in the forecourt.

Now past the gatehouse, the manor was at last revealed in the full extent of its magnificence. Two secondary wings projected forward, one on each side of the cour d’honneur, with the front facade framed perfectly between them. A sweeping mansard roof was punctuated by dormers and smoking chimneys, and the slate shingles held a bluish sheen. The main wing was fenestrated with dozens of square windows, while a pair of turrets marked the back corners of the manor. Under different circumstances, it might have been beautiful. As it was, the Château de Lestrange had the look of a well-fortified prison.

There was no time to talk, and in any case, Valjean did not believe he could have formed words of comfort even given the chance. The Death Eaters led them through the cour d’honneur, passing stables and outbuildings as they made their way up to the main doors. The windows stared down at the courtyard like vacant eyes; those on the inside had the power to surveil the entire property.

Going on ahead of the group, Vidocq climbed the steps to the tall main doors and banged on the knocker. A minute passed, and then there was a creak as the left door opened. Standing on the other side of the threshold was a house elf, wearing a pressed linen sheet like a toga. He barely came up to the wizard’s waist.

“Monsieur Vidocq, you have returned,” the elf squeaked.

“Call your master downstairs,” said Vidocq. “He will want to see me immediately. Tell him I come with gifts.”

The elf peered around the wizard’s legs, taking note of where Valjean and Javert stood, surrounded by Death Eaters.

“At once, Monsieur,” the elf replied. “And would you care for any refreshments?”

Vidocq considered this. “A brandy would do,” he said, “and a scone. It is past due time for
breakfast.”

The elf ushered Vidocq inside, and Valjean received another prod in the back, driving him forward. A fleeting, frantic look around the courtyard told him there was nowhere to go but through the door. He did not want to - there was a feeling of dread in the pit of his stomach which intuited he might never come out again - but his mind had gone blank. If there existed a way to save them, he could not think of it.

Javert, having received a similar sort of jab, climbed the steps with the same vacant, shell-shocked expression that had been fixed on his face ever since their capture. Valjean was not about to let him face whatever awaited them inside alone; praying for strength, he followed the Auror into the lion’s den.

The antechamber of the château was as grand as the exterior suggested. A double-height space rose from checkerboard marble floors to end in a vaulted ceiling above, from which hung a tremendous chandelier. Medieval weapons were mounted to the walls in brackets, and above them was a tapestry with the Lestrange family crest woven in the center. Despite the torches which flickered on the walls, the antechamber was dimly lit, and Valjean felt a shiver run through him.

A long ribbon of pine-colored carpet spanned from the entrance to the hallway, on the opposite side of which was the opening into the Grande Salon. Valjean and Javert were compelled at wandpoint to go that way, and with every step it felt as though another weight were placed on Valjean’s already-heavy heart.

If the antechamber was impressive, then the sole function of the Grande Salon was to demonstrate the wealth and power of the Lestrange family lineage. Taking up the full height of three stories, the Salon was cavernous, echoing, and oppressive. Dark walnut wainscoting wrapped the walls, while to the left and right, ornamental staircases led up to a mezzanine level. On the far side of the room was an assortment of lounge furniture and a fireplace, the massive stone chimney for which ran up the entire height of the wall. A portrait hung over the mantle; it depicted a severe, dark-haired woman, who sat in her frame blinking disapprovingly.

Valjean’s shoes clipped on the marble floor as he walked; biting his lip, he willed himself quiet. They crossed the Salon, and while the pair of Death Eaters keeping watch over them continued to follow, the rest fanned out, silently arranging themselves around the perimeter of the room.

Valjean approached the fireplace, Javert at his side, and he noticed a figure standing in front of the hearth engaged in conversation with Vidocq. Then the light hit the figure’s face, and Valjean recognized Rodolphus Lestrange. He looked up as they came to stand within the circular glow cast by the fire.

“You will have to forgive my lack of hospitality,” Rodolphus began, “but we rarely have visitors so early in the morning. When we heard a pair of broomsticks had been borrowed from the Palais de Justice in Tours, I thought I had best send out a welcome party, just in case. It seems I was right to do so.” The nobleman smiled thinly.

“Inspecteur Javert,” he said, stepping forward. “I believe we have been introduced before.”

“It was at the last benefit night the Premier Ministre held for dragon pox patients,” Javert murmured listlessly.

“Ah, yes, of course,” Rodolphus replied. “Perhaps, then, it surprises you to see me here.”

“Not especially.”
The nobleman’s gaze narrowed, but he turned to Valjean instead. “And you must be the convict I have heard so much about. I was beginning to wonder if we were ever going to meet.”

Valjean found his fear had left him, now that he was confronted at last by the face of his captor; Rodolphus was only a man, clever but fallible, and Valjean had escaped from far more secure locations than the bourgeois settlements of the Loire Valley. He did not reply to Rodolphus, merely looked at him evenly.

Rodolphus’ eyes glittered as he went on, “Madame Perrier whined for days about the blows you landed her in your little courtyard scuffle. Perhaps we will find out if you have the strength she claims.”

He raised his head, motioning for their guards to step forward. “Search them,” he commanded.

The pair of Death Eaters drew near. One pawed through Valjean’s coat and pockets, finding nothing but his wallet, which the man confiscated. The other had better luck with Javert; he had to untie the Auror’s hands, but he was then able to strip Javert of his greatcoat. A little digging revealed those bottles of potion which Javert had thought important enough to carry with him. The wizard held a phial up to the light. Its contents were clear as water, and Rodolphus chuckled.

“Veritaserum?” he asked, reaching out to take it. “Thought you might be using this on me?” The nobleman’s tone carried the suggestion of a threat as he added, “Don’t worry, I am sure it will not go to waste.”

He pocketed the little bottle, and then asked, “Their wands?”

Vidocq cleared his throat in response. “Here, Monsieur,” he answered, removing two thin, wooden sticks from the inside of his robe. One of them was clearly Valjean’s, but the other... Valjean felt his heart sink in understanding even as Rodolphus snorted.

“You call this a wand?”

He held the remains of Javert’s hornbeam aloft, where the firelight showed clearly how it was cracked all the way down the middle, almost broken in half. Had not Javert said that he had determined what was causing it to fracture, and could avoid it worsening? Had he been mistaken, or was it possible that the Auror allowed it to happen?

Javert focused on his wand with a particular fascination. For the first time since their capture, an emotion other than numb resignation crept over his face.

“That’s enough, Babet, Claquesous,” Rodolphus said, gesturing to the Death Eaters who had searched them. “Step aside. Our guests know better than to run, and anyway, I would test this Auror’s mettle.” Valjean’s wand disappeared into the nobleman’s robes, but the hornbeam Rodolphus tossed to Javert, who caught it automatically.

“You have been a thorn in Gisquet’s side for weeks,” said Rodolphus, “but in the end getting hold of you was child’s play. If he would have left it to us from the beginning, you would never have gotten this far. I’ve given you your wand, so stand and prepare to duel like a man.”

“This is hardly fair,” Javert objected.

“Of course it is fair. Now be polite, and bow.” It was not a request.

Javert gave a jerk of his head which would not have passed for a bow even in the loosest of terms, but Rodolphus did not seem hung up on the particulars. His own bow was exaggerated and mocking, knowing full-well that the Auror could do nothing in retaliation. Then he looked directly
at Javert and raised his wand.

“Crucio,” Rodolphus said calmly.

Javert did not have time to so much as blink, let alone get out of the way. The curse hit him, and there was a single instant in which his eyes widened in surprise. Then he fell to the floor as his knees gave out from under him. Valjean processed that only somewhat; his attention was taken up by the sound of Javert screaming.

It was not the sort of sound any human should ever have been made to produce. Agonized and ear-splitting, it reverberated through the room, recalling to Valjean’s mind the way the curse sent pain lancing like white hot knives through its victims. His soul ached for what the Auror was enduring. Where he writhed on the ground, Javert’s fingers twisted in fistfuls of his hair, his shattered wand abandoned on the tile beside him, useless.

It was horrible to watch. Javert attempted to resist, fighting to sit up, but it was clear that it was too much. Before long, he had been reduced to curling into a ball with his hands over his head. The sound of his cries did not stop, only was muffled by his robes.

Valjean peeled his eyes away to look at Rodolphus, wondering if the man would listen if he begged him to stop. The satisfied curve of the Death Eater’s lips suggested he would be only too happy to let Valjean plead, and then deny him. Surreptitiously, Valjean glanced around at the rest of the room. Babet and Claquesous were the only ones in close enough proximity to see their faces, but both were intent on watching Javert suffer; he only hoped that none of the others stationed around the Salon were paying him any mind.

Forcing himself to be careful, Valjean began to work at the cord binding his hands.

Eventually, Javert’s scream was reduced to a whimper, and then to silence as he panted for breath. Rodolphus broke off the spell, watching the way the Auror’s crumpled form trembled.

“This is only a taste,” he said, “a fragment of the pain you will know before the end.”

Rodolphus stepped closer, nudging Javert with the toe of his shoe, as he went on, “You think you are already spent, that you cannot possibly feel worse than this, but there you are mistaken. You see? Crucio.”

A low keening escaped Javert’s mouth as the spell struck him fresh. Where he lay on the floor, he curled into an even tighter ball, unable to do anything but wait it out.

Rodolphus sneered as he ended the curse. “This can go on for hours, even days, and it will,” he said. “And then, only when you are broken beyond amusement, you will die. You are rather pathetic, really. I don’t know what Gisquet was so worked up for.”

At that moment, unseen by anyone else, Valjean pulled loose the rope. He shoved it into his pocket, just as Rodolphus looked at Vidocq and said, “Take these two down to the dungeon.”

Heedless of all else, Valjean rushed to Javert’s side, where he knelt down.

“Javert,” he whispered. “Javert?”

He received a small, pained grunt in response.

“Come,” Valjean said, even as Vidocq approached them. “On your feet. I will help.”

Javert opened his eyes apparently with some effort, looking at Valjean’s proffered hand. He tried
to sit up, though he was clearly unsteady; Valjean slid an arm around him and helped him to his feet.

Standing, Javert leaned heavily on Valjean for support. He trembled still, and leaned his head against Valjean’s. Nobody appeared to notice that Valjean was suddenly free to use his hands, or if they did, nobody cared.

Rodolphus spoke, even as Valjean held Javert upright. “My Bella is accompanying her brother-in-law back to England, and I know she will be terribly sorry to have missed your arrival. But never fear - she should be back tonight, to give you the greeting you really deserve. You can make yourselves comfortable in the dungeon in the meantime.”

The Auror schooled his features into a scowl as Vidocq pointed his wand at them.

“This way,” Vidocq ordered.

Javert almost appeared as if he meant to refuse, and Valjean tightened his fingers momentarily around his shoulder in warning. The Auror stiffened and then sighed. Swallowing what remained of his pride, Javert let Valjean lead him in the direction Vidocq indicated.

“Wait,” came Rodolphus’ voice from behind them. Valjean closed his eyes in dismay - what else could the man possibly want?

There was the sound of footsteps, and then Rodolphus pressed Javert’s wand into his fingers.

“You almost forgot,” the nobleman laughed. “And that would be such a shame, wouldn’t it? Go on and keep it, it might be useful for kindling.” Still laughing, Rodolphus stood aside and let Vidocq take them into the neighboring room.

A twisting passageway went off further into the manor, but Vidocq stopped at one of the first doors. He tapped it with his wand, and it opened, revealing a set of stone steps lit by a single torch. They led down into darkness.

“If you behave,” said Vidocq, “I won’t have to lock you in one of the cells. You can just occupy the front room - who knows, it may save some time later.”

He grinned and gestured toward the stairs. Eager to be left alone, even if it was in the bowels of the château, Valjean tugged on Javert and together the pair entered the stairwell. They had only gone down a few steps when Vidocq shut the door behind them, and enchantments bolted it fast.

Immediately, Javert sagged.

When Valjean made a noise of alarm, the Auror shook his head. “I’m fine,” he said. “I’ll be fine,” he amended as Valjean regarded him with concern. “Just have to climb down these damn stairs, and -”

His words turned into an indignant exclamation as Valjean picked him up in his arms.

“What are you doing?” he asked, a note of helplessness in his voice.

“You will fall, otherwise,” said Valjean, descending carefully. “My God, Javert, you can barely stand, you are still shaking like a leaf - you need to not strain yourself and rest.”

There were no other torches at the bottom of the stairs, and so the room in which they had been abandoned was difficult to make out. It was cooler, and the floor felt like stone underfoot. Valjean set Javert gently on his feet and squinted as his eyes adjusted.
Javert held his head. “Ah,” he said. “Excuse me.”

He crossed haphazardly towards what Valjean thought was the corner, and a moment later, the sounds of the Auror retching reached him. This went on for several minutes, after which Javert just supported himself on the wall, breathing heavily.

“Well,” Valjean said dryly, “I’ll thank you for not doing that on me.”

Javert huffed a laugh. “Consider yourself lucky,” he said. “It was a near thing.” He directed his wand at the mess. “Evanesco.” Nothing happened, and he muttered darkly, “Of course.”

Gradually, the room came into focus, and Valjean had a look around. It was dark, still, but the light in the stairway made it possible to pick out some of the details. There were not many of them. A few columns supported the manor house above, and there was a single door on the far side of the chamber, which presumably went back to the cells Vidocq had alluded to.

There was also, he noticed, a drain in the center of the floor, down toward which the flagstone slabs sloped. Valjean shuddered a little. Grateful as he was not to be locked in a tiny cell, that still struck him as ominous.

Javert had edged away from the corner and sat on the floor, leaning his back against the wall and closing his eyes. Valjean joined him, scooting close enough to touch.

The Auror cracked one eyelid open to peer at him askance. “This entire, charming interrogation room to ourselves, and you had to sit right next to me?”

“I can move,” Valjean replied, going to get back on his feet. He paused as a hand grabbed him by the sleeve.

“Don’t,” Javert said softly.

Re-situating himself, Valjean leaned against Javert’s shoulder. The Auror did not remove his hand from where it was curled around the crook of Valjean’s arm, and so after a moment, Valjean rested his free hand on top of Javert’s. They sat like that for some time, silent but for their breathing. Javert’s shaking subsided as he regained control of his muscles, and he rested his head lightly against Valjean’s.

It was impossible to say how much time had passed when Javert murmured, “I am sorry, you know.”

Valjean thought at first he must have misheard. “Hmm?”

“This is my fault,” the Auror explained. “I should have known to be more careful. We wouldn’t be here if only I had expected a trap.”

Coming to the realization that he had in fact heard correctly, Valjean shook his head. “No,” he said. “You cannot blame yourself for this - it was as much my idea to come here as yours.”

“You must get out of here,” Javert continued as if Valjean had not spoken. “Leave me if you have to, but swear you will run if you get the chance.”

“Not without you,” Valjean insisted.

Javert turned to look at him seriously. “They intend to break us and then kill us, Valjean,” he said. “I will hold out as long as I can, but when they succeed, you will be the only one left who knows what the Préfet is planning. You must get away - if not, it will be as you told me, and innocent
people will die.”

There was a shard of truth to Javert’s words, but Valjean found he had no desire to leave Javert behind. He knew that it was selfish - he wanted the Auror at his side as much for the company as he did for the man’s safety - but he told himself he would just have to find a way. They went together, or not at all.

Valjean did not respond any further, except to curl his fingers protectively around Javert’s. His eyes closed as he thought through idea after idea. If they were going to get out of there, the first thing they needed was time.

Javert

It was difficult to keep track of time in a windowless room, but several hours had to have gone by. Javert sat with his arms crossed and his knees drawn up to his chest. He was hungry, though that was a feeling easily ignored. At his side, Valjean’s head was tilted back against the wall; the man had dozed off. Javert envied him for that. He was exhausted, but he also knew he possessed no chance of finding sleep, not so long as he felt like there was an axe hanging over his head.

Rodolphus had said Bellatrix would return by that night. As much as Javert might have wanted to believe the witch would fail to attend to him until the next morning, he very much doubted that would be the case. He could still feel the memory of pain just under the surface of his skin, and he was unsure how long he could tolerate more.

Valjean mumbled something in his sleep and shuffled positions. One of his legs brushed against Javert’s and then stayed there, their knees touching in a single point of contact. Javert wondered if he should move, but decided Valjean did not deserve to be disturbed. He stayed still, and Valjean slept, and time passed.

Javert could not have said when it was that he first felt eyes on him, but he looked over to find Valjean watching, wearing an unguarded expression. His eyes were still half-shut, but in the meager torch light, Javert saw the trace of a smile on his lips.

“You have been sitting like that since before I fell asleep,” he said. “Have you moved at all?”

“Not really,” Javert admitted.

“You should stretch,” Valjean recommended. “You’ll get stiff otherwise.”

Javert grumbled, “I think I’m stiff already,” but he rocked forward and got slowly to his feet. Something popped as he moved, and he had to concede that Valjean was right. Every muscle in his body ached.

“Damn,” he grunted, reaching his arms behind his head.

Valjean held out a hand, and Javert helped pull him upright. Strangely, even when he was standing, Valjean did not pull away. He was close enough for Javert to hear his quiet breathing, and their hands were still clasped. Valjean just looked at him, and Javert felt suddenly very conscious of the way his pulse thrummed in his neck. That easy smile was still on Valjean’s face, and Javert was compelled to look away.

“Did we ever try that other door?” Javert asked, breaking the stretch of silence.

Valjean craned his neck to look, finally taking his hand away. “I did not,” he replied.
Determined to distract himself, though from what he could not say, Javert paced over to the cell block door. Trying the handle, he found it locked. He took out his wand habitually, and then remembered its state.

“Alohomora,” he attempted anyway. Unsurprisingly, it did nothing.

“Alohomora! Reducto! Bombarda!” With increasing vexation, Javert tried to get some kind of reaction, any kind, out of the damaged wood. It remained cold and lifeless between his fingers.

A hand touched his shoulder.

“It’s locked, Javert,” Valjean said. “We will just have to look for another way out.”

Taking a calming breath, Javert returned his wand to the pocket within his robes. “We need a plan,” he pronounced. “When they come for me, you must use their distraction to try and sneak your way out, alright?”

Valjean hummed but did not reply. He returned to their place by the wall, and a moment later, Javert joined him.

Valjean’s presence was a warm mass in the darkness, one which did not protest even when Javert pressed against his side. No matter the lack of propriety, all the decorum in the world would not help him, and anyway, Valjean seemed unopposed to the Auror’s touch.

Over and over again, Javert thought to himself that Valjean had to escape no matter what. He also told himself that this was so that Valjean could warn the Premier Ministre; if there was another motivation, he did not dare examine it.

The passage of minutes into hours was impossible to mark. For a time, Javert tried counting the seconds in his head, but that quickly became tedious. Valjean did not return to sleep, but neither did he speak. Javert supposed he had to be used to sitting, waiting, in a dark cell. That thought came with less of his usual irony, and more of something like sadness.

When at last he heard the creak of the door at the top of the stairs, Javert found that whatever fear he felt had been usurped by acceptance.

“Valjean,” he whispered quietly, “hide in the shadows by the steps - be on the lookout for any opportunity to run, you understand?”

“Javert -“

“Go,” he hissed, as a woman’s laughter echoed in the stairwell. “You know it is me they care most about, do not lose that advantage.”

Valjean could only be described as looking miserable, but he squeezed Javert’s shoulder once and then crawled off into the dark as he was bid. Javert allowed himself a single, self-satisfied smile. Valjean would be safe, and Javert’s death would be avenged. It was a good plan.

Bellatrix skated around the corner at the bottom of the stairs, alight with a wicked enthusiasm.

“Oh Inspecteur,” she called out, a twisted girlishness in the way she spoke. “Where are you hiding? Periculum.”

A shower of sparks flared to life and hovered near the ceiling, illuminating the room like reddish lightning beetles. The light was enough to see clearly Bellatrix, and behind her Rodolphus. Valjean he could make out as well, standing still as a statue next to the stairs. Neither of the
Lestranges had noticed him yet, and Javert meant to keep it that way.

Getting to his feet, he crossed to stand where he could look Bellatrix in the eye.

“So you are the infamous Madame Lestrange,” the Auror said. “Your French is passable, for an English woman.”

Bellatrix laughed again at that; it was a cold, mirthless sound that made one’s hair stand on end.

“You hear that?” she asked, turning to her husband. “It is as you said, the man does not frighten!” Almost gleefully, she turned back and curtsied. “My lineage is of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black - perhaps you have heard of it?”

Javert scoffed. “I have priorities higher than learning the titles of Englishmen. I have not heard of it, nor do I care to.”

Bellatrix’s laughter turned into a shriek. “How dare you speak to a Pureblood that way? You will learn respect, Auror. Imperio!”

At once, Javert’s mind went blank. It was a pleasant feeling - in fact, it was perhaps the most pleasant he had ever felt. A passing fancy suggested he should kneel, which was curious, but now that he thought about it, Javert found he could think of nothing that sounded more enjoyable than kneeling. His legs folded beneath him, and he decided it was the best idea he had ever had.

A minute passed, and then Javert’s awareness returned to find him kneeling on the stone floor as the dungeon rang with laughter. A humiliated flush rose up his neck, and Javert scrambled back to his feet.

Bellatrix glanced at her husband. “Would you care to do the honors, love?”

Rodolphus motioned her forward. “I gave him an appetizer this morning. Finish him for the Dark Lord, dearest.”

Javert backed away warily as Bellatrix approached him. Beyond her, Valjean was still taking cover next to the stairs - he needed to move! Perhaps he was worried the Death Eaters would notice him trying to escape. Javert locked eyes with Bellatrix and knew he was about to have her complete attention. If ever there was a time for Valjean to go, this was it.

Bellatrix raised her wand, a warped walnut branch, and said, “Crucio!”

Knowing what to expect did not make it any easier to bear. The spell tore at his insides and set his flesh on fire with pain. Javert did not feel it as he hit the ground; if he had been capable of thought, he would have said it was impossible to feel anything more than what the curse inflicted. His throat felt raw with crying out, but he could not stop, could not do anything besides twist blindly in the curse’s grip.

Bellatrix lifted her wand, and all at once Javert could breathe again. He gulped for air, ears ringing, even as the witch considered him like a bug she meant to crush.

“I met a man once by the surname Javert,” she said conversationally. “They put him in Azkaban. Any relation?”

Javert tensed, but was unable to answer. The harshness of his breathing was his only reply.

“Stings a bit, doesn’t it?” the witch commented. “Perhaps you need another taste?” She waited as though expecting Javert to beg for mercy, and looked almost put out when he did not.
“Crucio,” she snapped.

Javert’s back arched as though he had been electrocuted. All presence of mind vanished, and his fingernails scrabbled at the floor as he tried in vain to get away. He tasted salt, and Javert discovered tears streaming down the side of his face. The agony was unending, and always fresh. Unlike a wound, magic did not dull with time.

Javert was slipping away. He could not breathe, and his lungs burned for want of air. His own screaming would asphyxiate him as certainly as if he had drowned. The notion of death offered some small comfort, and he prayed it came soon, even as he prayed Valjean had broken free.

Distantly, Javert heard a shout. All at once, the spell ended, and Javert gasped. He had almost forgotten what it was like to feel anything other than pain. Darkness danced at the corners of his vision; he might have welcomed unconsciousness, had he not then heard Valjean’s voice.

“Cowards!”

Struggling to focus, Javert lifted his head to see Bellatrix with her back to him, staring at Valjean. No longer crouching in the shadows, Valjean stood facing their captors with his head held high. Javert was confused, as well as a little angry. What was Valjean still doing there?

“In a fair fight, you would never stand a chance,” Valjean went on. “You can torture us, even kill us, but it won’t matter - you will not succeed in killing the Premier Ministre.”

Rodolphus’ eyebrows twitched in surprise and Valjean smirked.

“Thought we didn’t know?” he asked. “Well, we do - we know a lot more than you might think. For instance, that not all of your double agents are as loyal to you as you may wish.”

He was bluffing, Javert realized. Valjean was feeding the Death Eaters lies masked by a fragment of truth, but for what purpose?

“Is that so?” said Rodolphus. His expression bespoke boredom, but his voice betrayed a note of concern. “Perhaps you would like to tell us more about that.”

“You will only kill me afterward,” countered Valjean. “So no, I think I would not.”

“Half-blood scum,” Bellatrix hissed. “We will get it out of you one way or another.” She raised her wand, and Javert tried to call out a warning, only to find his throat too sore for speech. “Incarcerous!”

Valjean did not fight the ropes which appeared out of thin air to bind him. Instead, he looked past Bellatrix to where Javert lay in a heap and met his eyes, his expression apologetic. He held Javert’s gaze even as Bellatrix grabbed him roughly by the arm and dragged him toward the staircase.

Understanding struck the Auror like lightning. He tried to get to his feet, tried to tell Valjean he was not going to be a martyr on Javert’s behalf, but even the effort of pushing himself up on his elbows was too much. Javert could do nothing but mouth Valjean’s name as he was taken away.

Above him, the door slammed shut and he despaired. Rolling onto his stomach, Javert buried his face in his arms. He had been granted a stay of execution, but only because Valjean was willing to pay the price.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Oh my God, this chapter is so late, but it’s a longer one, so hopefully that makes up for it. The “graphic depictions of violence” tag is definitely still applicable here - somebody’s gonna kick me out of the fandom for how I’m treating these boys, I can feel it.

(P.S. I’m posting this from my phone, as I am currently sitting on a train without WiFi. I will check for formatting issues ASAP, but in the meantime, please know that I probably can’t see them on mobile.)

Javert

Fool.

Coward.

Failure.

Incompetent.

Weak.

The stone was cold beneath him as Javert lay huddled on the floor. In his head, each self-recriminating accusation stung like the switch of a whip, but he tallied them in a list with as much deliberation and dedication as he reserved for any other task. It was his fault they had gotten caught, his fault he had not come up with a better plan, his fault his damned wand would not even work -

There was no telling how long he had been lying there. Every sense he had was distorted. Though the Auror guessed it had been about an hour, perhaps it had been two, or a mere twenty minutes. The pain lingering in his limbs receded little by little, helped by the numbing chill of the floor. Briefly he thought about sitting up, and then he wondered who he was trying to impress, the rats? He pressed the back of his hand to his eyes.

In the long moments following Valjean’s removal, an oppressive hush had fallen over the manor. Javert could not stop his ears straining to hear what was happening, but all he could make out was that resounding silence. What did it mean? Perhaps even now Valjean was spinning some falsehood to send the Death Eaters off on the wrong track, or perhaps, Javert thought, the man’s ruse had been discovered already. Maybe they had killed Valjean outright.

Javert pressed his hand harder against his face until tiny galaxies exploded behind his eyelids. What was the matter with him? His little pity party helped no-one, not himself, not the Premier Ministre, and certainly not Valjean.

Ignoring the way he felt sick to his stomach again, Javert pushed himself upright slowly. Something in his pants pocket dug into his thigh as he moved. He touched a hand to it, perplexed, instantly regretting that decision as soon as he realized what it was: the rosary. He had completely
forgotten about putting it there.

Like a phantom, Javert felt the ghost of fingers pressing the gift into his palm. At the time, it had seemed strange that a mayor should have such rough hands, just one of a thousand little signs that something was not quite right. Of course, in retrospect, it made perfect sense. And if he had known then what he knew now...

The Auror did not allow himself to finish that thought. Sitting back on his haunches, he waited until the room stopped spinning, before digging through his robes to find his broken wand.

Holding onto it tightly, as though he might wring the magic out of it, Javert said, “Lumos.” The wood remained stubbornly unresponsive. “Lumos!” he repeated, swishing the wand insistently. The spell failed to elicit any reaction, and it was with a snarl that he slammed the instrument down flat on the flagstones. In what little light he had to see by, the exposed thread of unicorn hair glimmered tauntingly.

The Auror was playing at a dangerous game. Frustrating as it was for his wand not to respond to his magic, there was a good chance it was safer; half of the wizards living in permanent care wards were there as a result of damaged wands backfiring spectacularly, and there was every chance that a spell forced through his hornbeam would behave unpredictably. Still, Javert was agreeable to running that risk if it freed them.

As if to spite that willingness, even the simplest of spells, ones which children could perform, seemed beyond his reach. It was infuriating. Getting to his feet, Javert paced the length of the dungeon room. All his anger and frustration carried the underpinnings of worry. If only one of them was to escape, it had to be Valjean. Javert owed him that much, and more. He felt the weight of his debt in his veins, in every aching pain engraved in his bones, but how to repay it when Valjean refused the opportunity for escape he offered?

Javert’s pace increased in intensity, channeling his disjointed thoughts into steps. A few frenetic loops around the room made him dizzy, so he turned to the stairs instead. Though peering into the bright torchlight caused his eyes to water, he climbed the steps anyway to the door.

As he expected, it was locked. Javert tugged at the handle, first trying to tease it open, and then with greater and greater desperation as it showed no signs of giving. When it was clear the door would not budge, he pressed his ear to the seam, listening instead. He could make out the faint murmur of voices, but nothing more concrete than that.

The Auror swore under his breath, which became a string of angry curses as he descended the stairs. That in turn became an incoherent shout of rage as he reached the bottom, still trapped, still without any clue how to help. He kicked the wall, which served nothing except to give him another bruise.

Javert was hungry, a feeling that was harder to shake than it had been earlier, and he was sore. That, too, was difficult to put from his mind. Staring unseeingly at the wall, Javert’s fists clenched tight at his sides. Not knowing what else to do, he took a seat and drew his knees up to his chin.

_Idiot_, he thought.

That was followed by, _Selfish._

Then, _Inconsiderate._

_Uncaring._

_Pathetic._
It felt as though an eternity had passed before the creak of hinges echoed down the stairwell. Shaken from his stupor, Javert got to his feet without quite knowing what had happened. One hand braced against the wall, he listened intently, while his heart beat out a frantic tattoo in his chest; was Valjean returned to him, or even now was Bellatrix Lestrange sweeping down the steps with her wand? At that thought, Javert straightened, a steely expression settling into the lines of his face. He would not roll over and wait to die.

As he listened, however, he heard only a muffled, erratic thumping, as from a single pair of limping feet. He did not recognize the gait of any of the Death Eaters, and so cautiously, Javert crossed the floor.

Coming around the corner, he squinted up the torch-lit shaft to see Valjean descending one tread at a time, leaning his shoulder against the wall for support even as he favored his left leg.

“Valjean!” Javert exclaimed in alarm, scampering up to his side.

“Javert,” Valjean murmured in return, as the Auror offered his own shoulder in place of the wall.

Pulling a muscled arm around his shoulders, Javert guided Valjean down the stairs, taking the opportunity to look him over more closely. Valjean’s usually soft white hair was plastered to his head with sweat, and there was a definite tremor in his hands.

“Are you hurt?” Javert asked. “What did they do to you?”

Tonelessly, Valjean replied, “I am hurt. They forced me to take Veritaserum and questioned me. When that was unsuccessful, they tried to torture me as they did you.”

“Veritaserum?” repeated the Auror. “Then does that not mean -“

“I am still under its influence, yes.”

Frowning, Javert noted the glazed look in Valjean’s eyes and the expressionlessness of his voice, both of which he had taken for exhaustion. A tingle went down his spine. Truth Serum was notoriously difficult to circumvent, and though there were a few recorded instances of powerful Dark wizards lying even when having been administered it, the balance of probability was that Valjean did not have the skill to do so. Anything he said therefore had to be true. Except that -

As they got to the bottom of the stairs, Javert asked, “What do you mean, they were unsuccessful at questioning you? Surely the potion made it immediately clear that you were lying.”

“No,” Valjean said shortly. “I could not lie, but I found I could force myself not to speak. They seemed quite unnerved by the fact that I just sat there silently. But,” he added. “I am too tired to resist any further, so by all means, ask me what you will, Javert, and I will answer.” Removing his arm from around the Auror's neck, Valjean lowered himself gingerly onto the floor, not against the wall, but facing it, with his back to a column instead.

Javert hesitated. When no invitation was made, the Auror moved to sit by the wall alone. The two
men stared at each other for a moment.

“Well?” Valjean tilted his head. “Cat got your tongue, Inspecteur?”

Javert twitched involuntarily at that, and asked, “Are you quite -” He skipped the word alright, of course Valjean was not alright, “- yourself?” he finished.

Valjean’s answering laugh was bitter. “I am entirely myself,” he replied. “I had just expected to be interrogated by you, too, the moment I sat down. You cannot tell me the thought has not crossed your mind.”

The man’s words felt like a slap in the face, and an angry retort rose in Javert’s throat. He found, though, that he could not speak it aloud, because the fact of the matter was that Valjean was right. He had questions, lots of them, and there was a certain temptation to knowing that anything he asked, Valjean would have to answer truthfully.

His internal conflict must have shown on his face, because Valjean huffed a little. “That’s what I thought,” he said. “Fire away.”

Javert could not stem the guilty feeling in his stomach, but Valjean seemed to expect it of him, and anyway, he did want to know, so he asked, “How did you learn to resist Veritaserum?”

“I didn’t learn,” Valjean replied. “It was as much a surprise to me as it is to you - in Montreuil, I just carried the antidote. I suppose I knew our lives depended on my staying silent, so I did.” He shifted uncomfortably, but the potion did not permit him to stop speaking. “It probably doesn’t hurt that I have a minor degree of resistance to magic, on account of my heritage.”

“Your heritage?” Javert asked, forgetting his qualms as his interest piqued.

Lowering his eyes, Valjean said, “My great-grandmother. She was a giantess, or so I have been told.”

Javert’s first thought was that he ought not have been surprised. It explained a lot, actually, starting with the man’s strength. His second thought was for the way Valjean’s fingers fiddled with the hem of his shirt nervously, as though waiting for a sharp remark. Javert could not fault him for that. There was a time not so long ago when such a revelation would have proven just one more excuse to brand Valjean as a villain, for giants were notoriously violent, bloodthirsty creatures.

Working to remove any trace of condemnation from his voice, Javert said, “So when the Death Eaters tried to Stun you this morning...”

Valjean nodded slowly. “They failed, though if a few more of them had joined in, it would have been enough.”

“I see.”

Valjean continued not to meet his gaze. From the way his shoulders fell, it seemed any fight truly had left him. Veritaserum made putty of most men; that Valjean should have fought it at all was momentous.

That was the line of thinking which led Javert to his next question. “I asked you to run when you got the opportunity - why did you get involved instead?”

“What good would running have done?” Valjean countered. “Even if I had snuck up the stairs, even if I had gotten out the door, the rest of the manor is still full of Death Eaters. What we needed was to buy time - lying accomplished that. And anyway - you were hurt badly on my account. I
could not leave you as you asked.”

Javert had so many questions he thought he might choke on them, beginning with just the word, why? For instance, why did Valjean care if he lived or died? Why had Valjean saved him the very first time, in the town square? He might have asked any of those things, but he was struck suddenly by the idea that perhaps he did not want to know. He could imagine a few possible answers, any of which twisted his stomach.

His conscience also caught up to him in that moment of indecision, and he realized he had done exactly what Valjean had accused him of, had begun to pry at him the same way the Death Eaters meant to. Then he was ashamed, for he had no business doing so, especially when Valjean had no choice but to share things he might prefer to keep to himself.

“Go to sleep,” Javert said instead. “You need the rest.”

Valjean looked up, surprise showing through the lines of his face. “That can’t be all, surely,” he said.

“It is,” the Auror firmly replied. “I will sit and keep watch. Sleep, and let the potion wear off.” And damn me to hell for wanting to exploit it, he added in his head.

Valjean smiled in a way which was small but real. He did not move from that spot, but his chin dropped and he closed his eyes. It was not long after that quiet snores issued from his mouth, even as he sat balled up next to the column.

Javert watched, his own self-disgust keeping him awake. The manor was quiet again. Perhaps it was evening, and their captors had retired.

In the silence, even the agitation of his thoughts could not combat the Auror’s weariness indefinitely. Javert’s eyelids gradually grew heavy, taking longer to reopen every time they shut. In the final moments before he, too, nodded off, Javert prayed to whomever might be listening that they be given a real respite, if only for Valjean’s sake.

Valjean

Opening his eyes slowly, Valjean wondered what the time was. He felt better, with the exception of his throat, which was dry and gritty; they had consumed neither food nor drink since their dinner at the inn. He imagined they must have slept for some hours. Across the floor, Javert was nodded off, a strand of hair falling in his face.

Valjean caught himself smiling in a way which was almost fond. How improbable that was, and yet, as Valjean turned over his thoughts in examination, he was forced to conclude that “fond” was not a bad word for how he felt at all. The tiny growing thing in his chest put out shoots like a flower set in the sun. He made it a point not to think about the Unbreakable Vow; that was a problem to contend with after they escaped, not before.

Javert’s nose twitched as the hairs tickled it, and the Auror blinked himself back to wakefulness.

“Good morning,” Valjean said.

“Is it morning?” Javert’s voice was rough, made scratchy by sleep, and by the strain of the night before. “Can’t tell the time worth a damn down here.”

Shrugging slightly, Valjean straightened and stretched the kinks out of his neck. “It is later, at any rate. How do you feel?”
“Like I was run over by a stampeding hippogriff,” muttered the Auror. Looking up, he added, “And you, are you... recovered?”

Valjean considered this. The soporific, deadening effects of the Veritaserum seemed to have been neutralized, and he no longer felt compelled to babble every thought on his mind in response to questions, so he said, “I think so.”

Javert studied him and then turned away, looking discomfited.

The corners of his mouth turning down, Valjean asked, “Is something the matter?”

Javert was quiet for a moment, his head lowered, before he replied, “I owe you an apology for last night. My behavior was inexcusable. To take advantage of your condition to satisfy my own curiosity was wrong.”

Valjean’s mouth opened in surprise. “Well,” he said after a minute. “You put some thought into that, I see.” When Javert still did not look at him, Valjean went on, “Are you going to tender your resignation now, as well?”

Javert did react at that, the look on his face suggesting he could not quite believe Valjean had just made a joke.

“It is forgiven, Javert,” Valjean said gently. “You could have been cruel, but you were not.”

“That’s no excuse,” said the Auror. “I have been far too lenient in allowing excuses for my behavior.”

“What good comes of holding a grudge?” Valjean asked. He moved forward on his hands and knees until he was right in front of Javert. “It is no way to treat a friend, certainly.”

Softly, Javert asked, “Are we friends?”

“I am not sure that I have ever had one before,” Valjean admitted, “so I may be the wrong person to ask, but I think we could be.”

Instead of making a reply, what Javert said was, “Will you sit?”

Wordlessly, Valjean scooted alongside the Auror. When he was not striving to be an irreproachable pillar of ice, Javert’s face, though still sharp in its angles, was not so harsh; Valjean certainly preferred it to the impartial mask he usually wore. Javert’s eyes remained downcast, but he shifted as Valjean settled into place, letting their shoulders nest together. The man felt cold to the touch, and no wonder, with nothing but frigid stone making up their subterranean quarters.

Javert did not strike Valjean as being an especially tactile person, and yet he did not seem to mind sitting one against the other. Perhaps, Valjean reflected, it was just good to have the reminder that they were not alone, there in the dark. Also novel was the notion of touch without pain; Valjean found that reality particularly mesmerizing.

They sat quietly, each lost in their respective thoughts, until Valjean recalled a fragment of the evening before. He tugged on the edge of his sleeve self-consciously, uncertain if it was wise to try his luck.

“I was wondering...” he began. “And you don’t have to answer.” Valjean added as the Auror glanced in his direction, “but last night, Bellatrix mentioned a man in Azkaban named Javert, and so I thought I would ask...”

“It’s fine if you would rather not talk about it,” Valjean quickly reiterated. “In fact, you can forget I said anything, and -”

“No, it’s fine,” Javert cut him off. “You’re only settling the score where questions of family are concerned. Fair enough,” he went on as Valjean made to interrupt.

“The man Madame Lestrange spoke of was my father.”

The Auror was still for a long moment, and Valjean thought perhaps that was all he was willing to say on the matter, until he continued, “My mother was a Muggle. I do not know how they met - I never asked, and mother never said. My father was arrested before I was born and sentenced to life imprisonment in Azkaban.”

Javert cleared his throat. “I was only a few years old when I demonstrated an aptitude for wizardry, and when I turned eleven, I was of course accepted to the Académie de Magie Beauxbatons. That was when I learned what had really become of my father - all mother had told me was that I was to grow up to be a wizard like him. Mother died my first winter there. As for my father... he died in prison just as I was beginning my Terminale year.”

“And then you became an Auror,” Valjean murmured.

“I had two options, as I saw it. I could break wizarding law like my father, or I could uphold it.” He shrugged. “I did what I had to, to make up for his transgressions.”

“What was Beauxbatons like?”

“It is the best school of magic in the world,” Javert asserted.

Humming wistfully, Valjean said, “I never went to school. There was always too much work at home for too little pay, and I had to help raise my sister. I taught myself on the side - you’ll remember my library in Montreuil, I love to read - but when Jeanne’s husband passed... Well, it all fell apart from there.”

The Auror stared at the floor. “My father was arrested for smuggling. He’d established quite the racket, according to the records. What was your reason? Why did you...?”

“There were starving children to think of,” Valjean replied simply. “I didn’t feel I had a choice.”

Javert looked as though he might have said something else, but just then, the pair collectively heard the door opening at the top of the stairs.

“Damn it,” said Javert, getting up off the floor. “Valjean, stand behind me.”

Following suit, Valjean hissed, “Don’t be ridiculous.” He caught the Auror’s arm and added, “We both know I can withstand them for longer than you can - leave them to me, and focus on finding a way out of here.”

Panic crept into his voice as Javert protested, “Valjean -” but then Bellatrix appeared from around the partition wall, closely followed by her husband, and Valjean stepped forward.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” the witch purred.

Rodolphus pointed his wand at Javert warningly as he tried to sidle closer, and the Auror stopped short, eyeing the Death Eater with distaste. Meanwhile, Valjean watched Bellatrix stalk towards
him, holding himself to his full height. He maintained an expression of nonchalance, though internally it was difficult to remain calm.

“Do you suppose,” Bellatrix said softly, “that this one will be more cooperative today after he’s had some time to think about his position?”

Rodolphus chuckled. “I’ll bet you three Galleons he won’t be.”

“I’ll take that bet,” replied Bellatrix, not taking her eyes off Valjean. “And I won’t lose.”

Valjean met her gaze steadily, unintimidated. The witch gave a jerk of her head indicating that he should follow, and she backed towards the stairs. He did not contest her, walking stoically toward the stairs as he was bid. Rodolphus came up behind, and it was only a moment before Valjean was conscious of the Death Eater’s wand at his back. He was just grateful Javert possessed the good sense not to get in the way.

Ascending the steps, they came out once more into the back hallway of the château. Bellatrix turned around the corner, and Valjean followed, already able to guess where they were going. Sure enough, she led them back into the Grande Salon, where a wooden chair had been set in front of the fireplace. Apparently, some measure of planning had taken place, as opposed to his extemporaneous interrogation the night before.

