The first kiss turned a ghost into a man. The second turned a girl into a woman. Two kisses, a ring, a backward glance: on such things do lives turn. In the real world outside the opera, two people struggle against themselves.

Summary

Notes

Disclaimer: The usual. None of the familiar characters belong to me, and sadly enough, neither does Paris of the 19th century. Historical figures, including Napoleon III, are also not mine. Characters are based on the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical and/or the 2004 film. Other elements partly based on the novel by Leroux.

A word about historical accuracy: When I write, I research the setting first, because characters, like real people, must be the products of their surroundings. I have tried to ensure that details of everyday life and the political elements are faithful to the period. This includes things like locations, dates of known events, biographical details of historical figures, prices, clothing, the appearance of the streets, the names of theatres and other establishments, etc. In general, my descriptions are based on maps, photos, paintings and other appropriate sources. I do not, however, pretend to be writing a scholarly historical novel, and some liberties could be taken for the sake of the story.

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asked to see this story despite not being a fan of "Phantom": I am really honoured and I hope you enjoy it.

**Author's Note:** The 2004 film was set in 1870-71, which just happens to be the *one* period in the late 19th century when this story could not possibly have taken place: far from holding a masquerade on the New Year's Eve of 1871, the populace of Paris was under siege by the Prussian army. So, for the purposes of this story, I will set the events of "Phantom" back a year to 1869-70. We open, therefore, after the fire of the Opéra Populaire, in May 1870, in the last few months of Napoleon III's Empire.
Chapter 1 – Only Almost Here

It was raining in Paris. The black asphalt of the grand boulevards ran silver with light, so that it seemed the entire evening was reflected and continued underground: the gaily lit cafés-chantants with their bawdy songs, the carriages, the restaurants, social clubs, theatres, and the people, everywhere the people... They crowded under awnings and roofs to escape the rain, stood smoking in the dimly lit foyers or pressed shoulder-to-shoulder in packed salons. Paris was what it was; a party in full swing, cheerfully abandoning itself to the din, the glitter, the charming madness of champagne, absinthe and spring.

In the rue le Peletier, there was a gap among the brilliantly lit buildings, a black hole where the missing tooth of the Opéra Populaire now stood empty and silent. Soot streaked down its wet façade. A mere week after the disaster, it appeared ancient and entirely abandoned, its windows boarded up, its singers gone, its audience amusing itself in other theatres and in other ways. Parisian gossip, always fickle, had died down almost before the fire itself, the initial hysteria turning to fascination by the following morning, and to boredom within the week. A few makeshift booths had been run up outside, and during the day hawkers still stood there, selling bits of scenery and more fragments of the infamous chandelier than even the Opéra Populaire could have reasonably possessed ("For you, monsieur, just two sous!"). By now, only the most naïve English and American tourists bought the trinkets; savvy Parisians had long since declared the building an eyesore, and the fire old news.

"Life continues," said a well-dressed gentleman to the young woman beside him.

The two of them stood arm in arm in front of the building, in the rain, without cloaks or umbrellas. Passing strangers hurrying to their carriages cast curious glances in their direction. The young man went on, slowly shaking his head:

"A week ago I thought the world would end. But it's just the same as always. Well, except for..."
He gestured wordlessly at the dark building.

"Yes." The girl bit her lip, staring. "Almost the same. It's just been turned inside out... The darkness is on the outside, now."

She soothed away his worried glance with a small, apologetic smile. "But we should get out of the rain. I swore to Meg I would be careful with this dress."

"Oh!" he exclaimed, shame-faced. "You're cold, of course – forgive me. I should not have brought us here. Georges!" The last was addressed to the coachman behind them, who hurried to open the door. "Mademoiselle Daaé wishes to go home now."

"Yes, monsieur."

The gentleman extended a hand to help the young woman into his carriage. He winced as she carefully held the skirts of her gown clear of the gutter. "Meg's dress... Oh, Christine. I would buy you a thousand new dresses if you would only let me."

One corner of the girl's mouth lifted higher, turning her smile wry. "And Madame Giry would
shame me at once into giving them all back. We are not yet married, Raoul."

"Don't remind me," he said ruefully, settling on the seat beside her. "Our 'secret engagement'. After everything we've been through..."

"Not so secret now." She pulled off her gloves, then rested her head on his shoulder, wet dark curls escaping their pins.

Georges, a big quiet man, closed the carriage door behind them with surprising gentleness, and a moment later there was a slight jolt as they moved off. The ruin of the Opéra disappeared among the lights.

"Let me take you away, Christine. For both our sakes. We'll start everything again, away from this wreck, away from Paris and its ghosts. We'll have a house by the sea, just like the old one. You'll laugh again. We'll be free, you and I."

She lifted her head to meet his serious, pleading eyes.

"I don't think so. You see, it's too late... Maybe it's true that only children are free. But perhaps – we can be happy?"

Raoul took her in his arms then, holding her tightly, nestling his face in her damp curls. They held on to one another like this, two children caught in a storm so many years ago, buffeted by the wind.

"Tell me we'll be happy, Christine."

"Oh yes, Raoul. Very happy."

He felt her grip his arms, and kissed her mouth, tasting salt, tasting rain. He held her, this girl he had loved since they were children, this woman he did not know at all, and for a while he could believe that he had managed to save her after all. But in his mind's treacherous memory, he saw her eyes closing for another man's dark music, and in the pure warmth of her kiss he fancied the aching, desperate, shattering passion he had seen once and could never forget.

"I love you!" he whispered, crushing her against helplessly, "I love you, I love you, I love you..."

When at last they separated, they sat in silence for a long while, jolted by the movement of the carriage.

Outside was the noise of the hoofbeats and wheels, Parisian traffic and the crowds of night revellers. A burst of music came from somewhere where a door had been opened and shut. The rain had stopped and only the occasional tree showered their window with fat heavy droplets as they drove past.

"We're nearly there," Raoul said inconsequentially, peering into the window.

Christine turned to him with another of her wry half-smiles, her lips still swollen with their kiss. Raoul thought there was something heartbreakingly grown-up in that sadness and self-irony.

"Yes," she said. "Life continues."

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The glass shopfront of the café-boulangerie boasted exquisite plaster promises of bread loaves,
baguettes and other delights, which were fully realised within, filling the shop with the delicious aroma of fresh bread and steaming chocolate. The décor, all Louis XV-style cupids, gilt mouldings, heavy mirrors and crystal, had until recently reflected the boulangerie's proximity to the Opéra Populaire, like a conveniently located shadow of the theatre, enticing hungry patrons and hungrier ballet girls inside.

Now, with the Opéra across the road a dead hulk and the patrons and ballet girls all gone, the boulangerie seemed suddenly orphaned, a lost child overdressed in velvet and gold.

"Business is terrible, Madame Giry, just terrible!" complained the elderly shopkeeper, a neat, white-haired man by the name of Monsieur Antoine. "And it will only get worse, for you know it will take them months to repair the Opéra, indeed, months – and in that time what shall I do? Look, a Friday, and scarcely a soul in sight, not even a skinny ballet girl sneaking out for her chocolate..."

He broke off abruptly, darting an embarrassed look at the unamused face of the ballet mistress.

"That is – ahem. Yes. Well. Here we are then. Just a half-loaf, as usual."

He put the carefully paper-wrapped parcel on the marble counter and slid it towards Madame Giry. "Will that be all for today?"

Madame Giry added the parcel to the rest of the purchases in her carry-bag.

"Yes, Monsieur Antoine, thank you."

"Very good, madame. That comes to 20 centimes – I'll put that on your account, shall I?"

"Please. And..." She paused. "I regret to ask this, but would you be so kind as to calculate the total I owe you and forward the bill to this address?" She put a slip of paper on the counter.

Monsieur Antoine reached for his little folding spectacles to examine it.

"You are moving away? Not you too, Madame Giry..."

"I am sorry to add to your business troubles, Monsieur Antoine. But my apartment within the Opéra..."

She looked briefly over her shoulder, as though checking that the building was really ruined. It still stood black and silent in the night, framed by the cupids in the rain-speckled glass of the shopfront.

"I'm afraid you are right; it will likely be many months before the Opéra is repaired. Perhaps longer. I must find new employment."

Monsieur Antoine took off his spectacles and rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly.

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry. It must not be easy for you either, Madame Giry."

"No indeed, monsieur. Nor for any of us."

Monsieur Antoine carefully folded the slip of paper with her address and put it in his pocket. Then he gave Madame Giry a bright smile and clapped his hands on the counter – "Right! Well then, let me give you a little something in farewell, for young Marguerite. I think I have some of her favourite... where were they... with slivered almonds..."

He busied himself looking through the shelves in one of the displays.
"Really, monsieur," Madame Giry tried, "it is not necessary, Meg mustn't..."

"Nonsense, I insist. Ah! Here we are."

He lifted out one of the pastry trays, where a dozen plump almond rolls had been arranged in a cascade. He looked at the tray in puzzlement. There were only three left.

"But I have not yet sold... I don't understand. I put them right there, and then you came in, and now... There were twelve just a moment ago!"

Madame Giry's mouth quirked. "Perhaps it was a ghost?"

"A hungry ghost, it seems." Monsieur Antoine gave the tray a last bemused frown, then sighed. "Perhaps just three then. It seems I am getting forgetful in my old age."

He wrapped the rolls quickly in some paper, ignoring Madame Giry's protestations, and passed the package to her. After a moment, she took it, adding it to the others in her bag.

"Thank you. I do promise to stop by when I am in the area again."

"I look forward to it, madame. Au revoir, and," he gave a friendly nod in the general direction of huge city outside. "Bonne chance?"

"And to you, Monsieur Antoine." She smiled. "The best of luck."

The rain had continued through most of the evening. Behind the Opéra Populaire, the heap of ruined scenery had turned to a soggy mess of burnt wood, and the intricately painted backgrounds had melted together into a clump of glutinous, multicoloured papier-mâché. The acidic stench of wet charcoal rose from the pile.

No doubt there was some divine symbolism in all this, Erik reflected bitterly, as he tried in vain to find a relatively dry corner where he could eat the stolen bread. He ended up with his back wedged between the soot-blackened wall of the opera house and the piled scenery. The roll was almost fresh, full of almonds and very white, and he bit into it hungrily, tearing chunks off and finally just stuffing the rest into his mouth, hunger getting the best of all his worthless, theatrical manners. Bravo, monsieur, he congratulated himself contemptuously. You may now add 'thief' to your repertoire of accomplishments. He would have laughed, but for the hunger.

Yet hunger was a friend, and it was the rain that had been the hardest to bear: the relentless torture of droplets needling him, utterly outside his control. Underground, the water had obeyed him; now he was powerless against it, powerless against everything. The rain had coursed down his face, finding the valleys and ridges of the distorted half of his skull, as shockingly intimate as a caress. No return... He had clawed at his face at first, tried to hide, could barely resist crawling back into the half-collapsed tunnels of the Opéra. For two days, he had done little save fight the rain, and himself. On the third, hunger had forced him back into the shell of his sanity. It would not be denied; and finally, exhausted by the struggle, Erik had felt himself acquiesce. He looked up at the sky for the first time and, standing strung out like a violin string, trembling with tension, had allowed the rain to explore the ravaged contours of his face, caressing both sides of it with Christine's delicate fingers, gently coaxing open his mouth to explore inside.

After that, he had stolen bread, meat, anything to survive.

Yes, he thought when the bread was gone. There was definitely something symbolic about this
cold, wet, miserable night, where all the used-up and useless scenery was melting away, bleeding colour into the gutter. A few sets, a prop table with a missing leg, a singed page of music, half a wig. And an opera ghost, who was only a hungry man with half a face.

And, if Christine was to be believed, half a soul...

Despair crashed over him anew and Erik fed it maliciously, opening himself to the pain, repeating, Christine, Christine, Christine, thinking of the pity and revulsion in her face as he dragged her down, down, always down. Her arms had been fragile porcelain in his grip, and he had thought this made her weak but it was the other way around, oh Christine... *It is not your face,* she had said and looked squarely at him, the way nobody, nobody had ever done. Not your face. Your soul.

How had she done it? She had seen not the aberration of his face, but the fatal flaw in his reasoning, the role that had been playing him: the Phantom of the Opera inside his mind... And somehow, she had found what remained of *him* on the edges of his madness and collected those pitiful shards to give them back as one terrible whole. He looked down at his hand, opening his palm to the light. The ring was still there, it alone sparkling in all the filth.

Christine had made him a man.

Damn her.

He wanted to hate her for it, to break these bonds she had bound him with. The Phantom would have killed her and her lover both, easily! But... But she had killed the Phantom instead, with her bare hands against his distorted flesh.

*I am not an angel, nor a demon, nor a ghost. I am Erik!*

He hunched his shoulders over the damned ring, grit his teeth, shaking soundlessly, swaying back and forth. Loathing himself, loathing her, cursing her, loving her... Christine...

There was a crash, and a swathe of water drenched him suddenly from head to foot. He jerked up, gasping, momentarily disoriented.

"Stop!" yelled a voice from the road, "Stop, curse you!"

The wheels of an omnibus skidded on the road some way ahead of him as someone finally brought the horses to a halt. There was the angry sound of an argument. Erik tried to struggle to his feet, but his knees had locked up with the cold; the wall was at his back and there was nowhere to go. Futile anger gripped him: to have eluded the mob all this time only to be found like this among the burnt scenery, unarmed and stripped of his theatre and all his masks! He didn't want to die, not like this, not without dignity.

But to his surprise, there was only one set of footsteps, clicking quickly towards him. A woman's gait.

**Chapter 2 – Life Continues**

They regarded each other in silence, the disfigured man and the thin, black-clad woman. The only sounds were the monotonous drip of water off the walls and the wet scenery, and the gurgle of the gutter.

At length, Madame Giry spoke.
"So, Monsieur Opera Ghost. We meet again."

Erik glared up at her resentfully. He made an angry flourish at the ruined half of his face. "A ghost no longer, madame. As you no doubt see."

"Ah. Then you prefer a different title now..." Here she removed something from her bag and showed it to him. "The Phantom of the Bakery, perhaps?"

Erik made a low growl in the back of his throat, lashing out at her mocking hand, but she merely took a step back, holding the bread away from him.

"You mock me!"

"I do."

Erik struggled to his feet. "I assure you, madame, if you have come here to jeer at my humiliation —"

"You will kill me, too?"

Something in Madame Giry's face made him stand still.

"I have never believed that humiliation is anything to jeer at," she said. "Perhaps you have forgotten."

Her words were very quiet, but Erik suddenly felt much as an insect must feel, pinned to a board. Long-buried images tried to surface in his memory, and it took all his strength to hold them back: flashes of a whip, a gypsy man, straw, a sack over his head, the music box knocked from the fingers of 'the Devil's Child! Come and see, the Devil's Child!'...And the girl in a patched ballet frock, who took him by the hand and helped him flee.

"You little fool."

Erik stared. "What did you say?"

"You fool!" Madame Giry's eyes flashed. "You ten kinds of fool! I have spent years mourning your fate, shielding you, fearing you, justifying – but no. No! Do you understand? You threw away every kindness, every chance of life at your own vengeful, miserable self-pity!"

"You dare—"

"Tais-toi! How dare you snivel when poor Carlotta is weeping for her lost lover, when Joseph Buquet is dead! When all of us, every singer, every actor, have had our lives upended and our livelihood destroyed! Murderer!"

"The world..." Erik gasped.

"Oh, don't give me that – merde! You have seen cruelty, yes, terrible cruelty – but you would have seen compassion too, and goodness, if you had but looked."

She paused, breathing hard. A few strands of hair had come loose from her braid, and she raised her hands and fell silent, impossibly, taking the time to pin her hair back in place. Erik could only watch.

When she resumed her tirade, she kept one hand up in the air for a moment, showing him, then dropped it to her side.
"I am done holding my hands at the level of my eyes, monsieur. From now on, I will look well to see where I am going. I advise you to do the same."

"Indeed." Erik found he had regained the faculty of speech, though not the use of his though not the use of his legs, which were shaking madly. "And how, pray, am I to do that? I am a murderer, madame. And a fool. As you have so... eloquently pointed out."

"Yes. You are that. You are also homeless, filthy, and living on food which, I daresay, will do nothing more than let you die fat. If you intend to live, I suggest you find a residence other than this gutter."

Erik gave a short, disbelieving laugh. "I seem to have burned down my opera house. Where would you have me go?"

He had expected another lashing of her vicious sarcasm. Instead, she reached into her purse and held something out to him. It was a small card.

"You have skills, monsieur, which is more than can be said of a lot of other architects in this city. Skills which, to some, will quite outweigh the eccentricity of hiring a man with a scar over half his face."

She held out the card. "I know this gentleman. He will not see your face, or your wretched state, when he sees your sketches."

Erik tried to snatch the card from her, but found to his dismay that his hands were shaking as badly as his legs. He nearly dropped it into the mud before Madame Giry placed it securely into his palm.

The engraved writing read: "M. Jean-Marie Duchamp and Associates. Architects. 2, rue de la Sorbonne."

"I will let him know to expect you."

He could laugh in her face.

He could trample this ludicrous card into the mud, open his mind again to the dark music of the opera tunnels and fly home, shadow-like, to the prison where he belonged. Back to the sweet darkness that waited for him, called to him, caressed his mind with a hundred burning tongues...

He was on the edge, the no-man's-land between the abyss of the Opéra and the terror of the world.

And once again, a girl in a patched ballet frock was holding out her hand.

After a long time, he forced his mouth to form the unfamiliar words. "My thanks."

Madame Giry's mouth thinned. "Do not think me kind, Monsieur. You have scorned my kindness and scattered it to the wind, I have none left. But as God is my witness, I helped you once, and now your sins are mine also: You have made me a murderer. I cannot forgive you. I can scarce live with myself. But if you should live to find your honour... Well. Perhaps you may redeem us both."

Wordlessly, acting on some bizarre impulse, Erik opened his other hand and held it out to her, palm up. In the yellow light of the gas streetlamps, the ring sparkled like tears.

Madame Giry looked down at it, then back at him.

"You did not steal that."
"No," he muttered.

Had he wanted her to scream again? To faint? To take it away from him, his one prized possession, and thus prove herself as much a monster as the rest of the world? He did not know, so he could only stand there, holding the ring and her damned card.

"Then I believe it is yours," she said at last. "It is well; we all need something to keep safe. *Au revoir*, child."

She turned around, picked up her bags, and walked away unhurriedly, with the graceful, controlled step of a former ballerina. Erik watched her retreating back until she disappeared around a corner, and only then noticed the small bag at his feet.

She had left him the bread, after all.

He opened the bag. There was something else there, too.

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"*Maman*!" Meg exclaimed, jumping from the divan to run to her mother's side when she heard the front door. "We've been worried, you have been gone so long! Even Christine returned hours ago. Let me help you with that." She took the damp carry-bag from Madame Giry and, unable to resist, peered curiously inside.

"Thank you, my dear."

Madame Giry unbuttoned her coat, shook the rainwater off it, and threw it over her arm while she searched for her house-shoes.

"I'm sorry to have worried you; I was obliged to spend some time ... looking up an old acquaintance. Incidentally," she smiled slightly, "Monsieur Antoine at the boulangerie asked me to convey his regards. And his entirely inappropriate treats."

She nodded at the topmost package in the bag Meg was holding. Meg unwrapped it at once, delighted.

"Almond rolls!"

"Unfortunately, yes. Two. Do remember to share with Christine, they are equally unsuitable for her. You said she is back?"

"I am, Madame Giry."

Both of them turned to see Christine walk into the dining-room, carrying a coffee pot and a tray with a light supper of bread, cheese and cold cuts. She set them carefully on the table, before going to embrace Madame Giry.

Madame Giry patted her back lightly. "There, my dear. You needn't have worried. I was hardly going to join the next Montmartre riots."

Meg and Christine exchanged a grin at the image of Madame Giry waving a fist and shouting about the freedom of workers, or whatever it was the occasional riots they heard of seemed to be about. When Meg went to unpack the purchases, Christine sobered, remembering what she had been about to say:
"Monsieur Gaillard stopped by earlier. About the rent. He was very polite."

"But insistent?" Madame Giry waited while Christine poured the coffee. It was black and rich, the way they always had it at the Opéra, and it made the small room come alive with the comfort of home.

"Yes. He chattered endlessly about rising maintenance costs. He doesn't want us practicing in the apartment, either: it seems the family on the ground floor have been complaining about us 'thumping on their heads'. And they don't like the piano."

Madame Giry closed her eyes briefly, then shook her head and took another sip. "Where would he have you practice?"

Christine rolled her eyes. "He suggests the courtyard."

"Yes, on top of the carriages!" Meg put in, coming back and throwing herself into her chair. "I think he believes ballet to be a form of the can-can, maman."

"Well. We shall have to talk with the neighbours."

"It will not be so bad," said Meg, "if they take on Christine and me at the Variétés. Blanche says they have been short of dancers all season."

Madame Giry looked up at in surprise, her gaze going from her daughter to Christine. "What happened with the Opéra Comique? You have heard from them, so soon?"

Christine studied her hands, wrapped around the cup in the way she had done when she was a child. "They didn't want me," she said in a small voice.

"Didn't want you!" Madame Giry frankly stared in shock. "Good God, whyever not? They have all heard you sing!"

Christine stiffened her shoulders. "They have also heard other things about me, Madame Giry. The whole affair with," she faltered, "with the Phantom, and my role in Don Juan. They think I might be more trouble than I'm worth."

"They think she had a hand in it," Meg explained. "Since all the things that happened served to advance her career... No doubt Carlotta and Piangi's friends helped fan the rumours that Christine was the Ghost's, uh... His paramour, or co-conspirator. Or both. At any rate, it seems they don't wish to take the chance."

"What chance?" Madame Giry asked in astonishment. "That Christine Daaé is a murdering lunatic?"

Christine gave a humourless grin. "I would not be the first diva with more ambition than talent. And besides." She looked up, her brown eyes huge and childlike in the candlelight. "Perhaps I am responsible for the disaster. In part. It was because of my voice that... that some of those things happened."

"Christine..." Meg squeezed her hand quickly, "You can't blame yourself for – for existing!"

"Enough of this." Madame Giry said firmly. She set down her empty cup and rose from her chair. "I will sort out this dreadful mess tomorrow. It is late; please be so good as to take all the tea things to the kitchen and go straight to bed. Both of you."
"No, Madame Giry, please." Christine looked at her imploringly. "Do not trouble yourself, it will be no use. Really, I would rather dance. The Variétés will pay both of us well."

"You would rather dance than sing?" Madame Giry frowned. "Are you certain, my dear?"

Christine bowed her head. "I'm certain."

"And what does your fiancé think of this notion? You could continue singing when you are wed, but the ballet..."

Christine looked up, biting her lip, and shrugged. "I am not married yet."

Madame Giry gave her a shrewd look, but said only, "Very well. Good night, Christine. Good night, Meg."

"Good night, maman."

Madame Giry took a candle and headed towards her dressing-room, weaving around the boxes which lined the corridor, still awaiting unpacking. She resolved to renegotiate the loan with her cousin in view of all these recent developments. There was some money put away, but unless her own employment prospects improved, they would have to find a cheaper apartment. The situation could get difficult without Christine's singing, but perhaps the debacle of the Opéra Comique was just as well: clearly, Christine did not wish to sing in any case, and no money in the world would have compelled Madame Giry to force the girl after what she had been through.

Alas, she thought to herself with grim humour, if things continued in this vein, she would be forced to borrow back some of the money she had left at the feet of the man formerly known as the Phantom.

All things considered, "666" had seemed a rather obvious combination for his safe.