“Sit,” said Bellatrix haughtily.

Valjean eyed his surroundings; the upper mezzanine was deserted, but the sound of voices issued from the direction of the antechamber, and he knew not where the other doors and passages of the manor might lead him. Valjean crossed to the chair and sat.

At a flick of her wrist, Bellatrix conjured ropes which wrapped around Valjean’s legs, anchoring him in place. He stared straight ahead and did not move. Rodolphus circled the sitting arrangement and came to a stop directly behind Valjean; when he spoke, his voice was like honey.

“Bella and I have been speaking,” he said, “and we’ve agreed that perhaps we expected too much, too quickly.”

The look on Bellatrix’s face belied this statement, but Valjean maintained his silence. Unlike Javert, he was disinclined to openly antagonize their captors.

“We’ve not been the most gracious of hosts. You and your companion downstairs must be hungry by now. We can provide whatever you like.”

“I’m sure you can,” Valjean thought without humor.

“He perhaps you are thirsty,” Rodolphus continued. “There is tea, coffee, wine - anything. Even just a cool glass of ice water.”

He waved his wand above Valjean’s head, and a glass materialized out of nowhere. It filled slowly with water, hovering tantalizingly in front of him. Valjean’s arms were untied. There was nothing to stop him taking it, except the certainty that it was somehow a trap.

“No?” said Rodolphus. He flicked the tip of his wand, and the glass plummeted to the floor, where it shattered on the marble tile. Valjean flinched at the noise.

Rodolphus tutted. “What a mess. _Evanesco_.”

The puddle Vanished, and Valjean felt more keenly the way his throat grated like sandpaper. His
tongue ran over his lips, and Rodolphus gave him a shrewd smile.

“Maybe,” he said to Bellatrix, “I was still too impatient. Shall we offer our guest a second chance?”

The witch’s answering huff suggested she was ready to be done with that charade, but Rodolphus conjured a second cup anyway. This time, Valjean did reach for it; before he could take hold, Rodolphus snatched it away.

“I almost forgot,” he said, taking from his pocket a small phial Valjean had by then learned to recognize. The Death Eater tipped several drops of crystal clear potion into the glass, before sending it levitating back within Valjean’s reach. Rodolphus continued to smile, even as Valjean did some very quick thinking.

It was clever, making him choose to self-administer the Veritaserum, but ultimately it was nothing more than a ploy to try and rattle him. He needed a drink, and badly. It would be unfortunate to lose a chance to escape because he collapsed with dehydration, and who could say when he would be granted water again.

Valjean took hold of the glass and drained it in one gulp, meeting Rodolphus’ eyes levelly as he did so.

It took only a few seconds for the insidious potion to work its way through his veins, bringing with it an ethereal sense of calm. Almost in spite of himself, Valjean eased in his chair, the tension draining from his shoulders. Everything was going to be okay, he told himself. He could just close his eyes, and -

No! a voice said sharply in his head. He needed to stay focused. Clenching his jaw, Valjean pushed aside the feeling of security, though he longed to embrace it.

“What is your name?” Rodolphus asked slowly and clearly.

Jean Valjean was on the tip of his tongue, threatening to spill out. It was a harmless answer, one which they already knew, but if he started to speak, Valjean was not sure he had the willpower to stop again. He bit down hard, and said nothing.

Rodolphus glared. “You think you’re awfully clever with that trick. Where did you learn it?”

Javert beat you to that question, thought Valjean. I figured it out for myself last night. He bit down harder, tasting blood.

“What do you know about the Premier Ministre?” the Death Eater demanded, growing visibly irritated as Valjean remained silent.

“I told you it wouldn’t work,” Bellatrix snapped. “There’s no use in trying subtlety.” She lifted her wand. “Answer him! Crucio!”

Valjean doubled over. Every inch of his body felt as though pierced by a thousand needles, and if he had a natural resistance to the spell, then he could not begin to imagine what it felt like at full strength. His hands grasped the arms of the chair, forcing himself back upright. He found as he did so that his jaw was still locked tight.

Bellatrix strode up to the chair, seething. “Impudent filth,” she snarled. Raising a hand, she struck Valjean hard across the face, and his head jerked sharply to the side. The sting of the slap dissipated almost instantly. What did not fade was the way the witch’s wedding band scraped a line across his cheekbone. He looked back at her icily, feeling a drop of liquid bead slowly along
The voices in the antechamber multiplied and grew louder; Bellatrix looked up as a troupe of people came clattering into the Salon. At once, Bellatrix was diverted, leaving Valjean like so much refuse as she went to greet the newcomers. Rodolphus followed close after her, and Valjean took advantage of the reprieve to catch his breath.

“The details have been set,” announced Vidocq’s voice. “In three day’s time, at the appointed hour, Gisquet shall meet the Premier Ministre in the Salon Rouge. While he is distracted, we will take two parties, one entering through the Hôtel roof and one from the grounds. Will Madame do us the honor of leading the ground party?”

There was bloodlust in her voice as Bellatrix replied, “Of course. And once the Ministre is dead, I shall summon the Dark Lord to claim France as his own.”

Valjean closed his eyes and allowed his legs to relax as much as he could. Muscles eased, but it was not enough to slacken the ropes binding his legs. Bending over, he ran a hand along his calves, searching for a knot to undo, but there was none. The cord was seamless.

Grinding his teeth, Valjean fought to break loose, but without a file to wear down the rope, there was little he could do. Behind him, the Death Eaters were still talking.

“There are a few exercises yet to run,” said a witch. “May we use the back lot to practice?”

“Certainly,” Rodolphus answered her. “Work hard today and take tomorrow off to ensure yourselves well-rested.”

Breaking into smaller groups, the chattering intensified, then lessened as the majority made their way off toward the yard. The Lestranges circumnavigated the settee to return to their place by the fireside. They were joined by a trio of other Death Eaters, still deep in conversation. Picking up an iron poker, Rodolphus reached into the hearth and turned over the logs, sending a column of sparks up the chimney stack.

One of the Death Eaters, tall and with well-groomed dark hair, glanced at Valjean and asked, “Well then, who’s this?” With a start, Valjean realized the man had eyes the color of gold.

“Jean Valjean,” Rodolphus replied. “A convict from Azkaban, apparently, though he’s been keeping company with an Auror.”

The loup garou appeared suitably impressed by this. “You, ah, ‘putting him to question’, so to speak?”

“Yes,” replied the wizard coolly, “but he’s proven to be more resilient than anticipated.”

Grinning toothily, the loup garou said, “Let me have a go at him, he’ll talk.”

One of his compatriots, a witch, snickered. “Come on, DuPont,” she said. “He’s gotta still be alive for that to work.”

“Sure,” DuPont agreed, still smiling, “he’s gotta be alive, but he doesn’t need all his limbs to answer questions, does he?”

Valjean’s blood ran cold as they laughed raucously. Shortly, however, Bellatrix dismissed the wizards to the back of the manor with a few additional instructions on which spells to perfect. DuPont was the last to leave, and his final act was to grin cheekily one more time at Valjean.
The sudden silence was unnerving. Valjean regarded the two Lestranges carefully; there was no mercy to be found in their eyes.

*So be it,* Valjean thought, as Bellatrix once more raised her wand.

“*Crucio!*”

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**Valjean**

They had been at it for hours. The crest rail dug into the back of Valjean’s neck as he slumped in his chair, but it was not worth the effort to move. Any thought of escape had been driven from his mind entirely, taken over by the need to just survive. His senses were leaden, dulled by pain and the effort of concentrating. The Truth Serum had worn off, or at least he thought it had, but the Lestranges had ceased interrogating him some time ago. He was unsure if that meant they had given up on getting answers, or if they had decided the information was immaterial in the grand scheme of their conquest. One thing was certain, they were not giving up on pushing him to his limit.

Dozens of cuts littered Valjean’s face and arms, symptoms of Bellatrix’s displeasure. A few were bleeding through his shirt, though he did not think any of them were serious. At any rate, he could barely feel the scratches through the haze of confusion and hurt surrounding him.

As the Crucius Curse turned his bones to fire for what might have been the hundredth time, Valjean wondered vaguely why he did not just give in. If he screamed like they wanted, if he implored them to stop, perhaps they would finally be satisfied. His back shuddered, but he scarcely noticed anymore. Internally, Valjean had gathered his consciousness on a tiny island in the midst of a violent sea of pain; there in the eye of the storm, it was just possible to think with some clarity, detached even from his own sense of self.

The curse faded, and Valjean was left with his nerves tingling at the prolonged abuse. His breath came in slow pants, but he was aware enough of his surroundings to overhear Rodolphus say to Bellatrix, “Do you think there’s a chance he’s not human?”

The witch scoffed. “So what if he isn’t? Half-blood or half-breed, they’ll both bend sooner or later.” She looked Valjean over consideringly, and Valjean forced himself to sit up straight. Bellatrix tipped her head to the side as a vicious light kindled in her eyes.

“You know the trouble with the Crucius? It is exquisite, but...” They witch paused, pouting thoughtfully. “It never leaves a mark. Easier to resist, isn’t it, knowing that if nothing else, your body is safe?”

Rodolphus nodded slowly. “Yes, love, I see your point.”

Bellatrix turned to face the fireplace. In one smooth motion, she pulled out the poker from where it rested among the coals; the end of it glowed cherry red, and Valjean blanched. As she passed it off to her husband, Valjean shrank defensively in his seat, praying he could wrest the iron rod out of the Death Eater’s hands.

The witch quickly dashed that meager hope.

“*Incarcerous,*” said Bellatrix. The ropes which appeared slithered around Valjean’s wrists like snakes, dragging them down to be lashed against the sides of the chair. Though Valjean twisted and wrenched at the cords, they did not give, and he was left to look on in wide-eyed distress as Rodolphus approached.
The wizard said, “*Diffindo*,” and the Slicing Charm ripped through Valjean’s shirtsleeve at the shoulder. A tug exposed his upper arm to the air, and Valjean looked away. He was not going to give them the satisfaction of struggling. Without ceremony, Rodolphus laid the scorching metal against his skin, and immediately the room filled with the scent of burning meat and hair.

To his credit, Valjean did not scream. This was due less to any conscious decision on his part and more to the fact that the breath was forcibly ripped from his lungs, leaving him gasping. It was not as bad, he tried to tell himself, but it was worse, so much worse, and neither was it ending. A tidal wave loomed over his tiny island of mental calm, threatening to obliterate everything, and then the room turned upside down as Valjean passed out.

The next thing he knew, Valjean was sitting bolt upright in the chair, looking around in a frenzy. Bellatrix had her wand trained in his direction, which must have meant she had revived him. Rodolphus stood at his side, still holding the poker. It seemed only a minute or two had gone by.

His arm... Valjean did not want to think about it, but that was made difficult when it was the only thing he could feel: heat, and pain unlike any he had ever felt. Worse than any burn or abrasion, his flesh felt like it was still scorching, even though the metal had been removed. A whimper rose in his throat, and it occurred to Valjean that he had underestimated the Death Eaters. His one point of solace was that Javert was safe, but even that was only guaranteed until Valjean was no longer entertaining, a point which he was rapidly approaching.

“You will tell us what we want to know now,” commanded Bellatrix. “And if not, then we will take it.” When no response was forthcoming, the witch looked to her husband. “Together, Rudolph?”

Valjean braced himself, and the pair said in unison, “*Legilimens.*”

He had expected to hurt. He had expected to feel his resolve crumble, to plead and to beg them to stop. Valjean was therefore unprepared for the disorienting array of images which assaulted him as the Lestranges attempted to extract memory itself:

*He was a young man, and Faverolles was beautiful in the summertime. A holly tree full of bowtruckles yielded three wand-worthy cuttings, and the handsome profit put food on the table for a month. Jeanne smiled, and all was well, for a little while.*

*In the hospital, Fantine lay dying, consumed by an ailment without cure. There was no knock on the door before it burst open, revealing the vindictive Auror on the other side. It was shock which finally did Fantine in, her fragile heart unable to support the weight of her grief, and as Valjean grabbed the Auror furiously by the arm, both men pretended not to notice the way Javert trembled at Valjean’s superior strength.*

*Dimly, Valjean got the impression that the Death Eaters were grappling with the spell, but Valjean’s thoughts were too disjointed, reduced to fractal bits and pieces, to demonstrate any coherency.*

*The shape of a child, one whom he had never met, shimmered like a mirage - the image was imagination only, and a murky one at that. Still, the yearning was there, a depthless yearning for a family like the one ripped away from him. If only he could rescue her, perhaps he could have that again.*

*Locked in the dungeon, he stood side by side with Javert, who did not seem to mind holding his hand. Valjean knew the smile on his face must look absurd, but his eyes were tracing the curve of the Auror’s mouth, and he said to himself that -*
Absolutely not. Valjean snapped out of his stupor, incensed. He was not sharing that particular recollection any further, no matter what they did to him. His wand was confiscated, and his arms were tied, but he needed neither to defend himself, not when the battleground was his own thoughts. Valjean knew how to keep his secrets; he shared them when he chose to do so, and not before.

Somewhere in the recesses of his mind, it was as though a great pair of doors slammed shut. Before him, Bellatrix’s forehead creased. Valjean pressed harder, and a second barrier fell into place. Stars twinkled at the edges of his vision, but with a third push, the Death Eaters staggered as they were forcibly ejected from his head.

“Damn,” growled Rodolphus. He squinted at Valjean, grimacing as if through a migraine. “Are you certain you want to throw your lot in with the losing side? The Dark Lord would value a man like you.”

Valjean just spat in response.

Bellatrix made to lash out with her wand, but Rodolphus held up his hand. “Leave it, Bella,” he said. “He is going nowhere, and we had best check in with the others. They should be finished with their drills by now.”

A Slicing Charm cut through the cords holding Valjean in place, freeing him, but he could hardly stand unaided, let alone try to run. Rodolphus had to haul him to his feet by his collar before he was shepherded back in the direction of the dungeon.

The door opened at the Death Eater’s touch, and Valjean was shoved roughly through the opening. He stumbled, and as the door slammed shut behind him, he failed to catch himself.

Valjean fell, and his startled cry became a name.

“Javert!”

_Javert_

An hour after Valjean had been taken for the second time, the Auror was apoplectic, half-crazed with worry. By the time noon hit, he had come to the conclusion that he would do anything to have the man back at his side. It had not taken them nearly so long to be finished the night before, he was certain. What was happening up there?

Javert paced the room in circles until it made him nauseous. Hungry as he was, that did not take long. His track did, however, reveal a small trickle of condensation in a back corner where he was able to wet his parched lips. Feeling ill, Javert sat down next to Valjean’s column and leaned his forehead against his knees.

He dozed intermittently, and Valjean still was not back. On some level, Javert was glad for the lack of food in his stomach; he did not care to throw up again.

When the door opened, he did not register the sound. He startled when it slammed shut, and jumped to his feet at Valjean’s voice calling his name. There was a heavy thud, and then nothing, and Javert ran to the bottom of the stairs, his heart in his throat.

Valjean had collapsed halfway down the flight. In the light of the torch, Javert could see blood on his head from where he had hit the stone steps, and yet that was the least worrisome thing about
his appearance.

“God above,” Javert breathed. “Valjean?” he said, hurrying to his side.

Valjean’s eyes fluttered open. “Javert,” he returned quietly.

“Christ,” the Auror muttered. “Christ. Are you - can you stand, do you think?”

“Not well,” Valjean whispered ruefully.

Javert slid his arm under Valjean’s shoulders, pulling him somewhat more upright. Valjean winced, and at once the Auror murmured apologies.

Valjean shook his head a fraction of an inch. “It’s just my arm,” he said, and Javert looked closer.

“Oh God,” said Javert. Though initially obscured by the fabric of his shirt, Valjean’s arm was not so much burned as it was branded, an angry red blister sunk into the skin.

“If you... tear up what’s left of that sleeve, it can be bandaged,” Valjean said heavily. The strain of sitting up reached his voice, and sweat glistened on his forehead.

“Yes,” Javert said. “Yes, of course. But you should lie down first.”

The Auror had not the strength to carry Valjean, and so getting him off the stairs proved challenging. Eventually, they made it down to the floor, where Valjean sank promptly to his knees. Javert helped him to lie flat, then tore off the ruined shirtsleeve to make into lint.

Composed entirely of nervous energy, Javert rambled back and forth between thoughts. “Is that alright? Too tight? There. I found some water, I can soak a handkerchief.”

Valjean’s mumbled replies grew gradually fainter, and Javert fretted. The burn was bandaged, and he had done what he could for the man’s head, but Valjean was still fading.

“Javert?” came a quiet request.

The Auror looked down, and found Valjean’s hand open on the stone between them. Suddenly tentative, Javert reached out and threaded his fingers through Valjean’s, squeezing gently. The man was looking at him again, and the barest trace of a smile on his lips made Javert’s chest hurt unbearably. Then Valjean’s eyes closed and did not open again.

“Valjean?” Javert asked. “Valjean?”

He pressed a trembling hand to Valjean’s neck and found that the pulse beating there was too fast, but strong. He was just asleep, then, or unconscious. Relief flooded through him, and Javert bowed his head, completely drained.

When had he allowed a convict to so completely win him over? He tried to remember, to pinpoint what the tipping point was, but everything was inside-out where Valjean was concerned. He no longer even knew himself, and it was terrifying. But Javert did know that never in his life had he wanted anything so badly as he wanted what Valjean’s soft smiles seemed to imply.

Javert was still trembling. He knelt down, and before he could second-guess it, brushed his lips once against Valjean’s temple.

Never again, he thought. Never again would Valjean be hurt on Javert’s behalf. That he swore, and it was the most certain of anything he had been in some time.
I have to give special thanks to my beta, Awake-Jin, because her running commentary on this chapter was incredibly satisfying to read as the author. Lots of angst here, but also finally some gay, after a mere 80,000 words.

In other news, you may see the total chapter count increase by one or two; I’m planning a short epilogue, and I am unsure yet, but it’s possible one of the upcoming chapters may need to be divided in two parts. Hope everyone is having a good holiday season!

**Valjean**

Azkaban was always so cold. As consciousness returned bit by bit to Valjean, his only wish was that it not. Better to stay in the darkness of sleep than to return to that waking nightmare. Against his will, he grew increasingly aware of his surroundings; the texture of the stone against his cheek; the way he could not feel his fingertips; the rhythmic pounding in his head. Valjean recoiled from it all.

It occurred to him that it was very quiet. He could hear neither the drumming of waves, nor the howling wind. The stench of salt, he perceived, was also absent. Valjean’s eyes cracked open. He was imprisoned in a stone room, but not the same one he had imagined.

Everything came rushing back to him at once: Arras, the Préfet, Death Eaters, Javert, *Javert* - Valjean’s eyes flew open wide, and he looked around in a panic until he settled on the Auror at his side. Javert was still holding his hand, he realized, and had otherwise curled into his robes for warmth. The man’s other arm supported his head, a string of jet beads spilling from between his fingers. He appeared to be sleeping.

With a deep sigh of relief, Valjean let his eyelids fall shut again. The spot where he had been branded throbbed persistently with heat, the only part of him not chilled to the bone. Every muscle felt twisted in a cramp, and he did not know what he’d done to his head - had he hit it when he tripped? - but the migraine he was developing seemed intent on clamping his temples in a vice.

The fingers tangled up in his own quivered slightly as Javert adjusted position. Turning his head, Valjean examined the Auror’s face. Even at rest, there was a crease where his eyebrows were drawn together; the expression was one of his usual, but instead of communicating irritation, Javert’s face held the suggestion of concern.

Lifting his bad arm carefully, Valjean rolled onto his side far enough to brush Javert’s hair back, tucking it behind his ear. The Auror hummed, his eyes flickering open to meet Valjean’s own.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” said Valjean softly.

“No, it’s fine,” Javert rasped. “I wasn’t really asleep. I couldn’t, not when you were...”

Valjean frowned. “Javert, you need to rest.”
“I’m not the one who was tortured within an inch of his life yesterday,” the Auror muttered in reply.

“No, of course,” said Valjean with an amused huff. “You were only tortured within an inch of your life the day before yesterday. Completely different matter.”

“Please,” said Javert. “You know you got it worse than I did - much worse. I was afraid you were going to... Well, how’s a man to sleep like that?” he finished gruffly.

Valjean was touched; he couldn’t help it. It was not possible to recall a time when anyone had cared for him enough to lose sleep on his account. Words failed him, so Valjean resorted to smoothing the hair from the Auror’s cheek again. Javert watched his every move with a countenance that was both trusting and uncertain. Valjean wanted also to smooth the creases from the corners of the Auror’s mouth, but he decided he did not dare. He settled for cupping Javert’s jawline instead.

Javert glanced at the bandages tied just below Valjean’s shoulder. “How’s your arm?” he asked.

Valjean tipped his head in the approximation of a shrug. “It hurts,” he said. “But it will heal. If we live long enough, at any rate.”

The Auror’s expression darkened, and he leaned forward. “I was hoping to talk to you about that, actually,” he said.

Slowly withdrawing his hands, Valjean pushed himself up on one elbow. “What is it, Javert?”

Javert stared up at the ceiling. “Sooner or later, we have to face the fact that one or both of us may not make it out of here alive.”

Valjean’s stomach plummeted. “You shouldn’t talk like that,” he said. “They want us to think it’s hopeless, but -”

“I hadn’t finished,” Javert interrupted. His voice was not hard, but it brooked no argument, and Valjean was silent as he continued. “I am not proposing we abandon all hope. But I am saying we must at least acknowledge the possibility, unpleasant though it may be.”

Valjean thought the Auror’s point to be a great deal worse than just “unpleasant”, but he held his tongue anyway.

For a moment, Javert seemed to wrestle with what he wanted to say. He sat up off the floor, fidgeting with the lining of his robes, and he did not meet Valjean’s gaze as he spoke. “If I die, the Unbreakable Vow dies with me, and you will be free.”

Against the protestations of his battered limbs, Valjean pushed himself the rest of the way up, a strangled noise of dissent in his throat. Javert held up his hand, but Valjean could not repress his responses any further.

“Don’t you dare,” he gasped. “Don’t even think about it.”

“You still haven’t let me finish,” said Javert.

“I don’t have to,” Valjean countered. “I know where this is going - you’re going to tell me to leave you and run again, but I can’t do that, Javert, I can’t, and -”

Javert hushed him, but it was the look in his eyes, not the noise, which finally quieted Valjean.
“I was stating a fact, only,” the Auror said. “It is objectively true that my death would end the bond between us. However...” He ran a hand over his face. “However, I wanted to tell you that even should we both survive, I will do everything in my power to see to it you are not held to that oath.”

And then Valjean was touched again, a fragile feeling in his sternum as of something liable to break at any moment. The room blurred a little, and he blinked the saltwater from his eyes.

“Javert,” he said gently, even as his voice shook, “you know there is no way to break an Unbreakable Vow.”

Javert pounded the floor vehemently. “There must be something which can be done,” he insisted. “And if there is, I will find it. But that was not the whole of what I wanted to say. My point, I guess, is that I did not want to go to my grave leaving you to think I still intended to enforce our agreement.”

Words deserted Valjean entirely. Without them, he could do nothing but gape slightly at the Auror. Javert had the same look on his face as before, one so open as to be raw, while the emotion in his eyes was too deep to be called “concern”. Valjean was trying to place it, when Javert’s expression clouded over.

“You don’t want to hear this,” he muttered. “I don’t know why I thought -“

He was cut off by Valjean wrapping his arms around his shoulders, pulling him close and squeezing.

“Don’t be a fool,” Valjean whispered. “I simply didn’t know what to say - ‘thank you’ feels inadequate.”

“- hardly deserving of your gratitude,” Javert said into his shoulder.

Valjean shushed him and released his grip a little guiltily; he was rather afraid he may have been crushing the Auror’s ribs. Sure enough, Javert took a deep breath, but he did not pull away. Instead, he shifted to where he could lay his head against Valjean’s shoulder. Valjean held back only slightly before he slid his arm around Javert’s waist, hand resting on the man’s hip.

They sat like that, unmoving. In the dark, the silence was not as absolute as Valjean had first thought; distant sounds from above reached his ears, vestiges of some activity in the château. Something had changed in the world, Valjean could feel it. Though they were underground, the air felt charged, as if by a storm. Beyond their cell, the machine of war rolled on; with every hour that passed, the Death Eaters drew closer to their goal, while France lay unprepared for the assault which was coming. They were running out of time.

Foreboding fluttered through Valjean’s thoughts; for better or for worse, intuition told him it was the last day they would spend in the manor house. Was it a true premonition, or just the trappings of anxiety? Hard to say until the future came, he supposed, and yet his fingers tightened by a fraction against Javert’s side as if to tie them together.

The Auror seemed to notice. He turned his head to look at Valjean in a wordless question, and Valjean was abruptly overcome by a dozen things he wanted to say while he had the chance.

“I wish -” Valjean began, and stopped himself. There were a great many things he wished, each more impossible than the last. “I wish we had some light besides just that damned torch,” he finished.

Javert gave a snort of laughter, knowing perfectly well that that was not what Valjean had been
The enchantment is woven into the fabric itself,” Javert explained as Valjean looked on in wonder. “You don’t need a wand, just the incantation.”

“It’s beautiful,” Valjean breathed. “Like starlight. I had forgotten...” He trailed off, tracing the glowing edge of the Auror’s collar with his fingertips.

Javert smiled crookedly. “I’m sure it’s only some clever wizard’s variation on Lumos,” he said, “but I’m glad you like it.” His features were bathed in gold, and his smile turned almost shy. “Valjean, I had been meaning to ask,” he started, putting a hand on Valjean’s knee, but before he could finish whatever he meant to inquire, the pair once again heard the tell-tale turn of hinges.

Javert

The Auror was on his feet at once, spitting a creative list of obscenities. Valjean was right behind him, putting a hand on his shoulder to hold him back, but it was too late. Javert had seen who it was coming down the staircase, and it was neither Bellatrix nor Rodolphus Lestrange.

“Vidocq,” he gnashed his teeth. “You snivelling, traitorous murderer! What do you want, you -”

Descending unhurriedly, Vidocq flicked his wrist at where the Auror stood at the base of the steps. Javert staggered back as the jinx hit him, sending what felt like a whiplash across his chest. Valjean caught him, pulling him away from the open shaft.

“What do you want, Vidocq?” Valjean asked warily, even as Javert disentangled himself from the man’s grip.

The reneged Auror spread his hands. “No need for that tone,” he said, though his own conveyed a trace of ridicule. “I’m just the messenger. You are wanted upstairs. Both of you,” he added, with a venomous glance at Javert. “You are to follow me, immediately.”

Javert reached for the wand in his pocket when he remembered its state. Vidocq only grinned as Javert seethed, no doubt guessing what was on the Auror’s mind.

“Come along,” said Vidocq, standing to the side of the stairwell and indicating the door. “And please, by all means try to run. There are a couple of curses I would love to have an excuse to practice.”

Javert stormed up the steps, glowering. Valjean followed close behind him, perhaps fearing they would be separated. As he passed by his subordinate-turned-Death Eater, Javert’s anger reached a boiling point. Vidocq had his wand pointed casually at them, but there was a slackness to his grip that was too good an opportunity to miss.

The Auror lunged, his fingers wrapping around Vidocq’s wand with unbridled desperation. Vidocq was caught momentarily off-guard, and for one second, Javert was certain the chestnut wood was secure in his grip. It was that moment of overconfidence which was his undoing.

Vidocq lashed out, catching Javert across the windpipe with his elbow. Choking, Javert faltered, and Vidocq shoved him against the wall, the very same wand he had just been trying to steal now pressed against his throat.

“I would kill you for that, Auror,” Vidocq hissed. Javert’s eyes slid over Vidocq’s shoulder to
where Valjean was watching, open-mouthed, his gaze flickering back and forth between the two of them, but he didn’t dare do anything, not with the Death Eater’s wand shoved up under Javert’s chin like that. “But Madame Lestrange is so looking forward to it, and why deny her?” Vidocq went on. “In the meantime…”

Javert did not have the opportunity to duck. Vidocq’s fingers curled into a fist and punched him square in the nose. A shooting pain blossomed across his face and there was a horrible crunching sound, but it was nothing to when the back of his head collided with the wall; blinded by a searing flash of black, his knees buckled, and Javert sank where he stood.

The next few moments were a blur. He heard another handful of threats on Vidocq’s part, and it sounded as though everything was underwater. Javert realized his ears were ringing when strong, spade-sized hands lifted him to his feet.

“Javert?”

It was Valjean’s voice, and as the Auror blinked rapidly, the world regained its clarity, beginning with worried blue eyes looking him over.

“Your nose is broken,” Valjean told him.

“I hadn’t noticed,” Javert growled, wiping blood off his face with the sleeve of his robe.

Vidocq coughed impatiently. “Up you go, Messieurs,” he said. “Unless one of you would like to attempt that again.”

Valjean considered it. Javert could tell in the way his lips thinned and his eyebrows drew closer together, and he almost wanted to see the man try; Valjean could snap Vidocq’s scrawny neck like a toothpick. Vidocq, however, was no longer so lax in his bearing, and the cockiness was gone from his expression, replaced by ruthless loathing.

The moment passed. Valjean returned his hand possessively to Javert’s shoulder, and together, they slowly climbed the remainder of the flight.

At the top of the landing, Vidocq redirected them toward the Grande Salon. Valjean’s face paled. That could mean nothing good, but Javert did not ask, not with Vidocq right behind him.

They were marched into the extravagant hall to see the Lestranges standing with their backs to them. An array of masked Death Eaters were spread in a semi-circle opposite, and in the middle of that mess was a pair of wizards; one was standing, but the other was groveling obsequiously at Bellatrix’s feet.

“If it please your Ladyship, delivery would be much faster if you would lift the Anti-Disapparition Jinx on the grounds - we could be done in twenty minutes, and -”

“No!” Bellatrix screeched. “You think we would lower this château’s defenses for even one instant? Idiot - Avada kedavra!”

There was a brilliant flash of green light, and the kneeling wizard collapsed, lifeless, to the side.

“Now listen carefully,” the witch said to the unfortunate wizard’s companion. “You will deliver the rations exactly as we discussed. If it takes you the next week, you will not Apparate them into this house, is that understood?”

The delivery wizard bowed low. “Completely, Madame Lestrange.”
“Escort him out,” said Bellatrix to one of the masked figures. “And get rid of that,” she added, gesturing with her wand at the body on the floor.

Bellatrix spun around peremptorily, stopping short when she saw Vidocq with the prisoners. At his side, Valjean had gone even paler, and Javert wondered if the man had ever seen the Killing Curse in person before. He had the feeling they would see more of it before they were done; if the witch’s expression was to be believed, that emerald light might be the last thing the two of them ever saw.

“Vidocq,” Bellatrix said. “About time.”

At her words, Rodolphus turned to look, as did their Death Eater accompaniment.

Vidocq inclined his head. “Apologies, Madame Lestrange. The Auror required some convincing.”

The witch looked over Javert’s bloodied face and smirked. “Going to be difficult to the last, then, Inspecteur?”

Javert held himself ramrod straight and responded only with stony silence.

The two Lestranges exchanged glances. Rodolphus nodded once, slowly, and Bellatrix smiled. She wore a black evening dress, and as she approached, the flowing fabric billowed around her ankles, while the champagne flutes resting on the occasional tables suggested a celebratory atmosphere. Javert’s eyes narrowed. The Death Eaters were toasting their victory early. It was rather premature, he thought, though he could not deny things looked grim.

Bellatrix came to a stop a few feet in front of him, still wearing that eerie smile. “Messieurs,” she said, “so good of you to join us. It seemed unfair not to invite our houseguests to the party.” A chorus of laughter swept the gathering.

Javert grit his teeth. “Party, Madame?”

There was a hint of knife-like malice in the witch’s voice as she replied, “Before the death of the Premier Ministre. That little undertaking your friend claimed to know so much about.”

More laughter. At his side, Valjean shifted and crossed his arms.

“If it were up to me,” Bellatrix continued, “I would keep you for another week, at least.” She paced over to where Valjean was standing and looked him in the eyes. “We never did quite crack you, did we, sweetheart?”

Valjean just met her gaze, and the woman pursed her lips. If Bellatrix had been at all introspective, her expression might have been termed thoughtful.

“Regrettably,” said the witch, “Monsieur le Préfet has asked for us to get rid of you before Tuesday. He doesn’t want to risk any complications.”

Javert stewed silently. Bellatrix was regarding Valjean with that pensive look on her face, and the Auror did not like it. He cleared his throat. Immediately, all eyes were on him.

“Oh yes,” Bellatrix said softly. “The valiant Dark wizard catcher has something to say. Well, here we are,” she laughed, sweeping her arm at the assembly. “You caught us, very good. Go on, then, speak.”

However he replied, it could not make things worse. Javert cocked his head to the side. “I hope you enjoy your cell in Azkaban.”
The laughter disappeared from the witch’s eyes. “You never learn,” she spat. “Crawl before your betters, Half-blood.” She leveled her wand at him. “Crucio!”

This time, Javert was ready for her. He dodged out of the way, and the curse struck the fireplace mantle, sending chips of rock flying. Bellatrix whipped out one curse and then another, and Javert rolled behind the coffee table. A champagne glass burst as a spell flew over his head.

The distraction was working. No one was so much as glancing Valjean’s way anymore. He bared his teeth, and vaulted over the coffee table. Let him die, then, but not like a -

Javert fell over backwards as he ran straight into a solid wall of air. When his head stopped spinning, he saw that above him stood Vidocq, the man’s wand pointed directly at the center of Javert’s forehead. The jeers of the Death Eaters echoed off the distant ceiling, and Javert swore there would be a reckoning for the insubordinate bastard, if not in that life, then in the next.

“Thank you, Vidocq,” Bellatrix cooed. “As for you, Inspecteur...”

It was over. That was the only thought left to Javert as he sat up, and a deep sense of peace came over him. He had done everything he could. There was no shame in losing, not when he had exhausted every option. The feeling did not dissipate, and as Bellatrix let fly another curse, he almost smiled, even as he fell backwards, screaming.

Javert

He was laying on the floor, consciousness flickering at its edges. This had become less and less unusual over the past couple of days, and it took a few moments to unscramble where he was, and why.

Javert’s eyes focused on the pointed black boots in front of him.

Ah, that was Bellatrix.

He was lying spreadeagled on his side, his head held off the marble by his arm. Bellatrix was preparing to kill him - that was what was going on. He made a noise that might have been a groan as he tried to get up, but there was no controlling the shaking of his frame. He was going nowhere.

Valjean had remained remarkably quiet throughout the whole affair. This was presumably due in part to Vidocq, who after Javert’s outburst had elected to hold Valjean at wandpoint. Thus far, he had not struggled. It was wise, Javert thought. Very wise. Or perhaps he did not think that. Piecing full sentences together was not as easy as it usually was.

Above him, Bellatrix was finishing a low conference with her husband. She drew away from his ear to look down at the Auror before her.

“You’re done now,” she said, rolling him onto his back with the toe of her boot. “Die.”

Javert closed his eyes and prepared to meet his Maker.

“Avada-”

“Wait!”

Valjean’s cry rattled the crystals on the chandelier. To Javert’s everlasting surprise, Bellatrix waited. The shape of the curse that would rend his soul from his body was there on her lips, he
could see it, but she waited. For that instant, one could have heard a pin drop.

Slowly, Bellatrix turned her head. “What is it?” she asked, her voice a dangerous whisper.

“I would speak with you, Madame Lestrange,” Valjean said, evidently uncomfortable under the scrutiny of the entire room.

“Whatever you would say, you may say aloud,” the witch replied, “to everyone.”

Javert could not see Valjean without moving, and he could not move until the tremors ceased, so he was forced just to listen as Valjean said, “I was wondering if Monsieur Lestrange’s offer was still an option.”

Offer? Javert could not think what manner of bargain the Lestranges would strike, except that it would be bad. Surely Valjean was not going to give in to some inhumane trick in order to try and save him?

“My offer?” Rodolphus repeated. “What offer was that?”

Valjean coughed lightly. “I believe your words were that the Dark Lord would value a man like me. It sounded as though you were offering me a position.”

Bellatrix had not completed her spell, and yet Javert felt like his heart had stopped, regardless. It is a bluff, he told himself. Valjean is bluffing again. Stalling for time.

A quiet chuckle issued from Bellatrix, even as her husband stepped in Valjean’s direction.

“That is so, I did say that,” Rodolphus agreed. “You seemed... disinterested. Why the sudden change of heart?”

Valjean snorted. “I saw what you did to him,” he said, and Javert got the impression Valjean was gesturing to where the Auror lay on the floor. “I’m not in any hurry to die.”

Bellatrix outstretched her hand, beckoning Valjean forward. Javert heard the man’s steady tread approaching over the tile floor, and the Auror found he could turn his head. Valjean was crossing the checkered marble with Vidocq following close behind. He came to a stop a few feet from the witch, completely expressionless.

“Are you proposing a deal?” Bellatrix asked. “His life for your service, perhaps?” Her tone was mocking; everyone in that room knew that no power in the world would convince the witch to let Javert go free.

For a moment, Javert thought he saw pain in Valjean’s eyes, but then he decided he must have imagined it, for when Valjean spoke, he was unaffected. “Nothing like that,” he said. “Just my life, Madame.”

Javert did not believe it. He would not believe it. And yet, was that not what he had said about every betrayal hitherto? First the Secrétaire, then the Préfet, and now this, from the one man Javert should never have given his trust to in the first place. He didn’t know why he bothered being surprised, or why his chest felt suddenly like there was a great weight pressing on it.

Bellatrix’s expression was one of a cat toying with a wounded canary. “You are his friend,” she said to Valjean. “What use do we have for the friend of an Auror?”

Valjean did not hesitate when he replied, “We aren’t friends.” He glanced at where Javert was pushing himself onto his knees. “He arrested me. I thought if I sided with him, he might let me go.
It was convenient to keep the act up so long as there was a chance we could escape this place, but that was clearly wishful thinking. The only way out of here is death, or to serve. I choose to serve.”

Javert had gone through a lot in his career: curses, stabbings, and worse. He could not think of an incident more excruciating than listening to that exchange. But Valjean was not finished making his deal with the devil yet. Bellatrix reached out, grabbing Valjean by the chin and forcing him to meet her gaze. No doubt she was clawing her way into his head, searching for any thought or emotion which indicated he was being untruthful.

“Why stop me killing him, then?” Bellatrix asked, her long nails digging into Valjean’s cheek.

The silence returned. Javert leaned forward, waiting, still holding out hope that it was all some elaborate deception.

When Valjean answered, he said, “So that I might kill him myself.”

Bellatrix released Valjean with a satisfied sneer, even as Javert’s breath caught in his chest.

“I will require my wand,” said Valjean, and Javert was dimly aware of Rodolphus reaching into his robes. Nothing else in the world existed, not really, except for the Saint-become-Judas advancing on him, the English oak wand returned to his hand.

Valjean, it seemed, had forgotten the terms of their agreement. He could cast his spell to dispatch, but it would be the last thing he ever did. No magic to harm or incapacitate him, that was the injunction Javert had made. Without some revision of that, any curse Valjean cast would break their Vow, and kill him right along with the Auror. The notion of letting it happen was seductive; a fitting end for a backstabbing criminal.

Nevertheless, as he stared up into pitiless blue eyes, Javert recalled coarse fingers laced through his own, soft words, and softer smiles. He looked down at his hands. Was it not true that what he wanted more than anything was for Valjean to live, even if it killed him?

A small laugh spilled out of his mouth, and Valjean stopped in his tracks as Javert fell forward, the hysterics building. “Fine,” he said through the hiccoughing laughter. “Fine. Valjean, any prohibition I made regarding your magic - consider it lifted. Do what you will to me, without consequence.” He lifted his head, looking Valjean in the eyes again as he added, “You have more right to my life than any of these do, anyway.”

Something like distress flickered over Valjean’s face for a moment, and then it was gone. He raised his wand and held it steadily; his hand did not shake even a little.

Bellatrix clasped her hands gleefully. “Now,” she said. “Do it now, and be rewarded.”

Valjean took careful aim, and Javert found he did not want to look, did not want to watch Valjean kill him. His eyes squeezed shut, and he turned away.

That was how he missed the explosion.

Javert’s eyes flew wide open again as a great concussive force ripped through the Grande Salon. He could see nothing but blackness, and he feared something had happened to his vision. A moment later, he realized it was a dense smokescreen, from inside of which the astonished shouts of Death Eaters emanated.

In the chaos that ensued, a broad silhouette loomed through the hazy darkness. The figure’s hand grabbed Javert by the shoulder, and that was the last thing he knew before they Disapparated.
Valjean

The world rematerialized around him, and he was still dragging an unsteady Javert, who was working to get his footing. The Auror took one look at Valjean’s face and flinched back in revulsion, which hurt far more than anything the Death Eaters had done.

Javert made as if to speak, no doubt intending to demand a well-deserved explanation, but Valjean clamped a hand over the Auror’s mouth. Javert looked at first fantastically insulted. Then Valjean nodded meaningfully to the right, and watched comprehension spread slowly over the man’s face.

They were standing behind one of the large columns on the mezzanine level, still in the Château de Lestrange. To the left was a dark, winding hallway, but to the right was the long balustrade that overlooked the Grande Salon. Valjean removed his hand, hoping Javert understood well enough to keep quiet.

“We’re still in the manor,” Javert muttered under his breath.


Javert nodded towards the Salon, from which came an increasing amount of commotion. “What did you -?”

“See for yourself,” Valjean replied.

Javert peeked around the column, and Valjean could not resist a look at the pandemonium he had caused. The thick haze was disappearing slowly, revealing a smoking crater left in the marble floor. The Death Eaters shot spells off in every direction, hoping to hit their presumed attacker; a few of them had hit each other.

“Enough!” came a shriek from the center of the room. A fierce wind exploded from the same point as the shriek, dispelling the rest of the smokescreen. Bellatrix was revealed standing there, outrage written all over her face. When she perceived her prisoners had vanished, she screamed, and in her fury, the chandelier and windows all shattered, raining glass over the scene.

“Find them!” she shouted. “Search everywhere! They cannot have left the grounds, which means they are still here!”

Valjean grabbed Javert by the hand. “This way,” he whispered, starting at a jog down the hallway.

“Outside is back there,” the Auror replied, jabbing his thumb over his shoulder toward the antechamber.

“It’s the first place they will check,” said Valjean. “I have an idea that just might work. First, we need another room with a fireplace.”

They ran for it. Javert was no longer arguing with him, which Valjean took as a good sign, though he was certain he was not forgiven. Later, he thought. Hurt feelings could wait.

The first door he came to, he threw open. It was a cobwebbed nursery. No fireplace.


He should not have expected to get lucky on the first try. Valjean pulled the door closed and
found Javert waiting for him in the corridor with his arms crossed.

“What are you looking for?” asked the Auror.

“Floo Powder,” Valjean replied.

A spark of understanding flashed over Javert’s face. He stuck his head inside the next room, and reported back, “One fireplace, at any rate. I doubt if they keep Floo Powder in the lavatory, though.”

“There has to be some somewhere,” Valjean muttered, kicking back into a jog. “They live in the middle of the wilderness for goodness’ sake.”

At the end of the hall was a door standing ajar. Light spilled out into the hallway, and Valjean approached cautiously, Javert right behind.

Resting a hand on the knob, Valjean pushed the door open to see a hired girl straightening the knick-knacks on an oak desk. She looked up, startled by the movement, and barely had time to gasp before Valjean flicked his wrist, saying, “Stupefy.” She dropped to the floor, unconscious.

“Accio Floo Powder,” Valjean said firmly. One of the desk drawers thumped. Two pairs of eyes slid to the desk in unison. The room was characterized by the same traditional furniture as the rest of the manor. Shelves of scrolls and parchment lined the walls, while a pair of windows bookended a roaring fireplace. They had stumbled across a study, it seemed.

“Would you get that?” asked Valjean, waving at the desk. Javert nodded tacitly. The Auror crossed to shimmy open the drawer, while Valjean shut the door behind them. “Colloportus,” he added for good measure.

Turning, Valjean nearly ran right into Javert, who had crept up behind him again, holding a little silver tin in one fist.

“Thank God,” Valjean said feelingly. “Now if we just -”

Before he could finish, the Auror pushed him hard against the door, pinning him in place. Valjean felt the old panic of a trapped animal rear in his throat, and he winced as Javert’s hand brushed the burn on his arm. Without a working wand, Javert was no real threat; Valjean could easily overpower him, and it would be a simple matter to throw the man off. He might have done so, too, had it not been for the hurt in the steel-gray eyes looking at him.

“What was that about?” Javert growled. “Any of it. All of it,” he added as Valjean made to speak.

“Is now really the time?” asked Valjean weakly.

“Now,” Javert asserted. “Or I swear to you I will walk back out there and let Bellatrix finish what she started.”

“It was a lie, Javert,” Valjean said, shaking his head. “Every word I said to her - to them - it wasn’t true.”

“Then why say it?”

Valjean blinked. “To get my wand back, of course,” he replied. “There was no chance of us escaping without magic, and I knew the only way they would ever return it was if they believed I was on their side.”
Out in the corridor, Valjean could hear distant shouting. Javert was still studying his face, probably wondering how he could know if Valjean was being honest.

“You were lying?” the Auror repeated. “To them?”

“Yes,” Valjean said emphatically. “And every word of it killed me to say. I was hoping she would take me aside to talk, to spare you some of that, but .”

“You were lying.” It was a statement that time. “You meant it when you said you wanted to escape together.”

“More than anything.”

What happened next, Valjean would remember later in an odd, out-of-body sort of way. The shouting in the corridor was growing louder, but that seemed insignificant in comparison to the fact that Javert was leaning in, pressing his mouth against Valjean’s, in what proved to be a very clumsily-attempted, whiskery kiss. The whole world froze for several seconds, and then Javert stepped back.

The Auror appeared startled, nervous, and embarrassed all at the same time, and Valjean realized if he did not do something soon that Javert was going to start apologizing. It was just hard to get a message from his brain to his tongue; the connection between them seemed to have been lost.

Like a drunken man, he lurched forward, hands pulling Javert’s face back toward his own. Surprise briefly replaced the other emotions warring for control of the Auror’s expression, and then their lips met again, still clumsily, but with less shock on the behalf of both parties. Javert had never yielded to anyone in his life, and the same was no less true now. His kiss was assertive and insistent, and Valjean was only too happy to cede control. Then the noise in the hall became distinct enough to understand, and they broke apart in dismay.

“Try through here!” yelled one voice.

“Bellatrix will have you skinned if they get away,” came another.

Sobered immediately, Valjean and Javert looked from the door to the hearth.

“Where to?” Javert asked.

Where to, indeed? It came to Valjean in a sudden flash. “Thérèse’s place,” he replied. “We need help, and she’s an ally.”

The Auror nodded, crossing to where the firebox spread a flickering orange light over the room. Removing a pinch of powder from the tin they had found, he tossed it into the fireplace. At once, the flames turned from orange to a viridescent shade of green.

“Number twelve-hundred, apartment twenty-seven, the Rue Morand,” Javert intoned clearly.

“You first,” Valjean murmured, eyeing the door suspiciously.

Javert did not object, ducking into the hearth and disappearing in a greenish whirl. Then he was gone, and the flames flared orange again.

Valjean tossed a second pinch of Floo Powder over the logs. “Number twelve-hundred, apartment twenty-seven, the Rue Morand,” he repeated.

As what sounded like a spell ricocheted off the other side of the door, Valjean stepped into the
fireplace. The verdant conflagration swirled harmlessly around him, and the last Valjean saw of the château was the iron grate receding in the distance.
Chapter 17

By all the gods, this chapter was determined not to get written. My family had a whole laundry list of holiday-related activities to get through, and my grandma all but forbade the use of technology in her house, which made typing a tad difficult. Anyhow, happy (almost) New Year, everyone! Hope 2018 is good to you, and brings us buckets more quality JJ/VJ content.

Javert toppled face-first out of the fireplace, scattering ashes all over the floorboards. He was still scrambling to his knees when Valjean fell out, landing right on top of him. An undignified tangle of legs and elbows ensued, the sorting out of which was interrupted by an, “Oh!”

That was followed by, “Why, it be you two!”

Muttering his apologies to the Auror, Valjean staggered upright. Thérèse was seated on the couch across from them, a crochet pattern spread over her lap, but she forgot all about her yarn as she looked at the pair of intruders with astonishment.

“Thérèse,” said Valjean, dipping his head in greeting even as he coughed up smoke, “so sorry to arrive at such an hour without warning.”

Thérèse hastily shoved her yarn (and there was enough of it) to one side, coming around the coffee table to help Javert to his feet.

“Not without warning,” the woman replied, a slight grin tugging at the corners of her mouth. “The cards told me to be expectin’ visitors today. I just didn’t know whom to be expectin’.”

Javert did what he could for his disheveled appearance, brushing the cinders from his clothing. Looking down at their hostess, he said, “Madame, a glass of water, if you please. For each of us.”

Thérèse’s gaze roamed over their faces and the exhaustion written there, as well as the more obvious of their injuries. “Of course,” she replied, turning toward the kitchen. “Just water, or would you be likin’ tea?”

“Just water,” Valjean answered, following after her. Javert seemed to hesitate a moment as Valjean passed, and then he, too, joined the procession into the kitchen.

Thérèse rummaged through her cabinets, withdrawing two glasses. She poured ice water into them from a pitcher, and then set the glasses in front of where the two men stood by the table.

“So,” she said as they each took a long drink, “what brings you back here?”

Valjean glanced at Javert, and when the Auror did not respond, he took up the story.

“Well,” he began, “the last time we spoke, we were hoping to learn what had become of your neighbors.” Thérèse nodded, and Valjean continued, “Instead, we uncovered a conspiracy, more serious than either of us could have imagined.”
Valjean took another drink, letting the water soothe his throat as he tried to put words to what they had learned. “There’s going to be a coup,” he said eventually. “In two day’s time. The Death Eaters mean to kill the Premier Ministre and take control of the government.”

Thérèse’s canine eyes widened. “Ah, but they mustn’t! Messieurs, you’ve got to stop them!”

Javert laughed once, bitterly. “We tried,” he said. “We tried, and it nearly killed us. We don’t know any more than before we were captured, and even if we did, we’d have less than forty-eight hours to figure out what to do about it.”

Leaning over the table, Thérèse looked at Valjean and asked quietly, “That be what happened? You were captured?”

Tight-lipped, Valjean nodded. The woman’s gaze traced each cut and scrape on Valjean’s face, and her hand clutched tighter at the handle of her willow wand.

“Such bravery,” said Thérèse. “More than I’ve ever had, that’s sure.”

Javert was staring into his emptied glass with a deep frown on his face. “Air,” he murmured. Then more loudly, he repeated, “I need air.” He turned to Thérèse. “Is there a way up to the roof?”

Surprised, the woman replied, “There be a fire stair in the back, but -”

Javert took off before she could finish, leaving both Thérèse and Valjean agape in his wake.

“Now what was that about?” asked Thérèse.

Valjean could only raise his arms helplessly in response. “I had better go after him,” he said. “Did you say a fire stair?”

“At the end of the hall.”

Valjean hurried after the Auror; he was not difficult to follow, having left the back door swinging in his wake. A small, sleepy head peeped out from a bedroom as Valjean dashed past. Little Garrett took in their visitor, determined that it was simply the old man who had played blocks with him, and returned to bed, content. Valjean caught the door mid-swing, skidding to a halt out on the iron fire escape.

It was early evening, and there on the rear side of the building, the world was dark and cool. A few trees were interspersed between the neighboring structures, which ringed the trees to create a sort of inner courtyard. The fire escape led down to a concrete pad and a dumpster. It also led up, with landings at each apartment floor. The sound of boots clanking on metal told Valjean that Javert was above him, and headed higher. Valjean followed, moving quickly.

The Auror reached the top before Valjean did, some six stories above ground level. Valjean came up behind, even as Javert stared skywards; there was another fifteen feet between the landing and the top of the roof. Whatever had come over the Auror, that vertical distance was not about to stand between him and his goal. Javert grabbed hold of the guardrail, and started to climb.

Valjean reached out, laying a hand on the crook of Javert’s arm. The Auror paused, but did not step down.

“There are easier ways to get up there, you know,” Valjean said conversationally.

Javert did glance his way at that, quirking an eyebrow. By way of reply, Valjean linked his arm through the Auror’s and raised his wand over his head.
“Ascendio,” he enunciated. The spell lifted him off his feet, and shot them like a cork out of a bottle up and over the roof’s parapet wall.

Their landing was not so smooth. Valjean hit the concrete and stumbled, pulling Javert with, but the Auror was quick enough to catch them both before they lost their balance entirely. Though Valjean turned to thank him, Javert had already released his elbow. He was moving like one in a trance to the parapet, still gazing at the sky. Valjean trailed after, more tentatively now.

Javert came to a halt at the low concrete wall, looking out over the city. To the West, a faint glow on the horizon indicated where the sun had set, but above Paris, turquoise gave way to rich, midnight blue. A few bright stars shone through like distant candles, undeterred by the city lights.

Approaching the wall, Valjean stopped, leaving the Auror space to himself. Javert inhaled slowly, and as the night wind tugged at his hair, it returned something of a healthy flush to the man’s complexion.

A long minute went by.

“We actually did it.”

Valjean jumped a little at the sound of Javert’s voice. The Auror was leaning against the parapet, his fingers curled against the stone as if to hold himself there.

“Beg your pardon?”

“We escaped.” Javert sighed. “It doesn’t feel real.”

“I know,” Valjean murmured back. “But you’re right - we did it.”

The Auror returned his attention to the cityscape; in that part of Paris, it was mostly apartments, though the busy city center was visible in the distance as a concentrated mass of lights. A bird called softly from someplace nearby. Otherwise, all was quiet.

“Are you quite sure you are well?” Valjean asked after a little time had passed. “The look on your face downstairs, I thought perhaps...”

“Valjean -” Javert began, but he was interrupted by the man’s incredulous laugh.

“So you will kiss me, but you will not address me by my given name?” It was a joke, spoken with levity, but it was also a question, and both men knew it.

“Very well,” Javert continued after a moment’s hesitation. “Jean, then.”

Valjean was taken aback. He should not have been, having only just asked, but to hear his name uttered in Javert’s deeper timbre was... unexpected. He was suddenly nostalgic for something that defied description. Without knowing quite else what to do, Valjean rubbed at the old scars on his wrist. Javert treated him to an inscrutable look in turn.

“We’ve been trapped inside for three days,” the Auror said. “You see why I needed out?”

Valjean nodded incrementally. “I can see that,” he conceded. “But you are outside now, and you still look as though something is the matter.”

Javert turned away, eyes fixed on the twinkling stars. “It is... difficult,” he said haltingly. “I had rather hoped you would not follow me up here, so that I might put my thoughts in order. Don’t apologize,” he added, raising a hand even as behind him, Valjean opened his mouth to speak. “In
the end, it is just as well we do not address it where we could be overheard.”

The Auror collected himself, and Valjean tried to wait patiently, with only a moderate degree of success.

“I am not a young man, Jean,” Javert said. “I am not old - not yet, anyway - but I am no boy honeymooning over his first May Day, either.”

Valjean could see, in a roundabout sort of way, where this was going. He swallowed hard and raised his chin a degree. “Does that mean you regret it, then - the kiss?”

Javert frowned, the familiar crease between his eyebrows reappearing. “I do not regret it, no. ‘Regret’ is the wrong word.”

Valjean looked away. “Then what is it?”

He felt a hand on his own, and lifted his head to find Javert had closed the gap between them. “At my age,” said the Auror, “one must be sure. You can understand that, I think.”

“Sure of what?”

Javert wet his lips. “I know you were lying to Bellatrix. I do. But I cannot shake the thought that if you could lie well enough to fool her, then you could lie well enough to fool me. In fact, if you did, it would not even be the first time.”

Valjean colored. It was unfair to bring up Montreuil-sur-Mer, the circumstances were completely different. He seemed, however, to have lost his capacity for speech, and so he just nodded stiffly.

The Auror went on, “Whatever... this is, I cannot seem to stop myself from wanting it. But I cannot let myself have it yet. It would not be doing right by either of us.”

Continuing to nod, Valjean felt his eyes sting, but he kept himself carefully composed. Everything Javert had said was well within reason. The best news was that the Auror did desire whatever the thing was growing between them, and if it needed to be put on hold until Javert resolved his uncertainties, then that was just what had to be done. Valjean was good at waiting; it was fine.

“I understand,” he replied, and by some miracle, his voice even remained steady.

Javert squeezed his fingers, and then let go. “We should head back in,” he said, “before Madame Marie thinks something terrible has happened to us.”

“Sure of what?”

Javert squeezerd his fingers, and then let go. “We should head back in,” he said, “before Madame Marie thinks something terrible has happened to us.”

“Yes,” Valjean murmured. “We should.”

Valjean let Javert go on ahead. He startled when the Auror climbed over the low wall and jumped, but a clang from below told him that Javert had alighted on the stair landing. A moment later, footsteps echoed off the iron treads as Javert descended.

Trying to suppress his disappointment, Valjean followed, his feet dragging as he crossed the concrete roof deck. It was not as though either man was versed in the navigation of personal relationships; they were each slow to trust, and slower still to make overtures of friendship. He should have realized that deceiving Bellatrix would have repercussions.

Hanging onto the parapet, Valjean dropped onto the platform below. His expression was like a thunderhead as he took hold of the railing, unable to feel anything other than a strong conviction he had somehow made a mistake.
Back inside the apartment, Javert strode down the hallway and past the kitchen, into the salon. As Valjean proceeded after, Thérèse glanced up from where she stood near the sink dicing carrots. The look she gave him was sympathetic, as though she knew somehow what had been discussed.

“You gentlemen hungry?” she asked, setting down her knife.

Valjean stopped at the edge of the counter. He had done his best to put his stomach from his mind, seeing as the alternative was to be miserable. Now that he considered how he felt, however, Valjean found he was ravenous.

He nodded, and Thérèse said, “Well, I be making a vegetable broth here, should be ready in a little bit.” In a lower voice, she added, “I seen happier faces on a flobberworm. I know it be none of my business, but if I can help any, please say so.”

“Thank you,” Valjean said genuinely. “I think, though, that this is a matter which just needs... time.”

She patted his hand, then pointed her wand at a pot on the stove. The water began boiling at once.

Valjean left the kitchen, circling around the dining table to the armchair beside the fireplace. Javert was seated on the couch, staring into the red coals. His fingers were steepled beneath his chin, brow furrowed in consternation. As Valjean took a seat, the Auror grimaced.

“I just don’t see it,” he said. “Let us say we go to Premier Ministre Marchand and tell him what we know. I think we could make an estimate of the Death Eaters’ numbers based on what we saw at the manor, but even should he believe us, we have no-one to call for aid and no other information. The odds are stacked heavily in their favor.”

Valjean tapped his fingers against his side. “I’m not sure it is fair to say we have no other information,” he said thoughtfully. “During my ‘interrogation’, I overheard a conversation between Vidocq and the Lestranges. I had forgotten all about it, with everything else that happened after.”

As he leaned forward, Javert’s voice registered a new urgency. “What did they say?”

Valjean tried to jog his memory. He closed his eyes and said, “Vidocq mentioned Gisquet - it sounded like the Préfet has an audience at the Hôtel Matignon. Are you familiar with the Salon Rouge?”

The Auror hummed. “I do seem to recall being there on one occasion or another. I take it that is where the Préfet’s audience is to be held?”

“It is, if I heard correctly. I was a bit distracted at the time.”

“The Salon Rouge,” Javert muttered again to himself. “Did you hear anything else?”

Valjean thought about it, while trying not to dwell on how easy it was to fall back into their usual patterns. Javert was withdrawn and professional, while Valjean was reserved and quiet. To look at them, one would never guess at the moments of softness they shared during their imprisonment.

Racking his brain, Valjean finally replied, “The Death Eaters plan to attack in two groups, one from the grounds and one from above. That’s all I heard, though.”

The Auror hissed through his teeth. “An obvious strategy, but no less effective for it. The Hôtel Matignon has a number of skylights in the roof. It will be a simple matter for the Death Eaters to enter through them, after which they have only to break down the front door and pin the Premier
Ministre in between. One Anti-Disapparition Jinx around the perimeter, and Ministre Marchand is as good as dead.”

Valjean winced. “You are right, of course,” he said.

“Messieurs?” called Thérèse from the kitchen. “There be food on the table.”

Javert rose and helped Valjean up. The two men stood abreast for a moment, the Auror’s hand still gripping Valjean’s, before they each looked away uncomfortably. Passing over to the dinette, Valjean noted two place settings on the table: bowls and spoons, with a loaf of bread on a platter. He took a seat, Javert beside him, and Thérèse claimed the opposite chair. She had not set out dishes for herself, clearly more interested in what her guests had to say than in eating.

Valjean lifted a spoonful of broth to his lips, his hand trembling almost imperceptibly. Even if his mind had forgotten his hunger, his body had not. It was a thin vegetable bouillon, with a light flavor and lighter substance. Certainly, the dish was nowhere near as hearty as the stew Thérèse had made on their last visit, but Valjean suspected anything heavier would have made him ill. As it was, he had to pause after a few mouthfuls to allow his stomach to settle.

Thérèse watched, her golden eyes bright and attentive. “The Death Eaters be plannin’ to go after the Premier Ministre in his own house?”

Javert nodded, drinking his soup silently.

The loup garou shivered, tugging her shawls closer around her neck. “If that happens, no-one will be safe.”

Setting down his spoon, Javert massaged his temples. “If we had the Aurors on our side, we could put an end to it,” he said. “But they remain under Gisquet’s command, oblivious to his treachery.”

Valjean nodded his agreement. “The Préfet de Préfecture is the kingpin of the whole operation,” he explained for Thérèse’s benefit. “He commands the Death Eaters and he commands the Aurors. When he says ‘attack’, the Death Eaters attack, and when he tells the Aurors that I am a Dark wizard, they believe him.”

Javert crushed a napkin in his fist. “The two of us alone are nowhere near enough to stop every Death Eater in France. We could send the Premier Ministre into hiding, I suppose, but that would only create a different void of power for them to fill.”

“If the Préfet be the key as you say,” Thérèse began, “then perhaps you don’t need to be stoppin’ every Death Eater in France.”

Valjean took another sip of broth. “You mean to make him the target? It would be risky,” he said, turning to Javert. “Gisquet has no doubt been informed that we escaped the Lestranges. He’s sure to have doubled his security.”

Narrowing his eyes, Javert considered it. “It is no riskier than anything else we have tried.”

Yes, thought Valjean, and look how well that turned out.

“If we remove Gisquet from the picture, it might be possible to persuade the Aurors of the truth,” said Javert. “When my people realize I am not under an enchantment, they will be only too happy to help.”

“So long as none of them decide that removing the Préfet is proof I’m using Dark magic,” Valjean muttered, but there was no serious concern in his words. Truth be told, he was just grateful to have
any direction at all.

“Good,” said Thérèse. “Now eat up. The rest of your plottin’ can wait ‘til you’ve got food in your bellies.”

Valjean was not about to argue with her. The bit of soup he’d ingested was sitting better in his stomach, reawakening his appetite.

As he dug in, their hostess went on, “When you’ve finished, we can look and see what sort of poultices or potions we got ‘round the house.” She glanced at Valjean. “Some of those cuts look nasty.”

Valjean just nodded his acquiescence, pulling the bread platter toward him. He cut a thick piece first for Javert, then for himself, using the doughy slice to sop up more of the soup. Thérèse hummed a few bars of a song, standing. She swept over to a cabinet in the far corner, digging through its contents. Jars of herbs and ointments were pulled out and stacked on the countertop.

Javert raised his head. “I have Essence of Dittany in my -” He stopped as his hand brushed against his robes. “Damn,” he growled. “Those bastards still have my coat.”

“Essence of Dittany,” Thérèse announced, holding aloft a stoppered amber bottle. “Pepperup Potion, Murtlap Essence, and anythin’ else I can brew up.”

Javert set his spoon beside his empty bowl. “I am perfectly fine, Madame,” he said firmly. “See to Valjean. I will begin drafting a plan.” Neither man commented on the return to the use of Valjean’s surname, though both had noticed.

Valjean got to his feet. “You are *not* fine,” he declared. “You need a Restoration Potion, at the very least.”

Javert looked about to argue, but Thérèse interrupted. “No trouble at all, Monsieur,” she chirped, with a subtle wink at Valjean.

The Auror capitulated. “If you insist,” he replied wearily. Javert made his way to the window, as he often did when restlessness came over him.

Valjean carried the dishes to the sink, placing them under running water. He began to clean them methodically, and after several minutes of scrubbing at a singular stain embedded in the white porcelain, Thérèse turned to look at him with a bit of concern.

“How do you fare, really?” she asked. “Whatever’s eatin’ at you, I can’t seem to get a read for, but somethin’ has changed with you both.”

Valjean gave a quiet huff of laughter. “I’m not certain, myself,” he replied softly. “In spite of everything, things were better - good, even - only then I think I botched it. Now he doesn’t even want to look at me.”

Thérèse made a noncommittal noise as she crushed a handful of beetles under the flat of her knife. She gathered the resulting powder, sprinkling it into a tiny cauldron.

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“I think,” she said slowly, squeezing three drops of honeywater into the mixture, “that you not be givin’ enough credit to either one of you.” She squinted down into the concoction, adding the occasional counter-clockwise stir. “Your friend be in a difficult position. He never did tell you what we talked ‘bout, did he?”

Wrinkling his brow, Valjean answered back, “No, he didn’t.”
The woman nodded. “I didn’t expect he would,” she said. “It’s his own business, after all.”

A silence fell as Valjean continued with the dishes and the contents of the cauldron simmered.

“Can I ask you something?” Valjean inquired, drying his hands on a towel.

Thérèse set down her stir-spoon. “You just did,” she smiled.

Valjean inhaled. “I don’t suppose you know anything about a loup garou named DuPont?”

The woman tsked and wiped down the counter with an enthusiasm that was more aggressive than passive. “No,” she said. “Just because I be one don’t mean I know e’ry wolf-touched soul in France.”

“Sorry,” said Valjean. “I had to ask. He’s working for the Death Eaters, and at this point, we need all the information we can get.”

Thérèse extinguished the small flame heating the cauldron bottom and decanted the resultant potion into a crystal phial. It was a smoky purple color, and it shimmered slightly in the light.

“A pity,” Thérèse said when she had finished. “Most of us be mild-mannered folk, you know. We’re not much liked by wizard-kind, but we keep to ourselves and stay outta trouble.”

She handed Valjean several more bottles and a rag. “O’course, then there be some who resent the way we be treated. Resentment turns to bitterness, bitterness turns to hate.”

“I know a little something of that,” Valjean said, subdued.

Thérèse pursed her lips. “Well, it makes the agenda of He-Who-Mustn’t-Be-Named seem like a right fine deal - revenge, power, e’rythin’ they been after. They don’t realize the Death Eaters’ freedom be just another leash.”

Valjean turned over one of the bottles he had been handed. Murtlap Essence, read the label.

“Right,” he said, then called, “Javert? Come take your potion.”

The Auror looked up from where he stood at the window. He scowled, but after a moment he walked in the direction of the kitchen. Meanwhile, Valjean arranged the bottles on the table. He applied several drops of Murtlap Essence to the rag, and held that against one of the cuts on his arm. The scab pulled away immediately, revealing new pink skin beneath.

Javert’s scowl deepened as Thérèse held out the Restoration Potion.

“I don’t need this,” he said. “Really, Madame, I am well enough already. A good night’s sleep will be more than sufficient.”

“I’ve seen sheets with more color than your face, Monsieur, if you’ll pardon my sayin’ so,” Thérèse replied. “You take that now, and then get your good night’s sleep.”

Javert looked between her and Valjean. “You’re as bad as he is,” the Auror muttered.

He tipped the potion back into his mouth and crossed his arms. It took a few minutes to take effect, but then it grew difficult for him to maintain his look of self-righteous irritation as the Auror’s body visibly eased, shedding tension like water. This mostly served to make him more irritated. Valjean concealed a smile, continuing to tend to little scrapes and bruises. There was a lot of them.
When Valjean had worked his way up as high as his bandages, he tugged at the strips of torn fabric, unraveling them carefully with one hand. The burned stretch of his upper arm was revealed to the air, and Thérèse gasped in a way that sounded like a squeak.

“You’ll be needin’ some help with that,” she said, hurrying toward him. “By the Gods, I don’t even want to think what -”

“Leave it,” said Javert, stepping forward.

“But Monsieur!”

“I’ll take care of it,” the Auror told her. Something like protectiveness, or possessiveness, passed briefly over his face before he could hide it.

Thérèse’s eyes flickered between the two of them. Valjean raised his shoulders, and the woman relented.

“That’ll do, then,” she said. “I’ll just go make up the guest rooms, shall I?”

She gave Valjean what he almost thought was a mischievous glance as she left the room, leaving Valjean and Javert alone in the kitchen.

“Well,” Javert said shortly. “Let’s see it, then.”

Valjean pulled off the remainder of the bandages, exposing the blistered, shiny patch to the lamplight. The Auror strode up to him, wearing a no-nonsense expression. Fingers prodded gingerly at the burn, and Valjean looked anywhere else as the touch turned his arms to gooseflesh. Javert could not have failed to notice, but he made no remark on it.

“You’ll want Dittany for that,” he said instead. “And it may still scar, it’s been a few days.”

Valjean shrugged again, feeling heat crawl up the back of his neck. Javert was standing very close. “No matter,” Valjean replied. “There are worse things in life than that.”

Javert reached for the amber bottle of Dittany. “This will sting a bit,” he warned. “Hold still.”

Holding his breath, Valjean did not so much as blink as Javert dribbled several drops of brown liquid over the wound. As promised, it stung profusely, while also producing a cloud of greenish vapor. Then the stinging became an itching as new skin grew over the injury. When the vapor cleared, the burn was healed except for a slight topography of scar tissue.

“Thank you,” said Valjean.

Javert did not reply. He held onto Valjean’s arm a moment longer than was strictly necessary, before turning away, cheekbones turned ever so faintly pink. It could have been the restorative effects of the potion, but perhaps it was not.

“You should keep at it with the Murtlap,” the Auror said, deliberately facing away. “Your head especially could use some.”

“Yes,” Valjean agreed, but he did not move. “Javert -”

“Thérèse may require assistance,” Javert interrupted. “I will go and check.”

He disappeared down the hallway, leaving Valjean on his own. Valjean shook his head. Taking hold of the rag, he pressed the medicinal extract against the large scrape on his temple. It faded
more slowly than the smaller cuts, but with it went much of his residual headache. Looking down at himself, Valjean decided it seemed silly to bother with the rest of the cuts; they would heal well enough on their own, and medical supplies might soon be at a premium.

Tidying up as best as he knew how, Valjean meandered in the direction of the sleeping quarters. No sooner had he entered the hallway than he ran into Javert, who was carrying a bundle of blankets in his arms.

“That’s your room,” he said brusquely, nodding at the door he had just come out of. “I will sleep on the couch. Thérèse was going to give up her own bed for one of us, but I will not stand for that.”

“Nor would I,” Valjean responded. “But you could have the guest room if you wanted.”

The turn of the Auror’s mouth spoke plainly what he thought of that idea. “Take the bed, Valjean,” he said, before brushing past him toward the salon.

With some trepidation, Valjean pushed his way into the indicated room. Thérèse was inside, fluffing up a pillow near the headboard.

“Ah, Jean,” she said, smiling. “You be lookin’ much improved. I imagine you’ll be wantin’ to get some rest now.”

She pointed at the lowboy standing against the wall. “There be nightshirts in there, if you’d like. There also be an odd bunch of clothes, should you want to change in the morning.”

Valjean nodded. “Thank you. It will be good to sleep, I think.”

Tipping her head toward the room next door, Thérèse asked, “You sure that Monsieur Javert won’t take that room as well? I can just as easily -”

“No,” Valjean interjected. “It is very kind, Madame, but neither of us will remove you from your bedchamber, you have done too much on our behalf already. You can try to convince him if you like, but I imagine it will be like talking to a wall.”

Thérèse chuckled softly. “It be funny, the pair of you,” she said. “There aren’t many wizards I know half so decent.”

Echoing her laugh, Valjean replied, “Well, you can’t know all that many wizards, then.”

The woman paused, her hand hovering over a crease in the bedding. “Perhaps I don’t, at that,” she said eventually. When she looked up, the smile was back on her face. “Goodnight, Jean. Sleep well.”

Thérèse left. In her absence, Valjean changed, grateful to be rid of his torn, bloodstained clothes. He was all the more grateful for the chance to rest in safety, not to mention comfort.

Dimming the lights, Valjean sat on the edge of the bed, sinking into the soft mattress. He felt better than he had in days, but the prolonged exposure and fatigue had worn on him beyond what a single night could repair. The mere act of sitting amplified his tiredness tenfold.

Switching off the lamp, Valjean drew the heavy quilt over him and shut his eyes. Exhaustion crashed over him like waves. Sleep should have been imminent. It should have been, but it was not.

In the dark, Valjean could not stop his mind from running circles around the same thoughts. He
played out the conversation on the roof a dozen different times, a dozen different ways, but it never made any difference. Nothing he said was right, and the Javert in his head was always stern.

*I cannot let myself have it yet. It would not be doing right by either of us.*

He sighed into his pillow. The last thing he needed was a sleepless night, but that was how things were shaping up. Valjean cringed further into the blankets, hoping they would blot out the image of the Auror’s face leaning in towards his own, but he might as well have tried dousing a flame with oil for all the good it did him.

The apartment quieted, until all he could hear was the occasional crackle or groan as the building settled. Rolling onto his side, Valjean tossed and turned, seeking the position which would finally put his consciousness at ease. Then, seemingly as loud in the quiet as a gunshot, there came a rap on the door.

Valjean jerked upright, heart pounding. It took him a minute to realize that anyone who meant him harm would not have bothered to knock before entering. Still, he grabbed his wand from the night table, holding it at the ready as he called, “Who is it?”

The door swung on noiseless hinges. He recognized at once Javert’s silhouette in the doorway, framed by the pale light of a hallway sconce. Thérèse had obviously lent him a nightshirt as well. Valjean relaxed and lowered his wand, though he did not yet release his grip on its handle. He had not lived as long as he had by being naïve.

“Javert,” said Valjean, “what is it? It is late.”

The Auror leaned against the jamb. “I couldn’t sleep,” he said evenly.

Valjean blinked. “Neither could I,” he admitted.

“It is foolish,” Javert went on. “I have everything I should reasonably require: a cushioned place to rest, a full stomach, more than enough bedding.”

Valjean kept quiet, certain there was a purpose behind such pedestrian statements.

“So I asked myself -” the Auror paused, shifting his weight, “- what else could I possibly need? And then the answer came to me.”

He looked Valjean in the eye. “I have grown accustomed over the last few days to the sound of breathing by my side at night.” For the first time, there was a catch to Javert’s voice as he continued, “I found I was... missing you. And so I was wondering if I could...?”

“Stay in here for the night?” Valjean finished.

Javert did not answer, but his silence answered for him anyway.

Valjean could not repress the shy, pleased smile that crept over his features. “Of course,” he said. “Come in.”

“I shall have to fetch the sheets from the salon,” the Auror told him. A touch awkwardly, he added, “I did not want to presume you would say yes.”

“Nonsense,” Valjean scoffed. “I am not about to make you sleep on the floor. Anyhow, this bed is too big for one person by himself.”

Javert hung back by the door, but neither did he return to the salon. “You are suggesting we
share?”

“You don’t have to,” said Valjean. “Neither of us is likely to freeze to death tonight. But I did think, well, it might be nice.”

Javert just looked at him for a long moment; in what little light there was, his expression was completely unreadable. Then he said, “Very well.”

Valjean scooted over toward the wall, leaving enough room to admit the Auror. A moment passed before Javert sat down uncertainly on the mattress, slipping beneath the covers.

“Alright?” Valjean asked.

Javert nodded slowly. He appeared as though he meant to say something, running his tongue along his lips.

“Goodnight,” the Auror said after a moment. Valjean got the impression that that was not what he had wanted to say.

“Goodnight, Javert.”

Rolling over to face the wall, Valjean shut his eyes. He heard the rustling of Javert situating himself beneath the covers, and then the room was still once more. Now, however, the steady rise and fall of his breath was matched by another, just slightly out of sync.

Strange, he thought, how soothing it was listening to that syncopated rhythm. Warm for the first time in days, Valjean nestled deeper into the blankets. He was safe. They were safe. In that knowledge, sleep finally shut his eyes, and kept them shut.
This is officially now the longest story I have ever written, ever! That's pretty exciting, if I may say so! :D Thank you all so much for your encouragement!

Valjean
The bed was soft, its goosefeather mattress plump and warm. Valjean tucked the covers under his chin, content in spite of the early hour. It was still dark outside the window, so the only light was that which spilled through the crack beneath the door. He had rolled onto his back at some point during the night, and Javert was pressed close against his side, cocooned in the blankets.

The state of what might be termed repose was a new experience. Even when Valjean had possessed a bed of his own, it was merely serviceable; he did not believe in paying for his own comfort. On any other day, he probably would not have lingered, putting leisure behind him, but he reasoned that getting up might disturb Javert, and the Auror needed rest. It was an excuse Valjean was not too inclined to dispute.

Beside him, Javert made a quiet noise in his sleep. The Auror’s face was buried in his pillow near Valjean’s shoulder, perspiration sticking flyaway hairs to his face. Valjean would have happily stayed in that moment forever, given the chance. He knew, though, that it could not last. Even if they put a stop to Gisquet, even if they warned Ministre Marchand, Valjean was still a condemned man.

Under the covers, Valjean slid his hand over Javert’s; the Auror’s pulse thudded against his fingertips. It was not the loss of his own life that troubled him so much as it was the future he had forswn, a future which might, perhaps, have had Javert in it as something other than an adversary.

If he closed his eyes, Valjean could imagine that the world was different; that Javert would hold him close; that Cosette would grow up into a happy young woman; that Azkaban would be nothing more than a dark memory. All of that, he could imagine. Lying against the Auror’s side, it was almost even believable.

In the end, however, that pleasant fiction was not his reality. Valjean drifted off to sleep again, and when he awoke for the second time, sunlight filtering in through the blinds, Javert was gone.

Valjean got out of bed slowly. He dressed, borrowing a new shirt and a set of robes from within the dresser. His own pants he continued to wear; Thérèse did not appear to have any in his size.

Outside his room, Valjean could hear a ruckus coming from the kitchen. Coming down the hall, he found all three of Thérèse’s boisterous children bouncing in their seats at the table. Their mother was cooking breakfast, pushing bacon around a frying pan.

“Good morning,” the woman smiled.

Valjean waved in response, but his gaze was focused on the Auror sitting on the sofa. Pieces of paper were spread across the coffee table, and Javert was writing on another, his quill running

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furiously across the page. Beside him, his unused bedsheets from the night before were arranged in a neat, folded stack.

As Valjean watched, Javert muttered, “No, that won’t do.” He scratched out whatever he had just written, followed by an emphatic, “Damn!”

Standing behind the sofa, Valjean looked down at the paper in the Auror’s lap. “Anything I can help with?” he asked.

Javert started, having apparently not noticed the man’s approach. “Ah,” he said. “Good morning.” He blotted his page before the ink smeared. “I have been coming up with a strategy. The finer points could use some work.”

Valjean moved around the arm of the couch to sit next to the Auror. It was only after he sat that it occurred to him Javert might not want to be right at his side, but the Auror did not say anything about it, even when their knees knocked together. He just held the parchment up to the light and looked dourly at the words written there, as well as at the thick black line crossing many of them out.

Squinting at the parchment, Valjean hummed skeptically. He leaned forward, scooping the other papers off the coffee table, and sifted through those as well. On every page, the Auror’s neat script pointed to one inescapable conclusion.

“It’s no good,” he said eventually. “We’d never pull it off - not without Polyjuice Potion, at the very least.”

Javert frowned. “I doubt if Thérèse just keeps boomslang skin or bicorn horn handy in her cupboard, they are hardly run-of-the-mill ingredients. And even if they were, the stuff takes a month to brew. We do not have that kind of time.”

Valjean raised his hands. “I know that. I also know that you are far too easily recognized - by your voice, even if you went in disguise. I think you need a new plan.”

In frustration, Javert balled up the paper he had, throwing it into the fireplace. The flames spat and crackled at the intrusion. Over in the kitchen, Thérèse craned her neck in their direction.

“Breakfast be ready,” she announced, holding tongs in one hand and her wand in the other.

“I am not hungry,” Javert answered back, pulling a fresh page toward himself. Valjean glared at him - they had not been out of danger for twenty-four hours, and the Auror was already skipping meals - but with a sigh, he left Javert to his work. Valjean headed to the dining table, interrupting a scolding.

“Jacques, what’ve I told you ‘bout hittin’ your brother?” said Thérèse to the eldest of her three boys. Garrett was using his mother’s distraction as an excuse to siphon food off his brother’s plate, an activity which had likely precipitated the smack in the first place.

“Ah, Monsieur,” Thérèse went on, turning to Valjean, “we’ve got bacon, toast, and eggs. There be a plate there for you at the end.”

Once he had eaten, Valjean looked sidelong at Javert’s untouched food. Mouth tightening in determination, he grabbed the plate and carried it into the salon, setting it unceremoniously in front of the Auror.

“Eat,” he said, crossing his arms. “You can write with one hand and hold toast with the other if you must.”
Javert caught sight of the man’s expression and decided not to argue, drawing the plate toward him.

“Now,” Valjean continued, taking a seat in the armchair where he could look intently at Javert. “Between bites, tell me again about this scheme of yours.”

The Auror lifted a slice of toasted bread to his mouth, chewing listlessly. “If we rearrange some of the players in the original draft, the idea might hold water. There is a lot of potential for failure, however.” Neither one wanted to think for too long about what “failure” might entail. “And in that revision, we would require a third person.”

“A third person?” Valjean repeated. “Who in Merlin’s name do you think would be willing to participate in this? ” He gestured at the Auror’s parchment for emphasis.

Behind the high back of his chair, Thérèse had approached curiously. She leaned over Valjean to peer at Javert’s scribblings.

“This be how you mean to stop the Préfet, then?” she asked.

“Perhaps,” said Javert. “But for it to work, we cannot do it alone.” He paused, and in the room’s soft light, his face looked as serious as Valjean had ever seen it. “I am going to ask too much of you, Madame. And I want you to know, you do not have to agree. I cannot guarantee your safety if you say yes.”

Thérèse’s eyes widened, but she asked, “What is it you would have me do, Monsieur?”

Javert told her.

“No,” Valjean said the second he finished. “It will never work, Javert. We can risk our own lives, but we cannot risk hers.”

“You think I like this?” Javert snapped. “If it were up to me, I would go alone and keep you out of it as well. But unless you’ve thought of some brilliant plan you’ve neglected to mention, this is what we have.”

Valjean did not reply. How could he, when the Auror was right?

Javert turned to Thérèse. “It is your decision to make. If you say no, we will try to come up with something else.”

The woman licked her lips. “What be the chances of you comin’ up with somethin’ else in time?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Javert replied, “I don’t know.”

“That be what I thought.” Taking a deep breath, Thérèse said, “Alright, I’ll do it.”

Valjean closed his eyes. In the background, he heard Thérèse saying that she would have to Floo the boys to her sister’s flat, but all he could think about was how many things could go wrong.

“Valjean?” Javert’s voice pulled him out of his brooding. “You had better change.”

“Yes,” Valjean agreed, climbing slowly to his feet. “If we are all three agreed to try this madness.”

As Thérèse corralled her sons into something resembling order, Valjean and Javert made their way back to the guest bedroom.
“Are we switching all our clothes?” asked Valjean.

“Just the robes should be sufficient,” Javert said. “The rest of your outfit is neat enough to pass the inspection of most.”

In spite of himself, Valjean snorted. He could guess readily enough who among the Aurors might find fault with his manner of dress.

Javert peeled off his navy robe and handed it to Valjean, exchanging it for the plain black one Valjean had borrowed from the lowboy earlier that morning. Tugging the dark blue garment around his shoulders, Valjean found it fit poorly, but it did fit. With any luck, no-one would look at him long enough to notice that it was too long, or the way it bunched awkwardly around his armpits.

At the same time, the Auror had somehow contrived to look as well-dressed as he always did, nevermind that he was going to spend the operation unseen. Valjean shook his head, amused, until a thought occurred to him that wiped the slight smile from his face.

“Javert,” he said quietly, as the man adjusted his cravat in the mirror. Javert paused what he was doing, listening. “If all this goes according to plan...”

“It won’t,” the Auror interjected, “but go on.”

Valjean’s mouth was dry. “I was just wondering if you had given any thought to what happens... after.”

“After?” Javert turned to look at him, confusion in his eyes, until he saw Valjean’s expression. Then he said, “Oh. You are thinking of the Vow again.”

Valjean inclined his head. “The rest of the Aurors may be happy to see you when they learn what Gisquet is, true enough, but I doubt they will be pleased to see me, except to put me in handcuffs. I think by the terms of our agreement, I am obligated to let them.”