Chapter 3: La Lanterne

A big thankyou to everyone who is following this story and reviewing – you guys are wonderful! (Oh, and random fun fact for the day, with thanks to Mominator for reminding me to mention it: the boulevards in Paris were actually largely asphalted over by the 1860s. So there you are. Who says reading fanfic isn't educational? ;)

Chapter 3 – La Lanterne

The heights of Montmartre were an improbable place to go shopping, but Erik was determined to get as far away as possible from the siren call of the Opéra tunnels, and this, one of the poorest areas on the outskirts of the city, was perfect. The streets were narrow and confused, the shops small, and he soon discovered that by keeping to the shadow of the walls, he could pass all but unremarked even in the busier areas. He had tied a rag over the right side of his head and cut a hole for his eye, but he had the strange sensation that in this motley crowd, he would have been near-invisible even should he have walked naked down the street. Once or twice a passerby did turn around to give him a curious look, but he made sure he kept his face averted and they soon lost
interest in what they clearly thought was yet another impoverished drunk.

More disconcertingly, at one point a little beggar boy had latched on to his shirt-tails, with a grip like death. Even after Erik had turned his rag-covered misshapen face towards him and scowled, the boy had kept looking at him with silent, hungry eyes and would not budge. In the end Erik picked him up bodily and threw him over a fence. He heard the boy's yelped obscenity, but then, surprisingly, his gleeful laugh: he had landed in a carrot patch in somebody's vegetable garden.

Children had been rare at the Opéra, laughing ones doubly so. Erik thought this undeniably a point in its favour.

In trying to escape the mockery of that startling, happy laugh, he found himself at last inside a shop. It was little more than a hole in the wall: a wooden counter set back from the street, and deep floor-to-ceiling shelves lining the walls all three sides. Behind the counter sat a large, red-faced woman of indeterminate years and even more indeterminate hair colour, wearing a man's brown workshirt. She was loudly reading from the pocket-sized magazine in her hands, evidently for the benefit of somebody in the back of the store. *La Lanterne*, Erik read on the front cover.

"Got a customer, Jean!" she bellowed suddenly, and levelled an irritated stare at Erik. "Yes?"

"Bonjour, madame," he said coldly. He waited for the second it took her to notice his crudely improvised mask. "When you are satisfied that my head is indeed attached to the rest of my body, perhaps you would condescend to sell me a few necessary items?"

Too late, he realised that his polished, theatrically projected voice had surprised the woman far more than the covered part of his head had done.

"You'd best not be who I think you are," she said finally.


"Or," she went on, "I'll be forced to concede that the stuffed shirts at the *Paris Journal* have for once managed to print the truth. Though not about him – you – being dead, it appears."

Erik somehow managed a composed, supercilious smile.

"I regret, madame, that I have no idea whom you have taken me for. I do not believe we are acquainted; in fact I am quite certain that I have not had the honour of learning your name."

"Louise Gandon," she said grudgingly. "Look here, sir, let's not fuck around. If you're indeed the one all the papers were shrieking about last week, the disfigured lover of the little Swedish 'demoiselle from the Opéra, then you have nothing to fear from the likes of me. It's high time someone put in a few good kicks up the Empire's arse, and torching the Opéra is as good a place to start as any, *merde* – better than most!" She stabbed an emphatic finger at the magazine lying open on the counter.

"That's 900,000 francs a year that our beloved Emperor was doling out to it, the syphilitic sod, and I don't need to tell you what we could be doing with that money."

She tipped her chin in the direction of the street with an angry noise, as though the threadbare poverty of the crowd and the rundown buildings were somehow all the Opéra's fault.

"He thinks he can throw us a few bones, with his liberal this and liberal that, his Liberal Empire – pah! We're not blind, we see oppression when we feel it and we know what it's called, yes we do, and let me say this: you won't see me running to the *gendarmes* to tell them you're alive after all!"
You gave all those yawning hypocrites with their diamonds and sable furs a night to remember, and spared us the burden of paying for their shitty extravagance. All I have to say to you is, thank you. Thank you."

Through this entire performance, while Louise Gandon had been growing ever redder in the face and more agitated, Erik felt an inexorably growing desire to laugh madly, which he checked only with the greatest effort. Who could have thought it? The Phantom of the Opera, a fighter for the poor!

"You mistake me, madame. Those were not my reasons."

As though stepping down off her own private stage, Louise Gandon let out her breath and looked at him with a quiet, fierce conviction:

"I don't give a damn what you reasons were, sir. No doubt the papers had the right of it, and all you and the girl wanted was her name up in lights and a bigger share of the pie. But fact is, you did the rest of us a good turn all the same. A strike against the Empire is a strike for us."

"A man was killed," Erik said neutrally.

"Oh yes, the singer. P... P-Piano? Pudgy?" Louise Gandon waved a hand vaguely. "Must've been the chandelier. A shame, yes. But it was for the greater good in the end. The best cause."

"The cause, yes," he echoed. Her dismissive reaction made him suddenly dizzy, as though his carefully reconstructed reality was threatening to come apart. So was this how it was supposed to be done, then? One was supposed to murder, only for a cause?

Yet he could not see Christine saying the words this woman had just said so lightly; words that seemed to him a trap, like his chamber of mirrors. They promised a way out of his purgatory with their simple justification: he'd had his causes too, oh yes; he only had to accept this as truth, and he could have power once again. And this fragile reality he had somehow built around Christine's words, Christine's kiss, would be gone forever. The Phantom of the Opera... His hand flew to his face instinctively, expecting to feel the mask.

"Is something the matter? You're shaking."

"No." His voice was hoarse. "Just..."

He collected himself and said almost calmly: "Perhaps it is hunger."

"Oh, you poor man!" She clicked her tongue, "Look at me, carrying on, while you're practically starving! Now, what is it you wanted?"

Certainly not your pity, Erik wanted to snarl. Instead, he stepped up to the counter and resumed the role of a man.

He cast a glance over the contents of the shelves behind her. "Candles, madame," he said crisply, "if you would be so good. And matches, a set of compasses, pens, ink, lead and ink pencil, red chalk, white chalk, charcoal, an easel, three boxes of draughting paper, and," he looked down at himself. "Soap. A lot of soap."

And so, while Louise Gandon walked around collecting the things he had enumerated and anything...
else he could think of to add to the list, Erik contemplated this strange reality. He was standing in a
store with the money Madame Giry had returned to him and this bizarre woman was serving him
like any other customer, as though all this was perfectly natural and he had not spent a lifetime
underground and a week hiding from a long-dispersed mob. He wondered how long it could
possibly continue.

"So what do you do?" came Louise Gandon's voice from the depths of the store. She was standing
high up on a ladder, counting out something from a high shelf.

"I beg your pardon?"

"For a living, I mean." She started down the ladder, carrying a box of candles. "You do work?"

Erik blinked. "I am... seeking employment as an architect, madame." He gestured at the growing
pile of draughting implements on the counter. "My tools."

She gave him a probing look. "Then... you're not a singer?"

"No," Erik said flatly. "I am not."

"Aha!" Louise Gandon punched the air in triumph. "I knew the Journal couldn't be right more than
once a year. So." She added the box to the pile. "That's the last of it. Where should I have it sent?"

"Sent?"

"Yes," she gave him a strange look. "Surely you don't mean to carry the lot?" The pile covered the
better part of the counter. "I'll need an address. And a name for the bill."

"Erik," he said after a moment. He was strangely pleased by the sound of it uttered aloud.

Then he surprised himself by adding: "Erik Andersson. It's... Swedish."

"Oh right. Like the girl. And the address?"

The address. Why had it not occurred to him before that he had to have somewhere to take all these
things to? An address...

Louise Gandon gave him a look of unexpected understanding. "You too, huh? The landlords are
bastards, no man is safe from their greed. Not even an architect!" She roared, "Jean!"

A middle-aged man with a shock of red hair and a pair of glasses clipped to his nose popped his
head out from a back door. "What is it, Louise?" He held up his ink-stained hands. "I'm trying to
work here."

"The sign can wait. This man has been kicked out of his home by another of those bleeding
monsters. He's an architect."

Jean transferred his nearsighted eyes to Erik then back to Louise. "Looking to rent, is he?"

"I am," Erik said drily, unused to being the subject of a conversation carried out as though he was
not there. "Perhaps you have somebody to recommend? A landlord?"

The rest of Jean appeared from around the door. "There's a man upstairs as just moved out." He
pointed up, at the ceiling. "I could put you up. Place is small though, just one room."

"I have no family."
"Well and good, sir, but it's 80 francs a month. Fair price and it won't rise, I'm no big city landlord to bleed a man dry."

"That seems fair, monsieur."

"Well then, come on through." Jean lifted up part of the countertop to allow Erik to enter. "I'll show you around. Heard the latest about Bismarck?" he glanced over his shoulder as they headed for the back stairs.

At Erik's blank look, he threw up his hands. "Good Lord, man, have you been living under a rock? Louise! Give me that thing."

He caught the copy of *La Lanterne* which Louise tossed to him, and promptly pushed it into Erik's hands.

"Page twelve, sir: Bismarck's trap for France. In our day and age a man cannot afford the ignorance of an ostrich hiding with its head in the sand."

"No indeed," Erik said quietly, taking the magazine. "It seems I cannot."

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**Chapter 4: The Tale of the Marsh King's Daughter**

Thanks so much to all of you who are reviewing this. Every single review is appreciated, cuddled, treasured, and basically makes my day!

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**Chapter 4 – The Tale of the Marsh King's Daughter**

"A ball, Raoul!"

Raoul picked her up by the waist and spun her around, laughing. "Yes, a ball! A glittering ball at the Tuileries, two weeks from now, with the Emperor and Empress and all the nobles and ladies and I swear, not one of them will look half as stunning as you."

He set her down in the middle of the cramped parlour.

"Please say you will come."

"Of course I will," Christine smiled up at him. "I would be delighted. And," she looked mischievous, "I will even let you buy me a dress for the occasion."

She gave a startled cry and laughed as he spun her around again, faster and faster. "One dress! One! Put me down, put--"

"Oomph."

The both found themselves on the floor, in the middle of Madame Giry's rug.

Christine reached up to kiss the tip of nose. "You're going to be late for your father."

"I don't care," Raoul cupped her face in his hands and sought her lips instead. "You're much better company."

Christine hesitated a moment, then responded to the familiar, comfortable warmth of his kiss, the
way she always had. He was gentle, and wonderful, and all their kisses were what she had always known a kiss should be: a soothing, caring promise...

All except that one time, after they had gone to see the burnt shell of the opera house and he had kissed her with such frightening, desperate passion that it burnt her to her heart; a kiss almost like—but she did not dare indulge those thoughts. It was a hidden flaw in her, something wrong with her very soul, that she found herself returning again and again to that other kiss, that other man, lost in his darkness. No angel, she had thought when her lips had brushed his; no demon, as he gasped and some impulse drove her to taste him with her tongue, oh God, inside him; no ghost, with her hand pressed to the hot ruin of his cheek and the tears on her palm. Only a man.

"No," she whispered, pulling suddenly back, "Oh Raoul... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"What's wrong?"

He held her gently, looking into her eyes, worried and she knew, a little scared. And God help her, she knew what his fear was.

She could not let it destroy her life, and his. She would not.

She tried a smile. It came out a bit crooked, so she tried again and got it right. "Look at us, we're like a couple of children. You're probably horribly late already; your father is going to hate me."

Raoul looked visibly relieved, accepting this reprieve she offered. He helped her up courteously, and they both brushed themselves off, avoiding each other's eyes.

"I shall call on you tomorrow, then. About the dress."

"Yes, please."

She took his hand for a moment. "Have a good day."

"And you."

And he was gone, with a click of the lock shutting on the front door. A porcelain figurine of a dancer on the mantelpiece trembled slightly, and was still.

"You are a strange girl, Christine Daaé."

"Meg!" Christine whirled around. "You startled me. I thought you were asleep."

Meg walked in, still wearing her dressing gown and only one stocking, but with her hair already done up. She grinned at Christine's flustered expression.

"I came out here to ask if I can borrow a pair of your red barrettes. I didn't know you were, um—entertaining."

She gave Christine a knowing look that made her blush spread all the way to her ears.

"We didn't, I mean, I didn't... Raoul was just here to give me this." She held out the envelope with its golden seal. "It's for a ball at the Palace. To celebrate the, uh, the plebiscite results. Or something of the kind."

"The Palace?" Meg turned the envelope in her hands before handing it back. "Well, I can see why you wanted to thank Monsieur le Vicomte properly. On the floor."
"Arhh!" Christine waved the invitation in Meg's laughing face, "That's not funny!"

"It is, you know." Meg ducked Christine's ineffectual swatting and dropped down onto the armrest of a chair. She shook out the second silk stocking she was holding and began to put it on.

"Or maybe you're right." She shrugged a shoulder. "It's not funny. Just strange."

Christine looked at her, the smile slipping from her face.

"What do you mean?"

Meg fastened the garter and looked up.

"Just that I had thought you would be married by now. Oh, I know what maman says about no decent girl marrying so young – but Christine, you were so happy together! I saw you the night of the masquerade and I thought, you would be married within the month, even before I saw that ring. You practically glowed."

"Yes," Christine whispered. "I suppose we were happy."

"And then afterwards, when you two came out of the cellars together... It looked just like a fairy tale."

"Yes... It probably did."

"So why then are you here, kissing him on the floor as though both your lives depended on it and then pushing him away?"

"Because it didn't feel like a fairy tale, Meg!"

Meg looked at her in surprise.

Christine paced around the small parlour, her fists clenched, glancing up as though it could stop the tears. Then she dropped down again in front of where Meg sat. Her hands opened nervelessly.

"I was so tired. Exhausted. And wet, and cold. Raoul could barely stand. There was smoke everywhere, and people... It was hard to think, so many things had happened."

Meg nodded slowly.

"I gave away his ring."

"You – what?" Meg stared at Christine's deathly pale face; even her lips had gone bloodlessly white.

"The ring, the engagement ring Raoul gave me, the one – don't, Meg, please..."

Meg's hand stopped before she could touch Christine's arm.

"But I thought, the Phantom, at the masquerade..."

"No, he gave it back but then, then I, Meg, I..." She spoke very fast, her voice cracking dangerously, on the edge of hysteria: "I don't know why I did it. Or maybe I do, I don't know, he was down there with the boat, Raoul was, and I went up, I..."

"Take a breath. It's all right, it's over. Whatever happened, it's over. It doesn't matter now, it's over.
It's all right."

"No it's not."

Christine took a deep, shuddering breath; absently, she rubbed her bare finger, as though the memory was alive in her mind.

"I took it off, and I put it in his hand. The Phantom's. And then I – I closed his fingers over it because he was crying and, and I didn't – I thought it might drop! And I wanted to be sure he'd keep it. It seemed important somehow, God – I don't know why. Then I went back and Raoul didn't ask, maybe he never even saw that I'd got it back, he must think it's still stolen but I gave it away myself, what bride does that! What's wrong with me, Meg, I'm not well, I'm crazy..."

"Shh, Christine... It's all right."

She let Meg embrace her, squeezing her eyes shut against the wracking sobs that suffocated her with self-hatred.

"You said yourself you were exhausted, and after everything that happened with Don Juan, you were distressed, not thinking clearly. You're not crazy, Christine. Please don't cry. It is only a ring. You will have another, when you're married, and you'll be ever so happy! Really, this will all be forgotten, you'll see. Please don't cry."

"You're right. I was just distressed, you're right."

Christine found the sobs had stopped, and everything she had so foolishly babbled was slowly returning to its place inside her heart, making it heavy once again. How could Meg understand it when she herself didn't? She had been wrong to worry her needlessly and make herself a mess before their first rehearsal at the Variétés.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't know what came over me."

Meg stood up lightly, bouncing on her stockinged toes. "It's probably nerves. Are you hungry? We should go soon, we had better not be late for warm-up, on the first day."

"I'm fine. Let me fetch those barrettes for you now."

She picked up the invitation and hurried back through the dining room to her bedroom, eager to put an end to the whole embarrassing episode and trying to think only of the upcoming rehearsal. They would catch the omnibus to the Variétés, and then there were warm-ups, and barre, and two hours of trying to force her muscles to remember her training from before the days when she was a singer. She hoped she was not as out of shape as she felt, because then there would be costume fittings, and two more hours of precision torture, and then she would be home with Meg, soaking the agony from her blistered feet with hot water and soda. Then Madame Giry would be back from her new job at the Théâtre Français and they would have supper, and she would drink scalding black coffee and try to forget that tomorrow, she would have to do it all over again.

And then at night, she would fall asleep to the silence in her head, where once there had been joy and her angel of music, then fear and the murdering demon, and now... Now both the angel and the murderer were gone, and instead something incomprehensible was growing inside her, a wild yearning that spread like ink through her soul, turning it black and tainting everyone she touched.

And Raoul... Christine looked at the invitation in her hand. She remembered the old Scandinavian tale her father had told her, of a demon-girl who seemed human but did not know how to love. She was afraid that she was becoming that girl.
"Gentlemen! If I may have your attention, please. One moment of your time."

The two young men occupying the large, airy office looked up from their drawing boards to the door, which Monsieur Duchamp had just shut behind himself and another man.

Monsieur Duchamp, a stately, elderly gentleman who still favoured the old-fashioned tall top-hats and greased moustaches, stood aside politely to indicate the new arrival.

"Gentlemen, this is Monsieur Erik Andersson, a sketch artist and master draughtsman. He also makes some very fine scale models, if the selection I examined this morning is any indication. He will be joining us on the Sedan project. Monsieur, my staff."

He led the way to the drawing boards.

"This skinny lad here is Monsieur Vincent Fiaux, an engineer who saw the light several years ago thanks to Baron Haussmann's grand projects, and turned architect. A real prodigy when it comes to calculating even the most fiendishly complex stresses."

"Pleased to meet you, sir," Vincent Fiaux said, rising in his chair to shake Erik's hand.

Erik saw his startled look when the young man noticed the bandages covering the right side of his head, but somehow it did not alter his friendly manner. He had to concede that Louise Gandon had been right in her advice the morning after he had moved in, when she had turned up at his door outside the theatre, a mask invited questions; a bandage discouraged them.

"And this fashionable chap is Monsieur Jacques Choury, the best designer and draughtsman I have ever had the honour to work with. Don't let the neat haircut fool you. Even the ossified old dogmatists at the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts could not manage to train all the originality out of him; he won every prize there was."

"Bonjour, monsieur," came the second handshake.

The institution name meant nothing to Erik, but only a deaf man could have missed the air of pride with which Monsieur Duchamp pronounced it. Therefore, he adopted an expression of the deepest admiration:

"I am honoured, monsieur."

That seemed sufficient to induce a friendly grin from Jacques Choury, who even had the good manners to pretend he had not seen the bandages.

"Now." Monsieur Duchamp clasped his hands together. "Perhaps I could leave you two gentlemen to familiarise Monsieur Andersson with our most recent projects. I should like us to meet later this afternoon to discuss the commission for the new de Chagny residence at Saint-Cloud, perhaps over some wine, hmm?"

"Certainly," they said, "gladly."

*The de Chagny residence.*

Erik felt ill. Black and red stains danced in front of his eyes, as after a blow to the back of his ugly, malformed skull. It was a verdict.
Of course Christine and her husband would be building a new house. And his own private fire, his hell of atonement, was to create a house for a life he could never have, for a wife who was not his, for a love that would last another man's lifetime. A drawing room for her friends. A bedroom for her beautiful daughter, a study for her eldest son and a nursery for the youngest. A ballroom, a guest wing, four entrances for the staff, and a grand stables for every one of their accursed, thrice-damned fine thoroughbred horses! Oh yes, and a master bedroom with a four-poster bed, surmounted by an enamelled crest of the de Chagny family.

"That sounds fascinating," he said amiably. "I should love to hear more about this project; I don't believe I have ever been to Saint-Cloud. As a small point of curiosity, Monsieur Duchamp..."

"Yes?"

"I wonder whether our mutual friend, a certain Madame Giry, may have recommended this firm to the de Chagnys?"

Monsieur Duchamp looked surprised. "I really haven't the least idea, monsieur. We have had numerous private clients over the years, I daresay any one of them could have put in a good word. But say, what a marvellous thought!"

He seemed to light up from within, taken with a new notion. "We really ought to compile some information on where the best recommendations are coming from; it would be most instructive. Yes, a marvellous idea, Monsieur Andersson, I shall keep it in mind!"

And with that he walked off towards his private office at the end of the larger room, purposeful and quite at ease.

Yes, Erik thought; it was certainly instructive to know where this particular recommendation had come from. How fortunate, in fact, that he had kept the slip of paper he had found fallen by accident to the bottom of the bag Madame Giry had left him, presumably one of those she had been handing out to let former acquaintances know of her new address. Yes. Very fortunate indeed.

"So, Monsieur Andersson," said Jacques Choury, "shall we go over those sketches?"

Vincent Fiaux hooked a skinny ankle around the leg of a nearby chair and pulled it up.

"Make yourself at home, sir, we don't stand on ceremony while we're working. I say, I should like to hear more about those scale models of yours: old Duchamp isn't easily impressed."

Erik sat down, nodding in thanks. "I should be pleased to show them to you when we have a moment. But perhaps the sketches first?"

"Yes of course," Fiaux said. "Choury, may I have that folder?"

And the workday continued.

At night, Erik opened the strongbox where he kept some of the money.

He sat at his worktable, looking at it for a while, motionless. Then he removed a few bills, considered the rise in prices since had done this last, and took out a few more. He set the money in a neat pile, next to the slip of paper bearing an address written in Madame Giry's graceful, precise hand.

It was not far.
He took down the little velvet pouch with Christine's ring from its spot on the bookshelf above his table. Without opening it, he stuffed it quickly inside the strongbox and turned the lock. Then he threw the key in the drawer, slammed the drawer shut, and stood up.

With an easy, elegant motion, his arm moving like the wing of a falling angel, he reached for the folder he had borrowed from the architect's office. He leafed through it slowly, almost indifferently. The de Chagny residence at Saint-Cloud: Elevation of the façade... Gardens... Cutaway view... Floor plan... Master suite.

He put the folder away, took the money from the table and placed it into his waistcoat pocket. Then he unwound the bandage from his face and replaced it with his linen mask, knotting the fabric tightly at the nape of his neck. He strode over to the window beside the iron bed and held open the curtains, framing an imperfect mirror.

Out of the depth of night, the mask stared back at him: a featureless white half-moon with a hollow cavern for an eye.

It would take a few days to prepare. He could wait.

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Chapter 5: A Man Like Any Other

Thank you so, so much for reviewing, guys! Reviews make my day, and more importantly (perhaps!) they make it much easier to keep writing. It was really interesting to me to see how you guys took the last chapter, especially, in view of things to come (sly grin).

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Chapter 5 – A Man Like Any Other

The manicured gardens of the Tuileries looked impressive even by day. By night, with the wide avenue leading to the palace lit by a hundred torches borne by liveried footmen, the grandeur of the place was magnified a thousandfold. The façade of the palace rose in the distance, every window ablaze with golden light.

"It's spectacular," Christine said, peering out the window of their carriage. She ducked back, "And kind of frightening. Like an opening night gala."

Raoul slipped an arm lightly around her waist. "Nothing of the sort. Only some old men jumping for joy because the people voted to keep the Empire. They'll all want to dance with you, you know. I shall be forced to dance with my mother and torment myself by watching you flirt shamelessly with a terribly distinguished rich marquis who will be in every respect my superior."

Christine grinned. "Now look who is frightened! You have my solemn promise," she said seriously, "that I shall contrive to be a terrible dancer, and so repel the other gentlemen that they will gladly allow you to dance with me all night, and even through supper."

Raoul gave her one look of perfect mortification, before they both dissolved into helpless laughter.