Javert pursed his lips. “Leave the Aurors to me. As for the rest of it, ever since we arrived here, I have been of a mind to speak to Thérèse about our agreement - she seems to have some practice in the metaphysical branches of wizardry.”

A memory tugged at the corners of Valjean’s thoughts, just far enough gone to slip through his fingers. “You’re right,” he heard himself saying. “I should have thought of that, myself.”

He went to leave, only stopping when a hand caught him by the wrist. Valjean took a breath, then turned back around.

Javert was looking at him. His eyes flickered downward, and he released Valjean’s wrist, muttering, “Sorry.” When Valjean only looked back placidly, the Auror reached out again, twining their fingers together. “I will not let them hurt you,” he said. “Do you believe that?”

Valjean felt the steady beat of his heart in his chest, a metronomic reminder of a life which did not belong to him. He felt, at the same time, the smoothness of Javert’s fingers, so different from his own laborer’s hands. It was with sincerity that he finally replied, “I do.”

The Auror’s face hardened with resolve. “Go see if Thérèse is ready. The sooner this is over with, the better.”

The salon was empty of children as Valjean re-entered; Thérèse stood somberly in front of the fireplace, looking at a photograph on the mantle. Hearing footsteps, she raised her head and
“That getup don’t suit you,” she said.

“You’re telling me,” said Valjean. “I can barely lift my arms.” He made sure his hold on his own wand was firm, then added, “If you’re sure about this, we should go.”

Thérèse ran a hand through her thick curls. “My little cubs be safe, but not for much longer if’n those Death Eaters take over. I’ll help, as best I can. There don’t be a thing I wouldn’t do to protect them.”

*So like Fantine*, thought Valjean. “In that case, Madame, I believe you are with me.”

Javert emerged from the bedroom. He stood with the other two in a circle and explained, just once, and in detail, what precisely they were going to do. No sooner had he finished, than all three of them in unison Disapparated.

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Valjean

When the world reappeared and the vacuum of space stopped compressing his lungs, Valjean immediately crouched where he could take in the lay of the land. Javert and Thérèse materialized a few feet away, slinking back into the shadows as they assessed the scene.

They were all standing tucked in a niche at the end of the cour d’honneur outside the Palais de Justice. It was near the wall of the Sainte-Chapelle, a stone’s throw from where Javert had first Apparated with Valjean upon re-arresting him. Valjean felt he had aged by years since then. The wall shielded them from the view of the main doors, though they could see the gates leading onto the street. At the moment, the gates were deserted. Valjean side-stepped just far enough to peek around the corner, toward the front facade.

“No guards visibly posted outside,” Valjean confirmed. “You were right.”

Javert motioned him back over. “It seemed unlikely there would be anyone out in plain view of the Muggles. When we get in, I’m sure it will be a different matter.”

Tapping the Auror on the head, Valjean watched as a Disillusionment Charm changed Javert’s appearance like a chameleon. Within moments, he was virtually indistinguishable from the stone wall behind him.

“Good,” said the place where Javert was standing. “Remember, stick to the plan. Speak only when spoken to, and no more than necessary. Are you ready?”

Thérèse could only nod tightly.

Valjean took a deep breath. “No,” he responded. “But let’s get going anyway.”

Folding her hands in front of her, Thérèse toyed nervously with a plain wedding band. Valjean’s palms were so slick with sweat that it was hard to keep a grip on his wand. He stood close behind her, as any arresting officer would.

“Oh my mark,” came Javert’s voice. “Mark.”

Valjean nudged Thérèse in the back, and they started walking, heading from the shelter of the niche into the wide open cour d’honneur. The Auror, Valjean hoped, was following right behind.
He himself was conscious of little besides the buzz of adrenaline in the base of his skull and the pounding of his heart in his chest.

Focus, he thought sternly. There could be no grace given to distraction; a single mistake might prove fatal.

They made it the length of the courtyard unharassed, but Valjean could not shake the feeling that hordes of malevolent eyes were glaring down at them from the windows. In front of him, Thérèse climbed the limestone steps to the triptych of main doors. When they both stood at the top of the landing, Valjean tapped once on the center doorknob. The door swung open, admitting them to the gallery.

Working to remove all signs of trepidation from his face, Valjean prodded Thérèse in the small of the back. This was both for effect and because the woman was effectively petrified, her apprehension at being “arrested” entirely legitimate. They passed over the threshold, and Valjean held the door just long enough for Javert to slide past him like a gust of wind. At once, Valjean dipped his head, keeping his face turned to the floor even as his eyes scanned the gallery hall.

The vaulted room was as bustling as ever, but with one significant change: every hallway had a navy-robed Auror standing on either side of its portal. The security was doubled at the lifts, a group of four guarding the gold-leafed gates. And directly in front of them...

Valjean swallowed as he was hailed by a pair of Aurors, clearly set to watch the entrance. He nudged Thérèse again and slipped his wand up his sleeve.

“Morning,” said Valjean, aiming to sound pleasant. What he actually managed was somewhere in the realm of vaguely constipated. He kept his head turned as far down as he could get away with; if even one person identified him from a wanted poster, it was over.

“State your name, rank, and business,” the Auror on the left, a balding wizard, said bluntly. “I don’t recognize you, but if you are in fact an Auror, you’ll know we’re under a high security alert. If I don’t have a good explanation in two minutes, the klaxons go off.”

“Of course, Monsieur,” Valjean stammered hurriedly. “I was recently hired, so we won’t have met before. The name’s Fauchelevent, Ultime Fauchelevent, Auror Third Class. Monsieur Depardieu is my head of office.” He regurgitated the details he and Javert had agreed upon, and prayed that if he seemed flustered, it would be written off as the nerves of a new recruit.

The pair of Aurors looked him over suspiciously. “And your business?” continued the one. “Who is this woman?”

“Unregistered loup garou, Monsieur,” the so-called Fauchelevent replied, pulling Thérèse closer to him. That part of their story obviously checked out; anyone who cared to look could see the very real fear on the woman’s face, as well as her golden eyes. The guards’ expressions lost a bit of their mistrust at that. It was time, perhaps, to take a calculated risk. “Monsieur Depardieu instructed me to take her to see Vidocq for processing.”

“Ha,” laughed the other Auror, this one a witch. “Vidocq’s got his fingers in everybody’s pie lately, hasn’t he?”

“I don’t know about anybody’s pie, Madame,” Fauchelevent said politely. “I just know what my orders are.”

Normally, the matter of an unregistered werewolf or the like would be the purview of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, but their cubicles were in the
basement next to Magical Law Enforcement. Gisquet would be in his third floor office. There was no reasonable excuse for taking Thérèse up to the third floor, but a few weeks ago, Vidocq had somehow acquired an office on the second. At the time, Javert had assumed a bribe was involved, though now it seemed likely that it was to help conceal the man’s work as the Death Eaters’ liaison. If the three of them got in the lifts, they could simply press the third floor button instead of second, and the guards would be none the wiser. A very simple deception, in theory.

The wizard was still looking at them dubiously, but the main door opened behind them and a new group of people entered, requiring the guards’ attention.

“Very well,” the wizard said. “Head over to the lifts, then, tell them second floor.”

Valjean as Fauchelevent bowed. “Thank you, Monsieur.”

He linked his arm through Thérèse’s, steering her into the crowded hall.

“It’s alright,” he murmured under his breath. “They believed us.”

Thérèse was quaking in her boots, and Valjean could not blame her. Even the slight exhilaration he felt at having fooled the two Aurors was subsumed by the knowledge that there were still other guards to contend with, not to mention the Préfet. He tried to remind himself that people generally saw only what they wanted to see, but the reassurance did not entirely stick.

The crowd parted around them, clerks and office workers eager to get out of the way of an Auror on duty. Valjean supposed that Javert might enjoy the power to send underlings scurrying, but it made him uneasy. He would have rather kept the crowd close, concealing them within the safety of its mass. As it was, Valjean felt distinctly conspicuous. If nothing else, it did reduce the chances of getting separated; presumably Javert was following in the gap behind them, moving quickly and carefully to avoid stepping on toes with invisible feet.

As they drew nearer to the lifts, Javert whispered in Valjean’s ear, a soft, sibilant sound. “It looks like everyone not on active assignment has been moved to security. Gisquet knows we’re coming.”

His words caused the knot in Valjean’s stomach to tighten, but it was too late to worry about that. They were approaching the lifts, and the four wizards keeping watch were looking at them.

“Morning,” said Valjean again, this time opting for the tones of a competent professional. He borrowed some of Javert’s mannerisms as his point of inspiration, and so was closer to the mark. “The wizard at the door said to tell you ‘second floor’.”

“Martin said that, did he?” asked the first wizard. “What do you need that’s all the way up there?” He studied Thérèse with a frown.

“Monsieur Depardieu said to take her up to Vidocq,” Valjean replied. “Unregistered loup garou.”

The wizard raised his eyebrows. “Isn’t that an issue for downstairs?”

“No, it’s alright,” interjected his buddy. “Yeah, Vidocq’s taken a couple of those cases lately. Dunno why, but he’s requested them, and he’s been getting them.”

The first Auror snorted. “Figures. A whole career of successes and nobody listens to my requests, but that slimeball is suddenly on the career fast-track.” He turned back to Valjean. “Fine,” he said. “Take her up. I just hope Vidocq knows what he’s doing. Loup garou can be vicious.”

He pushed the call button for the lift. A moment later, the doors opened as a disembodied voice
intoned, “First floor”.

Valjean bundled Thérèse into the carriage. A faint shimmering in the corner told him that Javert had made it on as well; he stepped casually in front of the distortion before any of the guards noticed. One of the Aurors reached a hand over to the button pad and punched the numeral “two”. As soon as the gates closed after him, Valjean pressed the “three”.

Nobody in the carriage breathed until the little car began to rise. Valjean’s shirt stuck to his back and his collar felt too tight, but they had made it onto the lift. So long as nothing went wrong, they were in the clear.

“Vidocq has probably been using his position to enlist loup garou for the Death Eaters,” Javert said. “If we run into him, I’m going to wring his sorry neck.”

Valjean did not reply. He fervently hoped they did not run into Vidocq.

The carriage reached the second floor, a fact which was reiterated by the usual incorporeal announcement. As the gates rolled open, all of the air in Valjean’s lungs suddenly vacated his chest in a soundless gasp. There was an Auror stationed outside the lift, but he was not alone. There was another, and then another, and...

With steadily mounting horror, Valjean realized that there was an Auror posted every four or five meters the entire length of the hallway, in both directions. This amounted to at least a dozen of them, perhaps more. The third floor would undoubtedly be the same.

All of this Valjean realized in the bat of an eye. The wizard stationed opposite the gates had used the same moment to conclude that he did not recognize the officer arriving in the elevator.

“Apologies,” said Valjean. “Wrong floor.”

The gates began to close again. A flash of perception crossed the wizard’s face, and he ran at the gilded doors. For the briefest of moments, Valjean considered Stunning the man, but to do so would be to give himself away to the rest of the guards. And in any case, the Auror had stopped the gates shutting completely with some spell; reaching the carriage, he forced them back open with his hands.

“Who are you?” he demanded. “And what business do you have on the third floor?”

There was a tug at the sleeve of Valjean’s robe, but he ignored it. Whatever Javert had to say, he could not very well ask with this individual in front of him.

“My name is Fauchelevent, Monsieur,” said Valjean. “I’m newly employed - can’t say that we’ve met.”

“Well, Fauchelevent,” the Auror replied, glowering, “you ought to know there’s a high security alert on at the moment - third floor access is currently restricted.”

Valjean tried to look as though he were just mildly exasperated by this news. “But I was told to take this woman up there,” he insisted. “She’s an unregistered loup garou. The Préfet wanted to handle it himself.”

The Auror’s expression did not change. “And who told you that, I’d like to know?”

The tugging on Valjean’s sleeve had grown more urgent, but glancing around, Valjean could see no clear and present danger beyond the situation he was trying to talk their way out of. Whatever Javert wanted, he was going to have to wait.
“Monsieur Depardieu is my head of office,” Valjean answered primly.

“That so?” said the wizard, his eyes narrowing. “Because I’m Depardieu, and I’ve never seen you before in my life.”

The tugging at Valjean’s sleeve stopped.

_Ah_, thought Valjean. _Unfortunate._

“Wait a minute,” said Depardieu slowly. “I do know your face. You’re that -!”

Valjean whipped out his wand. “_Stupefy!_” he said, but it was too late.

Though Depardieu slumped to the floor, it was not before he whistled shrilly, attracting the attention of every other Auror in the corridor. In unison, a dozen heads turned their way, and any calm Valjean had left evaporated. He shoved Depardieu’s body out of the carriage, trying to force the gates closed. The Aurors were running toward them. Just a few more seconds, and the lift would move.

“_Immobulus!_” exclaimed a witch. Valjean ducked the jinx easily, only to realize it had never been meant for him. The jinx struck the elevator carriage, and the metal box shuddered, then stopped. They were trapped.

“Oh no,” Thérèse said aloud, as in the distance a klaxon began blaring.

“No way out but to fight,” Javert growled. “Try not to hurt anyone, they’re good people.”

_Good people about to hand us over to Gisquet_, Valjean said internally, but there was no use pressing the issue. The lift was surrounded, a dozen wands aimed at their persons.

Most everyone seemed to regard Valjean as the larger threat; Thérèse was unassuming in stature, and Javert was for the moment still camouflaged against the background. Valjean decided to use that to his advantage.

For a moment, the two parties stared one another down. Then, Valjean charged forward, barreling into the Aurors’ ranks like a cannonball. Two were on the floor before they knew what hit them.

“Thérèse,” Valjean panted, “run.” He jumped to the side, adding a quick, “_Protego!_” A Body-Bind Curse ricocheted off the Shield Charm and hit the wall, narrowly missing the witch who had cast it.

Thérèse looked from Valjean to the opening he had forced through the line and made a break for it, eager to be anywhere else but there. Her way was blocked by a stocky wizard with a ponytail, but then he stumbled out of the way as if struck by something invisible. Thérèse ran, and two of the Aurors peeled off in pursuit.

Valjean did not have the opportunity to see if she got away. His attention was immediately diverted by a firestorm of spells shot off by a trio of wizards. Shield Charm after Shield Charm deflected the barrage of jinxes and curses, but he was only just holding his ground, and the spells were growing more dangerous. Sooner rather than later, one was bound to slip through.

“_Expulso_,” said Valjean through gritted teeth. The section of floor in front of the wizards rippled, then erupted with enough force to throw all three Aurors backwards. A cloud of limestone splinters filled the air.

In the aftermath, Valjean took a look around. The few remaining Aurors in front of him were
engaged in a rather bizarre fight with something they could not see. It danced around them, just enough to be annoying, and the Aurors wound up hitting each other as often as their quarry. They had given up on spellwork, for reasons a few unconscious bodies on the floor could attest to.

A cry from behind him made Valjean spin around. Thérèse had been grappled, her pair of pursuers pinning her arms at her sides. Valjean raised his wand.

“Jean!” Thérèse shouted.

Valjean nodded, taking careful aim. To let them take the woman away and detain her in some cold cell was unthinkable. It was right around then that it registered Thérèse was not looking at him, but at something in back of him.

A sinking feeling made itself at home in Valjean’s stomach. He pivoted; the cloud of dust had settled, revealing one of the three Aurors still standing firm. The man must have Shielded in the nick of time. His arm was raised, a spell already on the tip of his tongue.

“Incarcerous,” said the Auror.

Valjean was halfway to lifting his hand, a counterspell prepared to let loose, but not fast enough. Thick cords wound around his limbs, cinching them together, and his wand fell out of his fingers, clattering to the floor.

Balance gone, Valjean pitched forward, landing as he heard a clever witch down the hall call out, “Revelio.”

The spell hit home, and Javert’s Disillusionment Charm, already weakening with time, fizzled out altogether.

There was a moment of shocked silence, before one of his opponents asked, “Javert?”

“Oh, shut up, Arthur,” said the Auror, clipping him hard on the temple.

Arthur fell to the floor, and a smirk crossed Javert’s face just as the very same witch from before landed a blow squarely across his jaw. For a second, Javert swayed where he stood, then fell against the wall. Instantly, the witch took hold of his collar, dragging him upright.

The Auror in front of Valjean knelt down, tipping his chin to the light. “Look who it is,” the man chuckled. “Jean Valjean, just like Gisquet said. He’ll be happy to see you in chains, I’m sure.”

Valjean was hauled onto his feet, and his captor peered over his shoulder. “Cadmus, François, see to it that woman is kept in custody. Run her through processing - they can transport her to Azkaban as soon as this mess is sorted out.”

“Please.” Thérèse’s voice cracked on the word. “I’ve got little ones - three wee boys -!”

Her pleading had no effect, and she was compelled down the hallway at wandpoint. Valjean stared after her in desperation; that made one more mother he had failed, another three children left in ruin by his own ineptitude. He tried to go after her, but his captor grabbed him by the shoulders.

“What do we do with them?” asked the witch, supporting a dazed Javert. “Monsieur l’Inspecteur is obviously bewitched. He needs a Healer.”

“Negative, Bernadette,” the wizard replied. “Not yet, anyway. Monsieur le Préfet said that any intruders caught in the building were to be taken to him immediately. That is what we are going to do.”
It was several minutes before Javert’s head cleared. He had been punched in the face more than once in recent memory, and it was a trend he could have done without.

When his faculties returned, Javert discovered himself in motion; he was being frog-marched onto the lift by Bernadette Lapointe and Arthur Proulx, the latter of whom had obviously been revived. Both were Aurors Second Class, and both had swallowed hook, line, and sinker the notion that Javert himself was Confunded, under the Imperius Curse, or in some other way magically impaired. There was little point in trying to convince them otherwise, as any objection would only be taken as the ravings of an enchanted mind.

In light of these facts, Javert kept quiet. He walked with increasing steadiness, his clenched fists the only sign of his aggravation. As he was pulled onto the elevator carriage, he took a good look around. There was no sign of Thérèse anywhere, but Valjean was right behind him, and bound fast with ropes again. Javert repressed a shudder. He was really beginning to hate that spell.

Valjean was holding himself together, but the Auror could tell it was a near thing. As much as Javert wanted to ease the worry lines around the man’s eyes, there would be no getting away with it now. Keeping his wand trained between Valjean’s shoulder blades was another officer Javert recognized: Mathis Coste, a promising, albeit gung-ho, young man from the country. Between Valjean and Javert, there was only one working wand, and it was almost certainly secured in Coste’s pocket.

The lift doors closed around them, and they began to climb. Javert almost laughed with all the humor of a gallows. They were still going to see the Préfet, but not in remotely the condition they had planned for. All Javert could do was hope that Gisquet would take a bit of time to gloat. Otherwise, he would surely kill them where they stood.

“Third floor,” announced the elevator voice.

The gates peeled open, and Javert narrowed his eyes. Just as on the second floor, there were Aurors posted up and down the corridor, but here the security was even tighter. A pair of guards stood outside Chabouillet’s door, and there appeared to be yet pair another outside of Gisquet’s. Javert doubted that the same level of attention could be found around the room behind the Préfet’s, guarding his hidden passageway, but that no longer mattered now that the rest of the plan was blown to smithereens.

They were given a lot of different looks as they were propelled down the hall, some hard, some curious, and in Javert’s case, more than a few sympathetic. In the increasingly unlikely event he got the opportunity, Javert was going to give every single person on the force a stern talking to about pity, and how it was never to be directed at his person, ever. As it was, he was about to have larger problems, so Javert ground his teeth and put up with it.

When they arrived in front of Gisquet’s door, the Aurors stationed there took one look at the prisoners and stepped aside. Coste knocked sharply, and after a moment, the door opened to reveal Gisquet, apparently in the middle of a meeting with Chabouillet. The Secrétaire sat in the chair in front of Gisquet’s desk, and both were looking up as the door introduced their visitors.

“Messieurs,” Coste began, bowing low, “we discovered these two on the second floor attempting to make their way up here, precisely as you predicted. There was also a woman with them, but she was inconsequential, and has been dealt with already.”

Gisquet leaned forward over his desk. “Excellent work, all of you. You have captured an
exceptionally dangerous fugitive today, and rescued a decorated Inspecteur from what has doubtless been a traumatic hostage situation. Expect to see a bonus next pay period, and I am certain Javert will want to thank you as well, once he is recovered.”

Recovered, Javert thought mirthlessly. I wouldn’t count on it.

“If you will leave them here in my keeping,” the Préfet went on, “you should return to your posts. Valjean may yet have other accomplices in the building.”

“With all due respect, Monsieur le Préfet,” Lapointe interjected, “are you certain it is wise that all of us should leave? You said it yourself, Valjean is dangerous. He threw two of our best into a wall - perhaps a few should stay.”

Gisquet smiled. “A stute as ever, Lapointe, but there is no need for concern. Should a situation arise, the corridor is full of our people. In the meantime, the convict is well-tied, and I trust also disarmed.”

Coste inclined his head. “I have his wand here, Monsieur.”

“Excellent. Keep hold of it, to reduce the convict’s temptation to try anything.”

“As you say, Monsieur le Préfet.”

Chabouillet rose from his chair, drawing his beech wand from his pocket. He crossed to where Coste had a hold on Valjean’s shoulder; Coste stepped back respectfully, and the Secrétaire took Valjean by the arm instead, dragging him into the room.

“He’s not going anywhere,” Chabouillet promised.

“And him?” Lapointe asked, tipping her head to indicate Javert.

“Let him go, certainly,” said Gisquet. The Préfet was still smiling, but Javert caught the hint of steel in his expression. “I would like to talk with him before the convict is transferred to the Conciergerie.”

The Aurors restraining his sides released their grip, and Javert held himself straight, rolling his shoulders. With a few final words of encouragement from their superior officer, the guards left. As the door clicked shut behind them, an ominous stillness fell.

“Chabouillet, if you would,” said Gisquet.

In a sudden flash of movement, the Secrétaire pulled one arm across Valjean’s throat, choke-holding him, and with the other pressed the tip of his wand against the man’s head.

“Just so that no-one gets any grandiose aspirations of heroism,” Gisquet winked.

The Préfet stood, navigating smoothly around the desk. The smile was gone now, and the temperature felt as if it had dropped by a couple of degrees.

“I have to admit myself impressed, Javert.” Gisquet halted in his advance, standing perhaps ten feet in front of his captives. “I did not expect you to escape Bellatrix and Rodolphus. Then again, in the story I heard, the convict was your rescuer, so perhaps I am not very impressed after all.”

Gisquet paused, picking a piece of lint from his dress robes. “Even so, it was clever of you to figure out I was involved. How did you do it, I wonder?”
Javert’s lips thinned. “Trade secret,” he replied. “You’ll just have to keep wondering, after you kill us.”

Tutting, the Préfet shook his head. “You mistake me for one of those bloodthirsty fools who intends to grovel at the feet of the Dark Lord. That could not be farther from the truth. I am, as I have always been, a patriot.”

“How does that factor into murdering the Premier Ministre?” Javert asked. He raised his voice, in case someone outside the door might hear, but he did not hold out a lot of hope; the oak door was thick and solid, and probably enchanted.

“The Premier Ministre is an idiot,” Gisquet snarled, and for a moment he was utterly transfigured from the even-tempered, lawful man Javert had always respected. Then he took a deep breath, controlling his expression. “What I mean to say is, the Premier Ministre continues to hold out hope that we can somehow win this fight. We cannot.”

He turned on his heel, pacing like a lion. “You must understand, Javert, England has fallen, if not yet in its entirety, then soon. Their Ministry is overrun with Death Eaters, and their miserable Order of the Phoenix has been all but stamped out. England will fall, not in months, but in weeks. And when that happens, the rest of the continent cannot be far behind.”

Stopping mid-thought, Gisquet met Javert’s eyes. There was an intensity to his gaze, an honesty, that the Auror could not look away from. “We have the chance now to put our people in position,” the Préfet said. “To set ourselves in a place where we can continue to do what we have always done - serve and protect the people of France. Think of it, Javert - in face and name, we may appear to bend to the Dark Lord’s wishes, but in the shadows, we can still do right by the citizens. Ministre Marchand is opposed to this strategy - the only strategy left to us - and so he must be deposed.”

Paralyzed under the hypnotic power of Gisquet’s voice, Javert’s eyes flickered in Valjean’s direction and then back.

“The convict?” Gisquet laughed softly. “He is nothing to you. He has never been anything but. We will return him to Azkaban where he belongs, and you shall be my second-in-command when I succeed Marchand as the Premier Ministre. Give up this ridiculous vendetta, Javert, and take your place in the new world order.”

That was wrong, Javert knew it was, and yet he seemed to somehow be wrapped in a fog. He blinked, and noticed that Gisquet’s wand was in his hand. It was an enchantment, then, and a very persuasive one, at that. It was hard to remember anything his superior had said, except that all of it had sounded remarkably well thought out at the time.

Javert glanced again at Valjean. The man appeared stricken. He and Javert had come away with very different impressions of that speech.

Something impinged on the Auror’s memory. Azkaban. The Préfet had mentioned Azkaban Prison. Javert’s fingers twitched. Gisquet wanted to hurt Valjean. That tiny revelation produced a spark of anger, which itself turned into a flame. The flame burned away the fog clouding his thoughts, and then Javert was left feeling empty and cold, but in control. He reached for his robes.

Gisquet had watched this unfold with amusement. “So, you did manage to resist in the end - I thought you might. Vidocq will owe me ten Galleons when he returns, but he is currently finalizing matters for tomorrow evening.”

Javert did not reply. He just very deliberately drew his shattered wand from his pocket.
The Préfet raised an eyebrow, then began to laugh. “Oh, very good, Inspecteur,” he exclaimed. “Except you and I both know that stick will not redeem you. Rodolphus filled me in, you see, on how it was broken past any hope of repair. What did you do exactly, sit on it?”

Javert ignored the taunts, simply raising the hornbeam wood in front of him. To the side, Valjean was watching, breathless with dread.

“Go on, then,” said the Préfet gallantly. “Give it a try. See what happens.” He spread his arms mockingly.

Taking a final look at Valjean, Javert held his breath. Please, he thought hard, not even certain who he was talking to. One spell. If it is to be the last thing I ever do, save him. That singular wish was the only thing which mattered any longer. Out in the corridor, there was some kind of growing commotion, but in his head, all Javert could hear was a ringing silence, a silence in which perhaps someone or something was listening.

Please, he thought again desperately. Please.

There was a change. He could feel a tingle in his palms, like electricity, and the fingers clamped around the handle of his wand were locked in place. He could not have dropped it now, even had he wanted to, but he did not want to.

Javert aimed his wand straight at Gisquet’s chest. “Stupefy,” he spat.

A surge of energy rolled from Javert’s shoulder all the way down his arm. His elbow bucked, but sheer willpower kept his aim true. As the magical force reached his fingers, the Auror felt his hand begin to vibrate, and there was the sound of wood creaking and groaning, but he did not look. His gaze he kept fixed on Gisquet, who was raising his own wand warily.

The spell exploded from the end of the hornbeam, and Javert did not think of his career, nor of justice, but only of Valjean and his safety.

The jinx produced was not so much a jet of red light as it was a fireball, which lifted Gisquet bodily from the ground and slammed him against the wall next to the fireplace. He hung there for a second, then collapsed to the floor and lay still.

There was a second thump, though Javert did not turn. His eyes were shut, waiting for the backlash he was certain was forthcoming. There was no magic which did not come at a price, he knew that, and yet it seemed that nothing was happening.

Javert opened his eyes a crack. His fingers were still curled around the end of his wand. He did not believe what he saw, and so he looked again. The jagged gash splitting the instrument along its length had been sealed. The old wood was the same blemishless white it had always been, but where it had been split a vein of new wood had taken over, as fresh and green as a sapling in April. He ran a hand over it, astonished.

Behind him was a noise, as of someone trying to clear their throat. He wheeled around and beheld an odd sight. Though the spell could not have touched him, Chabouillet had fallen to the floor, apparently dragging Valjean with him. Now Valjean struggled to sit up, but the ropes made it difficult.

“Hold still,” said Javert. He almost did not dare to test his luck, but he knelt at Valjean’s side and murmured, “Diffindo.” The ropes fell apart as though cut by a knife, the spell as neatly executed as any Javert had ever performed.
“Javert,” Valjean breathed. “Your wand -!”

“Not now,” Javert interrupted. “Later. We are still in the middle of a crisis.”

Valjean nodded mutely, getting to his feet. “Is he dead?” he asked, gesturing at the Préfet.

The Auror looked grim. “I only meant to Stun him,” he said. “But we shall see.” He crossed the floor, bending to press his hand against the artery in the Préfet’s neck. “Just unconscious,” he said after a moment. “And probably concussed.”

A moan from across the room drew his attention back to Valjean, but it was not Valjean who had made the sound. On the floor, Chabouillet was stirring. Valjean flinched back in alarm, but Javert held up a hand.

“Wait,” he said. “This may be precisely what we needed. Relieve Gisquet of his wand, won’t you?” So saying, he padded cautiously up to where the Secrétaire was holding his head, obviously in pain.

“Monsieur?” asked Javert. “Monsieur le Secrétaire?”

Chabouillet winced. “Javert? A little quieter if you could, please. I have a monstrous headache.”

Crouching down to the Secrétaire’s level, Javert offered his hand. More quietly, he said, “Chabouillet, I need you to tell me - what is the last thing you remember?”

Chabouillet took his arm gratefully. “I -” he began, trying to recall. “I was on my way here to meet with Gisquet regarding the Thayer case.”

Javert frowned. “The Thayer case was concluded almost a month ago. You don’t remember anything after that?”

It was Chabouillet’s turn to frown. “A month ago? Surely not. The break-in on the Rue Saint-Victor was yesterday morning!”

Worrying the edge of his lip, Javert pulled the Secrétaire up to standing. “I am sorry to tell you, Monsieur,” he said, “but as I just stated, that was nearly a month ago. I am afraid you have been under some very powerful enchantments in the interim period - probably the Imperius Curse for one, and you may also have been Obliviated.”

The color drained from Chabouillet’s face. “What happened? Javert, tell me everything.”

“I will,” the Auror promised. “But now is not the time for a full debriefing. Suffice yourself with this for the moment - Gisquet has defected. He must be the one who had you enchanted, as Stunning him seems to have broken the spell.”

“Gisquet?” the Secrétaire repeated incredulously. “Surely not. And who is that?” he added, catching sight of Valjean over Javert’s shoulder.

Valjean raised his head, and Chabouillet’s eyes widened. “Javert - is that not Jean Valjean, the wanted criminal? What is he doing here, and not even in handcuffs?”

Javert took a deep, steadying breath. “Chabouillet,” he said earnestly. “I recognize that you have had a trying day - more so than you probably even realize - but I need you to believe me when I say this person is not the villain we have been led to think. He is a good man, Monsieur, and a more worthy friend you could not imagine.” He flushed slightly at that last, aware that Valjean was listening to every word.
The Secrétaire looked Javert searchingly in the eyes. “Are you quite certain that is not you who are -”

“You are not the first person to think I’ve taken leave of my senses,” Javert interrupted him wryly, “but I assure you, I am quite well.”

“So,” Chabouillet exhaled slowly, “this is what you want me to believe - that the Préfet de Préfecture has elected to turn traitor, while this felon is some sort of saint, is that right?”

“That is about the long and short of it,” Javert admitted.

For a long moment, Chabouillet just stared at him. Then finally, he said, “Okay. Okay, Javert, I’m going to go out on a limb here for you. You have an hour. Tell me what you need, and I’ll try to get it. After that, you and I are sitting down, and you had better convince me of your version of events, or else.”

It was beyond what Javert could have hoped for. “Thank you, Monsieur le Secrétaire,” he said, bending at the waist. “First thing first, we need Aurors - those we can be certain are trustworthy. I will handpick a group.”

He strode toward the door, only stopping when he heard Valjean call, “Javert!”

The Auror paused and turned, looking at Valjean quizzically. Chabouillet was also looking Valjean’s way, probably wondering at the familiar tone.

“What about the fighting in the hall?” Valjean asked.

“Fighting?”

“Before you did... whatever you did. There was a great deal of shouting.”

Javert’s brow drew together. Holding onto his newly made wand, he pulled open the door slowly. What he saw made him take a step backward.

Outside the door was an enormous wolf, as high at the shoulder as he was tall. It had yellow eyes, and a mousy brown pelt. The wolf’s face was pinched in what almost looked like... concern?

“Thérèse?” Javert asked faintly.

There was a whirl of fur and color, and the wolf shrank until it became a short woman with mousy hair and a star-shaped pendant on her chest.

“You be alive still,” she said. “Thank all the Gods.”

Javert looked up and down the corridor. The floor was littered with the bodies of unconscious Aurors. “Did you do that?” he asked.

Thérèse looked rather sheepish. “I may have gotten a wee bit carried away.”

From inside the office came the sound of Chabouillet sighing. “Is anyone going to explain to me what is going on?” he asked.

“Shortly,” Javert replied, the sliver of a grin spreading across his face, “but first, I believe you gave me an hour.”
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

This chapter is still unbeta-ed, but I wanted to share it with you all anyway. Hopefully it makes as much sense to everyone else as it does in my head.

Also, this chapter breaks the 100k mark! I'm really, truly thrilled about that - I've been writing on various platforms for something like five and a half years now, and this is the first time I've gotten to (and surpassed!) 100k. :D

Well over an hour had passed before Javert stood in front of an assembly of Aurors, regaled once again in his navy robes. He had summoned all two-dozen to Chabouillet’s smaller office, having imprisoned the as of yet unconscious Préfet in his own, and so they were rather wanting for space. Chabouillet sat behind his desk, wearing a deep frown, while Valjean skulked in the back corner wishing the stone wall would swallow him. He was trying to believe that Javert could maintain order, but they were outnumbered twenty-five to two, and the briefing was not off to a winning start.

The gathered Aurors appeared unhappy. Most were regarding Javert with expressions of barely-concealed leeriness, though a few were looking Valjean’s way instead. Their eyes were bright and suspicious. Low murmurs passed through the crowd like ripples on a pond.

Javert cleared his throat, and immediately all attention was on him. In spite of the gravity of the situation, Valjean was almost inclined to smile at that; Javert appeared irritated, harried, and prepared to dress down anyone who spoke out of turn, which was clearly a disposition of his that the others recognized as normal.

“What’s happened to him?” Javert said sharply. “You first. Step forward.”

Mathis Coste stepped from the line, lowering his gaze. “Yes, Monsieur l’Inspecteur?”

Javert gestured at Valjean’s corner, and Valjean swallowed as twenty-four pairs of eyes swiveled toward him. “Do you still have this man’s wand?”

“I do, Monsieur,” Coste replied after a moment’s hesitation.

“Well, return it,” Javert growled. “Listen carefully, all of you - everyone here, myself included, has been duped. Forget Jean Valjean - the one pulling the strings for the Death Eaters this entire operation has been Monsieur le Préfet Henri Gisquet.”

This statement was met with shocked silence.

“The Préfet?” The speaker was a witch, a woman named Satki, with dark skin and a darker afro. Gold eyeshadow glimmered on her eyelids, matching the edges of her robes. “Is there one shred of proof to back that claim?”
Javert smiled thinly. “As it so happens, yes. Before calling you all here, I took the liberty of searching Vidocq’s office. He has also been playing traitor these past few weeks.”

A wizard Valjean recognized as Arthur Proulx muttered, “Now that I can believe.”

“In Vidocq’s desk drawer, I found a dossier of incriminating documents, which I believe will help to clear up a number of outstanding Internal Affairs inquiries. I have handed all of these over to Monsieur le Secrétaire for him to peruse.” Javert paused for effect. He was enjoying this, Valjean could tell, and despite his misgivings, the satisfaction was catching. Gisquet’s plot was coming unraveled at last.

Javert drew a document from his breast pocket and held it aloft; this was the Auror’s coup de grâce, but any trace of frivolity was now gone from his expression. The information contained therein was too serious for theatrics.

Addressing the room at large, Javert explained, “This is a missive in Gisquet’s own handwriting. In it, you will find a list of names, including your own. If the Préfet was to succeed at taking power, he had to know that there were those among us who would never consent to Death Eater rule. Those people had to be eliminated.”

Javert looked around, making certain everyone was listening. “Inside is a signed order for all of our collective disposals, followed by Vidocq’s solutions for doing so. He is a treasonous dog, but a creative one, it would seem.” He turned. “Coste, have you an upcoming assignment traveling to the giants in the Alps?”

Coste appeared thrown by the question. “That is privileged information - top secret reconnaissance. The only ones meant to know of it are myself and -”

“- and the Préfet. Strange, then, that Vidocq should seem to know where you would be, and had thought to have you ambushed by Death Eaters while making it look like the scene of a giant mauling.”

Coste turned a shade grayish around the edges. He held out his hand for the parchment, which Javert passed to him without further comment. The young Auror skimmed through the pages, looking more and more dismayed by the moment.

“Well,” he said at last, “the evidence is certainly compelling.” He handed the document to the woman standing next to him, a witch called Bernadette Lapointe. Lapointe flipped up a page, presumably searching for her own planned execution.

Satki remained unconvinced. “Am I the only one who thinks this is too convenient?” she asked. “None of that explains what this man, Valjean, is doing here, nor even what we are doing, for that matter. If the Préfet is in fact to blame, surely we can just stick him in a holding cell for a couple of days and then question him?”

It was apparent that Javert was losing patience, but he collected himself before speaking. “While I certainly do encourage you to put Gisquet in a holding cell, there remains a larger, uncontained threat.”

He gesticulated as he went on, “Gisquet’s ambition was to kill Premier Ministre Marchand and assume his position, and he has rallied the Death Eaters to back him in doing so. I am certain they will proceed with or without the Préfet, destabilizing our government and ramrodding their own people into power.”

Valjean studied the faces before him, trying to gauge whether or not Javert was making any
headway. There was still uncertainty among the crowd, but a few were nodding along. It was a start.

At his desk, the Secrétaire stood. “I am prepared to take Javert’s word on this,” he said. “The Ministre’s safety is our first priority. If we take preemptive action on a false lead, then we have wasted a few hours, but if we do nothing, a good man could lose his life.”

Javert nodded in agreement. “Precisely. We have a location, how they will gain access, and a general window of time. Secrétaire Chabouillet and I have settled upon our strategy - I will break you into your teams in a moment, but first, Coste, if you would.”

“I still don’t understand what purpose this serves,” Coste muttered, pulling Valjean’s wand out from his pocket.

In the past, Javert’s only response would have been to snap that the officer did not require understanding for obedience, but now he seemed to ponder the statement.

“I do not make a habit of explaining myself,” he began, “but here are two purposes for you to consider, besides the fact that I remain your superior officer and am giving you an order. The first is that Jean Valjean has been instrumental in uncovering this collusion, and I would not be standing here without him. The second,” and he glanced back over his shoulder, meeting Valjean’s eyes for the briefest of moments, “is that he has a role to play in our counterstrike, and therefore will need his wand.”

Valjean was momentarily stunned; Javert had yet to mention that to him, not that there had been five spare minutes in which to bring it up. In thinking about it, Valjean found himself heartened. He was glad to know he would be seeing the conspiracy to its conclusion, whatever that would prove to be.

Accepting the explanation rigidly, Coste turned his head toward Valjean and raised the English oak rod so it was clearly visible. Realizing he was supposed to go forward and take it, Valjean crossed the floor, feeling extremely self-aware. He had a sudden, absurd fear of tripping over his own feet, but he made it to Javert’s side without incident.

With a glance that suggested he was sizing him up, Coste turned the wooden instrument around in his fingers, holding it out handle-first. Valjean could not hide the flicker of surprise which passed over his face. Aurors, in his experience, were as likely to return a potential weapon as were the Death Eaters. Valjean reached out guardedly, watchful for any trick, but his hand closed around the lion’s head carved into the handle, and Coste released his grip.

The Auror’s throat worked as he swallowed, and Valjean realized that the man half-expected to be attacked. Deliberately, Valjean tucked his wand away before lifting his empty palms. Coste blinked once, and then stepped back into line.

Nodding his approval, Javert returned immediately to business. Speaking to the room at large, he said, “We will require two groups of twelve, each divided into teams of four.” Javert looked over at Valjean and added, “You will be with me, but we can discuss that later, if you would like to wait outside. This could take some time.”

Valjean wondered how much his anxiety had been showing on his face; Javert was one thing, but so many Aurors in one place were wearing his nerves thin. The corner of his mouth lifted appreciatively.

“I’ll just go check in on Thérèse,” agreed Valjean. Muttering, “Pardon me,” he squeezed through the crowd to the door. A few eyes followed him out, but most were more concerned with what
Javert had to say next.

“Satki, your team will include...”

The conversation became an incomprehensible buzz as Valjean stepped out into the hallway. The hall itself was abandoned, the unconscious Aurors having been revived and sent on their way, except for those whom Javert selected for his mission. The only person left in the corridor was a small figure keeping watch outside of Gisquet’s office. Valjean’s feet turned at once in the figure’s direction.

“Hello, Thérèse,” he smiled. “Doing alright?”

The woman’s eyes lit up. “Hello, Jean.” She indicated the door behind her and added in a whisper, “Monsieur Javert put me on guard duty. I’m s’posed to be listenin’ for when Monsieur le Préfet wakes up.” Thérèse tapped one of her ears proudly. “I’ve got excellent hearin’. He’s still sleepin’ at the moment, but if’n he wakes, he might try to get out by his secret passage, so I gotta watch.”

Valjean looked sideways at the door. “Well, we wouldn’t want him to do that.” Then he asked, “How ever did you get back here, anyway? Last I saw, you were being dragged off to some cell.”

Thérèse’s smile took on a touch of impishness. “Those two thought they had me good. I let them head down a few halls ’til we were out of the way. They weren’t expectin’ their prisoner to suddenly shift into a wolf, were they?”

Delighted, Valjean laughed. “Well, you came back at just the right moment. If you hadn’t knocked all those guards to the ground, someone would surely have heard Javert Stun the Préfet.”

“And you, Jean?” Thérèse asked suddenly. “They haven’t tried to lock you up yet, have they?”

Valjean rubbed his scarred wrist self-consciously. “Not yet. Javert’s keeping them all on a pretty short leash for the time being. I can tell some of them are thinking about it, though.”

Thérèse sighed. “It’s a pretty thing we’ve got ourselves mixed up in, ain’t it?”

“Mmm.”

For a little while, it was quiet, each of them lost in their respective thoughts.

Then Valjean began, “Thérèse...” The woman looked up inquisitively, and he continued, “Could I ask you something about the, ah, tea leaf reading you gave me last week?”

“‘Tasseomancy’, that’s what that be called,” Thérèse interjected, “but go on, what did you be wantin’ to know?”

Valjean hesitated, not exactly certain himself what he was asking. “You told me, I think, that I do not understand the consequences of the oath I’m bound to,” he said. “What does that mean?”

The woman pursed her lips. “I believe I also told you I can’t remember my predictions, not when they be made in a trance, and I’m never any good at explainin’ them.”

“But,” Valjean protested, “you must have a guess. Please - it’s important, or it could be.”

Thérèse folded her arms. “I don’t even know what sort of oath you made.”

“Does it matter? You have other gifts, Thérèse.” Valjean laid a hand on her arm. “You knew I
wasn’t completely human just by looking at me, and whatever prediction you gave Javert, you
didn’t make it with tea.”

Thérèse tipped her head, thinking it over. “It be a funny thing about oaths,” she said finally.
“Vows, contracts, agreements, whatever you care to call them - they all be words, don’t they?”

“Words and magic,” Valjean amended.

“True enough, words and magic, but the magic be followin’ the shape of the words, you see?”
When it was plain Valjean did not see, the woman raised an eyebrow. “If the words don’t be just
precise enough, what you really be agreein’ to and what you think you be agreein’ to may not be
the same thing.”

Comprehension spread through Valjean like wildfire. “And is that good or bad?” he asked, not
entirely able to prevent his voice shaking.

“Well, now, that would be dependin’ on the words you used, wouldn’t it?” Thérèse gave him
another raised eyebrow. “Just what sort of trouble do you be in, Jean?”

“Maybe not as much as I thought,” Valjean replied, his mind racing. If only he could be sure of
the exact phrasing Javert had used to forge their Unbreakable Vow, but if his fate came down to
the semantics of language, Valjean did not know that his memory would get it right. “I’ll have to
talk to Javert about it, I -”

He had said more than he meant to, and Thérèse was looking at him with a knowing expression.
“What he was offerin’ must have seemed like a real good deal at the time, huh? And now that
you’ve realized it’s not, you want out.”

“No,” said Valjean. “Or yes, but he wants me let out of it, too.”

The light in Thérèse’s eyes took on a different cast at that. “Do he, now?” she murmured. “Well,
well. Maybe he figured out how to bend after all.”

Whatever that cryptic statement meant, Valjean never had the opportunity to ask. The door to
Chabouillet’s office opened and all two-dozen Aurors spilled out, drawing his attention down the
hallway. The group was headed in the direction of the lifts with the exception of one, who was
moving towards them. It was not Javert, but M. Proulx, and Valjean stiffened slightly despite the
fact that the man was perhaps a third of Valjean’s size.

Proulx stopped in front of them, looking at Valjean. “Monsieur le Secrétaire would like to see you,
if you would come with me.”

Valjean breathed slowly in through his nose. “Of course.” Turning to Thérèse, he forced a smile
and said, “I’ll see you later. Keep an eye and an ear on the Préfet, alright?”

Thérèse nodded, though it was plain she did not believe he would be back. It was not a
comforting goodbye, as Proulx walked him down the corridor.

“Did you really swim all the way from Azkaban to shore?” the Auror asked as they walked.

Valjean blinked at the incongruity. Of all the members of Magical Law Enforcement he had met
or been detained by, this Proulx character was by far the friendliest of the bunch.

“Yes,” he replied after a moment.

The Secrétaire was still at his desk when the Auror showed Valjean in to the otherwise empty room.

“Ah, you found him, Arthur. Good,” Chabouillet said. Pointing to the chair pulled up in front of the stately work-surface, he inclined his head at Valjean and added, “Please, be seated.”

Valjean crossed the small office and sat in the chair, his stomach a roiling mass of anticipation. He heard Proulx leaving, shutting the door as he went. Then it was just the two of them left, himself and the Secrétaire of the Aurors.

Chabouillet leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers below his chin.

“I confess myself surprised that Arthur found you still in the building - I had expected you to run the moment Javert let you leave the room.”

“I’m sure that you did,” Valjean replied demurely.

“Javert has filled me in on the events of the past week. If even half of them are true, it would be incredible.”

Valjean met the man’s gaze unflinchingly. “You know as well as I do that Javert never tells anything but the truth.”

“Yes,” Chabouillet countered, “and I also know that Javert has never before this day defended the integrity of a criminal.” He paused, a line appearing between his brows. “He used to work for you, did he not, while you were living under an assumed name?”

Valjean licked his lips. “Yes,” he said tersely.

Humming, Chabouillet asked, “How would you describe your relationship with my Inspecteur?”

A dozen images flashed through Valjean’s mind at once: a fight in a hospital, judges and dementors and prison cells, a fiery red piece of spellwork fettering their hands like a chain, and Javert’s face a breath from his own, leaning closer.

“Complicated,” Valjean finally answered.

Chabouillet snorted. “Why do I suspect that is the understatement of the year?” Then he sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “I want to like you, Valjean, I do, but unfortunately I cannot make exceptions for anybody. I have to have you put away until the court can decide what’s to be done with you.”

Valjean nodded numbly. He had expected as much the moment Proulx came to fetch him, but it did not make the news easier to hear.

The Secrétaire continued, “Out of fairness to Javert, I have elected to give you a sporting chance.” Chabouillet pulled his wand from his pocket and looked Valjean in the eyes. “I am going to set this down on the desk and give you five seconds. At the end of those five seconds, I am going to call my people back in here. What you do with that time is your decision to make, though I don’t advise Disapparating - those who Apparate outside of the main gallery in this building find that the results are... unpleasant.”

Without breaking his gaze, Chabouillet placed his wand on top of a stack of reports.

“One,” he said.
Valjean’s fingers tightened around the arms of the chair so much that the wood creaked.

“Two.”

Inside his robes, Valjean’s wand rested against his heart. The Secrétaire was giving him the chance to draw it.

“Three.”

One Stunning Spell, and Chabouillet would be unable to summon the Aurors. Valjean could leave at his convenience, slipping out the back while the others were busy elsewhere.

“Four.”

Even if some loophole existed which would not punish Valjean for running, as Thérèse had alluded it might, he knew he could not bring himself to do it. Javert would be left to think nothing but the worst, and Valjean would endure far more than a holding cell before he would let Javert think he had been used.

“Five.”

As Chabouillet reached the end of his count, Valjean made no move to get up from his seat. The Secrétaire was expressionless as he reached to tap a small bell on his desk. It was a bell Valjean was familiar with, and he knew it would send a signal calling the nearest Aurors to the office. If he was to change his mind about running, this was the moment for second thoughts.

Valjean had thoughts, many of them, but they all faded to a dull roar as as he stared into space. His decision was already made; he would stay.

Barely hearing the click of the doorknob behind him, Valjean missed entirely the grudging admiration which appeared briefly on the Secrétaire’s face. Boot heels clipped on the wooden floor, and Valjean raised his hands, placing them slowly on the back of his head in a clear sign of surrender.

“Did I not tell you,” began a familiar voice, “exactly how this farce would end?”

Valjean whipped around as far as the chair would allow. Javert stood alone in the middle of the room, arms crossed. His ire seemed to be directed at the Secrétaire, who returned the man’s expression with resignation.

“Alright, Inspecteur, you’ve made your point.” Chabouillet shook his head. “I’ve never seen anything like it. He did not so much as reach for his wand.” It was difficult to say whether the Secrétaire was exasperated or impressed by this. “You do still have it, don’t you?”

Belatedly realizing he was being addressed, Valjean pulled the lining of his robe far enough aside to reveal the wooden instrument poking out from a pocket, then let the garment fall back into place.

“Extraordinary,” Chabouillet said.

Under his breath, Javert muttered, “That is the understatement of the year.” Then, more loudly, “What say you, Monsieur?”

The Secrétaire adjusted his cravat, looking thoughtfully at Valjean. For his own part, Valjean was not sure what was happening, but he did not seem to be under arrest yet, so he bore the scrutiny out.
“Very well,” Chabouillet said finally. “Your mission has my blessing. But Javert -” and here he leaned forward, impressing upon them both the importance of his words, “- I do not have the authority to exonerate anyone. That is a power only the courts have. I can turn a blind eye for a day or two, but not forever. Is that clear?”

Javert bowed. “Of course, and thank you, Monsieur.” He glanced at Valjean and tipped his head in the direction of the door. “Come on.”

Valjean got to his feet, not quite able to believe he had dodged disaster for the umpteenth time. He followed Javert from the room, cautiously at first, and then almost racing when no-one tried to stop him.

Back in the hallway, the door to the Secrétaire’s office had barely closed before Javert stopped in his tracks, so much so that Valjean nearly ran into him.

“I can explain,” the Auror said, “but not here. Bernard is on assignment in Austria at the moment, we could borrow his office.”

With that, he hurried down the hall again, Valjean moving to keep pace. Thérèse looked up from her vigil, visibly surprised to see them, but Valjean did not have the chance to fill her in. Javert stopped outside of another door, fumbling with the lock. The lettering on this one read, Alexandre Bernard, Ambassadeur.

The door creaked open into a room illuminated by a single window. A desk with a plush armchair sat in a corner, and one entire wall was covered by an enormous map. The sconces were doused, no doubt due to the Ambassadeur’s absence, but Javert did not bother lighting them. No sooner had Valjean let the latch fall than the Auror caught his arms, pulling him closer so they stood nearly chest to chest.

“Are you well?” Javert asked, his usual abrupt tones discarded in favor of plain concern.

Valjean nodded a little dazedly.

“I’m sorry for... that,” the Auror went on, making a violent gesture in the direction of the Secrétaire’s office. “He would not take it at face value when I said you bore us no ill will, hence the necessity of a demonstration.”

Valjean lifted a shoulder by a fraction. “No harm done,” he replied.

“‘No harm done’,” Javert repeated dryly, “except for having scared you out of your wits again. You’ve been through too much already, you don’t need Chabouillet breathing down your neck.”

“I’m fine,” Valjean murmured. “It’s over, for now.”

“For now.”

Valjean was very conscious of the way Javert’s hips canted forward, even as the Auror seemed to lean back, checking for any token of evidence that Valjean was less fine than he claimed. A sudden flush of heat on his neck was accompanied by the sensation of subcutaneous sparks running rampant, filling his veins with a distinct tingling.

Attempting to distract himself, Valjean asked, “Was there a reason this couldn’t be said in the corridor?”

Javert met his eyes, and the tingling did not stop; rather, it only got stronger, pooling in his extremities and turning any coherent thought into so much radio static.
“I was a fool before,” Javert said. “Probably I am a fool now, but at least I am somewhat aware of it.” He stopped mid-thought, and Valjean wondered if the Auror felt the same way he did, like his entire being was replaced by his thudding heartbeat.

Javert tugged his wand from its pocket, holding it at eye level. Valjean stared, amazed, at the green wood smoothing out every crack and imperfection. His fingertips brushed over the pale scar, silky smooth and alive. Perhaps it was the only such wand in the world.

“Do you know what that is?” the Auror asked softly. “I do not understand it, I only know that you are somehow the cause.”

It seemed Javert’s eyes had turned dark, and Valjean was conscious of a hand curled around his elbow, with another on his back. The Auror wet his lips nervously.

“Jean... May I still call you that?”

“It is my name, isn’t it?” Valjean croaked.

“Jean.” Javert took a deep breath. “I told you I am not a young man. This is so. And even if I am not old, I am still too old to pretend not to want what I obviously do.”

Valjean did not trust himself to follow the thread of Javert’s thoughts in his dizzied state. “What you do want?”

There was a touch of self-reproach in his voice as Javert said, “I have not been good to you, Jean. There is no denying that, and nor should it be swept under the rug. But if we were to die tomorrow, I’d at least like to have lived one night knowing if you would...” The words caught in the Auror’s throat. “…If you would have me.”

Almost stumbling, Valjean closed what space was left between them, laying his head against Javert’s shoulder. “You really are a fool,” he whispered, his vision blurring, “if you thought for one moment my answer would be anything other than ‘yes’.”

Valjean felt arms tighten around his back. His own had fallen somewhere in the vicinity of Javert’s waist. They stood like that for a while, until the beating of their two hearts became united in a single pulse.

Javert’s cheek pressed itself into Valjean’s white curls. “I should have asked permission last time,” he murmured, “but I did not. Would you mind terribly if I were to -” The word “kiss” came out sounding stifled, as if it were not quite in the Auror’s vocabulary. “- you again?”

The pair of them felt rather than heard Valjean’s huff of laughter. “You make it sound like such a chore,” he commented, tilting his head back until their faces brushed. “I wouldn’t mind at all.”

The tip of Javert’s nose traced down the ridge of Valjean’s until their mouths were barely an inch apart. For a moment, they breathed the same air, and then Javert very carefully placed his lips over Valjean’s own.

The first kiss they had shared was brought on by a heady combination of panic and the thrill of making their getaway. Their second was intentional, softer, and Valjean’s eyes closed of their own accord as Javert sighed against him.

With his wand in working order again, Javert had trimmed back his stubble, but the experience was still a whiskery one, a fact which Valjean actually rather enjoyed. He also enjoyed having the Auror pulled within arm’s reach, his fingers wrapped up in a handful of dark blue robes. These
little things he noticed in an abstract way, as he tried to comprehend the larger reality which was Javert’s lips, firm but pliant, on his.

A tiny dart of tongue escaped Valjean’s mouth before he could stop it, and Javert nearly purred.

“Careful,” the Auror said in a voice pitched lower than Valjean had ever heard it. “Or we won’t be any better than Vidocq and Paulette at the Christmas social.”

“Vidocq can go jump in a lake,” Valjean replied with feeling, and promptly kissed Javert again. If the man’s answering hum were any indication, Javert was in complete agreement.

Eventually, and not without a significant amount of regret, the Auror took a step back.

“We should go,” he said. “Get something to eat, rest.”

Valjean tilted his head. “Are you ever going to tell me what’s happening tomorrow?”

Javert nodded. “For once, the plan is simplicity itself. I can tell you while we pick up groceries.”

“Groceries?”

The Auror reddened, but held his gaze. “I thought you might want to go back to your own apartment tonight.”

“Oh.” A small smirk spread over Valjean’s face as he considered this. “It would be terribly rude of us to continue to intrude on Thérèse’s hospitality.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Javert agreed. Pulling the door open a crack, he looked up and down the hallway. “Deserted,” he said. “It’s safe.”

Valjean followed the Auror out of the little chamber. Turning to the side, Javert made straight for the Préfet’s office, outside of which Thérèse was still standing.

“Satki should be arriving soon to remove Gisquet to an actual cell,” the Auror said as he approached. “When she does, you are free to go. It seems your name happened to crop up in the registry accounts, so there are no charges to be made against you.”

Thérèse tousled her hair and grinned. “Thank you, Monsieur,” she said.

“What are you thanking me for?” Javert asked. “If a few documents were corrected, well then, that’s just good bookkeeping.”

“I s’pose you gentlemen be headin’ home, then?” Though her words were innocent enough, there was enough tact in Thérèse’s tone that Valjean was left to wonder how good the woman’s canine hearing really was.

“I thought we might,” Javert replied, equally as smooth.

The woman nodded. “Keep the clothes,” she said to Valjean. “They don’t fit me, and by the time my boys be big enough, the moths will have eaten them to rags.” Looking between the two men, Thérèse added, “Come and visit some time. Both of you. And stay out of trouble, now.”

Chuckling, Javert said, “I wouldn’t hold your breath.”

It was evening, and outside the apartment window the street lights let off their yellow glow. Valjean sat on the couch, leaned comfortably against Javert’s side. A half-filled wine glass
perched delicately between his fingers.

Javert had objected to the wine at the grocer’s, arguing that it was too early to boast their success. As he had put it, “The Lestranges were popping corks from champagne bottles and look what happened - you blew a hole in their marble floor.”

But Valjean had argued back that the mere fact they were still alive was reason enough to celebrate, and in the end he had had his way. Javert was certainly not protesting anymore; his wineglass rested against his knee, almost empty. A faint blush on his cheekbones bespoke the infrequency with which he drank, and Valjean was himself feeling a bit drowsy.

“I was thinking,” Valjean said. It was the first either of them had spoken in an hour.

Javert’s mouth barely moved as he replied, “That’s a dangerous thing to do after a couple of drinks.”

Valjean managed to appear indignant. “This is only my second glass,” he retorted.

“Well, go on,” said Javert, looking smugly at the man nestled against him. “What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking,” Valjean said, taking a sip, “that I might like to buy a house. Not an apartment, but a proper sort of a place, quiet, and out of the way. Maybe with a garden.”

“A house, huh?” Javert stared into the bottom of his glass. “I think I’ll stick to an apartment.”

The wine made Valjean daring. “You could get another apartment, I suppose.”

It took a moment for the words to sink in. Then Javert snorted. “If I was sober, I would laugh in your face.”

“Well, you’re certainly not drunk.”

“I’m drunk enough if I am even entertaining the idea.” Javert scowled. “I cannot move in with you, there would be a scandal.”

Upon returning to the Gorbeau Tenement, the pair had found Chouette waiting for them; now the little owl sat on the back of an armchair, preening happily in the company of those whom she considered her roost-mates. Javert pretended to be watching her as Valjean replied, “It wouldn’t be so scandalous. Plenty of people lodge with another renter.”

Javert exhaled heavily. He leaned forward far enough to deposit his empty wine glass on the cheap coffee table. Then he sat back, laying his head against Valjean’s.

“A house, huh?” he said again after a beat. “A garden would be good for the little one.”

Valjean looked at him askance. “The little one?”

“Cosette.”

In the ensuing silence, Valjean blinked. “You remembered,” he said, shock creeping into his voice.

“Well,” conceded Javert, shrugging his shoulders, “you were hardly going to let me forget. I decided I should learn her name if soon she’s going to be demanding all your attention.”

It was a long while before Valjean replied. His eyes had glazed over dreamily, imagining the
happy laughter of a child playing in the sunshine. Then he shook himself. “I know nothing about being a parent,” he said. “I had thought to have her adopted by... by someone of good standing, who could love her like their own.” Though he did not say it, the implication that he meant someone without a criminal background was clear.

Javert laid his hand on Valjean’s knee. “And where are you going to find this mythical person, hmm?” His manner turned gruff, unaccustomed as he was to displays of emotion. “I can think of no better protector, no-one kinder, and no-one more giving than you are. If such a person exists, I hope never to meet them - you are quite enough for me to handle on your own.”

Valjean gave a suspiciously watery chuckle. “God forbid you have to put up with more of that.”

“Indeed,” Javert agreed with mock severity. “You already seem to have been a corrupting influence. I have not turned in early once in my career, and yet I find I am about to suggest we go to bed.”

“To bed?”

“To bed,” the Auror confirmed. “Before we fall asleep sitting on this couch. I think it is more springs than cushion.”

Valjean asked a different way, to be certain he was understanding. “You mean, go together?”

“I would like that,” came the quiet reply.

Getting to his feet, Valjean held out his arm. Javert took it, and they walked down the hallway to the bedroom like a set of bookends, mismatched, but undeniably a pair. What came after, the soft laughter and wandering hands, would prove to be a comforting balm on their memories in the long days to come.

And when they awoke the next morning curled against each other, it would be in the knowledge that there was a final challenge still to face, one which would shape not only their own futures, but the future of their country.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Please be advised that the "graphic depictions of violence" tag is at least somewhat applicable again in this chapter (so sue me).

All the wand lore in this fic comes from or was directly inspired by the information provided by J. K. Rowling herself on the Pottermore website. In fact, one of the very first things I did when outlining this story was figure out the details of Valjean and Javert's wand types. Credit where credit is due - this story would not be what it is without Pottermore.

It was growing dark, a fact which had Valjean on edge.

“Are you sure this is going to work?” he asked the Auror behind him.

“No reason to think that it wouldn’t,” Javert replied. “Just don’t take your eyes off the garden.”

They had been standing back to back for what was approaching two hours. Around them, the Salon Rouge represented only a fragment of the Baroque splendor which could be found inside the Hôtel Matignon. In spite of its name, the Salon was predominantly cream and gold. Intricate, scrolling plasterwork outlined dozens of panels on the linen-colored walls, and all of it was brushed with gilt. Only the upholstery was red, and the tall velvet curtains, though in the glow of the fireplace everything took on an orangish hue. The crystal chandelier was unlit, keeping the chamber dim.

Outside the room’s three windows, the garden was vanishing into the gloom. Valjean watched through the glazing with a hawk’s eye; he was to alert Javert at the first sign of movement. The Auror was watching the door with the same quiet focus.

For the time being, the Hôtel was empty but for the pair of them. The staff had been evacuated, while Premier Ministre Marchand had been taken in protective custody to a safe house where he would be guarded by Secrétaire Chabouillet and a few loyal others. All that remained was to wait until the city residence was besieged by Death Eaters, and then arrest them. Javert was certain they would fall for the trap. From what he had observed of Bellatrix, Valjean was inclined to agree.

He shifted positions, stamping the circulation back into his feet. A few garden lights switched on, their circuits on a timer. Electric illumination swept over the lawn and flower beds. There was still no sign of anyone coming, but that meant little. They knew only that the attack was to be carried out that Tuesday night; they had never uncovered the precise time. An assault could come in moments, or not for hours.

“Javert?” Valjean asked, even as his gaze took another sweeping pass across what he could see of the grounds.

The Auror grunted in response, which was about as much idle chatter as he had made all evening.

“I have a question.”
Another grunt; Valjean assumed it was an affirmation to continue.

“Do you remember, that day, how exactly it was you worded our agreement?”

Javert did not reply at first. Valjean was not holding out hope for anything more verbose than a third grunt, but after a long stretch of silence, the Auror asked, “Am I to assume there is a reason you want to know?”

Valjean nodded, though Javert could not see him. “Something Thérèse said. She proposed the possibility of a loophole, that something in the verbiage might not be as binding as we thought.”

“And you want to discuss this now?”

Valjean squinted at a rustle in the hedgerow, but it was only a rabbit. “I am here because Chabouillet recognizes that I am essential to your plan succeeding. The moment I am no longer useful, he will not be able to justify my freedom any further.” Pursing his lips, Valjean went on, “That moment will come by the end of the night. We are running out of opportunities to discuss it.”

With a sigh, Javert said, “I imagine you are referring to the third condition, your eventual return to prison, correct?”

Valjean took a breath. “Correct.”

There was another silence, though it was broken somewhat by Javert shifting his weight in thought. Then he said, “‘When it is decided by the court that you are to return to Azkaban, will you go without offering resistance?’ That was the question, as I asked it. It was meant to be watertight.”

Valjean bit his lip, trying to hear the words objectively without thinking about what they meant for him. Chabouillet’s voice drifted through his head: I have to have you put away until the court can decide what’s to be done with you. The Vow made one critical assumption; take away that presupposition and the rest crumbled.

“It is watertight,” Valjean declared, “if the court sends me back to Azkaban. If they choose to do otherwise...”

He trailed off as he spotted more movement beyond the windows, just outside the ring of garden lights.

“Javert?” he said instead. “I think they are here.”

Upstairs, a floorboard creaked.

“Yes,” Javert said back. “I do believe they are.”

“Watch your mouth,” warned Valjean. “Don’t goad them, no matter how tempting it may be.”

“They have to concentrate on us,” Javert insisted, “without looking too closely at the big picture. Just remember to send the signal.”

The signal. Yes. Valjean knew to do that. He braced himself, wand in hand.

Outside, the flurry of activity intensified, and then all three windows simultaneously imploded, hurling shards of glass like knives towards the pair in the middle of the Salon.
Valjean had anticipated this. He cast a Shield Charm in front of himself, and the deadly projectiles rebounded harmlessly off of it. When the hail storm ceased, the shredded curtains fluttered in the night wind. They fluttered, also, as dozens of black-clad figures in masks appeared at the openings. In the center was a witch without a mask, one whose face alone was enough to make Valjean’s skin crawl. Bellatrix wore a wide grin, even as she leaped over the low sill into the Salon.

“Very clever, boys,” she exclaimed, her elation readily apparent. “We wondered if we would find you here tonight, Rudolph and I. So as you can see, we brought a few of our associates.”

Robed figure after robed figure climbed in through the window fenestrations. Valjean could hear more pouring in from the door behind him. Obviously, the group sent to enter from the roof had succeeded. Javert nudged Valjean in the side, and they rotated where they stood by a quarter-turn, until it was possible to watch the windows out of one eye and the door out the other.

The Death Eaters surrounded them on all sides, silently observing. They were in no hurry, not when the two men they were after were so thoroughly out-flanked. Bellatrix leered, and the shadows distorted her features. She pointed a finger at Valjean.

“Kill that one,” she said. Her finger moved to Javert. “But keep the Auror alive. We will take from his mind where he has hidden the Premier Ministre - then I will kill him.”

Valjean swallowed. There could be no question that the witch had taken the bait, and while this was a good thing if one were the fisherman, it was a very bad thing if one were the worm dangling on a hook. In that particular scenario, Valjean was uncertain which he was meant to be.

He eyed the windows. A seething mass of Death Eaters stood between him and where he needed to be. Javert could look after himself, Valjean reasoned. For the next couple of minutes, it was his own life he needed to worry about.

The Salon lit up all at once as spells flew through the air. Valjean ducked down, aware of Javert doing the same, as a jet of green light shot past the empty space where his head had been but a moment ago. Shield Charms were only good for so much; there was no countering a Killing Curse.

Rolling to the side, Valjean landed on his haunches. Half a dozen Death Eaters blocked the path to the nearest window. He pointed his wand at the ground underneath their feet.

“Glacius,” he said, and the parquet floor turned into a sheet of ice.

Four of the wizards slipped, cartwheeling to the ground as their feet slid out from under them. Two, however, remained standing, just outside the spell’s radius. The one in front jabbed with his wand.

“Avada kedavra,” he spat, and Valjean threw himself to the side, away from the lethal green light.

“Stupefy,” Valjean returned. The spell missed, arching over his attacker’s shoulder. “Stupefy,” he said again. “Stupefy, Stupefy -”

He stopped as one of the bolts of red light struck the Death Eater in the chest, and he fell to the ground. The other one saw the look on Valjean’s face and froze, just long enough for Valjean to redirect his wand out the broken window.

“Periculum!” he shouted. An explosion of red sparks shot through the opening, illuminating the night beyond.
Distantly, Valjean was aware of Bellatrix’s voice. “A flare,” she gasped. “They are not alone - they tricked us!”

Jinxing a wizard as he tried to climb off the ice, Valjean turned and locked eyes with the witch. Bellatrix’s face was white with fury.

“Meddlesome filth,” she hissed. “Avada kedavra!”

Valjean dropped to the floor so fast it sent a jarring pain through his knees, and the curse sailed over him, striking instead an unlucky Death Eater who had been creeping up from behind. The Death Eater collapsed, dead before he hit the ground.

Lifting his head, Valjean saw that Bellatrix was already in the middle of repeating her curse. He knew instantly there was not enough time to move. Short of a miracle, he would die.

At that moment, a bright, white light struck Bellatrix between the shoulder blades. The curse on her lips became a snarl as she forgot Valjean entirely, doing an about-face to look for who dared attack her. She did not have to look far. In turning, she revealed Javert, his wand trained on her unalteringly.

“You.” Bellatrix’s poise shifted, panther-like. “This was your doing.” She raised her arm, her wand hand trembling with anger, but whatever curse it was she uttered, it was drowned out by the sudden overlapping pops of air displacement as twenty-four more bodies Apparated into the Salon.

The Aurors had arrived.

For a moment, pandemonium reigned. The Aurors lined the perimeter, encircling the Death Eaters entirely, and panic spread through the Dark wizards’ ranks like a disease. A few tried to Disapparate, but a grimace of pain crossed their features, and they doubled over.

“Fools!” Rodolphus Lestrange had assumed control, striding into the midst of his forces. “If you can’t get away, neither can they. You don’t want to go to prison? Kill them!”

A roar of assent went up from the Death Eaters. Rallying, they surged forward, meeting the Aurors in a clash of hexes and sparks. Where before Valjean had been beset by six at once, now he found that he was temporarily forgotten in the melee, his enemies distracted by the newcomers.

Valjean looked around. Bellatrix had scarcely even noticed the Aurors; she was locked in a duel with Javert. They circled around the table in the center of the Salon, volleying spells back and forth so quickly it seemed to happen in a blur. Though Javert’s face was tight, beaded with sweat, Valjean could not intervene without risking either hitting Javert or breaking his concentration. Much as he longed to help, it could well do more harm than good.

Continuing to turn, Valjean spotted the witch, Sati, dueling two Death Eaters simultaneously. He darted through the throng to assist her, but before he arrived, she had one reeling back, face erupting in red welts, and the other tipping over like a stone statue. Meanwhile, Chevallier, whom Valjean remembered too well from his disastrous appeal, smashed a third wizard through a settee.

Valjean stopped short. Perhaps, he thought, it was better just to leave the fight to the Aurors. He had done his part luring them in, and these people were trained in combat where he was not.

No sooner had he drawn this conclusion, than things began to go wrong.

In the far corner, a spell lifted Mlle. Lapointe off her feet and threw her against the wall. She slid down the plasterwork, the impact shaking loose a mirror from its hook; the mirror fell, cracking
across the Auror’s head, and she lay still. Nearer by, a blue-robed wizard Valjean had not met was fatally dispatched, a halo of green light shining eerily around his figure before he collapsed.

Valjean ran into the void left by the body, firing one Stunning Spell after another at the closest Death Eater. The wizard blocked them all easily. Raising his wand momentarily to his own face, the wizard’s mask Vanished. Underneath was revealed Vidocq, smiling like a skull.

“Crucio,” he said, the smile never wavering.

Valjean’s legs bent and he pressed a hand to his heart as a wave of pain broke over him, but he remained standing.

“You should leave that spell to Bellatrix,” Valjean growled. “You haven’t got her flair.”

Vidocq’s smile soured, becoming a scowl. “I’ll get there,” he said. “Maybe you’d like to volunteer for target practice - you could tell me when I’m getting close.”

Valjean stepped to the side and Vidocq followed suit; they walked carefully in a loop, each watching the other with no small amount of distrust. The trouble, Valjean thought, was that for all Javert might say to the contrary, Vidocq was not totally incompetent. Sleazy, yes, and as two-faced as Janus himself, but not incompetent.

Vidocq’s fingers twitched around the handle of his wand, and Valjean braced himself.

“Confringo!” Vidocq cried, just as Valjean said, “Expelliarmus!”

Both spells hit their targets. A fiery blast struck Valjean in the chest, pushing him by several feet, even as flames blossomed on his clothing. At the same instant, Vidocq’s wand was ripped from his hand, twirling through the air to where Valjean had stood mere moments before. As the space was now unoccupied, the Death Eater’s wand fell to the floor.

Muttering, “Aguamenti,” Valjean drenched the front of his robes. Doubtless, he would find himself a bit singed later, but just then he felt nothing except satisfaction.

Satisfaction quickly changed to horror as movement across the room caught his attention. Eyes growing round, Valjean sent a Stunning Spell at Vidocq and took off toward it, not even waiting to see whether the jinx landed.

In front of him, a scene was unfolding out of a nightmare. Three Aurors stood in a cluster, dueling just as many Death Eaters, only one of the Dark wizards was no longer spouting curses. He was changing shape, becoming taller and broader, arms lengthening and growing hair. In the seconds before his face was distorted past recognition, Valjean recognized the loup garou, DuPont, who had threatened him at the Château de Lestrange.

Then the man DuPont was gone, replaced by an enormous black wolf. The creature stood perhaps ten feet tall, and a couple of people screamed as they registered the giant creature in their midst. The wolf which was DuPont paid no mind to the screaming, its gaze focused on the Auror it had been dueling with, M. Coste.

Coste was paralyzed. To be fair, he was not the only one. The skirmish in that quadrant of the Salon had ground to a halt, and even the Death Eaters were scurrying out of the way, aware of what the wolf was capable of.

Valjean skidded to a stop alongside the other two Aurors, who were regarding the scene warily. One of them was Satki again, no sooner having won one fight than launching into another, though she barely spared a glance for Valjean as he stood beside her.
“Mathis, get out of there,” Satki said, her mouth a grim line.

“Negative," Coste replied, and Valjean had to admire the man’s nerves; his voice did not betray a single tremor. “Wolves are predators, Satki. If I run, its hunting instincts will kick in.”

Except it’s not a wolf, thought Valjean. It is a Death Eater, and he is planning to kill you regardless.

The wolf crouched. For the briefest of moments, Valjean almost mistook its posture for fear as it curled back on its hind legs, but then he realized his mistake. There was no time to call out a warning before it launched like a coiled spring directly at Coste. A single, powerful paw the size of a dinner plate struck the Auror on the ribs, landing him flat on his back.

Pinned down, Coste could only struggle in vain to push the paw aside as a canine snout snuffled at his hair. All it would take was for the wolf’s scythe-like claws to press down a little harder against his chest, and no amount of magic would be able to repair the damage. Valjean winced; someone had to do something.

Coste had enough presence of mind left to remember the wand in his hand. Pointing his arm above him, he cast a Conjunctivitis Curse directly into the creature’s sclera. The wolf reared up, shaking its head, and Coste propelled himself backwards.

He was not fast enough. Like all fantastic creatures, loup garou were resilient to magic directed against their person. The Conjunctivitis Curse sputtered out of existence, and DuPont sensed his quarry escaping. Once again, the great paw came crashing down, holding the Auror in place like a doll. Once again, the wolf’s head hung menacingly above its chosen victim. This time, however, the creature’s yellow eyes burned with a very human anger.

Leaning down, the wolf’s mouth opened to reveal rows of sharp porcelain teeth and a long, gray tongue. Abandoning any pretense of calm, Coste threw his arm over his head. His face was turned away, pressed against the floor as if that might spare him.

“Oh my God,” breathed Satki.

The wolf lunged suddenly, clamping Coste’s forearm in its powerful jaws. Those jaws closed tighter than a steel trap, and everyone instinctively flinched at the sound of bone splintering. Coste screamed as rivulets of his blood dripped from between monstrous teeth.

Valjean did not think twice as he elbowed past the Aurors, though he did stop when Satki grabbed his shoulder.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she demanded. “That thing will make mincemeat of you.”

“Maybe,” Valjean replied evenly. He glanced over at Coste, just as the giant wolf jerked its head to the side, yanking the Auror’s arm in its socket. Coste screamed again in agony. “But I’m not going to stand here and watch a man get torn apart, either.”

Satki nodded slowly, releasing her grip. “We’ll cover you,” she said.

But Valjean was already gone, striding across the no-man’s land between the small crowd and the wolf.

Elsewhere in the Salon, the fighting continued, but Valjean tuned it out. The wolf ignored him as one might ignore a fly, intent on its mission to rend Coste limb from limb. It only paid attention when Valjean laid his hands on its muzzle, and then it paused. A large, wet nose snorted with
what might have been lupine laughter.

“What’re you... doing?” Coste asked weakly.

Valjean did not answer, just met DuPont’s yellow eyes in a silent challenge. The wolf’s hackles lifted in warning. Valjean worked his way into the creature’s slobbery maw, one hand on its top jaw, and the other on its bottom, threading his fingers between teeth.

“Can you stand?” he asked, not breaking eye contact with the wolf. Without waiting for an answer, Valjean went on, “As soon as you are able, get out of the way.”

“You’re mad,” Coste half-laughed, tears streaming down his face.

Very deliberately, Valjean began to push, trying with every ounce of brawn in his body to pry the top of the wolf’s mouth away from the bottom. At first, DuPont seemed to tolerate this with something like amusement. Then, the teeth buried in Coste’s arm pulled out by a fraction of an inch, and the wolf’s ears flattened against its head, recognizing a worthy opponent. Growling low in its throat, the wolf bit down harder, and Coste groaned.

Valjean was not about to be cowed. He pushed back, calling upon reserves of strength not granted to most, the sort of strength which had once allowed him to lift a vehicle off of a townsman. Little by little, the wolf’s jaws were forced open.

Disbelief flashed across the wolf’s expression. It raised its paw, taking half a step back in surprise, and that was when Satki acted. Her and her comrade, a lilac-haired wizard, ran forward. Satki looped her arms under Coste’s armpits, dragging him bodily away. The wizard countered spells thrown by the Death Eaters, who were overdue in realizing that their ace in the hole had been beaten.

As Satki pulled Coste to relative safety, Valjean was reviewing his options. He was left with a problem: namely, that he was face to face with a wolf almost twice his height, and had just made himself its principle target. Even if he could get to the wand in his pocket, it would not do him any good, and strong though he was, he did not think he would fare well if the creature got him pinned down.

All at once, the wolf opened its mouth wide, shaking Valjean’s grip loose. Valjean traipsed backwards, narrowly avoiding serrated teeth as the creature snapped at him. His hands were slick with drool and Coste’s blood; wiping them on his robes as best he could, Valjean watched every twitch of DuPont’s tail. DuPont was cautious now, unsure what to expect from this human with the vigor of a giant. He paced, and Valjean did the same, maintaining a cautious distance between them.

Inevitably, the wolf struck. A paw came swiping down from the right, and Valjean danced out of the way. He realized too late that it was a feint. Another swipe came from the left, and Valjean stopped where he stood, knees buckling, as the weight of the swing caught him on the shoulder. The weight was followed by a sensation first of ice, then of fire, as claws raked down the side of his arm. He sank to the floor, shock numbing the pain, but not for long.

There seemed to be quite a lot of liquid soaking the sleeve of his robe, and the wolf’s nostrils flared as the metallic tang reached its palate. It stalked forward, preparing to finish him off. Valjean glanced around dizzily, hoping that wherever Javert was, he would not see.

The wolf loomed over him, mouth gaping. It was going to eat him, then, or snap his spine between its teeth. Valjean supposed he was afraid, but he had been faced with the prospect of his own death enough times that the idea no longer inspired the same reaction. Or perhaps that was
the shock again, he was unsure.

Though saliva dripped down onto his robes, Valjean did not move, continuing to sit in stupefaction. The loss of blood made it difficult to think, much less to get up. Something shoved against his uninjured side, and then Satki was there, aiming her wand up into DuPont’s heaving muzzle.

The spell she cast was a bright point of light, and it flew down the loup garou’s gullet. The effect was instantaneous. The wolf snorted and growled, but try as it might to hold back, its form twisted and shrank in a whirlwind of color. When the whirlwind stopped, the wolf was gone, leaving just DuPont the man swaying woozily.

A single spell from the lilac-haired wizard threw DuPont against the wall, and he stayed there as his head connected with a crack against the decorative paneling.

“How...?” Valjean asked, struggling to his feet.

Satki extended a hand to help him. “It always works on Animagi,” she said. “You’re welcome, by the way, convict.” The slight grin on her face took away any sting the words might have possessed.

“How...?” Valjean asked, struggling to his feet.

Satki extended a hand to help him. “It always works on Animagi,” she said. “You’re welcome, by the way, convict.” The slight grin on her face took away any sting the words might have possessed.

“Thank you,” Valjean said fervently. “A thousand times.”

They were winning. This was the assessment Valjean made as he staggered away from DuPont’s unconscious body. Both sides had sustained losses, but the Aurors seemed to be gaining the upper hand.

Valjean’s left arm hung uselessly at his side; it needed a real Healer’s ministrations, not the sort of wound he could see to himself. He held his sleeve close around it, trying to staunch the blood flow.

“Valjean.”

Looking up, Valjean met the gaze of the lilac-haired wizard, whom he had learned was called Merle. The wizard beckoned, and Valjean shuffled over, feeling light-headed.

“Let me see,” said Merle, and Valjean held out his arm obligingly. Nearby, Coste had been settled into an overstuffed red chair; he seemed to be unconscious, but his chest moved with steady breath.

“Will he be alright?” Valjean asked as Merle prodded the deep gouges in his shoulder.

“He won’t have use of that arm for a while,” replied Merle, “but he’ll live, thanks to you.”

Valjean shrugged off the thanks uncomfortably.

“Ferula,” Merle enunciated, tapping the torn skin with the end of his wand. Bandages issued like ribbons from the tip, wrapping around Valjean’s upper arm firmly.

“That’s a useful spell.”

“Mmm,” Merle agreed. “You’re fortunate it wasn’t your wand arm. Can you defend yourself?”

When Valjean nodded, he clapped him on the back and added, “Good man.”
As Merle went to go check on Coste, Valjean turned to the rest of the Salon. Small groups were still sparring; he spotted Proulx entangled with two Dark wizards, while another Auror team had a group of Death Eaters surrounded and were taking them down like fish in a barrel. Rodolphus was restrained, shackled by an Auror with wild white hair. He was not the only one. There were now more Death Eaters sulking in handcuffs, it seemed, than continuing to fight.

What drew Valjean’s gaze, and indeed the gaze of most, was the fireworks display in the center of the room. It appeared that neither Bellatrix nor Javert had made any significant impact upon the other; evenly matched, they had long since given up speaking their spells aloud, requiring the speed of thought to attack and parry quickly enough. The air around them rippled with magic, as a technicolor storm of curses and counter-curses raged on.

The thing which Valjean saw that nobody else seemed to notice was a body lying just outside the magical dueling arena. The body, which for all intents and purposes had seemed unconscious, now moved slowly to its feet. This was not a hesitancy born from injury, but from duplicity; the black-robed figure checked carefully to see if it was being watched, then knelt and plucked a thin, wooden rod from the floor.

The light caught the figure’s face, and Valjean understood immediately. “Javert!” he cried, even as he groped for his wand. “Javert, look out!”

It was no use. The Auror could not hear him over the whistling, crackling spells exploding around him. The confusion gave Vidocq precisely the chance he needed. Through with feigning senselessness, he aimed his wand straight at Javert’s unprotected back.

"Expelliarmus," said Vidocq.

The Auror’s wand was torn from his fingers, flying over his shoulder. Vidocq caught it deftly, allowing a spell from Bellatrix to burst through Javert’s failing defenses.

The spell hurled Javert backwards; he connected with the ground hard, continuing to slide even after the sound of a sickening crack. Valjean hoped the crack was made by the wooden floor, but he doubted it. The Auror came to a stop only when he collided with an arrangement of gold-leafed chairs, and he lay there panting vainly for breath.

Bellatrix, rather than appreciate the assistance, looked positively incensed. She strode forward, ignoring for the moment her adversary on the floor, and glowered at Vidocq.

“You dare?” she said in outrage, her walnut wand raised in response to the offense. “You dare interfere?”

Vidocq bowed. “Madame, I only thought to -”

“You dare?” Bellatrix’s face was livid, and as worried as he was for Javert, Valjean did not envy Vidocq his shoes. “To undermine my authority? Cur!”

She lashed out, and Vidocq fell as though struck, whimpering. Javert’s wand slipped from the Death Eater’s grasp, and he was quickly apprehended by Chevallier, spelled cuffs clasping his hands behind his back. Chevallier watched Bellatrix suspiciously, but the witch had already put Vidocq from her mind. She was turning back to Javert, who was alert, but he was holding his wrist at an awkward angle, and he was not breathing any easier.