"You couldn't be a terrible dancer if you tried, Little Lotte."
"I wish Madame Giry shared your confidence! My ears are still ringing from the talking-to Meg and I got after the opening night at the Variétés. Apparently we are out of shape, out of time, too fond of smiling ridiculously, and in sum, two of the most unconvincing sylphs to ever land gracelessly on the stage."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"Glad! Raoul..."

"Certainly. I have always wanted to dance with a graceless sylph."

Christine attempted to kick his ankle, but it proved impossible through the layers of gown.

Raoul caught her lips in a kiss. "Here is our cue."

The carriage rolled to a halt at the palace entrance, and a footman was immediately at the door. He helped Raoul down and then stood aside politely while Christine took Raoul's white-gloved hand and descended the lowered steps to the marble forecourt.

Behind them, more carriages were pulling up, more gentlemen and ladies were descending onto the marble, like a swarm of tropical butterflies in the firelit brilliance of the night. The sound of violins floated from within the opened double doors.

"It really is like a theatre set," Christine whispered, as Raoul took her arm. "The largest theatre I have ever seen, with the most pompous corps de ballet on earth."

She felt the tug of Raoul's arm as he tried to stifle his laughter.

"Ah! Here they are," said a female voice behind them.

Raoul and Christine were joined by a tall, elegant lady in a crimson gown, and her stern, preoccupied-looking husband, both no longer young but still attractive with the easy, unselfconscious bearing of the born aristocracy.

"Bon soir, darling." The Comtesse de Chagny kissed Raoul's cheek, simultaneously fixing a button on his jacket.

"Bon soir, maman. Please stop that." He looked so embarrassed that Christine could not help a small grin. "Bon soir, Father."

The Comtesse turned to Christine with a smile while Raoul exchanged a few terse words with his father.

"Bon soir, Mademoiselle Daaé. You're looking lovely, my dear, rose is such a pretty colour on you."

Christine curtseyed politely. "I could never hope to have your elegance, Comtesse. That is a splendid gown."

The Comtesse laughed, pleased.

"Don't flatter me, mademoiselle, I'm much too old to believe it, especially from one as young and pretty as yourself. I trust my son has been taking good care of you so far this evening?"

Christine smiled up at Raoul as he again took her arm. "Always, Comtesse."
The Comtesse turned to her son: "See that it remains that way, Raoul darling. Shall we go inside? Do try to enjoy yourselves, you are looking so dour these days!"

Christine and Raoul fell in behind the de Chagnys and the other couples making their way towards the open doors of the palace. Christine noticed the glances exchanged by other women as they eyed each other's gowns avidly, without the barest attempt to disguise their competitive curiosity. For her part, she wished the dress Raoul had commissioned for her had a smaller crinoline and a more modest décolletage, but it seemed the favoured style here, and she did not feel out of place.

'Dress' was, in fact, a sadly inadequate term for this elaborate tulle confection, which had required both Meg's and Madame Giry's aid in lacing her into the corset, strapping on the steel frame of the crinoline, and arranging over it the voluminous skirts of the gown. Everywhere else in Paris this lampshade look was becoming passé, but in the rarified atmosphere of the Tuileries, where fashion was not dictated by the width of the omnibus benches, it seemed to be holding its own.

Christine had to admit that she was enjoying it. It reminded her of the extravagant costumes of the Opéra, the slightly ludicrous but magnificent dresses in which even a skinny ballet girl in her very first singing role could feel like a star.

Then they were inside, where the butler was announcing the guests:

"Mademoiselle Christine Daaé, and the Vicomte de Chagny!"

Christine caught a few curious stares from other guests, no doubt occasioned by the scandal of her name in the papers.

"Ignore them," Raoul said under his breath, as they continued into the foyer.

He was right, Christine thought; the only thing to do was to ignore them, and soon enough new and more exciting scandals would replace hers. Already, their interest had been caught by another woman's gown of shockingly bright green silk, and the stares were diverted from her.

The immense foyer, with its lavishly painted ceiling and glittering chandeliers, once again put Christine in mind of the Opéra, but she stopped those thoughts and resolved to follow the advice of Comtesse and simply enjoy herself. She had to learn to close the door on the past.

She hurried to join the Comtesse and other ladies in the dressing-room, where servants helped them remove their wraps and fix their hair, while they cast a few more appraising looks at each other's outfits. Here, too, Christine noticed a few unsubtle glances in her direction, and a few whispers, but the Comtesse firmly took her arm and engaged her in a conversation about the new house she and the Comte were building in the lovely fashionable town of Saint-Cloud outside Paris.

"Really, Mademoiselle Daaé, you must impress upon my son that he is not to allow you to spend the entire summer in Paris; it is in every way unhealthy. Two months by the sea would do both of you a world of good."

"Nothing would please me more, Comtesse – but I have been engaged at the Variétés for this season. I'm afraid it would be impossible for me to leave Paris until November."

"The Variétés? I see." The Comtesse gave her a long look. The expression on her fine-boned face did not change, save for a slight quirk of her eyebrows, yet it said everything.

"Well, my dear. We all decide on our own priorities. Ah, here is my son now. And as usual, no sign of my husband."
Raoul met them outside, having deposited his own hat, cloak and cane at the gentlemen's cloakroom.

"I left Father with Monsieur Ollivier, maman. They are off on Prussia and the throne of Spain and Bismarck."

The Comtesse sighed, "I had best find him, darling, or he will spend the entire evening with the other gentlemen from the Assembly, talking politics and being dreadfully unsociable. The two of you go on inside, I believe they are starting."

And she was off, gliding through the crowd to where she had spotted the Comte, just as the sound of the trumpet came to announce the start of the dancing.

Christine hurried inside with Raoul, through a pair of ceiling-high ornamented doors and into the grand ballroom.

"What did she say to you?" Raoul murmured as they found their set for the first quadrille. "You're frowning."

"Nothing. I am merely concentrating on my plan to be a terrible dancer."

"Indeed? I had thought you meant to be a terrible dancer only with other men."

Christine gave him a teasing look. "But I need to bring my skills down to your level."

"Ah," Raoul grinned at her covertly just as the music started. "I shall have to show you just how wrong you are about that, Mademoiselle Daaé." He clasped her hand and led her forward. "Prepare to be swept off your feet, Little Lotte."

And for the next two dances, Christine gladly allowed him to do just that. It was easy to dance with Raoul, they had danced together so many times, both as children and over the past year, that it seemed the most natural thing in the world. They made polite conversation with the others in their set while awaiting their turn, and more polite conversation when the quadrille was finished. She accepted dancing engagements from a few other young men, most of whom she recalled meeting at one time or another in the de Chagny salon before the disaster of the Opéra. Then the waltz began and, as she and Raoul whirled around the room, Christine could almost forget the look the Comtesse had given her when she mentioned the Variétés, and the flash of irrational anger she had felt at this disapproval. She abandoned herself to the dance.

The evening wore on, interrupted only once, briefly, by a surprisingly low-key entrance of the Emperor and Empress. They were older than Christine had expected from having seen the photographs in newspapers, and while she curtseyed deeply as the royal procession made its way towards their seats, she could not help but notice that the Emperor seemed pale and in some pain. Vaguely, she recalled rumours that he was ill and in constant unremitting agony, but somehow it had seemed ridiculous that Emperor Napoleon III could be subject to the same ravages of nature as anybody else.

Yet when they broke up the dancing for supper, and the entire party followed the Emperor and Empress into the adjoining hall, Christine saw once again, and at much closer quarters, the cautious way the Emperor held himself and the unnatural sallowness of his complexion. Even the Emperor, it seemed, for all his power, was just a man like any other. Christine could not say why she found the thought so oddly comforting.

When the night ended, she was grateful to be back in the carriage, leaning tiredly against Raoul,
with his arm around her shoulders. She nodded absently to his attempts to involve her in
conversation, until he gave up and only held her quietly as they both watched the lighted
boulevards roll by.

"Christine?"

She stirred sleepily. "Mm?"

"Father wanted to know why I have not yet bought you a ring."

Christine went very still.

She felt wide awake now, her heart pounding against her chest.

"I explained to him that you had one," Raoul went on. "And about it being stolen from you."

Christine was silently grateful for the semi-darkness of the carriage, which hid her burning face.
"I... I see."

"I was hardly going to tell him this, but as it happens..." He took something out of his pocket. "I
had been meaning to ask you before, but we never seemed to get a chance. So, I went ahead and
just got one."

He held the jewellery box open before her. Christine felt herself turning to marble, in a cold wave
from the tips of her hair down to her feet. She had known. She had expected it.

It was a diamond, on a delicate gold band. In the thin scattered light of the boulevard outside, the
stone burned with a black fire.

"Is it too plain?"

"Plain? No, Raoul... No. It's beautiful. But I can't take it, you know I can't!"

"You can! God, Christine, why not?" He looked stricken but also somehow determined. "You
cannot keep punishing us both like this!"

Christine understood suddenly why he had not asked her earlier, before the ball. He had known she
would not take it.

"Have you changed your mind about marrying me?"

"Of course not!"

"Then what is it?"

"Please, Raoul. I want nothing more than for us to be happy, but I cannot, I will not, take another
ring. Not after all that happened last time."

"For Heaven's sake, Christine..." Raoul looked at the ring and then back to her. "It is only a ring. It
cannot bring back the past."

She could see the words forming in his mind, the things they never spoke about. The Phantom had
disappeared, the opera house had burned, there was nothing left to haunt their courtship but their
memories. And yet, she knew why Raoul needed her to take this ring. She had to kill the ghost
inside.
The carriage had stopped. They sat, looking at one another, the ring lying between them in its box: such a small, such an impossible request.

After a moment, Raoul snapped the box shut and put it back into his pocket.

They left the carriage without speaking. The concierge let them into the apartment building and they went upstairs, their shoes echoing loudly on each step.

They were outside the door when Christine turned around.

"Give me time, Raoul."

He said nothing, but he looked at her for a moment, and in his eyes Christine saw a glimpse of the first and last performance of Don Juan, his hurt and his fear and knowledge.

Then he left.

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Chapter 6: Outside, Looking In

Today's trivia is on the subject of Raoul's parents: he mentions them in the film, therefore in this version, they are very much alive. Also, the titles of Count (Comte) and Viscount (Vicomte) are different (although the son of a Count could be styled Viscount as a 'courtesy title' until he inherited the actual title from his father). Under Napoleonic rule, the old regulations were changed, and titles were distributed in mind-bogglingly confusing ways: the title of Count was often given for some military or political achievements, as in the case of General Palikao, for example. In my version, Raoul's father is a Count by virtue of political successes, and his hereditary title of Viscount gets passed on to Raoul. Nothing like some randomly irrelevant information to brighten your day, huh?

Thanks so much for reviewing, everyone! Please do continue; given the rate at which this story is taking over my life, I desperately need some justification for all that time spent writing!

I hope you guys caught the hint in the last chapter. Well, two hints really: Erik has been jumping to some pretty rash, if logical, conclusions about the de Chagny residence (it is not Christine's house and Madame Giry certainly did not send him to the architect's office to build it!), and Christine's brilliant idea to rejoin the ballet was not so brilliant after all, if the Comtesse has anything to say on the subject. ;)

Anyway, that's enough from me. On with the story!

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Chapter 6 – Outside, Looking In

Erik chose a narrow ornamental balcony that faced the courtyard, barely wide enough to stand on. The night was nearly moonless, with only a sliver of white among the stars, and that suited him very well indeed. In the courtyard there were no lamps, and the few lighted windows that surrounded him now served only to cast a faint golden sheen on the wall of the apartment block and the cobblestones below, two floors of vertical nothing. He gave the door a light push to check the hinges. It inched forward soundlessly, the broken latch detaching itself from the inside wall. Erik remained on the balcony, the lasso in his hand. His black cloak merged with shadow.
He revelled in the familiar sense of peace in this darkness, in this stillness of expectant death. Here, he was the master of every small movement in the shadows, of the music of other lives, of their deceptive rhythm. Here it was he who decided who lived and who died, and how, and why. He was home again. The previous weeks seemed to him like a nightmare of running through water, spending all his strength in a futile fight against the pull of the tide, a foolish, pointless escape. Without warning he found a memory of many years ago: a child's confused recall of discovering the canals beneath the Opéra. The water had shocked him, the strange, cold embrace that met his fall, and the inexorable drag of the current, down, down into forever. But when he had given up fighting that current, it deposited him on the side of the great lake, the beautiful space where sound was perfectly formed and where he had at last found a home.

Madame Giry had given him that home. She had made him the Phantom. It was she who had turned a blind eye to the lessons with Christine, she who had given Christine his roses, as though she had hoped a little virgin sacrifice could save him. She had not protected Christine from his corrupting touch. The sin was hers.

And now, she wanted him to pay for it, to rebuild a life she herself had helped him steal from Christine. The de Chagny residence. Through his suffering, she thought to save herself. But he would not let her.

There was a movement inside the room, and a candle flickered alight. Erik's fingers coiled around the lasso.

It was her.

Madame Giry strode over to the polished table and set the candle down. It made the room glow with a warm half-light, like a stage-set for a dream.

Erik watched silently from behind the dark window as she sat at the empty table, directly opposite so that her face was turned towards him. He knew she could not see him, but the candle was between them and he was not certain he could get a good angle without spilling it and starting a fire. He did not want another fire.

So he watched her. She looked at the flame for a while, and then down at her hands. She unbuttoned her gloves and pulled them off, one by one, then held up her hands to the light, inspecting them. Erik could not read her expression, but even so near the glare of the candle, he could see clearly what she was looking at: her hands were reddened to the wrist, the skin dry and cracked in places. Confused for a moment, he recalled her hands when she had given him the architect's card – they had not been red then.

She stood up and walked away, leaving the stage empty for a long time. Erik waited in the darkness with his legs pressing back against the railing of the balcony, without moving. A droplet of wax rolled down the candle and froze there, tear-like.

When Madame Giry returned, she was carrying a steaming teacup, and something in a jar of dark brown glass. She sat again, and this time Erik noticed the way she caught her breath slightly, as though the movement pained her back, but no pain crossed her face. She opened the jar and rubbed the contents on her hands in brisk movements; it had to be wool fat or a similar ointment, Erik decided. A moment later the jar was put aside and she was calmly sipping the tea. It had to be tea, because he would have smelled the coffee from where he stood.

The candle grew shorter. He knew now, without quite being able to shape the thought to himself, that the candle was not an obstacle. That it had never been an obstacle. Yet he watched the candle, and the teacup going up and down behind it, in a movement like water in an underground lake.
Another minute. He thought again of the de Chagny residence. The elevation of the façade. The rope in his fingers seemed to have gone slippery; he felt suddenly it was a living thing, a serpent of hell sent down to tempt him.

No. It was the woman who was the serpent. She had tricked him with a promise of life and delivered suffering. She had to die.

The rope moved.

One flick of his wrist to open the door. Another to free himself of the serpent.

Madame Giry left the room again. Erik felt beads of sweat form cold on his forehead, soaking his linen mask on one side. It frightened him; he did not remember it ever happening before. A droplet crawled unbearably down his neck, into the collar of his shirt. The candle wept another drop of wax.

A shame, Louise Gandon spoke in his mind. But it was for a good cause.

No. That was a lie, a pretty lie he would not tell himself. This was death, and he was the cause. The rope was in his hand.

He touched the door. It swung inward a fraction, stirring the open curtain with a breath of night air. Nothing else moved. He waited.

He heard the approaching footsteps and raised the rope.

There would be only one chance to get this right. Noiseless and quick, with no chance to scream. He felt the coil of the noose against his thumb.

Absurdly, he thought of her red, chapped hands. A girl in a patched ballet frock, holding out her hand.

A serpent.

A serpent with broken hands.

He moved his shoulder to get the cloak out of the way, and got ready.

The rope slipped.

Erik made a grab for it but it was too late, the lasso slithered down over the side of the tiny balcony, uncoiling with lightning speed, plunging down. In a split second he knew it would hit the cobbles and the noise would be enough to startle his prey and it would be too late, too late...

He caught the very end. The rope dangled, swinging in the windless night. It had not touched the ground.

Erik stared down at it. Never before had the lasso failed him in this way, slid uselessly out of his grasp just as he was about to strike, an accident...

He stopped.

He thought of a rope swinging like this, with a man's corpse for a pendulum. Back and forth across the stage. "An accident!" the managers of the Opéra Populaire had shrieked, while everyone ran in terror. "Simply an accident!"
But they had known then, just as he knew now: there were no accidents.

He had dropped the rope. He had dropped it deliberately, with a tiny change of pressure from his thumb. He had made it fall. Because... In his mind he saw a body swinging back and forth across the stage while he held the rope in his fist, like a grotesque puppet show. Only this time, the corpse was that of a girl in a ballet frock.

He heard the footsteps again through the gap in the door, and held himself very still, turning his eyes back to the room.

And then he did drop the rope.

Madame Giry was back at the table. Next to her sat Christine.

"What was that?" Christine said, startled by the noise. "Something in the yard?"

Madame Giry shrugged. "More food for strays, no doubt. Our piano-haters downstairs may not think much of ballerinas but they are certainly fond of dogs, to be throwing them bones and bread every night."

Christine gave a wry smile in appreciation of Madame Giry's attempt at smalltalk, but made no reply. She picked up her teacup, but did not drink. Then she set it down again.

"Is Meg asleep?"

"Yes, my dear. It is well after midnight."

Christine nodded. She felt Madame Giry watching her, knowing that she was expecting an account of the ball, but all Christine could see was the open jewellery box with the diamond staring back at her like an accusation she could not refute. She felt wound up and angry, her insides compressed into a tangle of hatred, and she could not say why or at whom. A childish, vicious part of her whispered that it was Raoul's fault, that if only he had not spoiled the night with that ring, everything would have been fine. It felt like he had picked at a wound she had been trying so hard to heal, and made it bleed.

And yet it was not Raoul she was angry with. He thought her an angel, pure as her voice. He could not know his Little Lotte was a demon-child, a beautiful creature with a rotting soul, who took his ring and gave it to another, and who could not regret it.

"I am very tired, Madame Giry. Forgive me, I think I will go to bed. May I leave it until tomorrow to tell you both about the ball?"

"Of course, child."

Christine forced herself to rise slowly from her seat, to stand patiently while Madame Giry loosened the lacing at the back of her corset, and then to walk sedately back to her bedroom. She felt Madame Giry's eyes on her the whole way, even after she had rounded the corner into the corridor, and she knew she was behaving strangely but it was beyond her power to stop it. The shameful anger inside her felt like a fireworks charge, a single wrong movement could spark it and then she would explode. She walked.
Christine. Here. Not at the de Chagny residence, not with the Vicomte, not anywhere else but here. Here at night. Living here. Living here, with Madame Giry.

Erik found he could not move, could not do the only thing he had to do: scale down the wall and fly like the night itself, back to the cab he had hired with its silent, paid-off driver, back to Montmartre and the anonymity of his room above the store. Instead he stood like an effigy of himself, a black shell that contained he knew not what.

Christine was here. Christine was talking to Madame Giry. They were drinking tea. He had come here to kill the woman Christine was talking to. Christine would have found him here with the corpse, another, another corpse – and it would have been the end, of everything.

The rope had slipped. He had dropped it himself.

Erik felt a sickening burning in the pit of his stomach. He had been walking blindfolded to the edge of an abyss, and now the blindfold had fallen along with the rope, and he saw the drop into Hell.

He also saw Christine turn as Madame Giry did something to her dress that made it loosen and slip dangerously, and realised that against all reason, Hell could actually get worse.

He had to leave. He had to find himself again, somehow, find Christine's ring and think of that, think of her ring, not of the rope that lay coiled like a dead serpent under the wall, not of the slipping dress. He had to think of the ring and not of the fact that Christine was here, and the de Chagny residence... The Devil take the de Chagny residence. He could not understand it and did not want to. His mind was full of Christine.

A candle flickered behind the window to his right.

Erik looked at it.

It was another mirror, and once again he could be behind it.

It was madness.

It was very close; the walls were thin. He could touch the windowsill. Just one glimpse.

He was entirely still, without even a tremor of his hands or a movement of his eyes. He could not allow himself to do this. Having come so close, having finally come face to face with his own dark reflection and shattered that mirror, he could not, he could not, he could not dare to take on that role again. No mirrors. No music. Above all, no Christine.

He had to go back to Montmartre and learn to be a man, the man Christine had created or found or woken with her kiss. It was that or death or insanity, or very possibly all three, but here, with one temptation taking the form of another, he would be lost forever.

The candle went out, and the window turned dark.

Erik realised slowly that he was numb and probably bruised from standing in this awkward position, that his face itched abominably under the sweat-dampened mask, and finally that he was, in fact, standing on an ornamental balcony barely wide enough for a flower-pot, and had been there for the better part of the night.

He had to flee.

Then the window opened, and he saw Christine. She leaned out on her elbows, looked down,
perhaps looking for the stray dogs.

Then she saw him.

Chapter 7: And Speaks My Name

Thanks again for all the reviews guys, please please keep them coming, it's ever so much better than "writing into the void"! But I'm sure you all know that already.

Today's trivia, thanks to Ianthe and Mominator: (1) the story referred to in the title of Chapter 4 is by Hans Christian Andersen, and it's exactly the kind of "dark story of the North" that I think Christine and her father would have read; and (2) I have no idea why Christine's tombstone was in English, or why it identified her as Countess de Chagny. Perhaps they thought this is the correct translation of Vicomtesse. Or maybe Raoul was cheap and it didn't fit on the puny little headstone he got for her. ;)

Note: Since this update is a direct continuation of the previous chapter, for the sake of emotional continuity I'd recommend reading the end the last chapter before starting on this one.

Chapter 7 – "...And speaks my name"

She did not scream. Erik knew this because her lips were white and closed; the dark window was scarcely an arm's reach away and he saw every feature, every line of her face drawn by the faint orange glow of the windows opposite. She had not moved, only her eyes went huge in her delicate, perfect face. What screamed was the silence, a rising, roaring, terrible crescendo in his ears.

He wanted to fall.

"Christine..." he heard himself say.

The word sent a shock through her face, like a stone breaking through water.

"You," she whispered. Then she looked down.

The lasso lay below, coiled in the shadow. Erik wondered if she saw it as clearly as he did. He looked back to the window.

Christine was not there.

For a dizzying instant Erik thought he had imagined her, but then there was a swish of dark curls and her face – and something black and solid was hurtling through the air.

He caught it.

Instinctively, he looked down at his closed hand, and saw that the object he held was a candlestick. A cold, heavy, brass candlestick. Which Christine had just thrown at his head.
"My thanks, mademoiselle," he said, because he had to say something. "Perhaps you could now oblige me with candles?"

He looked back at her and the words died. Christine's entire face and body radiated hatred. It struck him like a lasso: her shoulders, her bare arms, every muscle and sinew were tense with coiled rage.

"You wish to kill me?" He had meant it as a question, but it was not one.

There was not a trace of fear in her eyes. Instead, as Erik watched, something was born from the coils of anger and sparked in them, a dark flash like diamonds or betrayal.

"Should I not be the one to ask you that?" And then bitterly, "Angel."

She meant the lasso on the ground. For an insane moment Erik wanted to throw the candlestick back, to shatter the open windowpane and escape with her, with his Christine, down the wall and away, while the chaos erupted behind them.

Again.

He could not do it again. There was nowhere to run.

He clenched his jaw. "Do not call me 'angel'."

"Would you rather be called murderer?"

"No." He felt a kind of rage come back into him, a rage at himself, at the night. "My name is Erik."

He saw her disbelief, her anger – and something else. The death of kindness, a resignation.

"My name is Erik," he repeated, striving to keep his voice low. "That man," he glanced at the rope on the ground, "is dead. I threw him away."