Around the Salon, those who could afford to do so stopped what they were doing to watch. A number of Aurors, seeing the Inspecteur on the floor, hastened forward. Valjean was among them, terrified for every moment that Javert spent as the object of Bellatrix’s attention.
“You think you’ve won?” Bellatrix asked, her voice traveling though it was barely above a whisper. “You think, because you’ve taken a few of us, that we are defeated?”

Her wand was leveled at Javert, but Bellatrix surveyed the room, meeting the gaze of the Aurors circled around her. Her fanatical eyes touched Valjean’s for a fraction of a second, and he shuddered.

“You cannot defeat us,” she hissed. “The power of the Dark Lord grows, and there is nothing — nothing — that will stop him.” Bellatrix stared down at Javert derisively. “Look at how weak you are, all of you. You would have me right now, but you daren’t risk it, knowing what I would do to your precious Inspecteur. Like this - Crucio!”

Javert cried out, bending forward to stifle the sound in his sleeve. He clutched his wrist to his chest, the broken bones grating that much worse as he twisted in the throes of the spell. Mingled revulsion and distress passed over the faces of several observers; the Cruciatus Curse was called “Unforgivable” for good reason.

When the curse ended, the Auror pushed himself back upright, careful not to jostle his hand.

“She is... the priority,” Javert forced through gritted teeth. “Leave me... and get her.”

“Ah, ah, ah,” Bellatrix warned as a few of the Aurors began to close in. “Another step and he dies.”

The Aurors froze, even as Javert said again, “Get the witch.”

Bellatrix was distracted, Valjean realized. She was watching the Aurors, making certain they were staying put, rather than keeping her focus on Javert. And so, in that moment of inattentiveness, Valjean did the only thing he could think to do. Javert’s wand lay across the room, out of reach, but Valjean’s own was there in his hand. Taking careful aim, Valjean tossed it to the Auror.

It was a good throw. The English oak rod flew through the air, landing neatly in Javert’s lap. The Auror startled, looking down at the honey-toned wand with surprise. Half a beat later, his fingers closed around the handle, something very like wonder in his eyes.

Bellatrix had noticed the motion in her periphery, and now she turned sharply to find Javert again furnished with a weapon. She howled in rage, whipping her arm forward with another spell.

On the subject of wands, there were a number of strange things which could be said. Most wizards thought very little about the magical instruments they wielded, but among those who were aware of such things, it was sometimes agreed upon that wands were, in their own way, alive. It was known, for instance, that wands chose their wizards, and not the other way around. It was also known, though to a lesser degree, that they had a tendency to assume the personality of their bearers, refusing to perform spells contrary to their bearer’s nature, or to cooperate with those their bearer might disapprove of.

There was, for a moment, a question on Javert’s face. That question was, would Valjean’s wand even condescend to work with him, having accounted for everything he had ever done to the older man. It would not have surprised him in the least had it sat spitefully in his fist, refusing to protect someone it deemed undeserving from Bellatrix’s wrath. And then, quite suddenly, his question was answered for him.

There was another fact which made the subject of wands strange. It was a fact not openly discussed, as those few wizards who experienced such phenomena often considered the lapse in control an embarrassment. Nevertheless, every once in a long while, certain wands (and
particularly those possessed of phoenix feather cores) took it upon themselves to show initiative, regardless of anyone’s will but their own.

Several things happened all at the same time. Valjean held his breath, almost unable to look. Bellatrix cast her spell, made all the more dangerous as her carefully-laid plot fell to ruin around her. Javert stared at the carved wood in his hand, afraid of what it would mean if the wand did not work for him, and more afraid of what it would mean if it did. And finally, Valjean’s wand, English oak, phoenix feather core, thirteen and a half inches, sensed both Valjean’s intent and Javert’s indecision, and chose to act of its own accord.

The wand spun in Javert’s palm. Before the Auror had time to react, it pointed straight at Bellatrix, and golden flames poured from the tip in a conflagrant line. The phoenix fire blasted the Disarming Spell out of the air, pushing Bellatrix at the broken windows. When the flames disappeared, the Aurors swarmed into the gap between Javert and the witch. Chevallier elbowed his way to the front, staring her down determinedly.

Bellatrix scrutinized the assembly. There was no getting past the wall of wands pointed at her. She spat defiantly. Then the witch swung her arm like a sword, and a burst of green light connected with the wizard holding Rodolphus captive. Grabbing her husband by the arm, Bellatrix gave the Aurors a final, disdainful look, and then lifted them both from the floor, her form disappearing in a thick cloud of smoke.

In a flash almost too fast to see, Bellatrix flew out the window, dragging Rodolphus with her. She vanished into the night, leaving nothing behind but a few, fading tendrils of smoke.

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then the Salon erupted in talk. The dominant theme, aside from astonishment, was the desire to fall in pursuit at once. This suggestion was repeated, growing more fevered, until it was interrupted by muffled, wheezing laughter.

The Aurors turned in unison to behold Javert. Valjean had gone to his side, was helping him up, but that was not why he was laughing.

“You believe you can catch her?” Javert asked, something nearly manic in the way he spoke. “You can not. Certainly, you may get a warrant to search the Château de Lestrange, but if Bellatrix has any sense, she will be on her way to England. We have no jurisdiction to follow her there.”

Valjean held onto Javert’s arm tightly, as much to reassure himself that the Auror was okay as to provide support. He hardly noticed the others looking at them; soon enough, those others recognized that Javert was correct, and so instead turned to more pressing tasks. There were Death Eaters to take into custody, and wounded to tend to. One Auror stood leaned against the wall by the fireplace in apparent exhaustion.

In the quiet moments which followed, Valjean looked over Javert’s face, tucking a strand of hair behind his ear.

“You ought to have someone look at that,” he said, nodding to the Auror’s wrist.

Javert huffed. “I suppose, as you will not let me alone until I do.” His eyes traced over Valjean’s injuries. “Your arm... I must have missed what happened.”

“It is nothing serious,” Valjean lied, unwilling to let the Auror worry over him.

Javert glanced down at Valjean’s wand, still held tight in his good hand. “Did you see...?” he asked uncertainly. Valjean nodded, and he continued, “I did not know if it would work for me,
“So it did that on its own,” Valjean murmured. “I thought it did.”

“Perhaps do not advertise that fact,” Javert replied, equally subdued. “I am of half a mind already to write someone regarding my hornbeam - surely wands are not meant to fix themselves?”

Valjean could only shrug his bemusement, and return his English oak wand to his pocket when Javert handed it to him.

They were hardly given a second’s peace after that. Merle and Chevallier hurried forward, supporting a body between them, and Valjean stepped aside as they stopped before Javert.

“It’s Proulx,” said Chevallier. “One of the Death Eaters hit him with some sort of weird purple light, and he just collapsed. He’s breathing, but not much.”

“We need Healers here,” Javert responded. “Floo Chabouillet - tell him to have the hospital send whoever they can spare.”

Chevallier nodded, disappearing in the direction of the fireplace. Merle laid Proulx down in a chair, and he slumped sideways.

“Lapointe has been revived,” Merle said, “though she will need treatment for head trauma. There are four of ours dead. A few of theirs as well, and the rest are in handcuffs. Azkaban will have a lot of new inmates after tonight.”

Across the Salon, Coste was being woken by a team of wizards. He sat up groggily, but despite what had to be debilitating hurt, Coste looked around intently as though searching for something. His eyes found Valjean’s, and he smiled in weary acknowledgment.

Valjean started, then inclined his head in return. The pain was catching up to him, each laceration burning almost past endurance as the rush of battle receded. He touched a hand to his bandages without scarcely realizing.

Voices from the direction of the fireplace attracted his notice, and Valjean looked up. He caught sight of ginger hair, and swallowed hard. It seemed that the Secrétaire had decided to accompany the Healers to the Hôtel Matignon.

Chabouillet walked among his Aurors, nodding in encouragement and offering advice where it was needed. The group of Healers, easily identified by their brilliant green robes, dispersed throughout the Salon, tending to the injured. As he made his way toward the center of the room, the Secrétaire spotted Valjean.

“Ah, yes,” he said. “I’ll have to have someone deal with you.”

“Yes, Monsieur,” Valjean replied, staring at the ground.

Chabouillet raised an eyebrow. “The Inspecteur’s plan worked, I see. Where is he, anyway?”

“You called, Monsieur?” Javert appeared out of the crowd, flexing his fingers. The Healers had repaired his wrist in the blink of an eye, and he looked to his superior diligently.

The Secrétaire gestured at Valjean. “Your friend’s re-appeal has been slotted for three days from now. It would have been a couple of weeks, but the Premier Ministre convinced the court to move it up. That is the best I can give you - he will have to spend the intermediate period in the Conciergerie.”
Javert frowned, looking between Chabouillet and Valjean. “Monsieur -”

Chabouillet raised his hands, staving off further comment as he looked around at the rest of the Aurors. “Get these -” and he gestured at the Death Eaters, “- into holding cells for the night. You may remove the Anti-Disapparition Jinx to speed the process.”

The majority of the Aurors went to attend to their prisoners, but Javert was still frowning. “Monsieur le Secrétaire, surely the jail time is not necessary. He could go home, and simply attend the day of the appeal.”

Chabouillet gave Javert what was almost a sympathetic look. “Inspecteur, I told you - this is the best deal you are going to get. The court’s Premier Président wants him kept in custody until a decision is reached. He is better off abiding by those wishes.”

Valjean had not lifted his gaze from the floor; now he did so. “It’s alright, Javert.”

“No,” said the Auror, and Valjean recognized the stubborn jut of his chin. “It is not alright. After everything you have done for this country - for Premier Ministre Marchand - and now they want to lock you up like a common -”

“- thief?” Valjean smiled ruefully. “It was to be expected.”

The Secrétaire was growing impatient. “Somebody put him in handcuffs, and let’s have done with it.”

Around the room, Aurors paused what they were doing. Satki turned from where she had a pair of witches by the collar. Merle looked up, crouched near a mahogany desk. Coste, who had been working his way to his feet, sat slowly back down. Even the navy-robed figure next to the fireplace was still. None of them quite wanted to meet Chabouillet’s eyes.

Valjean guessed immediately what the dilemma might be. “You needn’t worry,” he said. “I will come quietly.” He could only imagine after his display with the wolf that the others were wary of approaching him.

And yet, in spite of his reassurances, the Aurors did not surge forward to put him in irons.

“Is there a problem?” Chabouillet asked.

It was Coste who responded, a Healer lending her arm for support as he stood. “Only that... Well, you did not see it, Monsieur, but it was past belief. He saved my life, and I for one do not think I could arrest him.”

“Nor I,” Satki agreed.

“Nor I,” added Merle.

The Secrétaire rubbed his forehead. “This is not personal, it is just a matter of policy. Please, one of you, take care of it.”

Javert stepped between Chabouillet’s line of sight and Valjean, standing at attention. “With respect, Monsieur, I will go to jail myself before I will allow this.”

The Secrétaire’s face registered amazement, but Valjean was the one who spoke. The emotion in his breast was a nameless thing; it felt like eggshells, or cracks spiderwebbing through glass. He had to hold himself together, inasmuch for Javert’s sake as his own.
“Don’t do this,” Valjean implored softly.

“I will not see you imprisoned again.”

“Then don’t.” Valjean had not meant for the words to come out sharp, but it was worth it if it made the Auror listen. “Getting yourself detained in protest helps nothing. Defend me, if you will, and make the court lift its sentence. That is the only way the Vow can be broken.”

“What is he talking about?” asked the Secrétaire.

When Javert answered, his voice was dull with regret. “All this time you thought I was under his enchantment, he has been under mine. I made him swear - swear he would turn himself in, and yet he -” The Auror visibly collected himself, and when he spoke again, his words were toneless. “He saved my life, much as he did Coste’s, though that was never a part of our agreement. He would be free, had he not. Do you see why I...?”

Chevallier piped up then, saying, “For God’s sake, if none of you will do it, then I will.”

The Auror pulled a set of manacles from his robes and approached, but Javert spun around wearing a thunderous expression.

“You will not,” Javert said. “If anyone is going to do it, then it will be me.” He tugged the manacles out of Chevallier’s hands, and when he turned toward Valjean, his face was written with desperation.

Valjean, having already accepted his fate, was too far gone in a deadening haze to do more than blink as Javert came up to him. His arms hung limply at his sides, and true to his word, he did not offer resistance as Javert fit the cold bronze of the pillory-like cuffs around his wrists.

Something cut through the fog afflicting him, and Valjean realized that Javert was repeating the same phrase over and over, with just barely enough volume to hear.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry...”

The Auror was whispering apologies, breath hot against the back of his neck, and Valjean detected a slight tremble in the fingers brushing his own. The manacles fused into a solid piece, holding his hands securely in place behind his back.

“It’s okay,” Valjean breathed back. “It’ll be okay, Javert, I promise.”

The Auror stepped away, and Valjean felt his shoulder twinge as the awkward position pulled at the torn sinew. Javert marched back to the Secrétaire’s side, and the look on his face conveyed only the purest sort of self-hatred.

Chabouillet looked around and nodded. “Very good. Finish here, so that I may inform Ministre Marchand it is safe to return home. After that, I will fill out a warrant; those of you who are well enough will search the Château de Lestrange. Any evidence you find may be helpful, if not to us then to the English authorities.”

A little of the usual life returned to Javert’s expression at that. “I can lead the group,” he said. “I am familiar with the château’s location, as well as its approximate layout.”

Valjean barely latched onto the conversation. It did not affect him; possibly, nothing in the outside world would ever affect him again, unless the court elected not to return him to prison, and Valjean knew that was far from a done deal. His focus faded. It was easier to cast off everything - sensation, emotion - and merely float outside himself.
It was in that dissociative state that Valjean had a rather curious thought. That thought was this: the blue-robed figure standing in the shadows beside the fireplace had neither changed position nor spoken the entire time, so far as Valjean had seen. It just stood there, hooded, instinctively accepted by the group because of its navy Auror’s uniform.

If he had been anyone else, Valjean might not have found this peculiar. Years of hiding, however, had taught him to see danger in every conceivable form, and this silent watcher in their midst definitely struck him as out of place. Then the figure moved, and Valjean had a sudden, horrible premonition.

“Behind you!” he gasped.

Javert pivoted, along with a few others, but not quickly enough. The figure held a surin in its hand; there was the gleam of light on steel, and then the curved length of the blade was pressed against Javert’s throat. The figure pulled Javert tightly to its body; in the brief struggle, its hood fell back, revealing the long, dark hair underneath and eyes alight with malice.

“Madame Élodie Perrier, I presume?” Javert managed, breathing shallowly against the sharp edge eager to do more than nick his skin.

“Quiet,” Perrier snapped, eyeing the sea of dumbfounded faces around her. “Drop your wands,” she added.

Around the Salon, not a single Auror moved, continuing to keep their wands pointed at the witch.

Javert chuckled, a low, choked sound. “They’re too well-trained for that,” he said. “You must realize that whatever you hope to accomplish, I am no good to you as a hostage.”

Perrier’s jaw tightened. “I don’t want you as a hostage,” she replied. “You turned me into a laughingstock, but now even Bellatrix has failed to kill you. I will cut your throat, and think how the Dark Lord will reward me then for ridding him of your insolence.”

Valjean could do nothing but stare. The woman had been pushed too far, and it was plain that she blamed Javert for the loss of her high standing. At the slightest increase of pressure, the Auror’s neck would turn crimson, his own heartbeat bleeding him out. That gruesome image filled Valjean’s mind, and he stood petrified. If he moved, he feared he might scream, or weep, or faint.

A drop of sweat ran down Javert’s forehead as Perrier dragged him in front of her; she would use his dying moments to shield her as she Disapparated. That was her intent, at any rate, but the witch had made an error: she had left his hands untethered.

“Good riddance,” Perrier whispered in his ear.

“See you in hell,” Javert returned. Like lightning, he grabbed at her wrist, shoving the knife away from himself. A swing of the leg delivered backwards knocked the witch off balance and she tumbled, the surin slipping out of her hands to land on the floor.

Javert massaged the thin stripe of red on his neck, even as the Aurors sought in unison to incapacitate the noblewoman. Perhaps Javert thought they succeeded, for he momentarily relaxed his guard, but Perrier had landed where she was covered by a grouping of chairs, and these absorbed most of the magical potshots.

The witch’s fingers scrabbled across the floor, searching out her knife. They closed around the handle, and she sat on her heels, re-appearing over the seat of the chairs. Immediately, a cacophony of spells turned toward her, but not before she threw herself forward, burying the blade
to the hilt in Javert’s side.

After that, everything happened in slow motion.

Javert’s eyes widened. His lips parted in a soundless gasp that nevertheless hit Valjean like a physical blow.

The Auror tugged the knife from the wound. It slid out with a wet snick, the blade glistening scarlet in the firelight. There was a high, keening sound of grief, which Valjean realized had come from his own throat, and then Javert looked right at him, eyes dilated with pain. He stumbled, and sank to his knees.

Perrier had finally succumbed to one spell or another, but Valjean was fixated on the way Javert’s fingers were dripping red as they put pressure on the gash in his thigh. The wound was deep, and while it had to have missed anything essential, the color was fading from the Auror’s cheeks.

Someone touched Valjean on the shoulder. He shrank away, but it was only Satki.

“We need to go,” she said gently. “The Healers will look after him. It’s better for you to follow the court’s instructions, now that your part is over.”

“But I -” Valjean protested weakly as Satki linked her arm through his. “Please, I -”

The witch continued to murmur, but Valjean did not hear her. The last thing he saw before they Disapparated was Javert, staring at him. The Auror’s lips moved, though there was no telling what he said. Later, confined to a cell, Valjean would wish nothing more than that he had caught those words, whatever it was Javert had wanted him to hear.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

The bad news: This chapter is two days late.
The good news: The next chapter is finished already.

Originally, Chapters 21 and 22 were going to be one chapter, but then I realized that would make it a 20k update, which in comparison to my other chapter lengths seemed a little excessive. Just for the record, I have written eight pages since 2 PM yesterday.

Hope that everyone enjoys how things turn out - we're really getting to the finale now!

The Conciergerie looked much as Valjean remembered it. Tall limestone walls closed in on him oppressively, and as there was no sun left to see by, Satki had conjured him a spelled orb of light which hovered in midair. She had also removed the handcuffs, offering some scant words of comfort before leaving him alone to pace the small room.

It was very like the last chamber he had been granted the dubious honor of occupying; in fact, between the shoddy bed and table, it could have been that very jail cell. There was no telling - he suspected they all looked much the same. One noticeable difference from before was the presence of food. A tray of bread and fruit sat on the tabletop, so it appeared the court did not intend to starve him, or at least not until after his case was appealed again.

A shiver ran through him at that thought. It was difficult to think of himself when he had no idea how Javert was faring, but it did occur to him to wonder whether the Grand Chambre might uphold its original decision and have him executed. Even Azkaban would be preferable to that.

Of course, he had not Vowed to cooperate with the Dementor’s Kiss, and therein lay the crux of the matter. The Vow was only binding should imprisonment be his sentence. At the time they had forged their agreement, Javert could never have foreseen a day when he would believe Valjean belonged anywhere besides Azkaban. Now that had changed, and the Auror was, perhaps, going to testify in his defense. There was a chance, a better one than he had ever had, to be free of the charges against him forever.

Valjean quashed firmly the small, niggling doubt in his head which worried that Javert would be in no fit state to make a court appearance; after all, the Healers had mended his wrist in moments. A knife wound was surely an even simpler fix. Still, the memory of the Auror’s eyes boring into his own, turned dark by hurt, haunted him as he wore out his soles treading circles on the floor. *Was he alright? What if the blade had been poisoned? What if -*

Valjean’s dithering was interrupted by the sound of a key in the lock. He turned, reaching reflexively for the wand which had once more been taken from him. The heavy door swung open, and though it was not the person he had hoped to see, his visitors were at least innocuous enough in appearance. A pair of Healers entered, their green robes swishing around their ankles. An Auror Valjean did not know stood in the corridor outside, but he seemed content just to wait as the door again swung shut.
“Good evening,” Valjean said uncertainly. “Have you come from the Hôtel Matignon?”

The Healers glanced at each other, and one nodded the affirmative.

Immediately, Valjean was aflutter with inquiries. “Have you seen what happened to Inspecteur Javert? Is he okay? Will he -”

The same Healer, a red-headed witch, held up her hand. “We are not authorized to answer questions,” she said. “I was given to understand that the occupant of this block required treatment - is that the case?”

Valjean bit his lip, but he gestured at the bandages on his shoulder and sat on the edge of the straw mattress, allowing the pair to approach. The witch’s companion was a tall wizard with a nut-brown complexion, and he knelt beside the bed to hold Valjean’s arm steady.

They were silent as they worked, unwinding the strips of lint to expose the lacerations underneath. Though they were in no way unkind, their manner was aloof; Valjean wondered if that were simply clinical practice, or if it was because of who and where he was. He would have liked for them to say something, even make mindless conversation, but they did not.

Skin knit to skin, muscle to muscle, and Valjean fought the urge to scratch at his arm despite the strangeness of the sensation. He had almost forgotten his injuries in the aftermath of Perrier’s attempted assassination, but he found as the wounds healed that a tension he had been unconscious of carrying left him.

“Thank you,” he murmured as they finished.

Something like surprise went through the Healers’ eyes; perhaps they were simply not used to encountering gratitude in that place, but the witch smiled slightly in response.

“You will find a potion with your food in the morning,” the wizard told him. “You should take it, to clear up any lingering effects. There is some minor scarring on your shoulder, though because it was not a bite, it mended well.”

Valjean nodded his understanding. He thought of Coste’s mangled arm, and decided he had gotten off lightly.

“Are you certain you can tell me nothing of Javert’s condition?” he asked as the pair turned to go.

The Healers kept walking, and did not answer. Valjean watched from across the room as they rapped on the door. The Auror standing in the hall opened it at their signal, and any hope Valjean had of learning what transpired left with them.

The lock fell back into place as the door closed, and Valjean was alone again in the cell. He stared at his knees, the hovering sphere of light casting uneasy shadows in the corners of the room. Valjean could have suffered anything in the knowledge that Javert would be there on the other side of it, but now he did not even know whether the man was well, much less when he would see him next. The weight of his situation brought itself to bear on his shoulders, and Valjean buried his face in his hands.

It began with a faint tremble in his shoulders, which was followed by a dampness in his cupped palms, and Valjean realized he was weeping. That realization did nothing to stem the onset of sobs racking his frame; if anything, it seemed only to encourage them.

Valjean sat, crying, on the bed as the shadows wavered and flickered. It seemed that he cried for a long time.
The next morning found Valjean sitting in much the same position, looking blankly at the floor. So lost was he in thought that he did not notice the sound of hinges turning, nor the entry of the Secrétaire, until a voice said, “You should eat your breakfast.”

Valjean lacked the wherewithal to startle, so rather than jump, he merely blinked and raised his head. The Secrétaire stood just inside the portal, and his expression suggested he was taking the measure of his prisoner, from the dark circles under his eyes to the way his hands were folded in his lap.

“Sleepless night?” Chabouillet asked dryly.

Valjean’s gaze returned to the floor. “Yes,” he croaked.

“No rest for the wicked,” the Secrétaire quipped, but at Valjean’s small flinch, he seemed to take some pity on the man. “Truth be told, I think you have more than a fair shot. Coste will not be attending, but he has signed an affidavit detailing what you did for him, and with Javert’s –”

At that, Valjean lurched unsteadily to his feet. He stepped forward a couple of paces, stopping only when Chabouillet raised his wand in warning.

“Have you seen him?” Valjean asked urgently. “Is he alright?”

“I don’t think -” Chabouillet began, but Valjean cut him off.

“You must say what happened,” Valjean insisted. “Please. Those two Healers last night would tell me nothing - I have been worried sick - you must tell me, it is cruel to leave me in the dark like this.” Valjean’s voice cracked, and he felt tears pricking at the corners of his vision again, brought on by anger and concern and exhaustion.

He forced himself to meet the Secrétaire’s eyes. “I do not think you are a cruel man, Monsieur,” he said faintly. “Please.”

The Secrétaire watched this display of emotion with an odd countenance. His look was by turns appraising, mystified, and finally pensive as Valjean reached the end of his speech.

“I do not like to be told what I must do by convicts,” said Chabouillet. “I like even less to be begged by them.” He paused, tapping his wand against his thigh. “And yet, I find that what you ask is both reasonable and well-intentioned. You should sit - you look like a stiff breeze would knock you over.”

Valjean stumbled backwards automatically and sat on the bed, unable to tear his gaze away now that the Secrétaire promised answers.

“As you know,” Chabouillet began, “Inspecteur Javert was stabbed in the side last night by Madame Élodie Perrier. The Healers have seen to him, and he is expected to make a full recovery.”

Valjean sighed with immeasurable relief. The Secrétaire, however, was still regarding him seriously, and Valjean’s stomach twisted.

“There was a complication?” he asked.

“A minor one,” Chabouillet replied. “The surin Perrier used to do the deed was imbued with a curse.”
“A curse?”

“A very poor one, as it would turn out. It is improbable that Perrier cast the spell herself - more than likely, she bought the enchanted blade some time ago, and whatever power it possessed has waned. Or, perhaps she was duped, and the curse was never much good to begin with.” Chabouillet shrugged. “We are attempting to trace its origin, but I am not holding my breath for any leads.”

The Secrétaire’s lips thinned as he continued, “At any rate, the spell has sapped Javert’s strength, but the effects are not life-threatening. The Healers have him on a regimen of different potions, and he should be restored in a week or two. In the meantime, he is insisting that he attend your appeal, and will hear no argument to the contrary.”

Valjean’s heart was lighter than it had been all night; Javert was hurt, but would recover. He pressed his fingers to his lips to stop himself shaking. Then Valjean asked, “May I see him?”, though he suspected he already knew the answer.

Chabouillet frowned. “I am afraid I cannot allow that,” he said. “In fact, even if I could allow it, I doubt your friend the Inspecteur would agree to come. It would be much too easy for the prosecution to claim witness tampering, given the potential threat of your strength, and your already... unusual relationship.”

Valjean flushed at that, looking away. Surely all the Secrétaire meant was how unusual it was for Javert to have befriended a criminal; he could not know the rest of it. And yet, as Valjean glanced back in Chabouillet’s direction, the pensive expression had settled over the man’s face again, and Valjean was left to wonder if in fact he guessed at more than he let on.

“I understand,” Valjean said, if only to change the subject.

Chabouillet nodded. “Madame Sarkozy will be coordinating your defense. She won’t show it, but I think privately she is excited. This could be the biggest case of her career. You ought to be seeing her later, after she has finished grilling Javert - or visa versa, as the case may be.”

Valjean chuckled; he could only too easily picture that exchange. The Secrétaire shared his wry smile. Clearly, Javert’s habit of demanding information regardless of context was common knowledge.

Chabouillet raised his hand in farewell, turning to leave. A thought struck Valjean then, and he stood.

“And what of Madame Perrier, Monsieur?” he asked. “Has she been detained?”

Chabouillet paused, glancing over his shoulder. “Élodie Perrier is dead,” he said baldly. Seeing the shock on Valjean’s face, he added, “It is no wonder, really, considering the cocktail of spells thrown at her all at once. One reacted badly with another - we will probably never know which.”

Valjean nodded. He could not bring himself to feel happy, but neither did he feel what he would consider proper sorrow for a woman’s death. It was a sin he could atone for later.

The Secrétaire, seeing Valjean had run out of questions, took his leave. The door locked behind him, but for once the sound did not fill Valjean with foreboding. Javert was going to be alright. He settled back onto the mattress, leaning against the wall, and finally dozed.

Mme. Sarkozy did indeed visit, a number of times, in order to put together a suitable defense. Upon her first arrival, she came bearing a message from Javert, “but,” she said sternly, “I am not
Upon her first arrival, she came bearing a message from Javert, “but,” she said sternly, “I am not an owl. Do not expect me to ferry notes back and forth between the two of you.”

The message was simple. In Javert’s tidy script, the scrap of parchment read, I hope you are well. The terse wording nevertheless brought a warmth to Valjean’s heart and a glow to his face. He held it briefly to his chest when he was certain Sarkozy’s attention was turned elsewhere, before folding it and placing it in his pocket like a good luck charm.

The defense attorney was not so optimistic as the Secrétaire. “The Grand Chambre rarely reverses a ruling,” she said. Having insisted that chairs be provided for these meetings, Sarkozy sat with her hands folded on the small table, Valjean across from her. “They do not like to be made to feel foolish,” she went on. “You can expect they will lift the death sentence, but prison time may still be on the docket.”

She drummed her fingers thoughtfully. “Even so, Javert’s word does count for something, and internal investigation suggests that Madame Perrier had undue influence on the outcome of your first appeal, so the odds are not completely against you.”

It had taken hours to account for every possible question, and how they were to be answered. Before Valjean knew it, the day had passed, and then the next, and then it was the morning before his appeal and Valjean could not have been more anxious. He alternated between sitting, a hot, acidic combination of agitation and dread brewing in his stomach, and pacing, trying without success to burn off some of the nervous energy.

A short rap on the door brought him to a halt - it could not be time to go yet, the sun was barely risen. Besides, nobody bothered to knock before entering the cell, that was simply not a courtesy prisoners were afforded. Valjean’s brow creased as he stared at the door in perplexment, then startled as the knock was repeated.

“Enter,” he called, adjusting his shirt.

The door opened, and Valjean’s jaw dropped before he closed it for propriety’s sake. He knew the man stepping over the threshold from the newspapers; it was doubtful whether there was a soul in the country who would fail to recognize the salt and pepper hair or stern features of the wizard standing before him, no longer a printed photograph, but flesh and blood.

Valjean bowed awkwardly from the waist. “M-Monsieur le Premier Ministre Marchand,” he stammered. “I am sorry to have kept you waiting.”

The Premier Ministre waved at the Auror accompanying him to wait outside in the hall, then permitted the door to fall shut. Valjean shuffled his feet, aware that he looked more than a little disheveled, but the Ministre seemed unperturbed. Up close, Valjean decided that the man’s face was kinder than the photographs made it appear, and only when Marchand met his eyes did Valjean realize he was staring. Quickly, he dropped his gaze, but the Ministre did not seem to mind. Indeed, he was staring back, looking Valjean over with a frank curiosity.

“No need to apologize,” said Marchand. His voice carried a hint of the South in its intonation, and he was, overall, a soft-spoken man. “I did not even know whether you would be awake, but in the end I decided you were unlikely to have slept much at all last night.”

Valjean inclined his head. “You would be correct, Monsieur,” he replied.

“No need to apologize,” said Marchand. His voice carried a hint of the South in its intonation, and he was, overall, a soft-spoken man. “I did not even know whether you would be awake, but in the end I decided you were unlikely to have slept much at all last night.”

Valjean inclined his head. “You would be correct, Monsieur,” he replied.

“So polite,” the Ministre remarked, and though the words were spoken with some amusement, they were not mocking. “You may look up, you know,” he added.

Doing as he was bid, Valjean raised his head until their eyes met again. It was unsettling; here was
the seat of political power in wizarding France, having sought him out personally. Valjean forced
himself not to fidget.

“How may I be of service, Ministre?” he inquired.

The Premier Ministre’s answering laughter was as soft as his voice, but no less hearty for it. “If I
am correct,” he said, “then you have already done me a tremendous service. Is it not true that you
helped to uncover the conspiracy which would have ended in my murder?”

Flustered, Valjean responded, “It is.”

“And then willfully put yourself in harm’s way to ensure that conspiracy could not reach
fruition?”

It was increasingly difficult to hold the man’s steady gaze. “I did, Monsieur.”

Premier Ministre Marchand nodded. “My purpose in coming here was not to ask anything further
of you, but to thank you, Monsieur Valjean.”

Valjean’s face twitched involuntarily; he could not remember a time that honorific had been used
in conjunction with his real surname.

The Ministre could only have noticed, but he continued without comment. “Your actions have not
only preserved my life, but have protected countless citizens from exploitation under He-Who-
Must-Not-Be-Named. You should be proud.”

“But Ministre,” Valjean blurted, “it was not only I - There were others who -”

Marchand held up a finger, and Valjean swallowed the rest of his sentence. “Polite and humble,”
the Ministre mused. “I grow more intrigued by your character every minute.”

Then he smiled. “I have already delivered my endorsement to the Grand Chambre du Parlement,
and I am pleased to find I do not regret doing so. After all, if we continue to punish good people
for their past transgressions, then why should anyone ever change?”

It was not in Valjean’s power to answer. He just nodded mutely, too overwhelmed to speak.

The Premier Ministre did not seem discomfited by Valjean’s silence. He simply went on to add,
“Whatever the outcome, I shall be watching.” And then, “Do you know, I rather hope they rule in
your favor.”

Valjean stood fixed in place long after Premier Ministre Marchand left, fighting to suppress an
emotion painfully like hope in his breast. Sooner than he would have liked, however, the door
opened again to reveal Mme. Sarkozy, along with three Aurors. It was time, then.

Sarkozy held a folder stuffed with documents; Valjean could only guess at what all was in there.
Of the Aurors, Satki stood in the center, along with Chevallier and a third wizard whom Valjean
was fairly sure had been one of the party at the Hôtel Matignon.

“You know what you need to say?” Sarkozy asked, tapping her foot in what might have been
impatience, or might have been nerves.

“I think so,” Valjean replied, smoothing his hair so it lay flat.

“I have to cuff you now,” Satki told him. “It’s nothing personal.”
Valjean smiled a little crookedly. “I’m used to it.”

As she approached, Satki said, “Coste wanted to be here, but he’s laid up in hospital. Loup garou bites are tricky to heal, same as werewolves. The marks never fully go away.” She fastened the shackles around Valjean’s wrists, continuing, “They've taken his statement, though. The court will have to account for that.”

Valjean had heard as much from Chabouillet, but the distraction was welcome. He could almost convince himself he did not feel the cold metal close against his pulse point, and he nodded. As he was led from the room, Valjean had another thought: *I have friends here.* That notion settled his iron resolve. *This will not be like the last time.*

A maze of passageways ultimately found the group in front of a walnut-stained door.

“I will go first,” Mme. Sarkozy said. “Valjean, you are to follow after.” She looked at the Aurors. “Are you coming in?”

In the end, it was Chevallier who answered. With a slight glance at Valjean, he said, “We all saw how this man stood up to the Death Eaters. We will go in. And if you need to call another witness... Well. I would defend him.”

The others nodded their agreement, and as Valjean turned to follow Sarkozy into the courtroom, he thought that perhaps the pounding of his heart was not due to fear.

The chamber was unchanged, imposing and cold, and the members of Parlement were already seated on their high benches. Valjean knew to head to the dias, and to the chair fixed in the middle of it. He was conscious of Chevallier following behind, and even more conscious of the way every eye in the room seemed to be turned on him. At his first appeal, the court had been almost casually dismissive in their attitudes. Now he had their complete and undivided attention.

Climbing up to the top of the dias, Valjean experienced a shiver of déjà vu as Chevallier said, “Handcuffs.” He allowed the Auror to remove the restraints, flexing the feeling back into his fingers.

“Sit,” Chevallier added, gesturing to the chair. Valjean knew he did not have a choice, and yet as he looked from the Auror to the thirty-odd faces on the benches, he almost fancied it was of his own accord that he sat deliberately down. He waited for Chevallier to tap the chair with his aspen wand, activating the binding spell which would hold him captive. The moment did not come.

Chevallier stepped down from the dias, leaving Valjean unshackled and unrestrained. If he felt reassured, it was quickly buried under self-consciousness, and he thought perhaps his heart did beat with fear after all. He was like an insect pinned to a board, and for an instant, he almost wished he had been frozen in place; the urge to squirm under the Parlement’s penetrating stare was immense.

On the floor, Mme. Sarkozy took her place at the defendant’s podium. It was not long before the Procureur, Grenier, entered to take the prosecutor’s stand, and then they were waiting on only one other.

Valjean heard the door open behind him. Immediately, he was free of the staring, as all heads turned to the newcomer. Valjean could guess who it was, but he did not dare look in case he was wrong. The footsteps as they crossed the floor were measured, interspersed with the click of a cane. Then the newcomer drew level with the dias, and Valjean could no longer help himself: he glanced down.
Valjean had believed himself prepared. He was not. The naked relief he felt at seeing Javert again beside him was sudden and visceral. The Auror was not looking at him, but up at the Premier Président of the Grand Chambre, and Valjean took a moment to pick out the nuances of his posture. Javert leaned heavily on a black cane, which he gripped like it were a weapon. There remained an ashy pallor to his face, but the quiet dignity in the set of his shoulders was unmistakable.

Javert bowed by way of greeting, and then limped steadily over to where Sarkozy was stationed. Only once he was there did his eyes lift to meet Valjean’s. Valjean saw they held an echo of his own relief, as well as a faint promise of heat, but he did not have the opportunity to think on it, for that is when the Premier Président stood.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the Grand Chambre,” he began, and though the courtroom had already been silent, now that silence seemed stretched taut. “Two weeks ago, we heard the appeal to the case of Jean Valjean, and found him guilty on all charges. However, today we will hear his case again.” He paused, and while the look he gave Valjean was not amiable, neither was it hostile. “New circumstances require new testimonials.”

The Président lifted a parchment off the stand in front of him. He set a pair of reading glasses on his nose, then looked back at Valjean. “You are Jean Valjean of Faverolles?” he asked.

Valjean dipped his head. “I am, Your Honor.”

“Is the name Élodie Perrier known to you?”

A small frown puckered Valjean’s lips. “Yes, Your Honor. She was a noblewoman of some influence, but she was also a Death Eater. She tried on several occasions to kill Inspecteur Javert.”

The Président nodded at that. “It has come to the attention of this court that the late Madame Perrier was involved in a number of criminal activities. One finding is of particular relevance to this case - it was discovered in the hours following Valjean’s previous appeal that several members of this Parlement had been placed under the Imperius Curse, including myself. This was later learned to be the work of Perrier.”

A low murmur went through the assembly at that. From the bobbing of heads, Valjean imagined that this had already been a topic of some great discussion.

Raising his hand for quiet, the Premier Président then selected two more parchments from his podium. “I hold here two affidavits,” he said. “One from Mathis Coste, Auror Second Class, and one from Premier Ministre Marchand. Are you familiar with these documents?”

Valjean hesitated, trying to remember how Sarkozy had instructed him to answer that question. “I have not read them, Your Honor,” said Valjean. “Nor have I discussed the contents with their authors. But I could guess at which events they refer to.”

Adjusting his spectacles, the Président said, “Copies of these statements have been provided to the Parlement for perusal. In short, the contents are thus: Premier Ministre Marchand credits the accused with uncovering a Death Eater plot to overthrow our government, a plot headed by our own Préfet de Préfecture Henri Gisquet.” The murmurings intensified again at this statement, though they died down as the Président went on, “Monsieur Coste would in turn credit the accused with rescuing him from a loup garou attack, at great personal risk to his own safety.”

Having waited a moment for those assertions to sink in, the Président returned the parchments to the podium. “Are these summaries in line with your knowledge of events?” he asked Valjean.
“They are,” Valjean replied. “Though the Premier Ministre is over-generous in his praise. I would not have accomplished anything without Monsieur l’Inspecteur.”

The Président hummed in response. Setting the parchments back down, he turned his attention to the floor. “Now that all are aware of these facts, I would invite Monsieur l’Procureur Grenier to make the opening statements for the prosecution.”

Down on the floor, Grenier did not appear put off by the contents of the affidavits. He took his place at the lectern and began to speak, entirely unruffled. “Ladies and gentlemen, let us set stories of heroics aside for the time being, and recall to mind what, precisely, the charges are against this man.”

The Procureur drew a sheet of notes from his dossier, and read, “The charges stand thus - Jean Valjean is known to have committed an act of larceny, likewise breaking the Statute of Secrecy, which led to his original conviction. From there, he broke out of Azkaban Prison, an action never successfully attempted even by the Darkest of wizards. He has since lived under the alias Madeleine, procured a wand with falsified paperwork, and amassed a significant personal fortune under false pretenses. He is also accused of evading capture, and of escaping confinement following his reconviction two weeks ago.”

He folded his notes. “Regardless of any acts of valor, there is incontrovertible evidence to back all of these charges. The man is guilty, and should be treated as such.” Looking around, he added, “The prosecution rests.”

Valjean realized he was leaning forward in his seat, hands gripping his knees so hard the knuckles were turning white. What made the Procureur’s argument good was that it was factual and unvarnished, every word of it. If questioned, Valjean could not deny anything without lying, and if then, so what? There was proof enough to confirm what Grenier said.

The Premier Président turned to him then, and Valjean knew which question was coming next. “How do you answer these charges?”

Biting down on his tongue until the lightheadedness left him, Valjean replied, “They are true enough, Your Honor.” He took a deep breath, eyes flickering a moment to Javert before he returned his gaze to the front. “But even so, I... I would ask this court for clemency.”

Pursing his lips, the Premier Président removed his glasses entirely and turned his head to Mme. Sarkozy. “Perhaps now would be a good time for the defense to speak.”

Sarkozy squared her shoulders. “I call the Auror Javert, Inspecteur First Class, to the witness stand.”

Javert stepped forward, and anyone who sought to find weakness in his limp would have realized their mistake in the hard lines of the Auror’s mouth. For what was perhaps the first time, Valjean appreciated fully how glad he was to have Javert’s cool demeanor and understated confidence aligned to his side. Surely even the Procureur would quail in the face of the Auror’s determination.

“Monsieur l’Inspecteur,” Sarkozy began, “please summarize for the Parlement the events of the past week and a half as they relate to Jean Valjean. Succinctly, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Javert nodded. He stood comfortably at parade rest, and when he spoke his voice was clear and calm. He might have been giving a report to Secrétaire Chabouillet, or to a certain provincial mayor.

The Auror’s explanation picked up just after the conclusion of Valjean’s first appeal, beginning
with Mme. Perrier and the dementor, and his story unfolded from there. As requested, he was brief, but even so it took some time to describe the entirety of the conspiracy they had discovered, especially as Sarkozy would every so often ask a clarifying question.

There was no denying Javert was thorough in his narrative. That being said, it was also true Valjean, who was familiar with the events as they had panned out, perceived a few details that were noticeably obscured by the retelling. Thérèse was left out in all but the vaguest of ways, while the existence of the Unbreakable Vow, as well as the bizarre circumstances surrounding Javert’s wand, were absent altogether.

Eventually, Javert reached the attack on the Hôtel Matignon, and it was clear that the Parlement was hanging on to his every word. So intense was the atmosphere that one witch actually gasped aloud when Javert described Valjean tossing him his wand to fight back against Bellatrix.

“And then he turned himself in quietly, as promised,” Javert concluded. “What happened after that I could not tell you - I was stabbed by the late Madame Perrier, and so my memory becomes a shade unreliable for the next hour.” This last was said with his characteristic dry humor, and a few chuckles broke out around the room as the tension eased.