"I see him before me," Christine said quietly. "I had thought him dead, but he is here. A masked man all in black, from his cloak to his soul, who murders at will."

"My name is Erik." The words came in a harsh whisper. "Christine! I did not come here to harm you!"

She looked back at him, impassive and silent.

With one hand, the other still clutching her candlestick, he ripped off the cloak. It fell, fluttering like a torn stage curtain, down to the ground. Christine followed its descent with her eyes.

When she looked back, Erik caught her gaze. Then, with a vicious sharp movement that made Christine flinch, he ripped the mask from his own face.

"My name is Erik."

He relished her shock.

He crushed the useless linen of the mask in his fist. It took all his self-control not to slap that hand up to his face, not to hide the nakedness of his deformity. He clenched his fist harder, letting her look at his face. Willing her to see.

"Say my name, Christine."
"No."
"Say it!"
"I want it back."

Erik stared at her, the words not making sense.

Christine put out her hand. "That candlestick, Erik. I want it back."

He felt his lips part involuntarily. The name she had spoken remained in the air between them; he breathed it, in and out.

Christine's hand closed hard over his, and the candlestick was gone. Then she was back through the window and he could only see a trace of her, like a ghost in her white night-dress, long hair curling wild over her shoulders and her eyes reflecting the night: black firelight.

Erik stepped on the parapet as though he could fly, and went after her through the dark window.

Inside, the space was tiny. There was an unmade bed and a dressing table by the window; the metallic glint of a key suggested a wardrobe in a corner behind them. There were no mirrors.

Christine was standing at the dresser, clutching the top of it, white-knuckled. Erik gripped her wrist and pressed the linen mask up into her opened palm.

She turned to him, holding it up to see. A triangle of cloth, with an empty eye socket. Her mouth twisted, she made as if to dart to the window to throw it out, but Erik caught her by the elbows.

"Leave it."

He tried to relax his hold. She was not wearing a corset beneath that shift. He did his best not to watch her chest rise and fall, the soft curve of her waist under the sheer fabric outlined against the window. He was going mad.

Christine jerked herself free of him, and held up the mask in both hands, her fingers through the eyehole.

The she scrunched the fabric in her fists and *ripped*.

Erik hissed in a breath, baring his teeth. Enraged pain snarled through him, he made a grab for Christine's arm, but she dropped the pieces to the floor and flew into him, full-force. Her slight body slammed against his chest like a bird smashing itself on a window.

He could not breathe; his control was gone, he was powerless against her questing hands, her demanding angry hands that grabbed his face, his head, without regard for the pain.

She had spread her palms out against his cheeks, the ruined and the human, her fingers following at once both the scar where his right eyebrow should have been and the normal line of his left brow, then spreading out to his temples, his nose, his ears, uncovering his secrets for herself, fingers and nails, painting him in blood in her mind.

He caught fistfuls of her hair, trying to make her stop, flailing for purchase in the tangle of curls, drowning without air. Christine was drowning him, holding his head underwater, it was like falling into another lake with a distant, unreachable, burning shore.

She pulled his head down, and then he could not help it, he was forcing her mouth open to do to
her what she had done to him in the depths of the Opéra: opening her with his tongue, inside her, against the hot smooth flesh of her mouth. Claiming her for his own, only his, his Christine.

He thought he wanted her to stop, to tear herself away from his mouth and tear him apart, to repel the corruption of his soul with the purity of hers – but she would not save him. Worse, she demanded more, she would not shudder even when he tasted her kiss, mingled tea and the scent of nightflowers, and she was encouraging him, not pushing him away but driving her own small hot tongue against him, exploring him within just as her hands roamed through his hair and his scars.

The supple heat of her body pressed to his was scrambling his thoughts, his will. He could not see how to fight it, it was like water, like rage, the harder he struggled the stronger was the pull of the current, dragging him down below. He had tried so hard to block this out, to forget the heat of her flesh and the pressure of her hands guiding him to her, and – God, he had to stop her, before she was lost, before he destroyed her and himself and the world...

"Christine!"

He wrenched her away from him and held her out on outstretched arms, his body pounding with agony at the loss of her warmth.

"Christine..." he said again. And with superhuman strength, finally spoke her name: "Christine de Chagny."

She was doll-like in his grip, delicate spun glass which he was crushing in his fists. She made no move to resist, but only stared up at him in defiance, with her mouth blood-red and her lashes wet and heavy and dark. Waves of heat from her body touched his skin through his sweat-soaked shirt, shooting fire to his belly. He forced his hands away from her, stepped back.

Christine remained where she was, standing a little awkwardly, with her shoulders stiffly forward as though prepared for someone to wring her hands behind her – but her face was raised up to him.

"Erik," she said.

He bent down and grabbed the two pieces of fabric off the floor, the broken mask.

Christine made a move to take them, but he whirled angrily, thrusting her aside.

He leapt to the window, through it to take hold of the balcony railing, over it and down the wall in two swift catlike jumps. He landed on the rope, picked it up with one hand and the cloak with the other and ran from the courtyard, from the darkness, from his heart.

He sat, wrapped in his cloak, in the back of the cab as it trundled quickly towards Montmartre, with the hood pulled forward over his face as far as it would go. His teeth were chattering. The cab turned into rue Marcadet and Erik saw through the grimy glass a line of fire over the silent Montmartre cemetery. It was either the rising sun or the start of another, thunderous, riot.

Christine climbed into her bed, into the corner where it met the wall. She pulled her knees up to her chin and wrapped her arms around, holding herself together.

She tried squeezing her eyes shut. It changed nothing, instead it drew the pictures clearer in her mind: a masked man, an unmasked man, a face in the shadows... Raoul's ring, her anger, a ghost on the balcony. A man inside. Hands in her hair and her own mouth welcoming his, spinning her out of herself. These scenes somehow flowed together, overlaying a confusion of old memories of the
ballet: Madame Giry dragging her and Meg away from the *Foyer de la Danse* where the older girls practiced, glimpses of a rich man's flushed face and a dancer's searching, snaking hands on the back of his neck. She remembered Madame Giry's fury, the way she threw Meg and her down on the divan in her room and told them they were never, never to go in there outside practice hours, never, did they understand? They did not, but they nodded enthusiastically, terrified more by her fury than by the cause for it.

And now she knew. She was just like those girls, there was nothing precious or special about her. She had been blinded by the mask, perhaps, by the voice, by the loathing and grief and need in his eyes, so that she had not seen herself until it was too late. She could name the thing in her soul now. It was not love. It was only desire.

Only desire.

It was all right, she thought wretchedly, curling over her legs, pressing her chin to her knees. It was all right. She would call on Raoul tomorrow and ask his forgiveness, she would take his ring. She loved him, the feelings that had confused her and shamed her were nothing but desire, and she was stronger than that. She could kill the ghost.

But he was not a ghost. His name was Erik. Only a man named Erik, who did something to her soul that made it bleed.

She bit the skin of her knees through the night-dress, anything to stop her mouth from giving her away, anything to hurt. Then she felt cold air on the back of her neck and realised the shift was torn there, ripped like Erik's mask. Erik had ripped it. She had let him.

Christine dragged the night-dress over her head, covering herself with her blanket, then reached over to the drawer of her dresser to pull out the sewing box. She lit a candle. When her eyes adjusted to the light, she forced herself to thread a needle and set to mending the shift.

She made the stitches small and careful, focusing all her mind on the task. Nobody could see this, nobody would know. She was safe. It would be all right. Besides, she could not expect Madame Giry to mend her clothes and they had still not hired a maid. So she would do it herself. It was time to grow up.

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**Chapter 8: The Chorus Girl's Husband**

Thanks to everyone who has been reading and reviewing – I owe you guys an enormous debt of gratitude for all the feedback and support, in particular to those who waited for the review boxes to start working again and actually came back to reply!

This is a longer chapter, which means it may take a bit more time than usual until the next update (fair warning). Please take a moment to review, you'll make my day!

This week's trivia: "The Chorus Girl's Husband" was an actual play, performed in the late 1860s to entertain Napoleon III and his court.

**Chapter 8 – The Chorus Girl's Husband**

The neat, beautiful hall of the *Théâtre des Variétés* hummed with polite anticipation, as it did before every performance. In the pit and the stalls, a restless bourgeois crowd attempted to settle in, find its opera glasses, glare at those with unduly tall hairstyles which threatened to block their
view, and finally shushed each other into a respectable silence just as the lights dimmed, the conductor bowed, and the orchestra struck up the overture. Only then did the fashionably late aristocratic gentlemen start filing into the boxes, proudly escorting their diamond-studded wives, mistresses or, in the case of the less fortunate, their mothers.

Raoul de Chagny sat in his uncomfortable velvet-upholstered chair, and thought dejectedly that it would have been preferable, indeed, to have escorted his mother here rather than be forced to accompany his father, in a venture neither of them would enjoy but which seemed as unavoidable as the appearance of Mlle Christine Daaé, formerly of the Opéra Populaire in the chorus line of Act I.

"I hardly think this is necessary, Father," he said grimly. "I have seen Christine dance this role before."

"As has every other gentleman in Paris," replied his father in the crisp, matter-of-fact tone which never failed to infuriate Raoul.

The Comte folded a document he had been perusing on the way in and put it away into his breast pocket, making himself comfortable in his chair. He glanced at his fob-watch, but the numbers were invisible in the darkened theatre.

"Whether you consider this to be necessary is currently of small importance. Your mother was adamant that you and I must attend tonight's performance."

Raoul made a bitter noise. "I suppose she intends this as an object-lesson for me?"

"Perhaps she hopes it will be one for both of us." The Comte's mouth quirked beneath his silver moustache with a hint of irony. "It is, after all, my duty as a father to warn you against the mistakes which you will undoubtedly continue to make in spite of anything I tell you."

"So why trouble yourself," Raoul said without bothering to hide his resentment.

"While your duty as a son," the Comte continued over him, "is to listen to my elderly warnings and pretend to take heed. You will agree that this simple arrangement affords both of us a great deal more comfort than another row with your mother. I may benefit from a night away from the depressing reality of the state of our nation's army, while you may spend an evening safely contemplating Mademoiselle Daaé's more... obvious charms."

"May I remind you," Raoul said through his teeth, "That you are speaking of a woman who is to be my wife."

"I am speaking of the future Vicomtesse de Chagny, who will tonight be entertaining no less than eight hundred members of the audience. If this prospect Offends you, I would be delighted to report to your mother that she appears to have achieved her purpose in sending us here tonight."

Raoul turned pale with anger, but the Comte went on: "If you insist on following the lamentable course of the Duc de Nevers and his dancer-wife, then that is your business."

"On that at least, we are in agreement."

"I advise you, however, as a man and as your father, that it would be far more sensible and less expensive not to wed Christine Daaé. Besides which, it would also spare me the wearisome arguments with your mother at a time when I am faced with more than enough wearisome arguments at the Assembly."
"I love her," Raoul repeated for what felt like the five hundredth time. He had long since lost hope of this making any impression on either of his parents, but at least his mother had the decency to look upset when he said it. His father merely gave him a look that suggested he had once been a young man too, and had grown out of it. Then he turned his attention to the stage.

The set was not up to the standards of the Opéra Populaire, but like the music and everything else about the Variétés, it made up in vivacious energy what it lacked in grandeur. Raoul had no heart for the bubbly bawdiness of tonight's musical farce, selected quite deliberately for this family outing – a piece playfully and so very subtly entitled, "The Chorus Girl's Husband".

The trouble had started after the ball at the Tuileries. He and Christine had parted terribly after the disaster with the ring, and he had spent a sleepless night berating himself for his stupidity, for his impatience. He had pushed her away and broken the fragile life they had been trying to reclaim, and he was haunted by the memory of her happy, open face as she danced in his arms. That night, he thought he had lost her for good. Yet in the morning he had found Christine waiting for him in the parlour, red-eyed and looking worse than he felt, but smiling – and then he knew she would take the ring, and they would finally, finally, start to live again.

All of that was thrown awry by the chilly reception he got from his parents after he had seen Christine back to her apartment and joined them at the Bois de Boulogne. Christine had mentioned the Variétés to the Comtesse at the ball, and Raoul figured out the rest. He could not blame his parents for being wary after the scandal of the Opéra, but he could and did blame them for the things they had said to him that morning, under the pretence of a civil stroll through a park. He was irresponsible, childish, reckless. He had no self-respect and no regard for his status. He was marrying a woman who was clearly determined to be his ruin, because no respectable girl would follow a scandal by prolonging her engagement and signing on to be a dancer for the amusement of every man of fashion and means. All this was said pleasantly and very quietly, while smiling at the passersby.

"Here she is," his father said, startling Raoul from his thoughts.

Christine was the third in a line of twelve dancers, all anonymous in their little gauze skirts, ballerinas dancing the role of ballerinas. The main characters wandered around this sad little chorus, commenting and selecting and eliciting gusts of appreciative laughter from the audience, some of whom no doubt had mistresses among these same girls.

"Ah. I see you picked the prettiest of the lot."

"Stop it!" Raoul snapped hoarsely, unable to bear any more.

He turned to his father, hating himself for the pain that he knew was in his voice. "You know Christine. You have known her since she and I were children together. You welcomed her to your house when I began courting her, you encouraged me to buy her a ring! How can you do this now, just because she has gone back to the ballet for – for a while? Why do you betray her like this? Or do you merely enjoy humiliating me?"

"If you find it a burden to bear my jibes," the Comte said coolly, "Then think how it will feel to bear the jibes of a nation. And I warn you, they will be more cruel than either your mother or I, and care a great deal less for your tender feelings – just ask the Duc de Nevers. They laugh at this play because it amuses them. The reality amuses them even more."

"So what do you suggest I do? Force Christine to marry me tomorrow?"

"Make her your mistress."
"What!"

"I suggest," his father said calmly, "That you do not marry her at all. Make her your mistress if you must, buy her a few diamonds, bed her and put this nonsense from your head." He tapped the program with an emphatic finger. "This is where she wishes to be."

Raoul gave him a look of pure hatred. "Thank you, Father. I shall be sure to keep that advice in mind."

The Comte ran an impatient hand through his thick hair, silvery at the temples. "Very well. We shall have no more talk of this." His tired tone took Raoul by surprise. "I mean only to spare you pain. You believe you love the girl, very well. But you had best think hard on what your wife will bring you, and I hope, for your sake, that it is not infamy and humiliation. Do not make the mistake of thinking that because Christine Daaé is beautiful, she is also good."

"She is good. And innocent. And where she may not be, it is through suffering and not through any fault of hers."

"The fault is always someone's. In the end, it hardly matters whose."

Raoul sucked in an angry breath, but before he could speak, a man in a hat and street-clothes ducked into the box, opening the curtain, and motioned urgently to his father. He was holding a rolled-up copy of Le Soir. The headline shouted: "Ambassador snubbed at Ems: Prussia mocks French honour!"

Without another word the Comte stood up and left.

Raoul sagged back against the chair, staring at the stage with unseeing eyes. The farce continued, the audience laughed, he sat there and tried to convince himself that he was imagining the curious eyes watching him from the other boxes.

He looked down to the front of the stage, where Christine was miming something terribly amusing at the stalls, and felt an upsurge of loathing for those laughing, distorted faces, for those fancy hats and powdered noses and for the whole of Parisian society. Then he thought of the end of the performance, when he would go backstage to see Christine – and would have to fight through the familiar spectacle of men vying for their chance at the dressing rooms, for their little piece of ballet, all nicely wrapped in gauze and tulle.

He tried his best to pretend that he did not care.

o o o

Christine dumped her satchel on the bench beside Meg's in the busy dressing room, and began to pack her things: spare tights and legwarmers, shoes, ribbons, greasepaint for the stage. She felt faint with fatigue. Somebody jostled her from behind but she ignored it; everyone was in a hurry to go home.

"I ought to take the omnibus," Meg said. She was struggling to roll her long hair up into a chignon. "Pherapsh..." She removed the hairpin from her mouth. "Perhaps Raoul will want you to join him for supper."

"Here, let me do that."

Christine took the pin and reached over to fix it in Meg's hair. "Don't be silly. If we go to supper, Raoul will simply take the carriage past our building." She rubbed her calves. "He might have to
carry me out of it, though..."

"Christine, I would not want to intrude—"

"Who's Raoul?" chirped a girl next to them.

Christine turned around: it was Blanche, another of the Variétés chorus girls, a curious brunette with pretty, wide-set eyes and angular cheekbones that seemed rather popular with her male admirers. She was still in her leotard, but she had removed the gauze skirt and was swinging it from her wrist, playing idly with the string-ties.

Christine saw the girl notice the diamond on her finger, and instinctively covered it with her other hand. Blanche grinned, revealing a row of perfect little teeth.

"He must be pretty rich, anyhow!"

"He's our former patron, the Vicomte de Chagny," another dancer broke in – Helena Weiss, a fellow refugee from the Opéra Populaire. She had inherited her large-boned frame from her German father, and suffered continually because her height kept her out of so many perfectly symmetrical chorus line-ups.

"May I see?" she asked Christine, nodding at the ring.

"Uhh... Of course."

Christine held out her hand obediently, feeling embarrassed as a gaggle of dancers collected around her and Meg, drawn irresistibly by the sparkle of the diamond. She began to wish she had left the thing at home, but that would have hurt Raoul, and she did not want that.

"Is he handsome?"

Blanche's question caused a storm of laughter: she was not known for her discretion, and her own lovers seemed to be as notoriously unattractive as they were rich. Blanche made a face at the others:

"I was only asking! It doesn't matter, the uglier they are the more they'll adore you. And the prettier you'll look beside them."

"Christine should know!" Helena Weiss winked at Christine and Meg, making Meg frown and take a defensive step forward.

"What do you mean?" Christine asked quietly, but she knew exactly what Helena meant. Her lips felt dry.

Meg came to her rescue: "If you must know, yes, the Vicomte is very handsome. Now if you'll excuse us, we have to get our things."

She tried to take Christine's arm, but Christine shrugged her off; she was staring at Helena, who became increasingly more uncomfortable.

"I only meant," Helena stumbled, "I only meant – you know. About the Ghost." She brightened, "God, Christine, you're such a child. Nobody cares if you had him. It's not like we don't understand!"

She gestured around in an appeal to the gathered girls, most of whom were nodding agreement.
"Merde – if I had a tutor who could put me up on stage like that, managers or no managers, straight to the top, you can bet I wouldn't care about his face either!"

"Except that he burned down your opera house," said another girl from the back, "and killed those people, no?"

"And left you girls without a job," Blanche picked up, with some sympathy. "Something of a madman, if you ask me."

"She did not ask you," Meg said. "Excuse us." Christine felt her trying to tug her in the direction of their satchels, away from Helena.

"Meg, let me be."

Christine felt bile her mouth with hatred; she could not stop it. All her exhaustion and pain and suffering had been building inside her without her knowledge and now here was this smiling imbecile of a girl who thought she knew the whole story.

"You don't know!" she exploded at Helena's surprised face, hearing the shrill ugly note in her voice, aware of Meg's panicky expression but unable to stop herself now.

"You don't know anything, you never will! How dare you! You think I was the lover of a murderer? You think it was my fault all those people died? As if it were not bad enough that the papers wrote all those lies, now you too believe them! Now you too will spread these things about me and laugh behind my back and call me l'amourette du Fantôme! Do you think I'm deaf? Or stupid? I can hear you, every time, I can hear you! I can hear you!"

"Christine, stop it," Meg was saying, "Stop it right now, please, we have to go!"

"I can hear you..." Christine finished, abruptly feeling drained of all energy. She stared back at the uncomprehending faces around her and wished them all quietly, painlessly dead.

"You're right," Helena said after a moment, without any apparent anger. "You should have been in the opera."

Then she turned around and simply walked off. The others milled around for a while, then dispersed, shrugging and muttering among themselves.

Christine sank down onto the bench and dropped her head in her hands, feeling horrible. In the wake of the dissipating rage there remained only the painful embarrassment of the tantrum, her own words echoing disgustingly in her head. She did not know what had caused the sudden explosion; these things they said about her about had never bothered her, she was not so fragile...

Perhaps that was because before, there had been no truth to their words. Christine Daaé, the Phantom's Whore. Had she not touched his face in the night? With her hands, in her room?

"Christine... Raoul is here."

Christine looked up at the sound of Meg's soft voice, and saw Raoul coming towards her. He looked tired and somewhat harassed, but when he saw her, he smiled.

"I would not call the play a masterpiece – but you were wonderful in it." He nodded to Meg, including her politely, "Both of you."

Christine made an effort to compose herself, returning his smile. "Thank you for coming tonight."
"It was my pleasure."

She thought she heard a tight, pained note in Raoul's voice, but in the next moment he was back to his courteous self, getting their bags and helping them make their way out and asking about the performance.

They fought through the bustling theatre to the stage door; then they were finally outside, in the fresh air. Christine breathed a sigh of relief. She had not realised how suffocated she had felt between the blaze of the stage footlights and the crowded, stuffy dressing-room.

The evening was very warm but pleasant, without the oppressive heat that could sometimes stifle the city in July. The Boulevard Montmartre danced with lights; couples strolled by, arm-in-arm, their chatter mingling with laughter and music, the squeaking of carriage springs and the clack-clack of horseshoes against the paving stones. Christine allowed it all to wash over her, glad to be an observer at last, a mute audience for somebody else's orchestra, anonymous in the night.

"I'm afraid I don't have my carriage," Raoul apologised. "I was obliged to accompany my father, but he, uh... He left. Early."

"He left without you?" Christine tried to keep her tone light, but she had heard the same pained note in his voice again, and knew at once that this had something to do with it.

"I believe he had urgent business to attend to. Something political."

"Oh." Christine's throat constricted with dread. "It was not... because of the play?"

"No," Raoul said much too quickly. "Just politics. You know my father; Monsieur Ollivier calls and he comes running."

He had never been any good at lying, even as a child, but Christine could not bring herself to question him further. She accepted the excuse with a faint nod.

Meg touched her elbow. "Christine, I should go. The omnibus."

"I thought perhaps we could go to supper here," Raoul said, including Meg in the invitation. "The Café de Suède isn't far. They say it is really quite good."

"Thank you, but I must go home," Meg said. "My mother will be expecting me."

Christine attempted to talk her into staying, but she had to agree it would not do to keep Madame Giry wondering where her daughter was at this late hour. In the end Raoul helped her to hail a cab and the two of them watched Meg wave as the horse trotted off, the painted number of the hansom winking red as it passed a streetlamp. Christine had a fleeting crazy desire to call it back, to go home and collapse into bed and just sleep.

There was an awkward pause as she and Raoul looked at one another, each aware of the rare moment of being together alone, hidden in the peculiar privacy of a busy boulevard. Christine thought he would kiss her, but instead he only offered her his arm and they walked on towards the group of cafés further along the road, the ornate façades nested together like prettily etched volumes on a bookshelf.

"It was the play," Raoul admitted after a few steps.

Christine shuddered once, as with cold. "It is only the ballet, Raoul, in a respectable theatre." She strove to keep the hurt from her voice. "Not the can-can in some filthy guingette."
"I know that."

"I have been a dancer for most of my life, there is nothing else I can do half as well—"

"Except sing."

"No," Christine said quickly. "Not that. No. I dance, that is what I do. Like Meg, like the others."

"But I'm not marrying the others!" Raoul caught her hands, stopping her, looking at her face. "Christine, I don't know what to tell him. I can't fight for you if I don't understand what it is you want! Why are you doing this? This ballet, this self-torture?"

A laugh escaped before Christine could stop it, a nervous sound that was part exhaustion, part surprise. "Self-torture?"

"Isn't it? Why else would you be up on stage every night, under the eyes of all those leering men and God only knows who else, near-collapsing with exhaustion?"

"Because we need to pay rent! Madame Giry and Meg and I, we need to live. Somehow."

She saw the bewilderment in his eyes before he could speak the words: frustration and pity and the promises to give her a life where she would never need to think about rent again.

She stopped him with a wry, sad look. "You think me stubborn. But Raoul... I cannot leave them now. Please understand. Nor can I ask you to give them money to make up for what my dancing brings; you know Madame Giry would never take it, no matter how bad the need."

"That is nothing but bourgeois pride! How long will this continue, Christine? You promised me this was only until November, and then it would be over and we would be married and gone from here! What happened to all that?"

Christine felt a painful stinging in her eyes. "Don't."

"Don't what? You gave me your word!"

"I know I did, Raoul, and I intend to keep it! But I cannot leave them now. Not yet. Don't make me do this, I beg you."

Raoul shook his head, subsiding. He let out a long breath.

"It is July, Christine. What can change between now and November?"

Christine gave him a slow, tremulous smile. "If we are fortunate... Perhaps I can."

The glass-panelled doors of the Café de Suède in front of them flew open, engulfing them in a sudden, complete wave of noise as a torrent of people streaming out of the café blocked their way. There were ladies and gentlemen in elegant theatre clothes, and some others among them carrying newspapers and shouting something incomprehensible in the general din.

"What is going on here?" Raoul asked one of the men, a young bohemian-looking fellow with feverish eyes.

"The bastards have done it!" He thrust a paper at Raoul, the same copy of Le Soir that he had seen earlier. "Bloody Bismarck's work, you can bet on it! This has his stink all over it!"

Others yelled; someone broke into a verse of the Marsellaise.
"What's happening?" Christine caught Raoul's sleeve. "Why are they all shouting? What's going on?"

The bohemian fellow turned to her and yelled, "War, that's what! They've wanted it for years, well now they shall have it – and we're going to see some Prussian blood!"

"Blood?" Christine whispered, staring at the tumult in dismay. "Why do they want war?"

Her gaze stopped on one figure in the crowd.

Chapter 9: An Amusing Night Out

Once again, thanks to everyone who was so patient with this site's downtime last week and came back to review! Extra special thanks to those who left such detailed, thoughtful comments – these are always an honour and a thrill.

Please note that apparently this site is going to be experiencing downtime once AGAIN this weekend (grrr!) so I wanted to get this chapter posted before that happens. It also means that you may not be able to leave a review for a while, but I would really appreciate it if you could come back and review when the site is back up. Thanks so much!

This week's trivia: Edgar Degas used to spell his name as 'de Gas'.

Chapter 9 – An Amusing Night Out

The Café de Suède turned out to be a large, boisterous establishment. Erik looked around as he, Fiaux and Choury came through the doors, already beginning to regret having agreed to spend an evening in this social hell. A crowded street was just another kind of solitude, an office was, well... an office was bearable. But a café bubbling with coquettish laughter, conversations, the knock of absinthe glasses against marble tabletops – this was something else entirely. The room was furnished lavishly with couches, gilded mirrors, a mosaic floor and white stucco garlands winding around the ceiling lamps. The bar was of immaculate dark wood, and each booth was filled with patrons, male and female, many looking as though they too had just come from the theatre.

"I must say I'm grateful to you for the suggestion, Andersson," Jacques Choury said as they found an empty booth and sat down. "I've forgotten how much I do enjoy the theatre: I have not laughed so well in many months."

"Oh yes," Vincent Fiaux agreed readily, grinning from ear to ear. "It was quite marvellous, especially when the husband's brother – Armand was it? – Armand discovers her little secret and everybody is quite..."

"Indeed," Erik cut him off. "I am delighted you enjoyed the play, gentlemen. I only regret that I was not able to join you."

"You mustn't let old Duchamp work you into the ground," Fiaux frowned. "He may look innocuous, but just let him see you're willing to work nights and he'll be piling you with sketches and calculations enough to bury you alive."

"Still sending you to Sedan, is he?" asked Choury, after the waiter left with their drink orders.

Erik made a cynical noise at the thought of being 'sent' anywhere. "I have chosen to examine the
site in person."

"A bit of a dull town, I hear," Fiaux said. He tugged at his stiff collar, clearly not used to such formal attire. "Not even a theatre."

"Indeed? Then it shall make a pleasant change from Paris."

Choury looked amused. "Come, Andersson, confess it: there is another man entirely under that brooding façade you insist on showing the world! A chap who recommends a night at the Variétés, even if he steadfastly refuses to share it with his colleagues, is hardly the strait-laced workhorse Duchamp believes he has found."

"I confess it freely," Erik responded without a trace of irony, "I am in fact a rogue and a profligate, who loves nothing so well as a Variétés chorus girl."

Fiaux and Choury roared with laughter.

Erik looked back at them tolerantly. It was amazing how simply a truth could be masked, even a dangerous, closely-guarded truth. And yet he knew very well the gamble he was taking in saying those words, the same gamble he had taken in recommending the Variétés as an amusing night out. He could scarcely admit to himself how desperately he longed for them to talk of the dancers he could not see now, to paint for him the images which had sprung up unbidden before his eyes when he first read the terse lines in the Journal advertising the fate of the former employees of the Opéra Populaire.

The familiar name had stared back at him from the paper, branding the script into his vision: *Mlle Christine Daaé has signed on with the Théâtre des Variétés.*

He knew he should not be here now, hoping secretly for a word about her from these men – these strangers who somehow could look at her, up on stage, and yet see nothing at all. All of that had to be put well behind him, he could not afford to indulge the dangerous memories of the encounter with ... with the future Vicomtesse de Chagny. This new existence as an architect seemed to be shaping itself quite without his interference, and Erik had every intention of letting it continue thus, well aware that the smallest slip on his part, the smallest glance backwards, could make it unravel like a falling lasso. He had come much too close with the terrible error about Madame Giry and the residence of the old Comte and Comtesse de Chagny at Saint-Cloud. There would be no more mistakes.

Yet despite all these well-intentioned promises, despite all the effort he expended on creating sketches and models and keeping every moment of his life occupied with thoughts of the new courthouse he was to design for the provincial town of Sedan, he could not escape. His nights had become a writhing confusion of feverish, twisted sheets; he kept seeing his hands clutching Christine's bare shoulders in the silence of her room, kept hearing her angel's voice twisted beyond recognition by the discordant notes of his *Don Juan Triumphant.*

Before, he had found some measure of comfort in persuading himself that it was all over, that Christine was free of him now even if he would never be free of her. The memories of that night, of her wounded eyes and her fingers on his flesh demanding revenge, ripped that assurance from his soul and left him waking naked and terrified, longing to hold her and suffocating with the shame of it.

"Ah, Choury! I say, it has been a while!"

An impeccably dressed gentleman in his mid-thirties had stopped by their table and was
enthusiastically shaking Jacques Choury's hand in both of his, beaming with the unfeigned joy of one seeing an old and much missed friend. A tall blonde girl behind him, evidently his companion, stood forgotten and ill at ease.

"Good God, de Gas!" Choury gripped the gentleman's hand delightedly, getting up. "How the hell are you? I've been hearing the world of you ever since Italy – the Salon now, is it?"

"Quite right, the Salon – trapped in the gilded cage among the usual suspects." The man laughed with a hint of self-deprecation. "I swear, they will still be painting Ruth and Semiramis and good old Apollo a century from now!"

"Forgive me," Choury said, suddenly recalling the other two at the table. "Allow me to introduce you to my colleagues – gentlemen, my good friend Edgar de Gas, another veteran of the old Beaux-Arts college days and I'm proud to say, the most talented of us all."

"Now really, Choury..."

"No no, it is quite true, I assure you! Edgar, my colleagues: Monsieur Vincent Fiaux," Fiaux rose briefly in his seat to shake the gentleman's hand, "And Monsieur Erik Andersson, with whom I daresay you should have a great deal in common: he is quite the theatre enthusiast!"

Erik felt every muscle in his neck go rigid with the effort of not turning his face aside to the shadowed safety of the wall at his right, knowing that in any case the action could not conceal his bandage from the curious eyes of the newcomer. He attempted a civil greeting, hating the enforced contact of a handshake and the man's clear, expressive eyes studying the bandaged half of his face with the practiced gaze of a painter.

"A pleasure to meet you, monsieur," de Gas nodded, releasing Erik at last from the almost physical agony of this scrutiny.

It was only then, while attempting to regain his composure, that Erik's gaze slid over the girl who had accompanied de Gas and he had a shock.

She was not looking at the bandage. Her grey eyes were aimed directly at his face.

Erik forced his gaze to unfocus and turned his head, pretending he had not seen her, but his heart was racing as though death was a step away and approaching at the gallop.

A ballet girl.

He could not recall her name – a German name, Eismann or Weissman or something of the sort – one of Madame Giry's charges from the Opéra Populaire. Weiss, he decided, that was her name, Helena Weiss. The one who would always be relegated to the back lines because of her height, but who had been cast in Don Juan because there were no chorus lines in the flamenco. This Mademoiselle Weiss had only to gasp now and point at him, shrieking with the all the repressed lung power of the eternally-mute ballet girl – "The Phantom of the Opera! He's here!" – and he was dead. Trapped in the corner of the booth he knew there was no escape.

He stared into his absinthe, seeing green murder. A confusion of sound told him the man de Gas had taken a seat at their booth and Erik did not dare look to see whether the girl had remained with him. He kept staring into the drink until with a start, he realised there was a conversation going on among the others, and nobody was shrieking at all.

"Very true, Andersson here was just telling us – what was it you were saying about the lyrics?"
Erik looked up at the four pairs of eyes turned towards him. If there was a hell, he was quite certain it would involve the eyes of a multitude staring at him expectantly in exactly this way. He tried not to think of the scream that seemed to hover inevitably above the four of them, like an exclamation point only he could see: *He's here!*

"The lyrics?" he ground out the words, cursing himself for the worst sort of imbecile. Surely they could hear the frantic harshness in his voice.

"Yes, you said before, the lyrics had been written by, what was his name now..."

"Halévy," Erik heard himself say, quite calmly. "An impressively witty libretto, despite the lamentable title."

"Oh, you are acquainted with Ludovic Halévy? A good friend of mine," de Gas enthused, giving Erik the impression that all of them were part of an absurd slow-motion farce, a comedy about the great fire of Rome: the world was burning down around them while they talked of operettas. The scene lacked only a fiddle. Any second now the girl Helena would scream.

"I regret I have not had the honour of meeting Monsieur Halévy in person," Erik replied.

"A pity, then. A man of rare intelligence – is he not, mademoiselle? A mutual friend," de Gas explained with a warm smile for the company. "Ludovic did me the favour of an introduction to Mademoiselle Weiss."

The girl's gaze lingered on Erik briefly, and then, to his astonishment, continued past him. She rejoined the conversation, which turned to an animated discussion with Fiaux about the design of the set, as though the concept of sharing a café table with the erstwhile Phantom of the Opera had proved too bizarre for her to consider seriously.

Was it possible, Erik thought numbly, that she had not recognised him? Could it be that even a dancer who had seen him unmasked in *Don Juan* could not see that faceless monster in the gentleman he now pretended to be? The audience had seen only his deformity, a brief glimpse of horror, but the dancers had seen the other side, the undamaged side – and yet this girl laughed and chatted amiably, and did not seem to know him. Had he changed?

Perhaps she was merely waiting for her chance to blackmail him. Erik considered how much it would cost to buy her silence. It was in the midst of those unpleasant calculations that a shout came from the middle of the room – "*Le Soir! It's on the front page, gentlemen!*"

Ripples of excitement flew from around the speaker, as from an epicentre of a quake, and everyone in the room seemed at once on their feet, clamouring to see the paper. Erik heard shouts of "At last!" and "Ha, I knew it could not go on this way!" and then the paper was being passed from hand to hand, the headline blared across the café in a hundred different voices: "Ambassador snubbed at Ems!" and "Prussia mocks French honour!"

"You fools!" shrilled a young woman somewhere, "This is Bismarck's doing, I tell you! This is exactly what he wants, a war to unite Prussia against us, and we're flying smack into his trap! Hold, I say!"

The crowd drowned her out; Erik felt finally his endurance snap under the pressure of so much noise, unable to stand another minute in the exploding crowd of the café.

He caught Choury's eye with some thought to explain his departure, but the man was not watching him; like everyone else he seemed determined to get his hands on the paper and see for himself this
scandalous injury to France's pride that seemed cause enough for war.

Erik shoved people aside with no regard for their yelps and stumbles, cutting clear through the press of bodies with the blood-maddened urge of a caged animal trying to get out.

He could see the twin doors in front of him now but his progress was excruciatingly slow, forced as he was to push against the current of the movement – until someone outside shouted "Le Soir! Le Soir! Prussia throws down the gauntlet!". Within a heartbeat the direction was reversed, as people headed for the doorway where the fortunate paper boy was about to do spectacular business.

"Le Soir! Outrageous telegram from the King of Prussia! Full text inside!"

Cursing and fighting for a breath, Erik finally broke free of the doors and out onto the blessed openness of the boulevard.

He cast about for the most promising direction for locating a cab, his long strides taking him away from the worst of the café crowd, but at that moment other paper-criers emerged as though from underground, hawking their papers, and more people spilled from each doorway nearby, joining into bigger crowds and cutting off all obvious routes of retreat.

Erik looked back and forth along the teeming, gas-lit boulevard, searching for a cab or carriage or horse or anything at all that could take him away from here – until he turned and the pulse seemed to stop in his veins.

Not twenty paces from him, across the swelling torrent of hats and hairstyles and noses and opened mouths, there was a face he would recognise among millions: the only living face in a crowd of ghosts.

Christine; his Christine, on the arm of her Vicomte de Chagny.

It was too much.

Forsaking pride and sense, Erik stumbled backwards and leapt onto the back of a carriage, then another and another and then he was free and he ran, feeling Christine's familiar gaze all around him, her hair, her cheeks, her mouth, her beloved, perfect voice swelling in his chest. It seemed to him that he was condemned to repeat this horror again and again, each time fleeing wildly before her, always yearning fatally to stay.

He thought he heard her cry out his name, "Erik!" – but it could not be. He could not hear anything in this white noise of people, he had to escape the madness of Paris. Sedan, he recalled, turning into a cobbled alleyway. The first train in the morning would take him safely towards Sedan.

"Erik..."

The space in the crowd was closed over by the push-and-shove of chattering, excited people, and it now seemed impossible that someone who had stood there a moment ago could have simply disappeared. Yet Christine knew: he had been there. He had seen her. She had felt the frantic stab in her chest and the blood rushing hot to her face as their eyes met, caught together in that sudden, unguarded moment.

She had not meant to call out. His name was lost in the rumble of the crowded boulevard and the wheeled traffic, but she had felt it on her lips even if she had not heard it herself, and it frightened her that she liked it: the feel of her mouth shaping his name.
A pressure on her elbow made her look up.

"Raoul..." Christine whispered, coming to herself. And this name, also, was a guilty ache in her mouth.

Raoul's eyes found hers; his face wore a blank, tight-jawed expression. He had seen him, too.

He turned with a jerky movement, away from the spot where Erik had disappeared.

"Let's go home, Little Lotte. Let me take you home."

Christine sobbed once, and nodded.

They slipped through the crowd as easily as children through water, unmindful of everything except each other. There was the same bitter taste of the sea burning Christine's throat, the same shortness of breath as she had felt so many years ago, racing with this same boy along the black shoreline of the night-time sea. She had never been sure, then, how long she could keep running.

*I love you!* she wanted to tell him, and could not say it. *Forgive me* – but she could not even say that.

In the hansom cab, they sat close together on the padded seat as the driver struggled through worsening traffic. Raoul had his face turned away from her, watching the façades. He stopped the cab at one point, near a news kiosk, and bought a copy of *Le Soir*. The paper lay open before him the rest of the way, but Christine knew he was not reading.

*Please,* she begged somebody, neither her father nor God but some undefinable deity like the blind frozen angels at her father's tomb, *please hear me*. Take my heart, please, *please* take this worthless heart. Take it so I cannot hurt this boy, this man. Destroy me. Make me somebody else.

"I'm so sorry." She barely heard Raoul's whisper above the swish of the wheels of the cab and the rustle of paper. "Christine, forgive me."

"My God," she said, shuddering. "What for?"

"You warned me, and I didn't listen. You said... You said if you sang in the Phantom's opera, he would take you."

"Did I," Christine faltered. *He'll take me, I know... We'll be parted forever.* "I... don't remember."

"You were right. I swore to protect you and instead I put you right in his path. If the Phantom had killed us both, it would have been because of me, only me. My foolishness."

"Raoul, don't say that..."

"And if we're free now, it is because of you. I owe you my life. And..." Raoul swallowed harshly, as though determined to get the words out without anger, yet Christine could not help but hear the hurt in his voice:

"He doesn't know it, but so does he. He's alive. You freed the Phantom, too."

"His name is Erik," said Christine before she could catch herself.

There was a long, empty pause. Then the cab jolted, throwing them both forward, and stopped moving. Christine saw that they had arrived outside her apartment building.
"When," Raoul asked finally, "did you find out his name?"

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Chapter 10: Ablutions

Okay, I'm sure you're all getting tired of my starting each chapter the same way, but I can't go without thanking everyone yet again for being so patient with this site's problems and taking the time to write a review. Thank you so, so much!

A marthon chapter this time. It's so long in fact that there will be no trivia (cue sighs of relief). Don't get spoiled, now, the next one will be shorter. ;)

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Chapter 10 – Ablutions

"Maman?"

Meg peered around the dark, empty parlour in consternation. She had expected to find her mother home long before her, late as she had been getting back from the theatre because of all the unexpected traffic on the Boulevard Montmartre and around it. Yet there was no sign of Madame Giry anywhere.

Meg frowned, eventually deciding her mother must have gone out to visit her cousin again, and had been detained by the same confusion of people and carriages that she herself had encountered on the way home.

She lit the gas and made her way through the dining-room to the tiny kitchen, where the girl who came in to do the cooking in the afternoons had left a pot of lamb stew on the stove and some fresh crusty bread. Meg helped herself to the stew: it smelled delicious, reminding her that she had not eaten since long before the performance. Taking advantage of her mother's absence, she broke off a chunk of bread instead of slicing it neatly the way Madame Giry insisted was proper. There was no butter, so she just put the kettle on for tea, and took her food back to the dining-room, setting it on the table before the little balcony.

She reached over to pull the door open, letting in the night sounds and the warm, motionless air of the courtyard. The latch had been broken for some time; Meg made a mental note to ask her mother to buy a new one when she next went shopping. She took another spoonful of the stew. It was warm and thick and perhaps a trifle overcooked, but after a night on stage it was wonderful luxury: the meat was so tender it came apart in her mouth, the potatoes and onions were rich, and Meg felt a languid warmth seeping pleasantly through her body, all the way down to her sore feet.

There were some papers stacked in the centre of the table. She idly pulled the top sheet towards her as she ate, unfolding it and scanning the hurried-looking calligraphy. It was a note addressed to Madame Giry, and too late Meg thought that perhaps she ought not to be reading it – but as it was lying opened and in full view, she decided it could not be anything private.

Dear Mme Giry, it began;

Please be advised that, following the completion of restoration work on the East wing, your maintenance duties will now include an additional two Corridors, two Practice Rooms and a small Foyer. I refer you to the attached documents regarding staff supervision...

Meg stared at the note.
With a sinking feeling she thought of her mother's hands: the once-smooth skin reddened and dry. How could she have missed it?

So this was where the extra money had been coming from.

She had wondered about that, but foolishly had not made the obvious connection. Her mother's position at the box office of the Théâtre Français was not well-paid, and the first paycheque from the Variétés was not due until the end of the month. The money for the ruinously expensive pointe shoes and other gear to re-equip her and Christine for the ballet had to have come from another job. A job supervising the cleaning at the Théâtre Français.

She imagined her mother, with her stiff back and her graceful dancer's arms, joining the other women at scrubbing the marble stairs of the Théâtre Français – while she and Christine gossipped in the Variétés dressing room after a night on the stage.

Meg shoved the letter quickly back in its place, her cheeks burning with mortification at her own selfishness. She was a spoiled child. How could she not have seen it? She was dancing nights and sleeping in late, so content in her new life at the Variétés that she had not even thought to ask whether it was enough. It should not be her mother doing this. It should be her and maybe Christine; they were younger and fitter and if somebody had to spend hours mopping floors or removing cobwebs then it should certainly be them and not her mother. Meg berated herself for not having realised that all these supposed social visits in the evenings were nothing but an attempt to spare her and Christine what Madame Giry undoubtedly considered unnecessary worries.

There was the sound of a key in the front door.

Meg hastened to get it, thinking along the way of how best to inform her mother that she did not consider those worries to be at all unnecessary and that...

The door opened a moment before she got to it, revealing not Madame Giry but Christine. Her eyes were unnaturally bright, and she held one hand to her ribs as though she had run all the way up the stairs.

"Christine!" Meg exclaimed, startled. "What happened? I thought you would be at supper – you're back so early..." 

Christine fumbled with the door, trying to lock it. "Nothing," she said. "Nothing has happened."

Meg continued to look at her sceptically, until Christine could not help a weak smile:

"Honestly, it is nothing. There was a crowd at the café, we could not stay – people everywhere from Boulevard Montmartre all the way home. I should have been back sooner but for all the carriages. Everyone is excited about something in the paper; there were men who kept shouting that they want to see Prussian blood, they want war... It frightened me. Raoul – Raoul brought me home. That is all."

"All right," Meg said uncertainly. She watched as Christine changed her shoes and put away her fan and gloves into the chest of drawers by the door.

"Is your mother not back yet?"

"Christine..." Meg took a quick breath. "I need to show you something."

She went through the double doors into the dining-room, gesturing at Christine to follow, and handed her the note from the table.
"What's this?"

Christine took it and scanned the writing quickly, then bit her lip. "Maintenance duties... Your mother took on another job? Meg! Why did she not tell us?"

"Perhaps she would have," Meg said with some bitterness. "If we had thought to ask."

They stared at the note in silence. After a moment, Meg put it back on the table. She nodded in the direction of the kitchen:

"There is stew for dinner, Josette left it. And – oh curse it! The tea!"

They sprinted to the kitchen, just in time to see the last few wisps of steam rise from the kettle. Meg shut off the gas and lifted the kettle off the stove, staring at it in dismay. The bottom was black.

"Merde!"

Christine flinched at the word.

Meg slammed the blackened kettle back onto the stove, where it promptly tipped over, rolled, and crashed to the tiled floor with a tremendous noise.

The sharp clang of a fork against the kitchen water pipes told them of their neighbours' displeasure.

Christine picked up the kettle and set it gently on the benchtop. There was now a dent in one side.

"Come, Meg, let's eat. We'll get it fixed, later."

"I just wish I could do something to help. Instead of ..." Meg winced at the dented kettle.

"I know."

Christine ladled some stew into a bowl and they went back to the dining-room. The apartment smelled of overheated metal.

They ate the cooling stew without speaking, studying with undue attention every bit of potato or meat.

"It's revolting," Meg said after a while.

Christine shrugged absently. "It's not that bad..."

"Not the stew. This." She gestured at the letter on the table. "I am a woman grown, Christine, and my mother is breaking her back to buy my ballet shoes... What am I going to do when she gets older? In a few months you'll be married, and—"

"I am not getting married."

Meg's eyes flicked to Christine. She was staring at her bread, crumbling it with a fingernail.

There was no ring on her finger.

Meg felt her stomach clench. "Your ring... What have you done?"

"I gave it back."
Christine's fingertips pressed the bread methodically, squashing it. She spoke, as if recalling a dream:

"I put the ring in his hand, and I closed his fingers over it... And then I left."

"Why?" Meg breathed, dismayed.