Mme. Sarkozy smiled. “Do you believe this man deserves leniency, Inspecteur?”

“I do,” Javert replied seriously. “If Valjean has wronged society, then he has surely made up for it by his efforts. Monsieur l’Procureur speaks of a fortune made under false pretenses - true, perhaps, but how much of that wealth was returned to the citizens of Montreuil-sur-Mer in the form of schools, and hospitals, and infrastructure? The town has never been more prosperous than it was with Madeleine as mayor.”

“And,” he went on, “though there are those in this government, in this very courtroom, who would see him put back in Azkaban, Valjean still chose to save us all from death or servitude at the hands of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and his followers. Some of us,” he added with a cough, “have been saved more directly than others.”

Javert did not look at him, but where he sat on the dias, Valjean could still make out the way the Auror’s ears were turning red, as well as his slight, awkward shift in position. Then Javert tugged at his collar, and Valjean decided it was not the eyes of the Parlement that had him embarrassed.

The courtroom was oblivious to this subtext. Sarkozy inclined her head, saying, “The defense rests.”

“In that case,” said the Président, “I will open the proceedings to cross-examination.”

Grenier stepped back up to his stand, smiling slightly. “Monsieur l’Inspecteur, if you would.”

Javert turned to face him. “Monsieur l’Procureur,” he returned curtly.

Drumming his fingers on the podium, the Procureur said, “It must strike the entire Parlement as strange that you should defend this man you once so completely denounced. Many might wonder at your reasoning.”

“That is not a question,” Javert drawled.

“No,” Grenier agreed. “But perhaps the accused has caused you to say these things by some magical means, or under the duress of information.”

Javert did not roll his eyes, though Valjean suspected it was a near thing. “That argument grows more tired every time I hear it,” he said. “Valjean has spent the past forty-eight hours in the
Conciergerie. Even if I had been under some enchantment, the forced separation would surely have broken it. For that matter, I have been hounded by at least a dozen Healers - any one of them can testify my wits are entirely my own.”

He lifted his chin, and his voice was cold as he added, “And if you are insinuating that the accused might possess some information about my person, then I hope you would know, Grenier, that I would lose my post, my pride, and my life before succumbing to blackmail.”

Someone on the bench said, “Hear, hear!” but Javert did not break eye contact. He simply looked levelly at Grenier, whose sly smile had disappeared.

“As you say,” the Procureur replied. “Then perhaps you care to explain this.” He pulled a page from his folder. “The following excerpt comes from the court transcript of the previous appeal. You said, quote, ‘the man is undeniably guilty in the eyes of the law’. Do you recant that statement?”

Javert held one hand behind his back, the other leaning onto the cane in front of him. “Valjean has not denied the validity of the charges against him. Neither shall I. The law would find him guilty, and I do not retract what I said. However...”

The first hint of discomfiture crossed Javert’s features. “I was wrong,” he stated. The twist of his mouth at this admission suggested he had swallowed a lemon, but it did not stop him pressing forward.

“I was wrong to believe that human nature was only good or evil. I was wrong to believe a single mistake was enough to justify damning a man for life. Jean Valjean has erred, to be sure, but his heart is a good one. Whatever the law might say of such matters, it would not truly be just to condemn him.”

Grenier narrowed his eyes. “The prescribed punishment for the crimes of the accused is life imprisonment in Azkaban. Do you mean to tell the court that this law is unjust?”

The chamber was perfectly, deafeningly silent. Javert’s expression might have been carved from stone.

Then he said, “Yes.”

The uproar was instantaneous. The Président had to bang his gavel to restore order, and even that took several attempts. When the Parlement was finally quiet again, the Président waved for the men to continue.

Javert took a step nearer the prosecutor’s stand; settling carefully on his heels, he lifted his cane from the floor and pointed it directly at Grenier.

“I have a question for you now, Monsieur le Procureur,” he said. “You seem to keep a great deal of information in your files there - perhaps you can look up the answer, if you do not know it already. For how many years was Valjean first sentenced to prison?”

“Objection,” said Grenier.

Another swing of the gavel. “Overruled.”

“Well?” Javert raised an eyebrow. “Do you have an answer, Grenier? No?”

He tutted, and turned to the bench. “Monsieur le Premier Président - Jean Valjean’s original offense was petty theft, coupled with a minor breach in the Statute of Secrecy, under which only
The Président seemed to consider this. “Standard practice would recommend a five year sentence,” he replied.

“A five year sentence.” The Auror paced, clearly working toward some point. “I have reviewed the court record. I do not doubt that a copy of the same document resides in Monsieur Grenier’s dossier, though he ignores its contents because they are inconvenient to him. Valjean’s original sentence was indeed set for a five year period.”

He stopped, pivoting to look up at the dias. “Jean, how many years did you spend in Azkaban?”

Valjean swallowed. “Nineteen,” he whispered.

“Pardon?”

“Nineteen,” Valjean repeated, more loudly.

“Nineteen years,” said Javert, turning to stare back up at the benches. “Nineteen years.” His words trembled slightly with an anger simmering just below the surface, and his gaze swept from Grenier to the Premier Président to the other members of Parlement. “Is there a person -” he demanded, “- one, single person in this courtroom who can answer to the fact that Jean Valjean spent nineteen years in Azkaban on a five year sentence?”

The rage did not quite reach his voice, but Valjean saw it in the tightness of Javert’s back, and in the way his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

“How many others?” the Auror asked. “How many other people - perhaps even good people - have you kept in that place past their time? Ask yourselves that, and then tell me if it is justice to put this man back there.”

Javert had said his piece. He stalked off to the side of the floor nearer Mme. Sarkozy, and it was plain he was trying to keep ahold of himself. Around the courtroom, faces betrayed shock, amazement, and in a few places, guilt. The Président thudded his gavel, though no-one was speaking.

“I call the Grand Chambre to a vote,” the Président said. “Because of Élodie Perrier’s interference in the last ruling, the use of capital punishment in the form of the Dementor’s Kiss shall be forgone. Therefore, the options before the Parlement are as follows - either to follow the prescription of the Code Pénal, which amounts to a life sentence in Azkaban Prison, or to name the accused pardoned of all charges on account of services rendered to this government and its agents.”

Spell or no spell, Valjean could not have budged if he had tried. He was aware of two things: the weight of the court’s attention, and the drum of his heart against his ribs.

“Those in favor of conviction?”

Around the chamber, a smattering of hands went up, but not many. By far, the majority had remained motionless. That meant... Valjean did not dare think what that meant, as if the act of thinking it might take everything away from him.

“Those in favor of pardon?”

Hands went up. Valjean did not have to count, he could see which way the court had been swayed.
“Those abstaining?”

The Premier Président jotted down the results with a quill and blotted the ink. “Very well,” he said. “Jean Valjean, this court has elected to pardon you of all charges.”

The gavel fell on the podium and the room erupted in chatter, but Valjean had eyes for one person, and one person only, and that was the Auror staring up at him from the floor. Javert did not smile, exactly, but the happiness was there in his expression anyway.

Getting off the dias proved to be a slight struggle; Valjean’s knees felt weak, and descending the stairs took a moment longer than it might have otherwise. As the members of Parlement trickled past, several stopped to issue their congratulations. Valjean repeated his thanks over and over, and the words were just as sincere in each iteration.

Beside the door, Satki was beaming. She beckoned him forward, and Valjean went to meet her the moment there was a break in the crowd.

“Congrats, convict,” she winked. “You know that’s your nickname now, don’t you?”

Valjean laughed. “So long as that’s all it is, I think I can live with that.”

“Chevallier said to pass on his good wishes. I think he’s gone to accost the people who voted against you.”

Shaking his head, Valjean replied, “I wish he wouldn’t, it was their right.”

Satki shrugged. “And it’s his right to express dissatisfaction with our elected officials.” The witch reached into her robes. “Here,” she said, withdrawing his wand from her pocket. “This is yours now, for good. I’ll see to it the Wand Permitting Office sends you the proper paperwork.”

Valjean’s fingers closed around the handle, and a friendly warmth crept from the wood up his arm.

“I appreciate it,” he murmured. “All of it.”

The courtroom emptied gradually. Valjean waited in the vestibule just outside the main chamber, smiling to people as they spilled out into the hall. Finally, the Premier Président passed him, nodding cordially, and the vestibule was left quiet in the absence of footsteps.

“Jean Valjean,” growled a voice he knew well.

Valjean turned, something almost coy in the slant of his lips. “Inspecteur Javert,” he returned.

Javert leaned against his cane with some weight, but it suited him well enough that he could, had he been so inclined, have suggested it was for fashion rather than support. The heat was returned to his steel grey eyes, and he glanced pointedly from Valjean to the door of the vestibule’s little storage closet. Valjean’s smile widened.

A moment later found Javert shouldering the door open. Their faces met before it had time to latch after them, Valjean grasping at the front of the Auror’s robes. Javert’s hand was cupping his cheek, the other snaking around Valjean’s waist, and Valjean gasped against the mouth kissing him so thoroughly.

“Javert, I -” he panted between the needy parting of lips, “- I missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” came the muttered reply. The arm at Valjean’s waist tugged their hips
together, and the temperature of the room increased markedly. Then they were both staring at each other, breathing hard. The expression in Javert’s eyes had not changed, and Valjean knew himself wanted.

“The things you said,” pronounced Valjean, his fingers climbing higher to card through the Auror’s long hair. “In court. Javert, thank -”

“Don’t you dare thank me,” Javert said, bringing their foreheads together, “for something which should have been yours by right.”

Javert’s cane lay quite forgotten on the floor. His body exerted a slight pressure, and Valjean took a step backwards to compensate. When the pressure did not decrease, Valjean guessed the man’s intention and took another step back, feeling wood panelling against his shoulder blades. He did not think he had ever been so content to be pushed against a wall before.

Then Javert’s mouth was back on his, and Valjean’s chin lifted into it. The touch of tongues was still too unpracticed to be more than awkward, but Valjean did not doubt they would figure it out with practice. That thought, the notion that there could be more times like this, as many times as they wanted, crashed over him in a giddy wave. They broke apart again, and a laugh rumbled through his chest.

“I’m a free man,” Valjean said, tasting the words experimentally.

“You are,” Javert agreed, his voice low in Valjean’s ear. “Though there is one minor detail yet to resolve.”

Valjean raised an eyebrow. “What is that?”

The Auror smirked. “Nothing that needs to be taken care of right at this moment.” Then he tilted his head further to the side, putting his lips against the point on Valjean’s neck where his pulse hammered frantically.

Valjean’s reply died before it started, to be replaced by just an, “Oh.” His fingers wrapped tighter in the hair at the nape of Javert’s neck, and the Auror’s teeth grazed over the sensitive skin of his throat in response.

Well aware that no-one was likely to come looking for them, or to otherwise make use of the little storage room, which was empty but for some cobwebs and old shelves, Valjean’s free arm wound around the Auror’s back, meaning to draw him closer yet. In so doing, he inadvertently touched against Javert’s side, the place where beneath layers of clothing, bandages held his injuries in stasis. Javert winced, and Valjean could not fail to notice.

“But I am thoughtless,” he said, releasing his grip at once. “You are hurt, you should be resting. No wonder you are out of breath, I -”

“Jean.” Javert’s quiet tone cut through Valjean’s tirade. Though his voice was firm, his eyes danced with laughter. “That is hardly why I am out of breath.”

Studying him for a minute, Valjean determined that Javert was not, in fact, concealing any greater pain than he had already demonstrated. Resolving still to be more careful, Valjean took the man by the chin and guided their faces nearer; leveraging himself up on his toes, his teeth closed over the Auror’s lower lip, and the noise Javert made startled both of them. Valjean was immediately afflicted by the urge to press every breathy, desperate noise from the Auror that he could.

Something of his desire must have shown on his face, because Javert chuckled, burying his nose in the crook of Valjean’s neck. “We shouldn’t do this here,” he said, sounding muffled. “Someone
Valjean hummed. “So you say,” he murmured back. “But I don’t see you stopping.”

“It’s harder than I expected,” Javert conceded, planting a line of kisses down the length of Valjean’s neck. “I haven’t slept in two days, wondering...”

Then the Auror did something, and Valjean’s back arched off the wall. “Ah, Javert -”

“You would let me,” Javert said, sounding awed. “You would let me make you mine, right here and now.”

Valjean grunted. “I might require it,” he replied. “These trousers are getting uncomfortable.”

Hesitating, Javert said, “I shouldn’t. It wouldn’t be right - not yet.”

Valjean cocked his head. “Something troubles you still. Some uncertainty. If I have done anything to...”

“No,” Javert insisted. “It is nothing which you are responsible for.”

Biting his already-swollen lip, the Auror met Valjean’s eyes. “We have got to talk to Thérèse,” he said, “about this Vow that we made.”
Chapter 22

As it would turn out, they did not go to see Thérèse that day, nor the next. Valjean was learning that to become a legitimate person again required even more paperwork than to become an illegitimate one, and he spent a lot of time sitting at the kitchen table of No. 4 filling out forms and documentation for what felt like every department in the government. Fortunately, Javert was there to help in the process, even when helping simply meant a hand placed on Valjean’s shoulder in sympathy.

“I don’t understand it,” Valjean said on the third afternoon of this. “Surely it should not be so difficult to establish a bank account.”

Javert hummed with a frown, looking over the long parchment scroll requiring figures and signatures. Chouette sat beside it on the tabletop, feathers puffed up self-importantly. She had taken to the task of delivering all of these documents, aware that Valjean was likely to feed her bits of sausage for her trouble.

“Just what sort of account are you looking at, anyway?” Javert asked. “This form is for a high security vault - they must have given the bird the wrong parchment.”

Valjean shifted uncomfortably. “Actually,” he said, “the bank recommended this option, when I told them how much I had to deposit.”

At that, the Auror’s eyebrows lifted toward his hairline. “Just how much are you - Nevermind, I don’t want to know.”

Valjean laughed, and it was not long before Javert, too, let out a dry chuckle.

“Well then,” the Auror said, “I suppose you will have to start by cross-referencing with the numbers we gave the Department of Magical Transportation for your Apparition License...”

This went on into the early evening, but eventually Valjean was able to clear the stacks of paper and quill pens from the table. He was gathering up jars of differently-colored ink when Javert...
returned through the doorway, holding some document in his hand.

“Is Chouette still here?” Valjean asked. “I have a few more things for her to send.”

“Ah,” said Javert. “No, she’s already out with a letter. She’s been gone almost an hour, so I would expect her back soon.”

“I see.” Valjean’s eyes flickered to the paper. “What’s that?”

“Just another form,” Javert said far too casually. “I thought you might want to take care of it tonight, as it will take some time to process.”

Valjean looked at him, nonplussed. “Alright, let’s see it, then.”

The Auror crossed to the table, putting the parchment in Valjean’s hands before studiously looking at the wall behind him.

For a moment, Valjean just stared at the printed words uncomprehendingly. Then he raised his head to ask, “‘Certificate of Adoption’?”

“Oh, good, you can read,” said Javert. “I was getting worried, the way you were gaping at it.”

Setting the paper carefully down, Valjean turned to the Auror and crossed his arms. “Javert, what is this about?”

“You know what it is about,” came the quiet reply. Javert was still not looking at him. “Cosette needs a parent, and Fantine believed you were right to take care of her.”

Valjean looked askance at the form sitting so temptingly on the table. He could have a family again, without the fear of burdening a child with an alias, and Javert would be there, too, and -

Putting a stop to that line of thinking, Valjean asked, “But what if she does not want to go with me? She has been living with those innkeepers, the Thénardiers, for many years now - suppose she would rather stay with them?”

Now Javert did look at him, apparently both entertained and exasperated. “Jean, I cannot imagine a child preferring anyone to you, you are like a real-life Pere Noël, but if it troubles you so, then fill out the form and wait to sign it until you can ask the child for herself what she would do. Should she wish to stay with her current guardians, well, then they can sign the page, but one way or another, the state requires the girl to have her papers in order.”

Thinking of the mountain of parchment under which he had been buried, Valjean said under his breath, “She has my condolences.” With a sigh, he added, “You are right, of course. I will take care of it.”

Just then, Chouette swooped into the kitchen, landing on a startled Javert’s shoulder. She carried a letter in her beak, which the Auror prised away as he chastised her for the choice of roost. Once having transferred the bird to the counter, earning himself an unrepentant nip on the ear for his trouble, Javert slit the envelope and removed the small, handwritten note inside.

“Mmm,” he said. “Thérèse has invited us to lunch tomorrow.”

Where he stood leaning over the table, Valjean looked up. “She has, has she?” When Javert did not answer, he said, “I don’t suppose you intend to tell me what the two of you are plotting.”

The Auror glanced again at the letter. “I would rather not just yet,” he said. “I shouldn’t like to get
your hopes up in the event it doesn’t succeed.”

After a moment’s pause, Valjean nodded. “I trust you, Javert,” he said.

Javert said nothing, but the look on his face suggested he could not imagine why.

An awkward silence fell as Valjean scribbled information onto the certificate. When he was finished, he cleared his throat. “Dinner?”

“Yes,” agreed the Auror, eager to smooth the contours of the conversation. “There is that poultry in the icebox.”

“Mmm,” Valjean agreed. “If you would dice the vegetables, I can baste the chicken.”

With the cooking preparations underway, it was easier to return to a sort of equilibrium. Still, there were two topics they avoided: the certificate, now tucked safely in a drawer, and the letter, folded in Javert’s pocket. By unspoken truce, both men recognized it was better to drop the issue, at least for a little while.

The next day found Valjean and Javert standing side by side in front of the apartment complex on the Rue Morand, not long after the city bells had ceased tolling eleven o’clock. The Auror did not hesitate that time in front of the automatic doors, and they entered into the little lobby. The receptionist, Hebert, greeted them warmly and without any indication they had ever met before, which as far as he knew, they had not.

“We are here to see Thérèse Marie,” Javert said. “We were invited.”

“I’ll just buzz you in, then,” Hebert replied, pressing a button on the desk. “Have a good day.”

Valjean thanked him, and they advanced up the staircase to the second floor. At the door to No. 27, Javert knocked, and a few moments later, it was opened by the eldest boy, Jacques.

“Hello, Messieurs,” Jacques said seriously. “Mama says I’m to let you in and not hex you, even though I’ve been wantin’ to practice.”

“We appreciate it,” Valjean replied just as seriously. “I shouldn’t like to be hexed.”

The boy giggled and ran back into the apartment, leaving the door open in his wake. Entering, Valjean was brought up short by the transformation which had come over Thérèse’s salon; gone were the couch and the armchairs, the coffee table, and the rug. The entire space was bare, but for the wooden floorboards and a large circle of unlit candles. The family cat was sniffing one of these, and proceeded to knock it over.

“Ay, Sottises, best be gettin’ out of the circle,” Thérèse called from the kitchen. She was levering a large roast into the oven, and it balanced precariously on her hip as she turned to wave at the cat. Sottises gave an insolent meow, before stalking off to investigate a potted plant.

The roast made it into the oven without incident, and then Thérèse turned to greet her guests. She had traded out her usual layers of attire for a simple forest green dress, and as she walked it became apparent she was barefoot.

“Jean,” Thérèse grinned. “Good to see you. Inspecteur.” She gestured around the salon. “Everything be ready. I thought we should eat after takin’ care of things, the food be a grounder for the spirit.”
“Er.” Valjean raised a hand slightly. “What are we doing, exactly?”

Thérèse looked at Javert. “You didn’t tell him?”

The Auror coughed. “Not strictly speaking, no. My understanding of the details is limited, and I was not even certain it would work.”

The woman snorted. “Oh, it will work, but you need to understand what we be doin’. Both of you.” She sighed. “Well, you best tell him now, then, at least the basics.”

Valjean looked between the pair of them, wondering how many notes they had exchanged back and forth over the past few days. He knew Javert had sent Chouette on errands beyond merely delivering his paperwork, but he had thought little of it before last night.

Javert adjusted his weight; he required the cane less and less as the days went by, the healing potions continuing to improve what damage had been wrought, but he had brought it along for this trip even so.

“It’s like this, Jean,” he said. “The Parlement’s decision broke the third condition of the Unbreakable Vow. That still leaves two conditions more or less intact.” He closed his eyes, grimacing. “You have called us friends, but what sort of friend am I to have you chained to my side? If you cannot ever leave for fear of what the Vow might do to you, then how could I let us...”

He trailed off, but Valjean understood what was meant. It was the final inhibition, why the Auror would not let them be lovers, this contract that made it impossible to go if he so chose. Valjean did not want to go, could imagine few things more abhorrent than a life without Javert in it, and yet he saw the man’s reasoning. If their places were reversed, Valjean imagined he would feel the same.

He nodded slowly. “So you asked Thérèse for assistance.”

Thérèse smiled. “Not all magic be of the sort they teach in schools. My family has a magical tradition goin’ back generations. I think I have a solution to your problem, such as it be.”

She looked again at Javert. “Did you bring it?”

Wordlessly, the Auror dipped into his pocket and removed a string of black glass beads, a crucifix dangling from the end. Thérèse took the rosary from him, and indicated the ring of candles.

“This be a magic circle. The candles mark the boundary. Step inside, and I’ll tell you what we be doin’.”

Valjean eyed the waxy stumps apprehensively. He believed Thérèse to be an entirely capable, if unorthodox, witch, but something about this whispered of older magic, the sort which went forgotten by most wizards. To look at the candles was to make the back of his neck prickle, and Valjean did not care for it. Even so, Javert stepped into the ring calmly enough, and Valjean followed. A shiver of gooseflesh ran up his spine as he crossed the barrier.

Thérèse raised her arms from her sides; though her wand was tucked behind her ear, the candles all flickered to life in unison, and suddenly the salon was bathed in their glow. The light sparkled in the witch’s golden eyes like tiny, writhing creatures.

“Good,” said Thérèse. “My boys be knowin’ better than to bother me while I be working, so we shouldn’t have any interruptions. If the cat walks through, just ignore him.”

She knelt, and Valjean noticed a brown, leather-bound book on the floor, now exposed by the
Thérèse lifted this, and thumbed through dry parchment pages to the information she sought. When she stopped, fingers pressed against a chosen paragraph, she spoke.

“The undoin’ of geasa be an old practice, no younger than the practice of forgin’ them. Fortunately, the geas we be dealin’ with today has already begun to disintegrate. By pullin’ on the frayed magic, we can unspin it altogether.”

She paused, glowering at Javert. “You realize how lucky you be, Monsieur? If it hadn’t been for your little misspeak, there would be no help for any of this.” Her scowl increased as she went on, “Do the word ‘Unbreakable’ mean anything to you?”

“Yes,” Javert replied stiffly.

“Well, you had better think a lot harder about that the next time, or I may have to be buyin’ you a dictionary.”

Valjean almost stepped in; he knew Javert would take the criticism like a punch to the gut, all the more so because it was deserved. But then Thérèse, deciding the Auror looked appropriately contrite, allowed the matter to drop.

“To business, then.” Thérèse let the rosary slip through her fingers, holding it up where the jet strands could catch the light. “This pendant represents many things.” Her gaze flickered towards Valjean. “It be a symbol of your higher power. It also be a symbol of your past. Today –” and she looked now at Javert as well, “– it will reveal the shape of the thing that binds you.”

She took a step closer, and Valjean fought the urge to back away. He was certain of it now, that there was power in that humble Parisian dwelling. It was something akin to the power housed in the vaults of cathedrals, but different, more wild and less forgiving. It made his blood rush in strange ways.

Javert turned to face him. “We are to hold hands,” he said, “just as we did the first time.”

Valjean nodded, a little warily. He raised his arm, and their palms touched briefly as they gripped one another around the wrist. Javert’s pulse was accelerated under Valjean’s fingers; he wondered if the Auror were simply nervous, or if he, too, could feel the weird siren’s song of magic playing around the circle.

Thérèse took the rosary like a cord and wound it around their joined hands; she worked with her eyes closed, face tight with concentration, as she seemed to follow a pattern only visible in her head. When she finished, the length of it wrapped their wrists in roughly three loops, bound up in a knot Valjean could not follow the design of.

Then Thérèse opened her eyes, and there was something more wolfish in her expression than usual as she said, “I name this rosary your Vow. As one be, so shall be the other, and as one be unmade, both be unmade. So say I.”

The gasp which issued from Valjean’s lips was one of surprise. Within the round jet beads, a reddish light burned like coals, and Valjean realized he was seeing the fiery chains of their Unbreakable Vow, made visible once more by Thérèse’s spell. In that moment, he realized also that he could not release Javert’s arm even if he tried. They were stuck fast together.

Thérèse took a step backwards, turning the page in her book. “As with any knot, we must begin to unravel it at the end - that be its weakest point. State the third condition, precisely as it was agreed to.”

Javert looked Valjean in the eyes; any lingering skepticism the Auror might have felt about the
ritual’s effectiveness had been obliterated, to be replaced by a single-minded determination. A sourceless wind tugged at the edges of his robes, and Valjean noticed vaguely that the same was true of his own garments.

The Auror spoke, and his voice rang clear. “When it is decided by the court that Jean Valjean is to return to Azkaban, he will go without offering resistance.”

Thérèse looked on gravely. “Inspecteur, you made this bond. Do you, of your own free will, choose to relinquish it?”

Javert did not break his gaze away from Valjean’s face. “I regret entirely that I ever made you swear to such things,” he murmured. “I would have them undone.” More loudly, he said to Thérèse, “Yes, I do.”

The loup garou raised her hand. “And so the first binding is unmade.”

There was a beat wherein all three of them watched the rosary. One of the glowing coils faded to black as the third condition of the Vow unwound completely.

“State the second condition.”

Javert licked his lips. “Jean Valjean will use his magic only in ways I do not prohibit.”

Thérèse’s eyes flashed in a scowl again at that, but she went on, “You made this bond. Do you, of your own free will, choose to relinquish it?”

“Yes, I do.”

Twisting her hand in midair as though untangling something, Thérèse said, “And so the second binding is unmade.”

At her words, the fire left a second beaded coil.

“State the first condition.”

With a deep, shuddering breath, Javert said, “Jean Valjean shall make no attempt, by mundane or magical means, to escape my custody.”

“You made this bond. Do you, of your own free will, choose to relinquish it?”

“Yes, I do.”

“And so the third binding is unmade.”

The third and final coil of rosary cooled, leaving only black beads behind. Still, there remained an electric tension in the air, and Thérèse turned to Valjean.

“The Inspecteur may have issued these bonds, but you agreed to them. Now it be you who has a choice - whatever form you tell this geas to assume, it will do so. Choose wisely - once done, it cannot be undone.”

Across from him, Javert’s mouth thinned, and Valjean could guess well enough what the Auror would tell him to do if he asked his advice. Javert would tell him to reverse the spell, to bring the Auror to his knees with the magical bonds thrown back in his face, that it was no less than he deserved having done to him. It was not, however, Javert’s choice to make.

There would always be a tie between them, of that Valjean was certain, but there were kinder ways of being bound to a person.

“Very well,” said Thérèse. “Then by the will of all, and with harm to none, I pronounce this Vow finished.”

Javert struck the ground sharply with his cane to punctuate this remark, and then two things happened simultaneously. Valjean felt something deep in the core of his chest snap, and it hurt beyond anything he could describe, but the relief which came with it was immense. He swayed where he stood, in the same moment that the rosary exploded, ripped apart by the force of the spell breaking. Black beads flew like tiny projectiles; they ought to have wound up halfway across the apartment, but when they reached the boundary of candles, they bounced back inside the circle as though having struck an invisible wall.

The candles guttered and went out. Everything seemed suddenly very quiet without the roar of magic in his ears, and Javert released his wrist, staggering backwards dazedly.

“Javert!” Valjean hurried toward the Auror, holding out an arm to steady him. “Are you alright?”

Javert rubbed his temples. “I think so,” he said. “A bit dizzy is all.”

“Lunch will take care of that,” Thérèse said briskly. “That be why I put the roast in before we started.”

“Wonderful,” said Valjean. “How can we help?”

Thérèse removed her wand from behind her ear. With a few flicks of her wrist, the candles vanished into the air with a pop, replaced by the salon’s usual furnishings.

“The Inspecteur can get the plates,” Thérèse said. “Jean, I’ll leave you the task of wranglin’ the boys.”

It became clear a few minutes later why Valjean had been delegated this task. It was not as though the children were particularly difficult to gather; even baby Jean, who just wanted to run around in his diaper, stopped fussing after Valjean hoisted him up in the air a few times. He returned from the back bedrooms with three giggling boys in tow to find the table half-set, and Javert and Thérèse deep in conversation beside the kitchen sink.

Valjean shook his head fondly, and continued with the place settings. He resolutely told himself that he would not eavesdrop, but this proved a greater challenge than he had anticipated.

“- isn’t that I’m not grateful,” Javert was saying. “I won’t pretend to like the idea of magical retaliation. But I cannot shake the feeling that there is a cost to all this - one cannot just break an oath like that without there being repercussions.” He sighed, and Valjean clattered the silverware together noisily as he laid it out. “Whatever that cost is, I will pay it gladly, I just wish I knew what to expect.”

The sound of Thérèse’s laughter was covered slightly by a squabble between Garrett and Jacques, but Valjean could still hear her when she responded, “Ah, Javert.” It was the first instance where she called him by name rather than title. “You be learnin’ your lessons yet, I think. So caught up in judgement and prices to be paid that you forget not all consequences have to hurt.”

The oven timer dinged, and she added, “That’ll be the roast.”

Lunch was a pleasant affair. Garrett ran rampant over the conversation, his child’s mind jumping
from topic to topic like the flitting of a breeze, and everyone else struggled to keep up. Valjean was riding an elated high; he could hardly keep a grin off his face before it was back. He was, occasionally, aware of Javert watching him, but whenever he looked up, the Auror’s face was turned elsewhere.

The meal came eventually to its conclusion, and Valjean had to admit that a full stomach did ease the feeling of spaciness in his head.

Thérèse turned to him. “Would you be carin’ to stay the afternoon? I’ve a few card games I haven’t played in years.”

Valjean considered it. The invitation was welcome; when was the last occasion he had simply spent an afternoon enjoying the company of friends? Javert looked at him in equal measure, face carefully absent of emotion.

“I would like to,” said Valjean sincerely. “Perhaps another day. As it stands, I have a different appointment.” He withdrew a folded sheet of paper from his robes. “There is someone I have to help.”

“‘Have to’?” Thérèse repeated with half a glance at Javert.

“A promise of my own, this time,” Valjean explained gently. “There is a child, you see, a girl. She cannot be but scarcely older than your Jacques.”

Thérèse’s eyes widened in sympathy. “Do this wee one have a name?”

“Cosette.”

Valjean and Thérèse both started, for it was not Valjean who had replied, but Javert.

“Her mother is dead,” the Auror stated. “It is my fault.”

Valjean cleared his throat. He did not have a good response to that. “In any event,” he said delicately, “I must travel to Montfermeil to fetch her.” He got up from his chair, only for Javert to do the same.

“...Javert?” Valjean cocked his head in bemusement. “You do not have to come - you could stay here, or return to the apartment, or -”

“Do not be ridiculous,” said the Auror. “I told you I would go.”

“When - the Vow?” Valjean’s laugh was in part amused and in part incredulous. “That is broken now, you are not beholden to it anymore.”

Javert met his gaze steadily. “I told you I would go. I will go. If nothing else, your signature on that certificate will require a witness.”

Valjean did not try to prevent the small, charmed smile which touched his lips. “Well,” he said. “Good.”

Thérèse stood, hugging first Valjean and then Javert goodbye. The Auror looked like he did not know what to do with that gesture, and so just proceeded to cough and adjust his cravat afterwards.

“You ought to bring her by to visit,” Thérèse said as they got ready to leave. “She could play with the boys.”
“I will do that,” Valjean promised.

He and Javert stood by the door. Valjean took the Auror by the hand and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the next thing he saw would be Montfermeil.

The town of Montfermeil was bustling as Valjean and Javert stepped out from the narrow alley into which they had Apparated. It took some searching, and more than a little asking around, but eventually they found themselves in a town square which would, on weekends and holidays, host a local market of food and goods. An assortment of businesses lined this square, with residences to be found on neighboring streets; among those businesses was an inn by the name of Grindelwald’s Waterloo, and it was there that an elderly beggar woman had assured Valjean he would find the child he was seeking.

From the outside, Valjean had to admit the place did not look like much. Perhaps once it had been a fine piece of property, catering to Muggle and wizard travelers alike, but it was plain the current owners did not spend much on its upkeep. He frowned, patting at the new purse on his hip contemplatively. He knew little enough about these innkeepers, other than that Fantine had entrusted them with Cosette and paid them for her lodgings. He had written them in the days prior to Fantine’s death, but...

Valjean put a lid on that thought; what was done was done. All that was left to him was to make reparations in the only way he knew how. Beside him, Javert straightened his already immaculate navy robes, and for a moment, Valjean allowed himself to wonder if this were reparations for the Auror, as well.

They approached the inn at a leisurely pace. The time spent searching earlier had given the pair an opportunity to select a strategy, and so it was decided that they would enter the place as patrons. There was no rush to return to Paris, and it would be fair to say that Valjean shared at least some of Javert’s natural tendency toward suspicion. Posing simply as customers, at least at first, would position them to learn more about these people who had taken Cosette under their wing.

The inside of the inn was no more promising than the outside. They entered into a drab tavern space, filled with tables and chairs that had seen better days. On the far wall, a staircase led up to the rooms, while to the right was an unlit fireplace. Beside the stairs was a closed doorway, presumably leading to the kitchen. The flagstone floor was covered in a fine layer of grit, despite the best efforts of the little girl sweeping in the corner.

This girl was the room’s only occupant, and the tempo of her sweeping barely stuttered as the newcomers entered the tavern. Her blonde hair was dirty and matted in places, and her clothes - shorts and a tee - were old and ratty. She stood barefoot on the stone floor, pushing a broom twice her height. Valjean recognized at once the features of Fantine, made all the clearer by how the girl was as gaunt as her mother. From the sudden twist of Javert’s face, the Auror had made the same deduction.

The kitchen door opened, and out walked a man Valjean could only assume was M. Thénardier. He had a narrow, pointed face, and wore a cheap facsimile of dress robes. The way his hands were clasped together, it was evident that he had heard the front door, and had emerged to greet his guests. He looked altogether better fed than the child, and though Valjean tried to reserve his opinion, the untrusting part of him was gratified to find its suspicions not wholly unfounded.

“Messieurs,” said Thénardier with a broad smile. “Welcome! Your faces are new to me - you are travellers, no?” Without waiting for a response, he went on, “You have arrived at the finest establishment in Montfermeil - allow me to put you up for the night.”
Beside him, Javert took another evaluating look around the tavern, and Valjean could guess his mind; if this was truly the finest place to be had in town, then the rest must have been in shambles. Valjean did not voice this unkind thought, however.

“That would be well, thank you.”

Thénardier frowned to himself, as if running some calculations through his head. “I am afraid,” he said candidly, “that we are very busy this time of year. I can rent you two rooms, but the price is higher for a single occupant alone - you understand.”

“Oh yes,” Javert muttered, glancing again at the empty room. “Very busy, I see.”

Thénardier had caught the snide remark. He bowed humbly and said, “Indeed, Monsieur, I will grant you it does not look like much now, but by the dinner hour, people will be flocking to this place.”

“A single room will be fine,” Valjean interjected calmly.

Tipping his head slightly to one side, Thénardier drew a conclusion which was not wholly incorrect.

“Monsieur is very accommodating. I am willing to negotiate. The bridal suite is our most comfortable bedchamber - normally it is the price of two usual rooms, but for you, I would let it out at the price of a room and a half.”

Javert opened his mouth - to offer insult or argument Valjean was unsure - but Valjean cut in before he could speak.

“That will do, Monsieur,” he said, and then Javert was giving him a disbelieving look instead, but Valjean ignored it. Maintaining the same calm demeanor, he nodded at the child in the corner and asked, “Is that girl your daughter?”

Thénardier craned his neck and spotted Cosette, quietly sweeping.

“Alas,” he said, “but no. My wife and I do have children - two beautiful little girls and a baby boy - but that is not one of them. Her mother abandoned her, and we took her in out of charity, despite what a burden it is to have another mouth to feed.”

Valjean, who knew much of that to be a lie, felt something dangerously close to anger ignite in the pit of his stomach, but he held it back from his face. “I see,” he said. “Where are your own daughters?”

“Why, they are at school, of course!” replied Thénardier with surprise. “Education is held in only the highest regard here.”

“And that little one?” Valjean asked, deceptively placid. “Does she not go to school?”

Thénardier hesitated, evidently put off by all the questions. “Well,” he said after a moment, “we teach her what we can from home, but you must understand she has to earn her keep, much as she eats.”

“Of course,” Valjean demurred.

“Allow me to show Messieurs to your chambers,” Thénardier said hurriedly, eager now to bring the conversation to a close.
There was one other room on the first floor of that establishment, hidden behind the staircase. It was a bedroom with walls covered in mahogany wainscot, and a single large bed draped in a red calico canopy. Thénardier bowed himself out, and Javert shut the door firmly after him.

“Have you misplaced your wits?” Javert asked the moment they were alone. “What on earth were you thinking, agreeing to rent this of all...! Do you know what people do in such beds?”

Valjean raised an eyebrow. “Nothing that doesn’t happen in every other bed of this establishment, I wager.”

“Well.” Javert huffed. “You probably are not mistaken, there. Still,” he added, looking around, “I for one am not sleeping until every surface in this room has been cleaned.”

Valjean pointed his wand absently at the floor. “Scourgify.” Soapy bubbles appeared across the floorboards, stripping them of dirt. When the spell had run its course, he looked back at the Auror. “It suits our purposes if Thénardier thinks me a fool. He will talk to a fool. You, on the other hand, ought to be careful - I doubt he cares for law enforcement.”

Javert’s hands curled into fists. “That Monsieur Thénardier has conman written all over him.”

“Case in point,” Valjean retorted wryly, but Javert did not laugh.

“I have seen better-dressed house elves. And did you see how pinched she looks, Jean? They are starving that girl, and putting her to work - I do not doubt they beat her, too.”

Valjean’s mouth tightened. “I expect you are right,” he said. “But you cannot go arresting him, he has children of his own who need a father.”

The Auror scoffed. “I expect I would be doing them a favor.” He said nothing more about it, however, as Valjean made his way back out into the tavern room.

Cosette had finished sweeping; now she stood wiping down each table carefully. Valjean took a seat at a place nearby, watching her work with a frown. Javert sat beside him; the way he kept himself straight-backed and alert suggested he was waiting for trouble.

In due course, a large woman who must have been the Mme. Thénardier emerged from the kitchen. Seeing the guests sitting, she scurried over, swatting Cosette aside without a second glance. Her face screwed up in a cloying imitation of sweetness as she asked, “Can I bring Messieurs any refreshments?”

Javert said coldly, “We have already eaten,” in the same moment that Valjean said, “Bread, if you please.”

No less obsequious than her husband, Mme. Thénardier all but ran back to the kitchen.

“Jean -” Javert began, but Valjean hushed him.

Only a few minutes passed before the woman returned, carrying a wooden tray on which sat a loaf of bread. It was a sweet white variety, fresh and expensive, and Valjean did not doubt he would be charged accordingly. He thanked her by rote, and tore a chunk from the end.

Cosette had picked herself up off the floor and resumed wiping tables. As her mistress disappeared once again, Valjean raised his head and said softly, “Come here, little one.”

Startled, the girl looked around. Upon realizing that the gentleman could only be talking to her, she tiptoed closer like a spooked deer. Valjean held out the chunk of bread.
“It is for you,” he said, when she just looked at his hand with wide eyes. “You must be hungry.”

Quick as a flash, Cosette reached out and snatched the food, as though afraid it might be taken away if she did not.

“You may have more, if you like,” Valjean said, gesturing at the loaf in front of him. “Truly, I do not feel like eating.”

The girl stuffed the morsel into her mouth and inched closer yet.

“What is your name, Mademoiselle?”

Rocking on the balls of her feet, the girl replied, “I’m called Cosette.”

Valjean nodded. “I thought you were,” he said. “Your mother sent me to find you.”

Cosette stuck out her tongue, not in impetuousness but in a child’s confusion. Her eyes darted toward the kitchen. “Monsieur says that my mother is dead.”

Sadly, Valjean nodded again. “She worked very hard, hoping to come and see you, but she took sick. The last thing she asked of me was that I find you in her place.”

“Are you my Papa?”

The question was innocent, though Valjean could not help but cough in chagrin. “No,” he said, and then the girl looked so crestfallen at this that he added, “But I could be, if you wished.”

The kitchen door began to swing open, and Cosette jumped. She scampered back to the table she had been cleaning, picking up her rag which was, it seemed, cleaner than the rags she wore. She continued polishing the wood as Mme. Thénardier stepped out, bearing a tray of flagons.

“Aren’t you done with those tables yet?” she snapped. “Get on with it, girl, and then go see to it the beds are made. People will be arriving soon!”

Cosette scrubbed at the table faster, but when her mistress was no longer looking, she lifted her head for a moment. Seeing that Valjean was still regarding her meditatively, she nodded, just the once. Then she lowered her gaze, returning to her chores.

Within the hour, the front door breezed open, admitting the sound of giggling laughter. Turning, Valjean spotted two more little girls, one about Cosette’s age and one younger, entering with their lunch tins. Where Cosette was underfed, little more than skin and bones, they were flush and healthy, and wore not rags but skirts and blouses in the current fashion. These, then, were the Thénardier girls.

Again, Valjean felt a hot surge of anger rise in him. It was nothing directed at the children, for the inequality was hardly their fault, but even so he surprised himself. He had thought he had lost that capacity for rage, yet seeing Cosette treated so poorly was infuriating in a way which startled him. Even Javert’s torture at the hands of the Lestranges had provoked a different sort of reaction. And speaking of Javert...

If Valjean was angry, then the Auror was beyond that entirely and had jumped straight to cold-blooded hatred. Somewhat alarmed by the expression on his face, Valjean rested a hand on Javert’s thigh.

The Auror looked at him, white-lipped.
“We will take her away from here in the morning,” Valjean said. “I do not like it either, but you need to control yourself.”

The recrimination cut just enough for Javert to find his voice. “I will,” he said. “For now.”

Valjean settled back in his chair, but under the table he did not remove his hand from the Auror’s leg.

As the day drew on into evening, the tavern indeed began to fill. Valjean got the impression that the majority of the inn’s patrons were of a more uncouth sort, though he did spot at least one man in the dress of the Muggle National Guard. Cosette dashed between tables, cleaning up spills and dirtied plates as the dinner hour set in, and Mme. Thénardier distributed flagons of drink.