Christine raised her head with a wretched, lopsided smirk. "So that I can never give it away to someone else."

The heartache was so plain in her face that Meg felt tears well in her own eyes, the sharp pain of helplessness.

"Christine," she tried, "the other ring – that was not your fault... It was a kindness to leave it for the Phantom, it was good of you, it wasn't a betrayal, it wasn't wrong! You are innocent."

"Innocent!" Christine made a painful, humourless sound entirely unlike laughter.

"You are. And you ought to tell Raoul about that ring, you have nothing to hide. He will understand, you'll see. Then this weight will be lifted from your soul and you two will make up, and you will no longer fear that you might betray him somehow. The Phantom hurt you so badly —"

Christine rose from her seat so fast that the chair flew back, squeaking on the floorboards.

"I need a bath."

"What? Now?" Meg stared at her, nonplussed. "Are you upset with me?"

"No, I just need a bath. I feel dirty."

Meg caught her wrist gently before she could flee. "I'm sorry, that was stupid. It isn't any of my business, really. I didn't mean to lecture."

Christine nodded rigidly. "I know. It's not you, Meg. I'm just – in a foul mood this evening. Everything I say ends up hurting somebody."

She leaned down to give Meg a brief hug.

"If there's anything I can do..." Meg began uselessly.

Christine formed a strained smile. "Thank you."

She started towards her room, then turned back around: "There is something. Do you remember – when we were little, at the Opéra..."

"Of course I do." Meg grinned. "You had this hat, when I first met you. Do you remember it, with the turned-up sides? I thought it was the strangest thing I had ever seen. You let me borrow it."

"Meg..."

Christine stood framed against the dark doorway, small and somehow abandoned.

"Yes?"

"Was I happy?"
Meg felt at a loss.

"Well, that was right after your father died..."

Christine flinched. "Afterwards."

"Of course you were. That is— not all the time, but often... Like when you'd come back from the chapel, and you would be singing to yourself, and smiling..."

Meg trailed off at the expression on Christine's face. "Oh. The 'Angel of Music'. The Phantom, I mean. But those were not the only times!—"

"Yes," Christine said slowly. "They are the ones I remember, too. Every one of them a lie. There are no angels. The Phantom is a man, Meg, a man called Erik. And I am not innocent."

There was an awkward silence. Then Christine made an apologetic gesture. "I'll be in the bath."

Erik thought he had been completely silent as he made his way up the wooden stairs to his room above the store.

"Ah, our recluse!" Louise Gandon stepped out onto the landing in her dressing gown, holding a candle.

Apparently not silent enough.

"Bon soir, madame," Erik said, gritting his teeth. There ought to be a law, he thought, against having the way to one's own quarters barred at two o'clock in the morning, after one had run like a maniac through half of traffic-flooded Paris to get there. He felt alternately hot and cold, his blood throbbing with the image of Christine on the arm of her rightful lover. It was not right that it still hurt this badly. It was not right.

"There is some hot water left for a bath," Louise Gandon informed him, gesturing with her chin in the direction he had just come from. The bathing facilities, such as they were, consisted of a shed that housed an iron tub and— the landlord's pride and joy— running water that had to be collected into a barrel and heated in a basin over the stove.

"I am glad to hear it," Erik replied. "Now if you'll excuse me, I should like to retire for the night. May I?.."

His attempt to get past her was unceremoniously barred by a formidable arm ending in a dark, callused palm.

"There is water," she repeated firmly. "For a bath."

"Madame, I'm obliged to inform you that if you do not step out of my way I cannot be held responsible for my actions. I have had the devil's own time of getting here and I should like to have some peace."

Louise Gandon made an exasperated gesture:

"For pity's sake! I don't see how you can have the manners of a count, and not know a hint when it stops you on the stairs. I'll be plain then: You stink."

She pointed to his feet. Erik looked down and saw that his shoes and trousers were, indeed,
He felt himself turning beet-red.

"I warn you," Louise concluded in the same exasperated tone, "I will not tolerate filth in this house. Scrubbing horse-shit off these stairs is no picnic, believe you me. I don't know what you and your Opéra 'demoiselle get up to these days but I tell you this: she wouldn't want you in her bed smelling the way you do! Just you go on downstairs and get clean."

"I can guarantee," Erik said with the ice of murder in his voice, "that the temporary presence of manure on my person has no bearing on the permanent absence of Mademoiselle Daaé from my bed. It would be... prudent, Madame Gandon, not to bring up the subject again. Ever. Good night."

He tipped his hat witheringly, turned on his pungent heel, and proceeded up the stairs.

"Very well," Louise Gandon said behind him. "In that case you will kindly pack your things and move out."

"It so happens," Erik said, turning his head briefly, "that I am due to leave Paris tomorrow in any case. I had been intending to maintain my apartment here until my return, but I should be just as glad to be spared the expense."

He had called her bluff.

The look she gave him was not pleasant. Erik had no trouble imagining the struggle going on within her now, suspended as she was between the threat of losing his money and the humiliation of allowing him to pollute her precious staircase.

He gave her a cold smile, relishing this small triumph. A few seconds' stand-off ended, as he had known it would, in a filthy curse from her and the thump of a closing door.

Erik unlocked the door to his own room and proceeded inside.

Not fifteen minutes later, and against his own better judgement, he was walking down those same stairs carrying a towel and a cake of soap.

It was not surrender, Erik counselled himself. There were simply few things more abominable than the stench of manure in a confined space, and having taught the insufferable woman her lesson, there was no reason to suffer asphyxiation out of sheer spite. This was entirely logical, and Erik could not understand why there seemed to be a nasty sucking feeling in the pit of his stomach when he thought of Louise Gandon shutting her door. He paid rent; she scrubbed the stairs – as far as he could tell, this was exactly how the world operated. If she attempted to issue orders, it was entirely within his rights to use a little financial blackmail to put her back in her place. She ought to count herself fortunate, he raged silently, that he did not slip a noose over her thick neck and have done with it...

But that was a dangerous train of thought. Since the disastrous night on Madame Giry's balcony, the prospect of slipping a noose around anyone's neck made him feel distinctly queasy. Erik had a sick terror that any corpse he should bring into existence would spontaneously metamorphose into Madame Giry – and that he would look up from her swelling body, puffed and smeared with blood, to see Christine's wide, horrified eyes fixed on him. He felt his gorge rise and swallowed rapidly, chasing the thoughts from his overtired brain.

In the bathroom, Erik sloshed the contents of the wooden barrel into the deep, verdigris-covered
tub. He ignored the steaming basin set on a wooden stool nearby; he had bathed in the lake under the Opéra Populaire all his life and found it perfectly adequate to his needs. He shed his dirty clothes and climbed in, kneeling in the water. If anything it was too warm, he was used to the graveyard chill of the lake and this was lukewarm, almost alive. The darkness inside the bathroom was near-absolute, broken only by the faint moonlight streaming in through an air vent near the ceiling. There was a lamp somewhere, but Erik had no more use for it than for the hot water. He knelt in silence, immersed to his chest in a shadowy green mirror.

The caress of the water against his skin made him aware of the sharp smell of sweat on his body, yet another consequence of his flight through the city. He scrubbed vigorously, soaping his hands and rubbing the skin angrily until it was tender to the touch. It would no doubt have been glowing red had there been light in the room to see it.

He dunked his head down a few times, feeling the water creep through his hair on one side and the mess of scar tissue on the other, streaming into his eyes. It made him think of the rain outside the Opéra, which in turn made him think of Christine – which caused him untold discomfort as he tried without much success to fight the response of his own body. Erik gripped the edges of the tub, fearful lest his hands stray. He tried to hold on to the image of Christine as he had known her: his angel, his muse whose white dress he had not dared to sully with his bloodied hands... Instead the darkness taunted him with Christine the woman, Christine the living, angry, hurt woman, near-naked and so warm. The thought of her fingers stroking his face made him groan. His lips parted without volition, for a kiss he could not have. He gripped the tub harder. Christine had seen him tonight, he was certain of it – but he would not think about it.

He spent the next half hour in the cold tub thinking about it, and a restless night dreaming of Christine's voice calling his name.

In his dreams, his face was whole and he had a right to kiss her. He saved her, in his dreams, from the monster who had imprisoned her in a lightless dungeon and who sought, with his cadaverous paws and burning eyes, to make her his bride. He slew that monster without pity. "Erik!" Christine cried out when he found her, and she flew into his waiting arms. He lifted her into the saddle of his white horse, and they rode off somewhere, anywhere, to some place where they could sing together and their voices rose with the stars.

He woke up briefly while it was still dark, to the unbelievable clamour of people yelling and singing loudly in the street.

He groaned and lifted one heavy hand to his face, half-expecting for a crazy moment to find it whole – but of course it was not. A dream. Splendid, Erik thought with revulsion: in his dreams he played a better Vicomte than Christine's beloved original. He even managed to kill the monster. The Phantom of the Fairy Tale, the handsome demon come to rescue his maiden, oh yes, certainly, why the devil not! It was amusing, no, it was downright hilarious...

So he did not know why he wept.

He forced his deformed head against the iron bars of the headboard, and cried from the pain instead.

Sleep found him again and this time it battered him mercilessly, in retribution for the stolen fairy tale: He was hurting Christine, throwing her down, wringing her arms, dragging her with him to his lair while she struggled and screamed and pleaded and he knew, even while this was happening, that he was still the handsome prince; his face was whole, it was his soul that was mangled.

"Erik!" Christine begged, swallowing great gasps of tears. "Erik!" Then abruptly it was he who
was being thrown down on the stone floor, and Christine's slender hands were ripping into him and hitting his now-disfigured face, forcing him down, getting in past his shattered defences to hurt him, to kiss his mouth – to forgive him.

When he woke up a second time it was broad daylight, and he had missed the train.

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**Chapter 11: You Can Run**

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Once again, thank you to everyone for reviewing! For MariaY and anyone else concerned about the absence of a deep and meaningful conversation between Raoul and Christine: I promise I haven't copped out on it. Much as I dislike quoting Disney... "Patience, Iago." ;)

I lied about a shorter chapter this time. This is another long one, but it looks like the next two really will be shorter.

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**Chapter 11 – You Can Run**

Madame Giry picked up her cup and sipped slowly, watching her daughter and Christine over the rim. She had allowed them to sleep late as usual after a night's performance, and so they were having breakfast while she was taking her second coffee for the morning. At the rate this particular morning was progressing, Madame Giry thought she could well be on her third cup by midday.

"It is a beautiful day outside," she tried again. "And you are both free until tomorrow's rehearsals. Why don't you take the beltline train and go for a walk in the Bois de Boulogne?"

"No, maman," Meg said, "We must practice."

"You cannot practice alone, Meg, and I shall not be here to play the piano until this evening. We can practice then, but I insist that you go to the park and get some sun; you are pale as wax and I do not like these mournful looks one bit. You too, Christine Daaé, you are worse than my daughter. What is the matter with you this morning?"

"Nothing, Madame Giry."

"Nothing, maman. Only Christine broke off her engagement."

"Meg!" exclaimed Christine, just as Madame Giry said, "Christine!"

"Well, it's true," Meg said decisively. She stopped poking at her omelette and set down her fork. "You cannot keep such a thing secret."

"I had not meant to keep it secret! It is only that I," Christine stumbled, "I did not want to talk about it now."

Madame Giry looked from her daughter's defiant gaze, unhappy at being forced to keep silent on so serious a subject, to Christine's bruised, tired eyes. She sighed.

"Christine is right, Meg. We will not talk about it now. Finish your breakfast please, then we shall see."

She rose and went to make herself that third cup of coffee. Between the worrying talk of war in the boulevards, and now this, it did not promise to be an easy day.
She had just taken the coffee-pot off the stove when there was a knock on the door.

"I'll get it!" Meg called from the dining-room, and a moment later – "It's the laundry!"

The delivery girl, a bright-faced child in a worker's kerchief with her arms full of neatly pressed linen, ducked her head into the kitchen. Meg leaned into the kitchen after her, looked to see that Madame Giry was there, then went back out.

"Your washing, madame."

"Yes – thank you, Marie. Leave it over here please." Madame Giry moved the dented kettle off the counter and the girl deposited the stack of linen there.

"Ma says to tell you it'll be two sous extra this week, because of the mending."

"Mending?"

"A seam on a nightgown, here." Marie turned back the corner of a white lacy garment on top of the stack.

Madame Giry frowned. The gown was Christine's; the back seam had evidently been torn from the neckline down to just below the shoulder.

"Ma sewed it up for you, but she says it mightn't hold long, seeing as it's such fine fabric and it was stitched up so messy, last time." The girl clucked with the air of a professional who disapproved of shoddy work.

Madame Giry counted out the money into her hand: "Thank you, I'll be sure to patch it. Wait a minute, my daughter will bring this week's things for you. Ah, here she is."

Meg walked in with a bulging sack made out of a pillowcase, full of dirty linen.

"Shall I help you carry it?" she asked the child, earning herself a grown-up scornful look.

"No thank you, mademoiselle. I do it myself."

"Of course," Meg apologised gravely. "Let me get the door for you."

Exit working-class dignity, stage left, Madame Giry thought with a sad smile. This was precisely the life she had never wanted for her daughter and Christine, the life her own parents had never wanted for her. But what was so different after all about ballet dormitories and practice halls? She felt no more tired after scrubbing the floors in the Théâtre Français than she had felt after several hours of rehearsal.

She examined the garments Marie had left, running a finger over the stitched-up seam of the nightgown. It was odd that Christine had not asked her to mend it.

o o o

Getting to the Gare de l'Est train station in time for the second train to Sedan had turned out to be far more difficult than Erik could have ever suspected. He sat in the cab, bleary-eyed after his tormented night, nursing the sense that he had lost a battle without ever knowing who his opponent had been. He no longer cared where the hell he was going. What mattered above all was the need to get out of this prison, this city whose every street beckoned him treacherously towards Christine.

The streets roiled with a throng like the Opéra masquerades on a grander scale: every last Parisian
seemed to be outside this morning, soaking up the atmosphere of a festival. Erik found its vulgarity distasteful; its marching rhythm rang with the false notes of militant hypocrisy. Open landau carriages dressed with Chinese lanterns rolled past, and on top of these stood women in strange clothing, singing patriotic songs. Erik recognised one of them when his cab became wedged in the traffic behind her conveyance: it was la Carlotta herself, who had apparently forgotten all about her mourning for dear Piangi when presented with this rare opportunity to display her vocal cords and other dubious assets. Her red-dyed hair was elaborately coiffed, and she was wrapped in a blue, white and red stole, which on closer inspection turned out to be a tricolour flag. She waved it around. She sang. She waved. She sang some more. It was horrible.

Erik suffered this cacophony the rest of the way to the station. For the first time, he thought he could appreciate the plight of his audience at Don Juan Triumphant: one had to be attuned to the mood to appreciate such dissonance, and he felt about as attuned to this swarm of humanity as a tone deaf corpse to his funeral march.

He paid the driver and took himself and his travel bag through the colonnaded entranceway of the station and into the immense hall, where the crowd was as thick and as noisy as in the streets. The big clock struck midday, each chime an assault on Erik's sensitised hearing. Light streaming in through the coloured glass of the rose window high above splashed patches of yellow, blue and orange across the clothes and faces of the passengers; everyone hurrying, yelling, gesticulating, mothers hauling squalling children by their wrists, gentlemen in top hats swerving around old peasant women bent over their precious bundles.

A piercing scream startled Erik. His heart thumped until he realised it was only the whistle of a departing train.

He battled the impulse to turn around and walk out, back to a cab and the privacy of his own room. Louise Gandon seemed to have forgotten the previous night's incident with the stairs; she had made no more mention of his moving out, but he had thought it best to leave the next fortnight's rent with Jean just in case. He had no wish to return to Paris to find his few possessions strewn across the sidewalk. In light of the new day, he had to admit the argument over the stairs had certainly not been one of his finest moments – but considering the entire distressing evening at the café and his encounter with... with the future Vicomtesse de Chagny, Erik decided it could have been a lot worse. At the very least, nobody was dead.

"One to Sedan," he said into the little glass window where the ticket clerk sat in his raised chair.

"What class?" the clerk asked in a bored voice, without looking at him.

Erik hesitated. Class? Surely 'bourgeois' would not be the right answer...

"Get second," recommended a lady behind him. She had the pinched expression of a migraine sufferer, which probably explained the look of commiseration she gave him. No doubt she enjoyed all this noise as little as he did.

"Second class," Erik said into the window. He nodded fractionally to the woman in acknowledgement.

"One moment please."

"Have you never travelled by train?" Madame Migraine-Sufferer inquired. "Or is it that you don't recall..." She made a sympathetic gesture at the bandage wrapped around half his head. "Memory loss? They say it can happen with a concussion..."
"Memory loss!" Erik sputtered, startled despite himself into amusement. "My thanks, madame – that's certainly one I have not heard before. At least, not as far as I can remember."

He paid, took his ticket and walked off in search of the right platform. To his surprise, the crowd did not seem to be bothering him quite as much anymore. In fact... He looked down the line of platforms and found that he felt almost at ease, even somewhat interested by this new method of travel.

It had been an excellent idea to get out of Paris. From the next two weeks he could endeavour to put everything from his mind save the plans for this courthouse. There would be no chance meetings in Sedan; no dark, twisting dreams of Christine. Like a blinded man learning to walk again, he would teach himself to live without her, a step at a time.

He wondered what she was doing at this moment.

o o o

The coffee was growing cold; Madame Giry poured it quickly and went back into the dining-room. Meg was gathering the dishes from breakfast, but Christine was nowhere in sight.

Meg stopped as soon as she saw her, the last plate still on the table. "You must talk to her, maman. I'm afraid I upset her."

Madame Giry gave her daughter a reproachful look.

"It was badly done, Meg. Would you like it if Christine were to blurt out your confidences that way?"

Meg looked abashed. "No. But I worry about her... She has been so strange these past few days. Angry and sad and... I don't know. Not herself. There was such a scene at the Variétés last night, you would not have recognised her! She was shouting at Helena, right there in the dressing room. And now this thing with Raoul. Maman, I don't know what's wrong. Christine won't tell me anything."

"You mustn't push her, Meg. It has been a difficult year."

"I know." Meg picked up the last of the plates. "You will talk to her?"

"Of course." Madame Giry touched her daughter's shoulder briefly in comfort. "But no more tantrums at the table, do you hear?"

"Yes, maman. I'm sorry, that was childish."

"Very childish. Take care of things here please, while I find Christine. She is in her room?"

"I think so."

The door to Christine's bedroom was ajar, but Madame Giry knocked anyway, loathe to intrude on the girl's privacy.

"I'll be out in a moment." Christine's voice was muffled.

"Christine? I should like to talk to you, my dear. May I come inside?"

"Yes... One moment. Come in."
The door opened on Christine, dressed in a dark skirt and blouse, and holding a hair comb. The sombre outfit lent her skin an even paler hue, against which her red-rimmed eyes and nervously bitten lips stood out as starkly as if they had been painted for the stage.

"I should not have run off, I'm sorry. I'll go help Meg."

"No, Christine." Gently, Madame Giry took her cold hand. "Come sit down with me for a moment."

Christine stood aside reluctantly to allow Madame Giry to enter. The drapes had been shut tight and the room was nearly dark; what little light filtered through the fabric had the reddish dusty quality of twilight. Madame Giry strode over to the window to open it, but Christine stopped her:

"No, please. It is better... My head aches."

"Shutting the window will do your head little good. You are not a vampire; you need fresh air and sunlight."

Nonetheless, Madame Giry left the window alone and perched beside Christine on the edge of the bed. There was nowhere else to sit; the room was the same as Meg’s, with space only for a wardrobe, a bed, and a dresser with shelves in place of a mirror. The furnishings had come from the ballet dormitories at the Opéra Populaire; one of the few rooms untouched by fire. The managers had allowed the staff to take what they could before selling the rest at auction, as a small extra payout on top of the precious little they had received after bankruptcy had been declared. On the dresser was a portrait of Christine’s father, some plain jewellery she had evidently been choosing from, and a little round mirror with a jewelled handle, a present from Raoul.

Madame Giry watched Christine toy aimlessly with the comb in her hands. She waited for her to speak, trusting that it would be wiser to let the girl find her own words.

"What Meg said... It’s true, Madame Giry." Christine held up her hand, to show her bare ring finger.

Madame Giry waited.

"You must think I’m insane."

"I think no such thing. You are quite old enough to make your own choices, Christine. I wish only for you to be certain that you do not make them rashly, or for the wrong reason."

Christine ran a fingernail over the teeth of the comb, producing a nervous staccato. She said nothing.

"Did your fiancé do something to upset you?"

"No... It was me. I did something to upset him. I – hurt him. Many times."

Madame Giry raised her eyebrows a fraction.

"You don't believe me," said Christine.

"I have my doubts." Her lips quirked, "Yours is not the face of a femme fatale, child."

"My face!" Christine jerked her head at the mirror on the dresser. "You're just like Raoul! He thinks I look innocent so I must be an angel. He's so sure of it that he cannot believe the truth even
when he sees it with his own eyes, even when he sees – when he...

"Come now." Madame Giry gently pried the comb from Christine's clutching fingers and set it on the dresser.

"If you have indeed done something you regret then you must set it right. It is no use hiding here in the dark. The world will not go away because you have shut your eyes."

"Don't you understand? I lied to him! You said I should not make choices for the wrong reasons but I did, I took Raoul's ring and told myself it was right and swore to myself that I would never again – that from now on... Damn it!" Christine exploded, surprising Madame Giry.

She ran to the window and tore the drapes open, flooding the room with sunlight. Madame Giry raised a hand against the brightness, even as Christine flung open the window with a loud crash of the shutters.

"This!" she said, whirling around. "This is how it happened! This is what I am, Madame Giry! So how can I be innocent, how can I marry him now!"

"Christine, stop these dramatics." Madame Giry did not raise her voice, but she felt a cold anxiety welling within her.

"Tell me what happened. Calmly, please."

"He was here," Christine said in a hollow voice. "The night after the ball. I opened the window, and the Phantom came inside."

"...I see."

Madame Giry heard the words drop, a breath gone.

The discipline of her body was ironclad; it would not betray her. Only her mind was turning black, a great deal of blood pulsing out to darken her vision. She had known he would seek her out one day; she had not forgotten the sight of Christine's ring burning in his dirty palm – but not like this. Never like this.

Damn him, she had pitied him. Again. She had told him to find his honour. She had saved him again for this, for doing to this girl with his body what he had once done with his voice.


Madame Giry moved her head from side to side, as in denial; caught the movement and stopped it.

"Child, the Phantom..."

"I am not a child. His name is Erik."

"Yes, you're right," Madame Giry moved her lips to speak. Erik: the name she had once guarded as closely as his home, the name of a little boy. She saw his hands on Christine's body on stage, before the audience of Don Juan. She had known then that he was no child; nor Christine. She could not admit it.

"I touched him," Christine spoke with blood in the words, as though determined to make this as painful as she could. "I had kissed him once before, down in the tunnels, I told you..."

Madame Giry nodded slightly.
"This time he kissed me. I ... wanted him to." In the sunlight from the window, Christine's face was burning white; she was shaking. "I betrayed Raoul, Madame Giry. I betrayed myself..."

The nightgown, Madame Giry thought numbly. The torn seam that Christine had tried to mend.

"I should have stopped it but I didn't, I couldn't, it was like the music – I can't explain, please don't make me..."

"And afterwards?" asked Madame Giry mechanically.

"He ran away."

She bit back an obscenity. "Through the window?"

"Yes. Like a ghost." The blood rushed back to Christine's face.

Madame Giry glanced at the sun-drenched windowsill. She could just make out a corner of the dining-room balcony through it. Not like a ghost, she thought painfully. Like a coward.