As a part of the crowd, meals were set in front of the pair of them. Javert did not touch his plate; he had barely moved all afternoon. Valjean, however, was hungry. The loaf of white bread had dwindled, but he had not eaten a bite of it himself, instead slipping pieces into Cosette’s small hands occasionally as she passed. The drink, Valjean discovered, was beer. He was not partial to the taste, and less partial to the smell, but unlike the soft white bread, the bread which came with his dinner was coarse and dry, and required something to wash it down.

He ate slowly, and drank slower still, yet Valjean was finishing his meal when he realized his head felt ever so slightly fuzzy. It was a strange sensation, not strong enough to impair his mental faculties, but something which spread a curious illusion of warmth through him. Valjean frowned; how much had he had? Looking into the tall glass, he found had failed to even make a dent in the contents. Frowning in earnest, he took an experimental sip, and found that the level of beer remained stubbornly unchanged.

“Someone’s put a Refilling Charm on these glasses,” he muttered, setting it back down.

Javert looked over at that. “That’s illegal,” he said. “This place serves Muggles, not just wizards. At the very least, it’s a hefty fine.”

Valjean glanced over his shoulder at the full, rowdy room behind him. “Maybe so,” he said, “but every Muggle here is too drunk to notice.” There was a beat where he caught the refrain of a song being sung a few tables over. “That’s obscene.”

The Auror listened a moment. “Obscene and anatomically impossible,” he agreed. Nevertheless, he shifted in his chair, and perhaps it was only the light, but Valjean could have sworn that Javert’s cheekbones turned faintly pink in the way they sometimes did.

Just as Valjean was considering that interesting development, a commotion near the fireplace drew his attention. Hitherto, Cosette had been seated underneath a small table to the side of the hearth, darning a pair of socks. She had, however, become distracted by a dried leaf on the floor, and was holding it in her hands. For a moment, it sat there unmoving, as leaves were generally wont to do, but then very slowly it began to lift into the air, hovering an inch or two above her fingers, suspended. Cosette’s eyes grew round with wonder. Unfortunately, that was when Mme. Thénardier noticed her sewing sitting abandoned on the floor.

The woman’s temper was swift and unrelenting. “So that is how well you work,” she spat, storming over to tower above the table. “I ought to see how you work to the tune of a beating, I should.”

Valjean stood up from the table. He was not angry. Javert also made as if to get up, but Valjean put a hand on his shoulder and pressed him back into his seat. The Auror crossed his arms, but did not argue.
“Madame,” said Valjean, stepping around the table towards them. “Let the child play.”

Mme. Thénardier stopped where she stood, in the middle of reaching for the cat o’ nine tails which hung on the wall. “She is a sickly, slovenly creature, Monsieur, and if she will not do her work, why! She must be beaten. What kind of brat accepts food and clothing and shelter, yet refuses to perform the simplest of tasks?”

They had an audience now. Half the tavern had stopped what they were doing to watch the brewing altercation. Valjean did not allow that to bother him. He was not angry. He tapped the purse at his side meaningfully.

“How much are the socks worth?” he asked.

The woman grimaced. “I should say twenty francs, at the least. Twenty! Yet she sets them on the floor like they are rags!”

Valjean reached into his purse and withdrew a collection of coins. “Forty francs, then,” he said. “That is two pairs of stockings, isn’t it?”

Mme. Thénardier gawked openly at the coins. Depositing them into her palm, Valjean added quietly, “Let the child play, Madame.”

Underneath the table, Cosette stared out at Valjean with the same sort of wonder she had reserved for her leaf. Looking hesitantly between him and her mistress, her small voice asked, “May I, Madame?”

The proprietress’ grimace had become, if anything, more pronounced, but she said, “Play,” in a tone that was not so much a capitulation as it was an order.

“Thank you, Madame.” Cosette settled down on her heels, watching Valjean return to his seat. By the time the noise of the tavern picked back up again, the girl was distracted by the leaf which was become a toy; she twirled it through the air as if it were a paper kite.

Sitting again at the table, Valjean was conscious of Javert looking at him. He drew it out for a moment, wishing he had some proper plaything to give the child, before turning his head to meet Javert’s eyes.

“Yes?”

The Auror regarded him with irritation. “Of all the ways you could have handled that,” he began, “and you just had to offer her money, didn’t you?”

Valjean sighed. “I am not surprised you did not like that. It worked, didn’t it?”

Javert shook his head. “That’s not the point, Jean. People like that - money is the only thing they really want. And now that you’ve shown them you have it, they will try to squeeze you for everything you’ve got.”

At that, the outline of a smile lifted Valjean’s lips. “Yes,” he said. “It should make negotiations tomorrow much simpler.”

Javert’s own mouth quirked down, and he shook his head. “You are still like no-one I have ever met, Jean.”

“Mmm,” hummed Valjean. “It is just as well. Otherwise I might have cause to be jealous.”
“Ha. Now I know you are flattering me.” But Javert said it with a slight smile, and after a minute had passed, his hand came to rest alongside Valjean’s on the table.

It was getting to be very late. The tavern had all but emptied for the night, and the lights dimmed hours ago, but Valjean and Javert still sat at their table. Even Cosette had vanished, creeping off to whatever corner she was permitted to sleep in. Valjean had taken to holding Javert’s hand outright, as there was nobody left to see, and he rubbed absent-minded circles across his knuckles.

It was eventually the Auror who suggested they go to bed, and when Valjean jumped, then apologized, it became apparent that the man had lost track of time completely, thinking of other things. They made their way into the bridal suite, not, as Javert pointed out, that they had any business calling it such a thing, and went to disrobe for the night.

Inside their bedchamber, which was luxurious only in comparison to the rest of the inn, Valjean turned down the lamps to a more comfortable brightness. The Auror had already shrugged off his uniform, folding the navy robes with the same practiced and efficient motions he repeated every night. Valjean had seen it happen often enough to almost know the order of operations, but when he surreptitiously attempted it on his plain black garments, the result was still a wrinkly mess.

Giving up on that endeavor, Valjean turned his attention to his waistcoat, and then his shirt.

“You aren’t drunk, are you?” Javert asked suddenly from the other side of the room.

Pausing with his hands at the button of his collar, Valjean considered this. “No,” he said. “A bit warmer than usual, still, but that is it.”

The Auror rolled his eyes. “If I had had half as much as you did, I wouldn’t be able to stand straight.”

Valjean grinned, working his shirt off his shoulders. “I doubt that,” he said. “Truth be told, it could not have amounted even to two glasses. Though it is also true I have rather more bulk than you do.”

Snorting, Javert said, “I cannot argue with that.” Then, “I am glad you are not drunk.”

“Oh?” said Valjean. “Why is that?”

The Auror folded his own shirt neatly and laid it on top of his robes, then strode up to Valjean without preamble. “Because it would be unseemly. And because if you are not, then I may do this.” He reached out and pulled Valjean’s face toward his own, kissing him intently. “You taste like beer,” he complained, and Valjean laughed.

“Well, I was not offered water,” he replied.

Javert made a noncommittal grunt in response and pulled their mouths together again in a kiss which was slow and languorous. Valjean’s fingers trailed down his back, coming to rest on the Auror’s waist. A slight pressure exerted by the press of his thumb on the smooth jut of a hipbone caused Javert to hiss with an intake of breath, and Valjean propelled them both gently toward the bed.

It took several carefully maneuvered steps, but then Javert was sitting on the edge of the mattress, with Valjean working his way between his knees, and Javert letting him. They were kissing still; with the Auror sitting, Valjean had to bend over to keep their lips together, not that he minded. One of Javert’s hands was wrapped up in his hair, and the other was on the back of his thigh, guiding him closer.
“Am I to take this to mean,” Javert gasped, “that you intend to pick up where we left off a few days ago?”

“Yes,” Valjean replied, voice so rough he almost did not recognize it. “Provided you want to, that is.”

The Auror’s hand pulled him closer still, and then Javert was pressed up hard against Valjean’s leg. “Please for the love of God do not develop some moral compunction now,” he growled.

Valjean only chuckled in response, pushing the man’s shoulders back and down until Javert lay flat on the bed, his legs dangling over the edge. The motion of pushing had more or less required Valjean to climb on top of him; realizing this, he paused, straddling the Auror on all fours. For a moment, they each simply looked into the other’s eyes, catching their breath. There was a question in Valjean’s mind that he was not quite certain how to articulate.

“Would you rather if I...?” he began, gesturing to indicate their positions reversed.

Javert looked at him blankly for a moment, and then suddenly he understood; even in the dim lamplight, his flush was clearly visible. “I am perfectly happy where I am, thank you,” he said.

“Yes. Good.” Valjean thought he was blushing, too, at that point.

To make up for their mutual embarrassment, he rested on his elbows, pressing his lips to the underside of Javert’s chin. He kissed down the man’s neck and then across his collarbone, and in so doing must have skimmed an especially sensitive spot, because Javert’s back arched off the bed, his knees drawing up behind where Valjean was situated. For a fraction of a second, their hips came together, and the sound Valjean made was anything but chaste.

Javert seemed to shudder at it. “That. Again.”

Valjean did not know what he meant - the kiss, the momentary press of arousal, the noise - so he opted for what had precipitated it all, putting his mouth back against the Auror’s collarbone, and this time biting at it lightly. Whether or not it was what Javert had meant, it had the desired effect. Javert groaned as his hips bucked, and this time, Valjean did not bother holding himself up.

The Auror fell back to the mattress, and Valjean let his knees go slack so that he was propped up by his elbows alone. The splay of his legs against Javert’s was immediate, as was the presence of heat on heat through the fabric of their trousers, which despite its newness was still unmistakable. Valjean’s eyes closed as every nerve in his body sang.

“I think,” Javert murmured, “that this is the part where people will traditionally remove their pants.”

Valjean trembled; he told himself it was with amusement. Already his overwhelming affection was more than he knew how to handle. To call that feeling by a different name, even one which he thought might be correct, would be too much in that moment.

“I believe you are right about that,” he said, kissing the Auror once on the mouth in a way that was entirely too continent considering their activities. “And we may as well move farther onto the mattress, since we will be billed exorbitantly for it in the morning regardless.”

Javert’s bark of laughter was comfortable and familiar. As Valjean rolled to the side, working his belt off - and yes, trousers were definitely unnecessary at this juncture - he wondered when it had become that way.
He turned to find Javert already tucked under the covers, undressed, and with his pants laying mercifully unfolded on the floor. Shaking his head, Valjean scooted under the covers himself, pulling a surprisingly warm comforter over the top of them.

From there, it took some time to work out the right rhythm, and Javert’s encouragement was more sarcastic than anything. But little by little, Valjean worked out what was right, what was good, what made Javert’s fingers twist blindly for purchase in the sheets, even as his dry words turned into incoherent sounds mingled with Valjean’s name.

They found release in almost the same moment. It had not lasted very long. It had lasted exactly long enough.

The sun was only just rising, but Valjean sat already out in the tavern room. Javert was across the table from him. By tacit agreement, they had emerged together from their room with a single purpose; it required no discussion to know what they intended to accomplish that morning. Each man looked off in opposite directions, waiting patiently, though every once in a while, their eyes would flicker and meet. When that happened, Valjean would inevitably feel his face go hot, while Javert would adopt an irritatingly smug expression that Valjean could not help but find endearing.

They saw Cosette before they heard her. She moved down the wooden stairs with the practiced silence of one who has been punished for being too loud, sticking close to the wall where there was more support and the wood was not so prone to creaking. When she in turn spotted the two men sitting in the dappled morning light, she paused. Something bright and inquisitive flashed over her features, followed by something almost hopeful. Then she continued in her descent, retrieved a mop and a bucket from the kitchen, and slipped out of doors to clean.

The next time that Valjean and Javert met eyes, their faces were set with resolve. Valjean removed his coin purse from his hip and set it deliberately on the tabletop.

Perhaps an hour had gone by before Mme. Thénardier bustled downstairs. She started when she saw the guests waiting; at once, her face tried painfully to adopt the resemblance of courtesy.

“Messieurs,” she said, hastening forward. “What may I do for you this morning? Perhaps some breakfast, or -”

“Just the bill, please,” Valjean interjected.

For a moment, the woman appeared put out, doubtless wishing she had a further excuse to charge the strange pair, but she nodded her head. “The bill, of course.” So saying, she vanished into the kitchen.

In the interlude, Javert folded his arms.

Mme. Thénardier returned after a lengthy period with a scroll of parchment. “Your tab, Messieurs.”

Valjean took it from her, ignoring all of the totals but the one at the bottom. “Twenty-four Galleons?” he asked mildly.

“Twenty - twenty-four?” Javert repeated, spluttering. The sum in wizard’s currency was absurd; perhaps at a fine inn in Paris, one might expect to pay so much, but it was outrageous to suggest the services of Grindelwald’s Waterloo were worthy of such a fee.

“Twenty-four,” the woman asserted. “A Galleon only buys half so much as it used to.”
Valjean raised an eyebrow. “Very well, then,” he said. “We shan’t argue with economics.”

Javert looked much as if he did intend to argue with economics, but Valjean continued.

“Incidentally, I do not suppose that little girl is still hereabouts?”

Mme. Thénardier scowled. “You’ll mean that bastard child, Cosette, I suppose! If she knows what is good for her, she is out back cleaning.”

Valjean nodded thoughtfully. “I don’t suppose you would care to be rid of her? I see how much it must wear your nerves to have another girl to provide for, and I am an old man with no children. Her company might amuse me.”

“Ha!” said Mme. Thénardier. “Yes, please Monsieur, by all means -”

At that moment, the kitchen door opened, and Thénardier the husband stumbled out. Crossing swiftly over to the table, he ordered his wife away with a look and a jerk of the head, and then he was all smiles.

“She meant that your total is twenty-four Sickles,” M. Thénardier said, taking away the parchment. “My wife is ever so poor with the figures, though God bless her heart she tries.” At that distance, he reeked of alcohol; Valjean was left to surmise that he had spent the night drinking in the kitchen.

Javert turned in his chair so that he faced Thénardier directly. The piercing look in the Auror’s eye was one Valjean knew, and it was plain that it made Thénardier anxious. He wrung his hands nervously as he spoke.

“I could not help but overhear your words just now Monsieur - how noble of you to seek to relieve my wife of a burden. Yet I am afraid I must object - you see, I love that child as though she were my own.”

The disbelief on Javert’s face was blatant, but Thénardier went on in the same vein.

“It is true - she is ever so costly in her food and medicine and clothing, but blessed Fantine made us her caretakers, and I could give her to no other.”

Valjean carefully removed a note from his pocket. “This is from Fantine herself. You shall find that it instructs you to deliver Cosette to the person who bears it.”

Thénardier ripped away the note and stared dumbfounded at the words inside. It was written exactly as promised.

“There is a Certificate of Adoption as well,” Valjean told him. “It simply requires signatures.”

Thénardier returned the note while attempting a scoff. “Well, perhaps,” he conceded. “Perhaps. But you could have taken this note from another - what proof have I that you are the man meant by it? And with Fantine no longer alive to confirm you story... I should think I might trust the girl to a wealthy individual, one I could be certain had the means to pay for her care, but I will not hand her over to any working man who comes in off the street!”

The innkeeper appeared very pleased with this speech; had he been paying closer attention, he would have noticed the way Javert smiled, teeth bared, and the peril inherent in such an expression.

“Do you know who I am, Monsieur?” Javert asked, leaning back in his chair almost as if
lounging. Thénardier turned to him, and it was possible that he saw what he had missed before in Javert’s face, or that he looked more closely at those navy robes and understood suddenly what they signified.

“I am,” Javert enunciated, “the Auror Javert, Inspecteur First Class.” All the color left Thénardier’s face at that, but Javert was not finished. “We do not have to ask you to take Cosette. I could remove her from these premises this instant and let that be the end of it, but I will not do that. I will drag this out. I will bring a team of my people here to evaluate the situation - your treatment of Cosette for starters, but anything else illicit we come across will count against you. It will take weeks. It will be expensive. It may result in jail time.” He paused to be certain the message sank in. “May I now suggest that you cooperate?”

Thénardier gawped like a fish, unable quite to believe what he was hearing. Valjean chose that moment to draw the deal to a close. He jangled his coin purse, and the innkeeper’s attention was on him immediately.

“Your mistreatment of Cosette is unacceptable,” Valjean said. “Even so, I too have done wrong in my life, and have been granted the opportunity to choose better. I believe all men deserve that chance.”

“Without question,” Thénardier said hurriedly. “Why, as the great Voltaire once wrote -”

“I think,” Valjean went on, ignoring him, “that it is fair in a matter of custody such as this, to allow for a settlement. I do not doubt that such a man of business already has a sum in mind.” This last was spoken with irony, but Thénardier missed the inflection.

“Messieurs,” he said, “I am in need of one thousand Galleons.”

A moment passed, and then Javert burst out laughing. “You have some gall,” he said. “I mean, can you imagine -”

“One thousand Galleons is a lot to carry,” Valjean stated. His air of calm had not wavered once. “Surely you do not think a full thousand coins would fit in this purse?” He shook his head. “If that is your price, I will have to travel to the bank to remove additional funds. It would take some time. You say you are in need of the money - perhaps your creditors will not be content to wait?”

The innkeeper winced ever so slightly, and Valjean knew he had the right of it. “A counter-offer, then - would you accept Muggle bills instead?”

The greed in Thénardier’s eyes said “yes”, but his mouth said, “I might consider it.”

“Good.” Valjean tapped his purse once with his wand, and the contents switched over from wizarding to Muggle currency. “I believe your sum corresponds to roughly ten-thousand francs, would you not say?”

Thénardier did not reply, except by the avarice written even more plainly on his features. Valjean carefully counted out a handful of crisp banknotes.

“Are those real?” Thénardier asked, licking his lips.

Valjean paused. “Do you really think I would give you counterfeit in front of an Auror?”

Thénardier took the money the moment it was offered, shoving it deep into a pocket before Valjean could change his mind.

Standing from his seat, Valjean said, “Call Cosette.”
In the end, their departure evoked little fanfare. Cosette had few personal belongings to pack, and none of the Thénardiers were eager for a lengthy farewell. In fact, Valjean was certain they wanted Javert out of sight as quickly as possible. So it was that Valjean and Javert found themselves standing in the Montfermeil square, with a little girl clinging to Valjean’s hand in a grip as hard as she could manage.

Valjean knelt down to her level. “We shall have to get you some new clothes,” he said. “And then we may go to lunch. Any toy that you see in the store you may have, simply point it out to me, alright?”

Cosette nodded solemnly. Then she asked, “Are you my Papa now?”

Valjean thought of the document in his pocket, signed and simply awaiting delivery. “Yes,” he said, “I am. And you are my daughter.”

Cosette turned half around, still wrapping her tiny fist around three of Valjean’s fingers. She stared up at Javert, who must have seemed very tall.

“Are you my Papa, too?”

When Javert realized he was the one being addressed, he almost choked as he wanted to laugh and protest at the same time.

“No, Mademoiselle,” he said quite emphatically. “No. That is to say, I... Your father is - No.”

Where he sat on his heels, Valjean hid a smile. “Perhaps she could call you ‘Uncle’,” he suggested.

“Uncle?” Cosette repeated, cocking her head.

“I think just ‘Javert’ would suffice,” the Auror muttered. “But if you must have a pet name, then I suppose ‘Uncle’ would do.”

“Excellent,” Valjean said smoothly. “Let us be off, then.”

He scooped Cosette up from the pavement, and Javert rested a hand on the crook of his arm. In that moment before the vacuum of Disapparition closed around them, Valjean felt Cosette nuzzle her face against his shoulder, and he thought to himself that there was not a single thing left in the world that he wanted.

“Javert,” Valjean called out, laughing. “Javert, wait up, my stride is not so long as yours, and Cosette takes three steps for one of mine.”

The Auror paused on the street corner, turning his head back to look at them. Valjean was advancing up the brick sidewalk, Cosette following close behind.

It had taken several hours after they first brought the girl home for Javert to carefully comb and detangle Cosette’s blonde hair, a task which Valjean had left to him because, he said, Javert’s hair was much longer than his own, and the Auror should therefore be used to managing such things. Privately, Valjean had been a bit apprehensive about leaving him in charge of matters - Javert was not known for his understanding, and he was new still to gentleness - but he had taken to the job with an especially patient hand, careful not to tug too hard, and Cosette did not fidget.

Cosette liked Javert, Valjean thought. When he expressed this to the Auror later, the man had
simply scoffed.

“Well, if she does,” Javert had said, “then she really could be your daughter - you have equally poor taste.”

The eventual result of those ministrations, coupled with several hearty meals and a new wardrobe, had wrought a tremendous change on the young girl. She was still too thin, but a healthy glow had returned to her face. On rare occasions, Cosette even smiled.

Valjean reached the street corner, still chuckling. “Do you plan on telling me where we are going, or will you lead us in a wild goose chase all over Paris?”

Javert shook his head. “I told you, it is a surprise. One block more, and we will be there.”

“As you say,” Valjean replied. “But I think Cosette is wearing out. Would you like to ride on my shoulders, dear?”

Cosette nodded; she was still so quiet. Valjean picked her up easily, hoisting her above his head so she could sit comfortably with her legs dangling down his front.

Once she was situated, Valjean turned back to Javert. “Lead the way.”

The Auror was not off in his reckoning. They had walked only a little farther through the neighborhood before they turned left down a cobblestone street. The houses there were surrounded by brick walls, and Valjean looked about him curiously; what had Javert brought them there to see with such a mysterious air?

Explaining nothing, Javert continued to lead them along until they had traversed about half the length of the street. Then he stopped in front of a house which looked older and less well-maintained than the others.

He held himself with a particular stiffness and gestured at the house, raising an arm to point. “Take a look,” Javert said mechanically.

Before Valjean’s gaze followed the hand, it first studied his partner’s figure. The stiffness he recognized; in Javert, it usually meant that the man was uncomfortable, nervous, perhaps even expecting a rebuke. What was all this about?

Returning Cosette carefully to the pavement, Valjean crossed to the house the Auror indicated. A brick wall fenced in its yard like the rest of the properties on the street, with an iron gate set in the middle. Valjean laid a hand on the gate, studying the residence intently.

The house itself was two floors, white paint peeling off of wooden clapboard siding. Dormers poked through the roof in two places, and there was a large window into what was presumably the salon. On the other side of the gate, the yard ran rampant with weeds, but there were gnarled apple trees among the grass, and it was clear that it had had a beautiful garden once. Beside Valjean’s hand, a rusting numeral ‘55’ was bolted to the brick. Then Valjean spotted the “For Sale” sign buried among the weeds, and he understood.

“Oh, Javert,” he breathed.

“That was definitely nervousness in Javert’s voice, as if it were possible for Valjean to be anything but enraptured. For a moment, he could not reply. The words stuck in his throat. “It’s perfect,” he finally managed. Turning, he added, “However did you find this place?”
The Auror smiled, but it was not calculating, nor was it smug. The expression on Javert’s face was something almost resembling shy. “I did a lot of asking around,” he said. “Investigating. There were a few other places I looked at as well, but the moment I saw the garden, I thought of you.”

He ran his fingers back through his hair, a very unprofessional gesture. “It’s definitely a fixer-upper,” he said hesitantly. “It needs repainting. The kitchen will have to be redone, and I think you would want to add a bathroom. In fact,” he admitted, “it really needs quite a lot of work. If you want to look someplace else, or you decide you don’t like it, I’ll understand, really -”

Valjean reached an arm around Javert’s shoulders and pulled him forward, kissing him soundly. “I said it was perfect,” he said, “and I meant it.” With a slight smile, he added, “It is no amount of work that magic and a bit of elbow grease won’t fix.”

Javert smiled crookedly in return, then coughed and pulled out of Valjean’s arms, nodding pointedly down at Cosette. Cosette, for her part, was not paying the least bit attention. She was staring up at No. 55 with wide eyes.

“What do you think?” Valjean asked, kneeling down to her level. “You could have your very own bedroom. Perhaps a swing set in the back?”

Cosette nodded, the corners of her lips lifting.

“Uncle Javert found it for us. Wasn’t that sweet of him?”

“Sweet?” Javert interjected. “I am many things, but I do not think ‘sweet’ qualifies as -”

What happened then cut him off entirely, for Cosette turned and wrapped her arms around his legs, hugging him tight. Javert gaped for a moment, at a loss for words, then very slowly stooped to pat her on the shoulder. He never did finish his argument, but then, there was not much he could say to argue with that.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

I can't believe this story is finally over - it took six months to write, updating once a week, and that's not accounting for the full year it took to outline and worldbuild this thing in my head! It really is my baby, and it's bittersweet to call it finished, but you guys, my readers, make it really worthwhile. I can't tell you how uplifting it has been to read all your comments, and I guess what I'm trying to say is that I'm very sentimental this morning.

Anyhow, thanks once more to Awake-Jin for agreeing to beta this whole thing, in spite of how it turned into a 135k monster, and do make sure to check out the end notes after reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

November 23rd, 1981

Monsieur Javert,

Thank you for your letter. Your information was quite correct, I am widely considered the world’s greatest wandmaker, and I say that with the utmost in humility. I apologize also for the lateness of my response; prior to October 31st, many of my sources were in hiding, and after the 31st, well! I’m afraid I got rather carried away in the festivities - I have no doubt the parties were equally hedonistic in Paris!

Now, with regard to the body of your letter, there are a few disclaimers I must first address before reaching your most intriguing of questions:

First, I should state that every wand is unique, as the combination of tree species, core, and length results in an instrument that cannot be replicated. Even were I to craft two identical wands (a thing which no true artist would ever attempt, might I add), the beasts and plants the component parts originated from would undoubtedly differ, changing the wands’ temperaments. Second, and of no lesser importance, the bond between wand and wizard is not only unique, it is something not fully understood, even by experts such as myself. It is known, for instance, that a wizard may win the allegiance of another’s wand in a duel, yet why a wand chooses to work with a wizard in the first place remains a mystery we can only guess at. In light of these facts, and without your wand in front of me to examine, the only answers I have to offer you are conjecture, albeit conjecture born from decades of experience.

When I first received your correspondence, I was excited - truly, there is no greater joy than a challenge and the acquisition of new knowledge. Sometimes, when one reaches my age, one believes they have learned all that there is to know of a subject, but this of course is hubris. I immediately took to my library and sent a number of letters to colleagues, should they have possessed some scrap of lore which I did not. The responses I received were all the same: in any known instance of a wand breaking or fracturing such as you have described, the effects end in an instrument which is either unresponsive and useless, or else so unsuitable to practice magic with that a wizard is likely to fry his brain trying. Even so, I hesitate to call your wand one of a kind - so often an ‘expert’ proclaims an anomaly to be singular in nature, only for the universe to present him with another example.
Whether other examples exist or not, I feel safe in saying that your wand’s condition is exceptionally rare. I would offer the following as a possible, but unconfirmable, explanation.

Hornbeam, also called ironwood, is one of the less common species to select a human partner, and when it does, such wands bond for life. My own wand happens to be of the hornbeam variety, and so I am intimately familiar with its particular sentience. Hornbeam selects only those witches and wizards of talent whose lives are dominated by a single, driving passion, such as might be termed ‘obsession’ by the less generous. In so doing, they rapidly become personalized to the point that they are inoperable to others. Moreover, the ironwood is so named for its iron will; the bearer of a hornbeam wand is usually tied to a particular code of honor, one the wand learns to such a degree that it will refuse to perform acts - for good or for ill - which do not conform to that code.

From what you told me, I would speculate that if another had picked up your wand and tried to perform magic with it, they simply would have found their efforts ineffective. However, because you are the wand’s chosen partner, it attempted to fulfill its duty by following your wishes, even when they went against your usual moral standard. These conflicting messages likely caused a blockage and buildup of magical energy, ultimately causing the wood to split. All of this supposition is well-rooted in established fact.

Where we move from the solid ground of fact to the airy realm of hypothesis is in the matter of your wand healing itself. I can offer no concrete answers for you, but if I were to venture a guess, I would say only this: a wizard who has lost his path would lose his wand, but in choosing a new path, one to which the wizard was just as committed as the first, he might conceivably win it back.

I regret to say that this is all the more I can tell you; should you ever find yourself in London, I would encourage you to visit my shop at the South end of Diagon Alley - the name is over the door. I would relish the opportunity to see your wand for myself, and should you know anyone in the market for a new one, well, my wands are not called the best without due cause.

The sincerest regards,

G. Ollivander, Wandmaker

December 25th, 1981

The lights on the Christmas tree twinkled gently, filling the salon with their soft white glow. Cosette had asked for lights, and so lights she received, but the decorations did not end there. An abundance of real icicles, spelled to stay frozen even in the roaring heat of the fireplace, were suspended in glittering lengths from every branch, while garlands of golden bubbles lent the fir a pearlescent sheen. Stockings hung from the mantelpiece, and over top of it, greenery sat carefully arranged around a pair of silver candlesticks. Taken altogether, Javert thought it a bit much, but Valjean could not imagine a single more perfect scene.

Outside, a blanket of snow had put a wintry halt on Valjean’s preparations of the garden, but even after nine months of possessing the deed to No. 55, there remained enough work to be done in the house that he stayed plenty occupied. And what a nine months it had been!

Javert was at first insistent on finding rooms of his own, which coupled with his work, meant that they saw one another far less than either would have liked. The Auror was especially busy, as there remained the threat of Death Eater activity across Paris. Though the once-Préfet Henri Gisquet had received a sentence of life imprisonment in Azkaban, the carefully-built network he had established still had to be dismantled. Javert regularly came home with cuts and bruises from
some scrap with a Dark wizard, and Valjean fretted constantly.

Then, at the end of October, a miracle occurred. Valjean could hardly believe the truth of it, until Javert’s sources in the British Auror Office confirmed it outright.

The evidence suggested that on Halloween night, the greatest Dark wizard of all time, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named (“Lord Voldemort,” the brave whispered in the back corners of noisy rooms), had met his end. And the stories, too sensational yet somehow still true, told of how Voldemort had entered into the little town of Godric’s Hollow, intent on murdering the entire Potter family himself for offenses unknown.

James and Lily Potter perished, said the newspapers, but Voldemort was unable to touch their son, a baby boy only a year old. Voldemort’s Killing Curse rebounded, destroying the Dark wizard instead of the boy, and the entire world rejoiced. Nevertheless, the victory was tinged with sadness, for the boy, Harry, was orphaned, and no magic in the world could resurrect the dead.

Without their leader to guide them, Voldemort’s followers fell into disarray. Many, it seemed, came out of a trance, having been forced to serve under the Imperius Curse. Others went underground, vanishing without a trace, while still others were apprehended. The papers announced that Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrange had been captured in London, and Valjean slept a little easier at night.

Javert did not put up so much of a fight when Valjean asked him to stay over after that. Of late, he was forgetting to take his suitcase with him when he left for work, and it always conveniently slipped Valjean’s mind to mention it. Instead, Javert’s things sat upstairs in the bedroom, as if just waiting to be unpacked and put away in the chest of drawers.

Valjean only had to ask once if the Auror would be home for the holidays, and the pair had spent a very pleasant Christmas Eve sitting by the fire. Now, on that holiest of mornings, Cosette was curled up in a blanket on the floor by the tree, looking at the pile of wrapped gifts in amazement. For themselves, both Valjean and Javert had asked very little, but for Cosette, each had gone out of his way to make certain the girl’s holiday was a memorable one. As Valjean passed her present after present and perhaps Javert’s description of him once as Pere Noël was not utterly without base - she unwrapped new clothes and dresses and toys. A magnificent china doll was especially esteemed, and Cosette cradled her close.

“I shall call her Catherine,” she announced.

Valjean raised himself from his place beside the tree, holding a sizable clothes box wrapped in brown paper.

“Javert,” he said, “this is for you.”

Where he stood behind the settee, the Auror assumed an expression of alarm. “I told you I did not require a gift,” he replied. “Whatever you’ve put in a box so large, my present to you will surely pale in comparison.”

Valjean shook his head. “Your presence is gift enough, Javert. A small token of my appreciation can hardly repay that.” Handing it over the back of the couch, he added, “Seeing as I have already bought it, you might as well do me the favor of opening it.”

The Auror took the box gingerly, as if afraid to touch it. Resting it on the back of the settee, he undid the paper carefully, then lifted the top off the box.

“You did not,” he said. “Jean, tell me you did not. It is too extravagant, I couldn’t possibly -”
He stopped, simply staring into the box. Folded inside of white crepe paper trappings was a new coat. It was midnight blue, precisely the same color as Javert’s uniform, and was adorned with shiny gold buttons.

Valjean rubbed the back of his neck a little sheepishly. “I know how you miss your old one,” he said, and it was true; even amidst all of the Aurors’ raids on the Château de Lestrange, it was never discovered what had become of the Inspecteur’s greatcoat. Javert had lamented on more than one occasion the idea of some ruffian wearing it around.

“I...” Javert said, fingering the fine wool. “I do not want to know what this cost,” he finished, muttering darkly to himself.

“If it was presumptuous, then I shall apologize,” Valjean said, “but the color was just right, and I could not resist.”

“Do not apologize.” Javert opened and then closed his mouth. “It is just that I...”

Cosette climbed up onto the settee to peek in the box. Seeing the buttons, she oohed and reached out to touch one but did not quite, fingers hovering over the tantalizing sparkle.

“It is very handsome,” she said. “Will you try it on, Uncle?”

“Yes, will you?” Valjean grinned.

Javert looked between their two eager faces and sighed. “It would appear I haven’t much of a choice,” he grumbled, but he was exceedingly gentle as he lifted the garment from its nest and slipped it on over his robes. The heavy blue fabric fell all the way to Javert’s ankles, and as the Auror did up the buttons, Valjean decided that he had to agree with his daughter’s assessment: the coat made the Auror cut a very handsome figure indeed.

Cosette clapped her hands in enthusiasm, and Valjean’s smile stretched further. Circling the couch around to his partner, Valjean said, “It could be taken in a bit at the waist - I shall let you pay for the tailor if you so wish, though I had been going to offer.”

“Thank you,” Javert said softly, looking down at himself. “I have never owned something quite so...”

“You’re welcome,” Valjean replied just as quietly, pecking him once on the cheek.

The Auror bit his lip. “I am afraid my earlier statement was correct - your present is nothing nearly this... lavish.”

“You know I expect nothing of the sort,” said Valjean, putting his hands on Javert’s hips and pulling him closer. “In fact, I feel rather lavished already, seeing you wear it. It looks well on you.”

Javert’s features quirked a little at that. “Is that so? Perhaps you can help me out of it, later.”

“Javert!” Valjean laughed, his cheeks reddening. “On Christmas morning -!”

There was a flash of teeth as the Auror grinned, pleased by the effect his teasing was having. “Cosette,” he said, his eyes never leaving Valjean’s face, “why don’t you take your things up to your room? Then your father can cook us some breakfast.”

The girl scampered off to do as she was told, and it became just the two of them in the salon.
“I do have something for you,” said Javert, stepping out of Valjean’s arms to take a thin red box off of an end table. “It is... Well, it is something.”

Accepting the box, Valjean said dryly, “You never oversell anything, do you?”

“You’ll see when you open it,” Javert mumbled. “I think.”

His interest piqued both by the box and by the way the Auror, usually so bold, was turning almost bashful, Valjean undid the simple ribbon and lifted off the lid. The sight inside stilled his breath.

Laying on a velvet bed was a rosary with beads and a crucifix cut from fine black glass. The silver clasp shone in the light, and Valjean’s fingertips trembled as they traced over the delicate, familiar workmanship.

Javert responded to Valjean’s sudden silence with anxious rambling. “I gathered the beads from Thérèse’s floor - it seemed wrong to leave her with the mess to clean up - but I never had the heart to throw them away. I tried re-stringing them myself, but the results were pathetic, I am no craftsman. Finally, I took the pieces into a jeweler’s and - But you don’t need to hear all that, it was a foolish whim, and maybe it was insensitive of me to -”

“No.” Valjean looked up at that, his eyes wide and dark with nostalgia. “No, it is sentimental. It is...”

He thought of a mayor’s calloused fingers pressing a cross against an open palm. He thought of lies and deceit, once hidden and then revealed, and of words spoken in anger and hurt. He thought of other words spoken, ones which formed a chain harder to break than those of iron, and of how that chain had been severed even so, leaving them with nothing to tether them together but love.

He thought of these things and he looked at the rosary in the box, and it seemed to him that some circle which had been open was now closed, that this was the final stroke he had not known he needed to complete the loop. He had first given the rosary to Javert, and now it had been given back to him in his turn.

“It is exactly right,” Valjean murmured. “Thank you.”

Javert did not reply, but the corners of his mouth lifted in a smile.

Feet pattered on the stairs as Cosette returned to the salon. Valjean slipped the rosary into his pocket, then turned and scooped the girl up in his arms. He felt Javert watching him as he carried Cosette towards the kitchen, and in a way which Valjean was becoming more and more accustomed to, it felt that the Auror watched only for the sake of watching, with no purpose in mind but to observe that little family they made.

Breakfast was of bacon and toast and sweet things, with small, tangy oranges for a Christmas treat. When all had eaten their fill, and Cosette had gone up to her room to play with her new toys, Valjean stood at the sink scrubbing the dishes clean. He could have done it quickly with magic, but this was still a chore he preferred to do himself. Javert sat behind him at the breakfast table, sipping a cup of coffee and skimming the paper.

“Mmm,” he said, tapping the side of his mug. “The British Ministry of Magic has let that character Karkaroff go. Whatever were they thinking?”

His musings were interrupted by an enormous great horned owl landing on the windowsill outside; as the window happened to be directly in front of the sink, Valjean nearly dropped a skillet in surprise. The owl had a haughty bearing about it, and the letter it clutched in its beak was closed with a wax seal.
“I know that bird,” said Javert, getting to his feet. “That is Roi, he is Chabouillet’s owl.”

Valjean pried open the window, admitting a blast of frigid air into the kitchen. Roi fluttered inside, landing on the table. Where Chouette would have dropped her letter at once to peck at the remnants of Javert’s bacon, Roi held himself with a regality befitting his name. The letter was addressed to Javert, and the Auror took it.

Valjean returned to washing the dishes, but with more distraction, and soapy water was sloshing onto the hems of his sleeves. Surely Chabouillet would not have written on a holiday if it was not a matter of importance.

Peeling off the seal, Javert withdrew a piece of expensive stationary and frowned at the small script. “Chabouillet wishes us both a ‘Merry Christmas’. Why he knows I am here with you, I shall not venture a guess.”

The Auror hummed as he continued to read, brow creased in concentration. “He says his position of interim Préfet de Préfecture has been made a permanent promotion - ah, so that is why he has written me. I shall still be answering to him, but only until they select a new Secrétaire.”

Where he stood at the sink, Valjean closed his eyes as he relaxed. Every day that passed felt like they were waiting with bated breath for bad news; that the war was over had still not entirely sunk in.

His relief was broken by Javert’s sudden, “What?”

Valjean’s eyes flew open. “What is it?” he asked, wiping his hands on a dish rag. “Javert, what’s happened?”

The Auror’s hands tightened, wrinkling the fine paper, and his eyes moved back and forth as if re-reading one paragraph repeatedly. Eventually, he set the page down, smoothing it where his fingers had gripped it too hard. Then Javert stood, running his hand over his hair with a sigh.

“It is Vidocq,” he said. “Chabouillet thought I - we - would want to know. His trial was yesterday, they have been so backed up with cases that Parlement is working through the holidays, and Vidocq claimed - he claimed, as so many others have now done, that he acted under the influence of the Imperius Curse.”

“They did not believe him!” Valjean exclaimed, horrified.

“They did,” Javert replied grimly. “God help us all, but they did. And why shouldn’t they? Veritaserum has never been a permissible means of obtaining evidence in court, so there is no forcing him to talk, and if Chabouillet himself had been victim to Gisquet’s control, why not others? All Vidocq had to do was stand there and put on a repentant act, and any jury would have doubts at his guilt.”

Valjean shivered. Looking out the window at the snowy garden, he eyed every shadow as if it might be concealing a secret danger. Much as Valjean could not bring himself to wish Azkaban on anyone, the knowledge that Vidocq had gone free sat poorly in his stomach; there were crimes which did deserve punishment, if only to ensure the safety of others. Then something else occurred to him, and Valjean turned back to Javert.

“If Vidocq is wise, he will lay low,” Valjean said. “He is in no position to seek revenge, as it would only prove to the court that he is a liar.”

Javert nodded slowly to himself. He approached, and wrapped Valjean in an embrace. “Yes,” he
murmured against the other man’s hair, “but even so I worry. I am grateful that you chose this place - it is quiet and out of the way, with more Muggles than wizards who might know your face.”

“Or yours,” Valjean pointed out. The words which came next to his lips were spoken so naturally, fit so well in his mouth, that he did not even realize what he had said until he’d said it. “I love you, Javert.”

Javert went perfectly motionless. “You do?” he asked, and the emotion in his voice was impossible to identify.

“Yes,” Valjean breathed against his shoulder.

Carefully, Javert took a single step back, hands lifting from Valjean’s waist to come around the base of his neck. Javert looked at him, and Valjean looked back. There was hesitancy in Javert’s face, and astonishment, but also something very like tenderness. Whatever he saw in Valjean’s expression, it must have satisfied, for he pulled Valjean back to him and held him tight.

He did not speak, but it was answer enough.

That night, when all was quiet in the dark of winter, Javert suggested they go up to bed. Valjean rose from where he sat by the fire, his heart full of quiet joy, and when Javert smiled at him, it was with a soft, lopsided grin that never failed to tug at his heart. Still, as the Auror turned and headed for the staircase, Valjean did not yet move, standing as if transfixed in the middle of the salon.

There was a feeling he could not shake, a feeling of something left unfinished. They had not seen the end of strife, in that moment Valjean was certain of it. Something sparkled in the dying light, and he looked up; it was a candlestick that had caught his eye, polished to a silver shine.

Yes, he thought. Strife would surely come again one day. But just as there was always the certainty of struggle, so too in life was there always the possibility of hope.

It was with that selfsame hope burning in his chest like a candle’s flame that Valjean ascended the stairs. Javert was waiting for him on the landing; he cupped his hand over the small of Valjean’s back as they walked to the bedroom, and hope burned all the brighter for the love that mingled with it.

That was how it had always been, how it always would be. Together, hope and love would lead them - through adversity, and to the stars.

Chapter End Notes

Here we are at the end notes, and... surprise! This fic may be done, but the story is not. Because I am a drama queen, I have waited until this point to announce that Per Ardua ad Astra will be the first in a two-part series, as there is a second war with Voldemort still to come, and I have so many more things I want to do with this universe.

It will probably not be the very next thing I write (I have some ficlet ideas I might explore first), and I make no promises that it will come quickly, as I am still outlining and figuring out major plot points. All that said, the idea first came to me a few
months ago, and it's only gotten more insistent since then, which means my brain won't let go of it until I write it. Therefore, a sequel is forthcoming, and I look forward to sharing more of this world with you all. <3

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