"I miss him." Christine spoke barely above a whisper. "I miss him! It's like he's inside me, in my bones – he's not a ghost, I know, and Raoul knows as well because he sees, he know what happens to me... I can't marry Raoul. I can't. I know it's crazy; I don't expect you to understand..."

Madame Giry rose, half-unseeing. "It is all right, my dear. I do understand, better than you think. It isn't your fault."

"How can it not be my fault!"

"Christine, you are young. Too young."

Somehow, she managed to embrace Christine, kiss her clammy forehead, promise her that everything would be fine. Thinking of it later, she could not recall a word she had said, but it seemed to have worked well enough. Christine had calmed down, and had then stood patiently while Madame Giry helped her tidy her hair and get ready for a day at the Bois de Boulogne with Meg, a nice stroll through a park.

How all this was managed, Madame Giry could not say. She knew only that she moved with the mute precision of a wooden dancer in a German clock, backwards and forwards along the familiar track. Only when she had finally shut the door behind the two girls did she allow herself to walk – slowly – to her room, to collect her hat and gloves, and to find the calling card with the address of Monsieur Duchamp's office.

She had no choice. *Monsieur le Fantôme* would have to face the music.

Madame Giry pulled the calling card from the hat-box where she kept all the little things, scraps of paper and the accumulated trinkets of a life. There were ribbons cut from costumes, and brittle, yellowed newspaper clippings, testament to a girl's vanity – a critique of her very first solo, in *La Sylphide*, praising a promising young talent. There were many after that, then none at all. She had been luckier than most. Madame Giry swept the clippings to one side, searching for something else.

At the bottom of the box she found it: a small cream-coloured envelope with a broken seal of red wax. Inside was a square of card cut around the edges to resemble lace; a fortnight's work for a child's meticulous hands. The writing was plain, without the florid sarcasm that he had picked up later, she never knew where from.
Reading it made her age-old grief and anger burst afresh:

*Come and play with me, Mademoiselle White Girl.*

*I'll show you the lake, it's very big. I want you to live here, too.*

**Erik.**

She remembered finding him after that; explanations muttered through a wall about her job in the ballet, which he had neither understood nor cared to hear. All he could understand of her words was 'no'. She had been fifteen. When next she heard from him, he no longer referred to himself as Erik, and she no longer referred to herself as Mademoiselle – yet she never did learn to think of him as the Phantom. When Christine had heard him sing and believed him to be the Angel of Music, she had not the strength to deprive the little girl of the fairytale that had restored her joy; nor could she deprive Erik of the only person who had ever thought him beautiful, the child who loved him for his voice. So she had allowed these music lessons to go on – idiot that she had been! – thinking the deception could do no harm, two orphans helping each other...

She had been a fool to trust him.

She had to keep him away from Christine now. This much was obvious. She had to take the card with his address to the police, give her testimony about the deaths in the Opéra, and protect Christine.

Madame Giry stood up, found her legs unsteady, and sat again.

For many minutes she sat unmoving, holding the child's letter in her hand. Holding a child's life in her hand. She did not know how one came to the decision to kill; she had no experience with the planning of a murder. The thought of him imprisoned behind bars, caged as he had been as a boy, was abhorrent. Yet how many chances could one man have? The murders, the fire, kidnapping, God only knew what else, and now this – with Christine... Had he come here for vengeance, trying to destroy the future Christine had refused to share with him? Or ...

She thought suddenly of Christine's ring in his hand – and realised what she had to do.

Madame Giry closed the hat-box and stowed it back under her bed. With brisk steps she returned to the dining-room, took out the inkwell and a pen and sat down at the table. She allowed herself one final look at the note – this beautiful, precious thing she had kept for so many years – and silently bid it goodbye.

On the obverse of the card she wrote:

**Monsieur —**

*Kindly recall the difference between a man and a ghost. A man takes responsibility for the actions of his body and his soul; a ghost is dead. If you cannot be the former, I shall be pleased to aid the gendarmes in helping you become the latter.*

**A. G.**

The initials stared back at her, mockingly. The irony was too painful. Resolutely, she blew on the ink to set it, put the note back into its faded envelope and slipped it into her purse. Then she strode out of the apartment, but not for the prefecture of police.

She slammed the door of the building behind her, and headed straight for Monsieur Duchamp's
Thanks to everyone who reviewed the previous chapters! There have been some really interesting thoughts and comments in many of the recent reviews, which are invaluable in letting me know what does and does not come across in my writing. Thanks also to everyone who stopped to check out my R/C one-shot ("The Edge of Something"). I haven't been wasting time on it instead of "Solo", I promise; I was just bitten by the angst bug.

Trivia for this week: Oppenord's sketches for "The Opera of Mount Olympus" really exist, and really are spectacular. He insisted that it should be built somewhere where it can stand all by itself, without other buildings around. Predictably, this did not happen, and the theatre was never built at all.

Chapter 12 – The Wallflowers

Madame Giry had intended to catch a cab to the architects' office, knowing that she was due at the Théâtre Français before the matinee, but it was clear from the moment she stepped outside the apartment building that she would have to walk. The boulevards were packed with people, not only the pavements but the roads themselves, bringing wheeled traffic to a standstill. The very air seemed charged with political fervour the likes of which she had not seen since her early years in Paris, during Napoleon III's coup d'état. This time the madness was of a different sort, however – there was a theatrical, dangerous quality to the riotous fun of patriotic singing and the lines of men combing the boulevards with their arms linked, shouting ribald slogans about taking Berlin by storm. It seemed closer to a rehearsal of Hannibal than to a real nation prepared for a real war, although Madame Giry had to concede that she had scant notion of what a nation prepared for a real war ought to look like.

Clots of people congregating by the news-stands spoke of the war having been officially declared, and of the Emperor's unexpected avowal to lead the army himself. Madame Giry heard the same words again and again as she passed each of these groups, vague terms like 'honour', 'demands' and 'insolence'. Fed up with being accosted by newspaper boys, she finally bought a paper in self-defence, and struggled grimly through the worst of the mayhem.

The walk to the office building seemed to take hours. By the time she reached the right address, she felt fairly baked in her dark dress under the scalding July sun. A passerby with a watch confirmed her suspicions: it was well after midday, which left little more than an hour until she would be missed at the theatre. Belatedly Madame Giry thought she should have stopped an errand boy and sent him with a message, but she was well out of the crowd now and returning would only waste more time.

Hot, painfully thirsty and harried was not how she had hoped to arrive at this confrontation. She dismissed the cowardice at once and went on to the office building.

As she had expected, the street entrance was unlocked; Monsieur Duchamp had never been one to shut shop because of a minor incident like the declaration of a war while there was work to be done. Madame Giry respected that.

The portier, on the other hand, was evidently a man more easily tempted by the activity outside, because the lobby was empty, and she encountered nobody else on her way up the marble stairs.
It was pleasantly cool inside the building. Madame Giry felt her composure slowly returning, but there was no helping the anxiety that had accompanied her all the way here. Old stage habits told her to control her breathing, straighten her spine and ignore the trickle of perspiration from her shoulder blades to the small of her back. She did all this, but the anxiety remained. Disciplining the body was a simple matter. The greater difficulty was disciplining the mind.

She paused on the first landing to check that the faded envelope with the note was still in her purse. In the subdued daylight of the stairwell, the fine paper stolen from the managers of the Opéra Populaire seemed less impressive, and the old seal was a crumbling blob of wax. The delicate lacework of the card, however, retained all its impossible intricacy – and it seemed monstrously unfair that the same hands that could create something like this should also be the hands that could strangle the life from a human being, or tear the seam of a girl's night-dress.

Madame Giry hid the envelope away. She felt a sick, desperate pity for him, almost fondness; it was like a vice in her chest. She was glad, shamefully, that Christine had never called her 'mother', because no mother's heart would bleed for her child's tormentor even as it bled for her child. Somehow, in this mess that had become their existence, she had managed to fail them both. No more, Madame Giry decided. She had to set it right. This resolve was a knife in her grip; it gave her strength. She fastened her purse and ascended the rest of the way up the stairs.

Monsieur Duchamp's draughting atelier occupied one half of the second floor, the other side of which was shared between the offices of a lawyer and an individual of some unspecified profession identified as 'M. Aguirre, by appointment only'. Madame Giry pushed the first door and walked in.

A chime announced her entrance. The brass plaque outside had proclaimed only "M. Duchamp and Associates", no other names, but a single look around the antechamber was sufficient to confirm to Madame Giry that the man she was after had indeed installed himself here. On the walls were plans of buildings, one of which stood out as plainly to her eye as a familiar face in a crowd. His handwriting had not changed. She had almost expected to see 'O.G.' under that drawing. Instead, the signature read, "Andersson".

"Can I be of assistance, madame?" asked the secretary at his desk by the door. He was a pleasant young man in a neatly pressed suit, with carefully combed dark hair that gleamed in the sunlight from the window behind him.

Madame Giry approached the desk.

"I am here to see Monsieur Andersson. Immediately, if I may; it is a matter of some urgency."

"Ah. I regret that isn't possible, madame. He left this morning to inspect a building site. If you could leave your name, he shall be sure to contact you directly on his return."

Madame Giry cursed her luck.

"That will not be necessary. I'll wait here."

"There would be no point, madame – he is not due back in Paris until..." The secretary folded over a page in his ledger, then another.

"He is gone from Paris?" Madame Giry asked, taken aback.

"Oh yes, madame." He finally located the right entry. "Until the first of August, I believe."

"Two weeks! I ... had not expected it."
"I really am very sorry. Would you perhaps like to talk to one of—"

"Well, well!" came a deep voice from the other side of the room, and Madame Giry turned slowly, still reeling, to see Monsieur Duchamp standing in the doorway of his adjoining office.

He looked unchanged since she had last seen him: a grey-haired gentleman with his waxed moustaches and the genial, friendly manner that could soothe even the most intractable of clients. He had clearly been working; he was dressed in his waistcoat and had the stub of a pencil wedged behind his ear.

"If it isn't young Agathe Giry! I had wondered when you might pay me a visit."

Madame Giry shook her head, finding a smile in response to his genuine warmth. "Not so young these days, monsieur. I had hoped to have a word with – my friend, but it appears I have missed him. I am sorry to interrupt your work."

"Not at all, I'm delighted! Please, come inside."

"With pleasure, Monsieur Duchamp, but I fear I only have a minute. I am expected at the theatre."

"Oh yes, you wrote, the Théâtre Français – I shall not keep you long, you have my word. I say, what is all the commotion on the boulevards? It was frightful this morning, quite impossible to get anywhere at all."

"It is no better now," she assured him. "Perhaps worse. It seems there is to be a war with Prussia; more than that I cannot tell. One would think from the celebrations that we have won already."

"So it's done at last, is it?" He sighed. "Politics is the curse of our day. After you, Madame Giry."

He held the door and she preceded him into the office.

There were two chairs at a large desk; behind it was a glorious drawing of a theatre in red and white chalk and charcoal: Oppenord's 18th century plan for the non-existent Opera of Mount Olympus, done in breathtaking detail. The beauty of it made Madame Giry pause as always – every line spoke of an instinct for the marriage of grace and precision, the endless search for perfection.

Monsieur Duchamp saw her admire the sketch. "Still has pride of place, Oppenord. Art and technique, hmm? Nothing like an unattainable dream to inspire one."

She had to smile at that.

"Yes; in ballet also. I have always loved this drawing."

She took a seat across from him, while Monsieur Duchamp deftly rolled up the plans that had been opened on his desk.

"Your young friend Andersson was quite taken with the sketch as well," he said, as he stashed the tall rolls in a corner. "I cannot thank you enough for sending him my way – truly, my dear girl, you know some remarkable people! Remarkable! He has the eye of an artist, but his calculations are faultless; even the most quarrelsome engineer could find nothing to quibble about. I don't believe I have ever seen anything like it. Watching him draw is quite the experience; it is as though nothing else exists. I fear that if we did not lock up the office at night he would remain in his place and keep working until he died of hunger. As it is, he works every night at home."

"Does he," Madame Giry remarked noncommittally.
She released a breath, and resigned herself to the thwarted confrontation. "It really is a pleasure to see you, Monsieur Duchamp." She smiled wistfully. "I hope your sister's family are all well?"

"Very well – thank you. And little Marguerite? Still dancing, I gather?"

"Yes, with the Variétés until November." She was relieved he did not ask after Christine.

Monsieur Duchamp moved to the cabinet by the window and took out a heavy bottle and two glasses.

"Brandy," he indicated, hefting the bottle slightly. He poured out the two measures and passed hers across.

Madame Giry acquiesced, taking the offered glass. It was a greeting they shared as a solemn ritual. Jean-Marie Duchamp was a man of the old, disappearing world, one who greeted women with a bow and polite words rather than with brandy – indeed, he had greeted her in the regular manner for a long time after they met, all through the difficult months of her pregnancy when she had relied on his assistance. It was only when she had been ready to return to the ballet and had come to thank him for his help, that he had taken out the brandy. He had poured it equally between them and, coming from this man, she had understood it then for what it was: a gesture of his highest regard, a recognition of courage. She took it as it was offered, simply and without words.

They lifted their glasses in a brief, silent toast, and drank.

"I am sorry you missed Andersson this morning," Monsieur Duchamp resumed, setting his empty glass aside. "All the same, I am glad he has taken the opportunity to leave the city. It is not good for a young man to be so consumed in his work that he forgets daylight."

Madame Giry made a harsh sound. "He never lacked focus."

"Precisely," Monsieur Duchamp picked up the word, "focus! Absolute focus. Quite, quite remarkable – I daresay with some little experience he could be giving old Oppenord's ghost serious cause to fear for his status."

"I am pleased to hear he is doing so well. May I inquire, monsieur, where precisely he has gone?"

"Sedan. A little place on the Belgian border; we have a commission for a new courthouse there. Andersson flatly refused to put his signature to the plans until he has seen the site. And very commendable of him, too – it isn't every architect nowadays has the humility to fit his work to what's built already."

"Thank you," Madame Giry said, thoughtfully. "I shall have to consider this."

She stood up, apologising. "Forgive me, please, but I really must go; I am very late. Still, I am glad we have met once again, even so briefly. I hope I have not been too much trouble."

"Too little trouble, as usual," Monsieur Duchamp grumbled. "Agathe, please my dear, allow me to help you in some small way. I cannot help but worry for you now the Opéra is gone. The Daaé child, she is getting married, no? At least accept a small gift for her, ease my old heart. Come, you cannot deny the girl a frilly dress and all the trimmings."

"You are good, monsieur – but Christine's fiancé is a wealthy young man, and much in love. I have no doubt that should this marriage proceed as planned he would consider it his personal obligation to dress her in all the finery she could wish."
"Agathe, what's all this rubbish? You cannot mean for the girl to owe her husband her own wedding, and every last thread on her back!"

Madame Giry raised her shoulders in a resigned gesture. "If she is to spend a lifetime on an income not her own, then neither you nor I can change that with the price of a bridal veil. I believe Christine's fiancé is a good man; he would not hold such a thing against her."

"Even so..."

"Even so."

Monsieur Duchamp rose also to get the door for her. He paused as she came up, and spoke more quietly.

"I want you to promise that you will not hesitate to contact me if things become too difficult. If not for your own sake then at least for the young ones."

Madame Giry placed a hand on his in gratitude and affection, but shook her head.

"You have already helped more than you know, Monsieur Duchamp. As regards money, surely you know me better than to believe I would let Meg or Christine suffer privation, marriage or no. They are well enough off for the present."

Monsieur Duchamp tugged at his moustache in frustration. "I do not believe I have ever known a woman more obstinate than you, Agathe Giry, but I daresay you know best. A moment please, allow me to see you out."

He opened the door for her and reached for his hat and cane. Madame Giry gave him a wry smile.

"Monsieur, if I could not hail a cab at my age, I should be in a sorry state indeed. Please convey my best regards to your sister – good day!"

Monsieur Duchamp grunted in defeat. "Good day, Madame Giry."

☆☆☆

"No, I do not believe she is expecting me, but if could wait—"

The concierge, a stocky middle-aged woman, gave Raoul a harassed look from behind her table. "I'm sorry, monsieur, but I really can't say when Mademoiselle Daaé will be back, and I will not permit you to loiter in my lobby for hours on end."

"Madame, you may have my word that I shall not inconvenience you," Raoul tried not to sound exasperated. He motioned with the rolled-up newspaper he was holding towards a wooden chair by the door:

"I shall simply sit here and read until Mademoiselle Daaé returns."

"I cannot allow it, young man. If you have leisure to spend the entire day waiting, then by all means wait outside. Heaven knows there's enough vagabonds and louts out there today!"

This was true; the streets had been jammed since morning, and early afternoon had brought little improvement.

Raoul let his breath out through his nostrils, determined not to be baited.
"Fine," he said. "I thank you for your kind assistance."

He put his hat back on and was halfway to the door when the concierge spoke up again, sounding somewhat mollified, and more than a little curious:

"Why do you not simply leave the lady a letter, monsieur?"

Raoul looked back. "Forgive me, but that is none of your concern."

"Certainly it is my concern," the woman bristled, "if it is a question of strangers lingering here to accost the tenants!"

"I am not a stranger, madame, as I'm certain you are perfectly aware. You have seen me here many a time with my fiancée."

"You are Mademoiselle Daaé's – but gracious, I had no idea she was to be wed!"

The nosy woman looked genuinely startled; the revelation that there was something about one of the tenants she had known was clearly a new experience for her.

Raoul found he could not reply. Her words had stung him with a pang of something like jealousy, though he could not say of what. The concierge had seen him with Christine a dozen times, kept tabs on every tenant, knew all the gossip – and yet had not even guessed at their marriage plans. He had the painful sense that this entire engagement had been a figment of his imagination, an illusion that was real to nobody but him.

The concierge recovered at once, clasping her hands and beaming at him, quite melted by the idea of marriage:

"Of course you must stay here and wait for her, if you so wish! Why, it would be a sad thing indeed to keep two young lovers from meeting. And may I ask when the happy day is to be?"

Raoul cleared his throat uncomfortably. "I'm afraid I cannot say."

The woman's expression softened still further, into benevolent sympathy. "Had a tiff, did you? I do see why you wouldn't wish to leave a letter. Well! Then you had better find her and talk to her!"

"That was my intention in coming here, madame. I do not know where else I may find her."

She gave him a little wink, "I believe I heard her say something on the way out about a walk in the Bois de Boulogne."

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**Chapter 13: From the Second Prison**

Thank you, everyone, for your reviews! Please keep reviewing, and I'll try to keep updating as frequently as I can. This chapter is all Erik for a change.

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**Chapter 13 – From the Second Prison**

Erik was determined to have a pleasant, quiet journey. It had certainly started out agreeably enough: he located the Sedan train without undue hassle and walked along the snake of the steel construction, searching for the right carriage. Passing the windows of the third class, he glanced up and had cause to remember with some gratitude the woman who had recommended that he take
second: through the dim, grimy glass, he could make out rows of wooden seats being taken up by a somewhat raggedy crowd, like a Montmartre street being squashed into a tiny space. People sat down shoulder-to-shoulder, so close together and so hemmed in by all their boxes, bottles, bags, children, parcels and the like that there seemed scarcely room to breathe among them.

The second class was far more to his liking.

Erik took his seat in an empty compartment and stowed his bag under the padded bench. He opened the curtains on the window – then shut them at once: some people on the platform had looked inside, just as he had looked into the other carriages. The sensation of being on display for every curious pair of eyes, powerless to direct their attention or control their response, was nothing to relish. He unclenched his fists, taking a few moments to chase thoughts of freak-shows back into the deep well of the past. The horror slid back, obedient.

Really, this was almost simple. Certainly simpler than putting up with the bright daylight of the draughting office while he focused on his work. Here, the compartment was his alone: the two facing benches and the little table by the window that could be folded out of the way, all of it smelling faintly of wood-polish and dust. Not exactly lavish interior decoration, but a vast improvement on the crush of the third-class carriage. He could get used to this.

Erik seated himself more comfortably and took out his copy of *La Lanterne*, the most recent. The magazine had been imposed on him by Jean from the day he took up residence in Montmartre, apparently in the interests of fostering his political and social enlightenment. Erik had to admit there really were some interesting things to be learned. He flipped over to the article he had been reading – a scathing indictment of the disorganised French military, written with vicious, brilliant sarcasm – and prepared for a peaceable journey.

In the space of two minutes, his compartment was invaded by three other men of various ages and body shapes, all with bags, and a young woman in possession of a peacock-feather hat, which took up the rest of the room. Erik felt very much like the French military was currently feeling, if *La Lanterne* was to be trusted: entirely unprepared.

He tried to reach for his bag, thinking to make a strategic retreat, but a glance out to the corridor assured him that his chances of another empty compartment were non-existent: people were hurrying and calling out things like, "I say, here's an empty one!", doors banged, and a loud whistle outside only added a new urgency to the pandemonium.

It appeared to be the normal state of affairs for a train due to depart, and none of the other passengers shared Erik's discomfort. The men had seated themselves in as dignified a manner as could be accomplished in so small a space, while the lone woman perched elegantly across from him, by the window. Naturally, she then felt the need to draw the curtains wide open.

Erik moved back from the window as far as he could; not very, considering the wall at his back. This entire arrangement was beginning to grate on his nerves. He tried to engross himself in his reading; it was difficult, to say the least, when he considered spending the next several hours penned up in a steel box with all these creatures.

"Rather stuffy in here, isn't it?" said the young lady, fanning herself with yet another peacock construction, perhaps the hapless bird's tail. "May I open the window, monsieurs?"

"Certainly," said one of the men, "Let us have some air."

The upper pane of the window was duly opened, without regard for Erik's unvoiced protest. Then another whistle sounded – and something began to happen to the train. At first Erik thought he was
dizzy, and the platform seemed to move before his eyes; a second later he realised the train had started to move very slowly, in a peculiarly gentle fashion. It gathered speed, the platform with all the hurrying people moving past and some station official in a red cap waving a flag – then quite suddenly they left the station behind and sunlight blazed in the compartment.

From that moment on, Erik was glued to the window.

He forgot all about the other passengers, his reading, about being stuck in a minuscule cramped space. First there were other trains, hurtling past in a tremendous blur of windows and rattling steel – then houses and trees and lamp-posts and smaller houses flashed by as Paris melted into suburbs. They passed the fortifications and Erik felt the breath lodge painfully in his throat: he had not been past these walls since he first came to the Opéra. A prison – a second prison he had never even suspected, and now he was out. Before his ravenous eyes, the view opened out all the way to the horizon, searing him with the staggering, alien immensity of the countryside.

They passed vineyards, then yellow and ochre fields like cloth of gold, but with the texture of velvet, rippling and suffused with light. He had seen paintings, but no canvas could possibly have done justice to this light, to the way it seemed to fill the very air. Rows of cypresses separated fields, spear-like and almost black against the sky. The train crested a rise, and it was like being lifted above the land, offered everything at once: from the precise edges of the fields and orchards that fitted together like a puzzle, down to the tousled trees sloping from the field to the gravel of the railroad, the whole world lit by a brilliant whiteness in a sky so vividly blue that it hurt to look – and yet it was not harsh, this daylight, but joyous. The occasional cloud cast shadows on the land, and in the distance small dark shapes moved peacefully: cows or perhaps horses. A glittering river, sister to the black canals he had loved. The supports of a bridge in the distance. The steel ribs of the bridge they were crossing, blurring in and out of phase, like two pieces of lace rubbed together against the light. The train shrieked and applauded with its wheels in the crazy elated symphony of freedom. More fields again, the river vanished.

He must have seen all this as a child, Erik knew, but all he could remember were vague shapes through slits in a sack. A pain welled up in his chest, such anger – to have been deprived of all this! – but he could not seem to make the thoughts real; it was too important that he look now and remember. Remember everything, everything. A few isolated cottages appeared, then hills with a church spire in the distance that suggested an invisible town nestled in a valley.

The train plunged into blackness. Before Erik could blink it was suddenly out – a tunnel. He was speechless at the speed of it, the suddenness with which everything happened and was left behind. He had felt the stale breath of the darkness through the window, a scent of earth, and now they were in the open again. He pressed his fingertips to the glass, and the vibration became music.

"I say! Monsieur! Hello?"

Erik became aware that someone was addressing him. He turned quite slowly, keeping his hand to the window, unwilling to be parted from it, feeling as a man woken up from a pleasant dream to a less-than-stellar reality.

"What is it?" he demanded of the intruder, an anxious-looking young man in a cap and buttoned-up jacket.

"Your ticket, sir," the conductor gulped, with the earnestness that suggested it was his first day on the job. "You do have one?"

Erik produced the little paper, at which the young man looked visibly relieved.
Duty completed, he looked around the compartment: "We'll be stopping at Reims to change engines around six thirty, so there should be plenty of time for a stroll."

"What a nuisance!" complained the big-bellied gentleman next to Erik, folding his paper to a new page. "Do you suppose they'll keep us waiting long?"

"Shouldn't think so, sir," replied the conductor cheerfully. "Half an hour at most. We'll be in Sedan before you know it."

The gentleman's only response to this was a long-suffering look, which the other passengers around Erik echoed variously with, "As usual!" or "Ah well, it is to be expected with this war." The young conductor departed, courteously shutting the door behind him.

"Every month I travel this way," Erik's neighbour told him. "And each time they say, 'oh, we'll be there at nine on the dot!' – you wait and see if we're there before ten! And now, what with all these troop movements, you can be sure they'll be taking the engines down to Châlons and who knows what that's going to do to the schedules."

Erik made an inarticulate sound of irritation, which the other man took for assent. He longed to return to gazing out the window, but he was fast coming to the conclusion that this would be considered strange behaviour, and it would be folly to give these people cause to spend the next few hours staring at him. Keeping his head turned away so as to keep as much of the bandage to the wall as possible, Erik finally said:

"I doubt they would be taking engines from here. They're crossing the border down towards Saarbrücken."

This was an unwise move; the red-cheeked gentleman fairly blossomed with the apparent offer of a political discussion.

"Oh, you have the new Lanterne!" he exclaimed in pleasure, spying Erik's neglected magazine on the table. "So, you think there's some truth to what they say about Bavaria then? Could they really have a secret alliance with Bismarck? Because if they were to push against us from the South, that'd catch us in a fine old trap—"

It was shocking, still, to be spoken to this way, but Erik found the role was starting to grow on him. At any rate, he experienced no great difficulty in parrying the man's entirely nearsighted arguments about the war, and from there it was only a short step to opinions of a general nature, about soldiers and the government and the indolence of the so-called working class. To his own puzzlement, Erik felt some displeasure at such blanket condemnation of the people he had come to know in Montmartre, and before long he was tied up in an argument on the subject of fair pay and all sorts of other nonsense, with which he had evidently been filling his own head all unknowing throughout his stay above the Gandons' store. Not without irony, he reflected that Jean would be gratified to hear him now.

It took a full hour before he managed to extricate himself from the conversation and return to the window; by which point Erik decided he had done all the social duty expected of any gentleman, and if anyone else felt the desire to talk to him, they could damn well talk to his back. This did not seem likely, however, as the two younger gentlemen had in the meantime identified a mutual acquaintance whose political views they were now discussing in some detail, and the lady had spent the entire trip engrossed in some novel. Erik turned his attention back to the sunlit vineyards outside. The music came back to him, this time with a clear, simple melody. He watched, and listened.
The train stopped fairly often, mostly at small stations that seemed to rise out of nowhere; each
time accompanied by scuffing boots and muffled voices from the corridor as new passengers
boarded or alighted. At one such station, Erik took out a pencil and began to scribble idle notes on
the inside back page of the magazine, where there was hardly any type. By the time the train pulled
into the next station, he realised what it was he was composing. Not just a song – a voice. Her
voice. Christine's clear, aching voice weaving into melody all the fields, the vineyards, the sky,
even the rhythmic comforting rattle of the wheels. He traced the staff with a fingertip, hearing her,
feeling her soar. So beautiful...

So wrong.

The realisation jolted him. He was putting words into Christine's mouth, again. He had promised
himself, promised!

Erik tore the page from the magazine and scrunched it up, stuffing it into his pocket. The woman
sitting across from him looked up curiously from her novel; Erik ignored her. He stared out the
window, pulse racing, trying to shed the disgust at his own weakness, trying to forget Christine's
song in his soul. He could as well have stopped his own heart from beating; the song lived. It was
fortunate that just then the train began to slow once again, this time bringing them into Reims.

Erik had never felt more grateful to be outside, or more genially inclined towards the random
buzzing of a crowd. The platform took the song from him at last, and at length he was able to buy
some indescribable fried thing from a vendor, wrapped in brown paper, and consume this in a fairly
unpopulated corner of the station. While he ate, he watched another train being assembled at a
siding, two third-class carriages being coupled to a locomotive. A large group of men dressed
identically in red trousers and navy-blue jackets loitered around, and Erik realised these were
soldiers, waiting for their transport.

Food seemed to help. By the time the train resumed its journey, Erik felt more human, and
thankfully there was no more music in his head. This cheered him enough that he did not mind too
much that the stop stretched well past the promised half-hour, and even condescended to join in
the general grumbling on the subject with the other passengers, once the five of them were again
assembled in their compartment. The train pulled out at last just as the light turned softer, edging
from afternoon into a fine summer evening.

"Cards, perhaps?" suggested Lenoir, one of the two younger gentlemen, when the lamps were lit
inside.

The young lady declined, offering laughingly to keep score while the gentlemen played.

It was only when Lenoir began to deal that Erik realised they were including him.

Chapter 14: When the War Is Over

Thanks, guys, for all the reviews! There may be a slight delay getting the next chapter out, because
real life has an unfortunate tendency to play havoc with my writing schedule. Rest assured that this
annoys me as much as it does you, so I will do my utmost not to keep you waiting long!

Regarding Madame Giry: to the best of my knowledge, neither Leroux nor ALW give us her first
name. Some works of fanfiction, both published and online, call her Antoinette; others I have seen
include Adele, Charlotte and even Marguerite. I decided on Agathe because I think it suits her.
Today's trivia: The title of this chapter comes from a song by Cold Chisel. If you are not familiar with it, the lyrics are worth a look.

Chapter 14 – When the War Is Over

More than once, Raoul had been on the verge of giving up the search as futile. The Bois de Boulogne was vast, and Christine, walking on foot and unconstrained by the carriage-ways, could be anywhere within it – if she was in the park at all. He was not certain why he persevered so obstinately in heeding the concierge's advice, except that he could not stand the thought of sitting alone in his study like an invalid; he wanted to move, to feel that he was doing something purposeful and sensible. Was it sensible, to wander through a park for hours, his heart leaping at every passerby who bore the slightest resemblance to Christine? Was it sensible, to fear that if he did not find her now, he never would?

A landau rolled past. For the briefest moment Raoul thought the dark-haired girl reclining on the plush seat was Christine. She was not. He took the next turn into yet another unexplored path and kept walking.

Gradually the shadows deepened, turning the foliage of the ancient trees dark-green and casting long purple shapes upon the footpaths. Raoul glanced at his fob-watch; it was after seven, and the sun was starting to set. More and more of the people he met along the paths were coming the other way, heading back home or to the cafés or the theatres, emptying the park of voices. After a while, he could hear only the unseen birds.

That was how he found her in the end: by her voice in the growing stillness.

He had turned into a wide alley that led to the lake, and heard laughter. And there they were: two slender figures seated on one of the wrought-iron benches alongside the path, silhouetted like black lace against the fiery glare of sunset. Meg and Christine talked in low, animated voices, their laughter carrying in the still-warm air.

It was mean to resent this laughter, Raoul thought. Irrational. He could not help it.

He walked toward them with a rapid gait, spurred by betrayal.

"Bon soir."

The laughter stopped; Christine's head shot up.

"What a charming coincidence, mademoiselle. You're looking well, I see."

"Raoul..."

"Oh, you remember me."

The moment the words were out, Raoul knew he had spoken with the voice of his father, with the acid sarcasm he himself had always detested. A terrible gulf of remorse opened inside him, but he could not apologise.

The remnants of joy froze in Christine's face, then melted away, leaving nothing. Raoul thought wretchedly, I take away her joy.

Christine stood up, nervously smoothing the dark skirt that made her seem again the fatherless child, dry-eyed at his funeral. Beside her, Meg said something and went away. Raoul heard her
footsteps fading.

He had thought of a thousand things to say while he searched for Christine: about her, about him, about the Phantom, about letting go of the past. All sensible words, all hollow. Instead, he reached into his pocket for the ring:

"You ran off," he said, "and left something behind. Like Cinderella." Raoul smiled crookedly. He had not known it was possible, with his heart breaking.

Christine did not take the ring from his palm, but only looked at it, and then at her own hands. She sighed.

"Please... No more stories."

"You used to love them."

Christine flinched. "I still do. I'm just – not Cinderella, Raoul. Nor Little Lotte, nor any of the others. Only me."

"Don't you think I know that? Christine, I'm in love with you. Not with some story."

Christine reached one gloved hand to touch his sleeve; a light, impossibly careful caress, as though she feared she had no right to it. Then she bit her lip, hard.

"I am not in love with you."

Raoul exhaled a breath. He looked aside, to the sunlit path. At its end, the lake glimmered through branches.

"I do love you, with all my heart," Christine's voice was breaking, quietly. "You mean more to me than anyone else in this world. The things you and I remember – the stories, my father's music – everything that's happened, everything that was ours. But I can't keep hurting you—"

"Then don't."

Raoul turned back, his mouth set, and looked at her squarely. Christine's face was half in shadow from the tree behind her, and she stood there, helpless, stranded – just as she had stood on the edge of the underground lake a lifetime ago, knowing there was nothing she could do. I love you, she had promised him silently, only her lips moving.

"One more story," Raoul said, abruptly. "I'll tell you one."

Christine looked at him in consternation, as well she might: Raoul supposed it was only fair; they both knew he had never been one for storytelling. He looked down at his shoes; kicked at a piece of gravel by the bench.

"Let's sit," he suggested.

They sat awkwardly, careful not to touch. All very proper, now. After a pause, he asked:

"Have you ever seen a poppy-seed rattle?"

Christine darted him a surprised glance. "No... I don't think so."

"I have. My father gave me one, when I was small."
"Your father?"

"I suppose he thought it was a curious thing. Maybe he just wanted to give me something." Raoul shrugged, dismissing the question. "It looked strange. A dry, hollow pod on a stalk, with seeds inside. When I shook it, it made a noise like whispers. And I thought – what if I plant the seeds? I could have poppies, hundreds of them."

"I remember the fields," Christine agreed. "Near a town where Father played. They were beautiful."

"That's what I thought, too. So I broke the pod. It cracked open in my hands, and the seeds came out. There were so many, enough for a field. I only had a small patch, in my parents' old house. I planted them, and watered them faithfully, every single day. Only, Christine – nothing grew. Not one plant. Days passed, and then weeks, and nothing happened."

"Why not? Was it too cold?"

"Perhaps. I'm afraid I know no more about poppies now than I did then. But they did not grow. When at last I realised they never would, I remembered that rattle, and the noise it had made. And how my father had looked at me when he gave it to me. And I realised that – I'd destroyed it. I wanted something better, and I destroyed what I had. It was beautiful, that dry thing. In its own way."

He was silent for a while, looking at the bench, the trees, the path.

"We were good friends, Christine. A long time ago."

From the corner of his eye, he saw her nod.

"I wanted to grow old with you," he said simply. "I thought we could be happy."

"So did I. Raoul, I just... Maybe I'm poisoned inside. I don't know how to be happy. From all those stories, I never learned that."

"You are happy. Without me."

"Raoul..."

"Could I kiss you?"

He saw Christine's refusal in her imploring eyes. He ran his hands over his face, roughly. "You kissed the Phantom."

He had not meant to accuse her. He sighed, "Why did you ask Madame Giry for his name?"

"I didn't. This isn't about him."

"No. But what if he should come back to haunt you? I swore to keep you safe."

Christine only looked at him, her eyes bright with unshed tears. Then she shook her head very slightly, and Raoul understood. Her future was closed to him. Her fears were not his to soothe, nor her grief, her laughter, her kiss... Whatever lay ahead – it was no longer his to share. He could not keep her safe now, she wanted to do it herself.

Christine was saying good-bye.
"I could wait," he said at last. "Until November... until you want."

Her tears did fall then, and Raoul knew that these, too, were not his to wipe away. "It is like your poppy-seeds," she said. "They will not grow."

"Yes, I know... You're right."

He rose to his feet numbly, offering his hand to help her up.

"Forgive me, I must go. Allow me to offer you my carriage to take you home; Georges is waiting at the gates." He indicated the direction he had come from.

She looked bewildered. "But what about you?"

"I am expected at Reboul's for supper; it isn't far. I shall walk." He tipped his hat at her and nodded respectfully, in farewell. "My apologies for interrupting your conversation earlier. I will let Georges know to wait for you on my way out. Have a good evening, Christine."

"Raoul, wait!"

He turned in polite inquiry.

"Could we not still be friends? Please..."

He reached forward and took her hand gently, her fingers in his, then let go. "Of course," he said graciously. "We shall always remain friends."

He left her standing near the bench, lit by the last of the sun behind her as though on stage once again. He thought he saw her raise a hand towards him, but he could not look.

When Raoul reached the next bench, he nodded at Meg in passing, to let her know that he had finished taking up Christine's time. His vision seemed blurred a little; the iron gates up ahead appeared to waver like the air above a burning lamp. It did not last long. He reached the row of carriages lined up along the road outside, and found Georges, bored and leafing through a penny magazine of caricatures. The big man reacted without surprise to the instructions regarding conveying the ladies home; Raoul left the matter there and walked on along the footpath until he was out of sight of the carriages. He stopped and looked up at the park to his left, at the wall of trees behind the iron fence and higher, at the colourless sky of early evening. He took out the ring, and pitched it into the thicket.

The diamond winked in the fading light, and disappeared. If its fall made a sound, Raoul did not hear it.

He did not go to Reboul's for supper. The prospect of half a dozen of his friends gathered for food and banter was physically repulsive. Instead, he walked through the city until he could no longer move his legs, and then sat in some all-night café-concert with his chin in his hands, listening to one song succeed another, each of them different, all about love.

In the morning, he returned home to wash, shave and change his clothes. He was perfectly composed when he went to tell his parents. His mother sighed with relief; his father expressed approval with a grip of his shoulder and the offer of a drink, as though it was some sort of celebration. Raoul spent the morning being a dutiful son, and the afternoon being a dutiful patron, smiling at everyone at some art exhibition.

He tried to recall what he had done with his days, before Christine – but he could not remember.
"Are you all right?" Meg asked, coming to the bench next to which Christine stood, statue-like. Meg squinted against the sunlight. "Would you like to go home?"

Christine shook her head, then glanced back over her shoulder. "Let's walk to the lake."

"It's getting late. Maman will be worried if we're not home for supper."

"We will be; Raoul left us the carriage."

"Left it? What do you mean?"

"He said he would walk, and that Georges will drive us home."

"Christine, you're crying..."

"I know."

Meg went to hug her, but it was like embracing a stone; Christine stood unmoving in the circle of her arms, uncomforted. She made no protest, but Meg knew to leave her to her grief. It was all she could do.

They walked side by side to the lake, as the sun set. The surface shivered in the lightest wind, the water black under the flecks of golden light.

Christine took off a glove and picked up a pebble, then another. Meg thought she would throw them in the water, but she only looked at them for a while, then dropped them to the ground. A flock of ducks rose off the water, quacking and screaming, and disappeared past the trees on the other side.

"It's getting cold," said Christine. "And I don't want to keep Georges waiting. We should go."

"Was it – difficult?" Meg asked, when they turned back along the alley towards the exit. She chided herself mentally for such a clumsy question.

"Yes."

"You are strange, Christine. To do this to yourself..."

"You keep saying that."

"I'm sorry. I'm young and naïve; I'll understand when I'm older."

Meg was gratified to hear the small laugh Christine could not repress – there was only eight months between them. "How do you do this, Meg?"

"What?"

"Make everything seem so... normal."

Meg shrugged, "Everything is normal. If you let it be."

Christine gave her an uncertain smile. "You have an odd idea of 'normal'..."

"Well, I did grow up in an opera house."
Christine shook her head at that, but Meg noticed that she relaxed slightly, and walked with a lighter step.

They came out of the park and onto the street, heading toward Avenue de Neuilly. The street lamps had been lit even though it was still early, and the pale halos of gaslight seemed tenuous against a sky not yet dark. Only three or four carriages were still waiting, and they had no trouble finding the right one. Georges spotted them, hopping down from his box-seat, and he and Christine exchanged all the usual words of greeting while he helped them inside. The door was closed behind them, and they drove off.

The gates of the fortifications reared ahead, welcoming, and then they were again inside the city proper, with its lively cafés and dance-halls, promenading couples and tourists; the endless shimmering lights glowing brighter and brighter against the blue dusk.

It was strange to be there with Christine, watching her stare out the window as though determined to ignore the familiar space inside, devoid of Raoul's presence.

"I shouldn't ask you this," Meg said, "but I will. Are you—"

"Don't ask me if I am sure, Meg. Please don't ask."

She leaned her forehead against the glass, and cried noiselessly all the way home.

Chapter 15: Giselle

Here 'tis, the long-awaited (or not) Chapter 15, in which Erik does not marry a puppet (sorry, Phantomy-Cookies), nor does he masquerade as a buttered croissant (sorry, Gondolier), but he does consume a food product of dubious quality. Never let it be said that I don't listen to my reviewers! Really, guys, you mean the world to me – thanks so much for sticking with this story, especially through the recent enforced update drought.

Today's trivia: There really were all kinds of gala performances in Parisian theatres to celebrate the outbreak of the war. The performance described here really took place, though not at the Variétés. Also, the Marseillaise was not at this stage the national anthem; it had been banned for many years under the Second Empire and, to the best of my knowledge, was only legalised shortly before the war.

Chapter 15 – Giselle

Madame Giry met them in the parlour. She had been reading; Christine saw what looked like old letters set before her on the divan, with a loose bit of string around them, untied. Drawn curtains left the evening outside. Within, light from Madame Giry's reading lamp made a circle of warmth around her, casting shadows on the landlord's floral wallpaper. The room was not beautiful, but to Christine's eyes it looked cosy: the brown upholstered divan from Madame Giry's Opéra apartments; the old rug on the floor that had to be rolled away when they practiced for the ballet in defiance of the neighbours' wrath; the polished bulk of the piano and even the porcelain dancer presiding over the empty fireplace, frozen in her perfect second arabesque. Christine touched her palm to the doorjamb, solid wood under her hand. It was good to be home.

"We're back," Meg called, unpinning her hat and letting her hair swing free.

Madame Giry set aside the letter she had been holding as the two girls entered. The corners of her
lips curved downward when she noticed Christine's blotchy face. "What is this?"

"I am not crying," Christine said hastily. "Raoul found us in the park, we – talked. Everything is all right."

"You have reconciled?"

"No," Christine admitted. She hid her hands, conscious of the missing ring. "But it is all right," she insisted. "Or, it will be."

Madame Giry did not look convinced.

"Maman, is that a picture of you?" Meg had come up to look at what her mother was reading.

Joining her, Christine saw that it was not a letter at all but a watercolour sketch, done on plain writing paper and faded with time. It depicted a dancer in semi-profile, in a white veil and with arms outstretched in the stylised attitude of a ballet farewell, but with her face pleading in a sorrow so deep that it could only be genuine. Meg had been right; the high forehead and elegant line of jaw and cheekbone were unmistakably Madame Giry's.

"May I see? Oh, maman – it's beautiful!"

Madame Giry tolerated her daughter's delighted examination of the sketch with a wry expression. "Well. I was young once also."

"You're still young," Meg huffed.

"Thank you, that is sufficient flattery for the evening. You may go wash your hands and set out things for supper. No, Christine – you stay a moment, please. I would like to show you something."

Surprised, Christine watched Madame Giry pick out three unmarked envelopes from the pile, yellowed around the edges. All three had been opened neatly with a slit across the top.

"What are those?" she asked in some confusion.

"Letters." Madame Giry held out the envelopes for her to take. "You may find them of some interest."

"But surely... Are they not private?"

Madame Giry gave her a look rich with irony. "If memory serves, you and my daughter had no such qualms when you were younger. I fairly had to drag you out of my things."

Christine coloured in embarrassment, but Madame Giry only laughed and pressed the letters into her hand. "They are not private. Come and speak to me when you have read them, Christine – it is important. But supper first."

Christine bobbed her head uncertainly, accepting them. She could not think why Madame Giry would share these with her; she and Meg had only rarely been allowed to look through Madame Giry's old things, and most of those had been news clippings, drawings or trinkets from ballets, never private correspondence. There was little time to wonder, however, because Meg was already setting the table in the dining-room. Christine took the letters to her room, and hurried to the kitchen to help with serving supper.

"Those are ready to go out." Meg nodded at a porcelain tureen of steaming-hot broth, and a basket
of fresh bread. "Tell maman I shall be a minute longer. I'll just put the coffee on; Josette forgot to
grind it again. She didn't lecture you about Raoul, did she?"

"No... She gave me some letters to read." Christine glanced at Meg, puzzled. "I think they must be
from a long time ago."

"Perhaps it is something to do with your father," Meg suggested.

"Oh! I had not thought of it... I hope you're right."

Christine picked up the soup tureen, balancing the bread on top of the lid. "Meg, would you come
to the cemetery with me sometime? I haven't been back since – since before the fire, and I don't
like to go alone, anymore."

"Of course... Watch the bread!"

Christine caught the basket with her chin before it could slide off the tureen, taking it out to the
dining-room in this undignified fashion and earning herself an amused look from Madame Giry.
Christine sighed inwardly; if she and Meg ever found a practical way to help with money, it would
certainly not be by waiting tables.

Meg followed presently with the rest of their supper and they settled down to a quiet, comfortable
meal. Meg and Madame Giry talked little, and then of trivial things that required no more input
from Christine than the occasional ‘yes’ or ‘no’. She sensed they were trying to spare her
unnecessary chatter, giving her space in which to grieve for Raoul, for the love she had broken.
Their kindness shamed her. Madame Giry had warned her from the first that it was unwise to
consider marriage so young, yet she looked at her now with compassion, as if she was a sick child
instead of a foolish young woman, wilfully blind to the reality outside her dreams.

"The Théâtre Français are putting on a gala for this war," Madame Giry remarked, with a faint
grimace of disapproval. "The Opéra Comique as well. What have the Variétés planned?"

"Much the same," said Meg. "We are to put on something about the Revolution, with the whole
chorus dressed as washerwomen and soldiers and such, and a ballet about the triumph of the
French people... Christine and I are dancing, and Blanche and Helena – but they are still searching
for somebody to dress as Liberty and sing the Marseillaise."

"What of their regulars?"

"The Opéra Comique has Carlotta; the Variétés want to outdo them."

Christine felt their eyes on her and knew the unspoken question. "They have not asked me."

"They would if they heard you," Meg protested. "Christine, the scandal was so long ago. We've
been dancing there three months and the roof has yet to collapse; they know you cannot be as
cursed as all that. If you would only audition..."

Christine studied the pattern on the bottom of her empty plate. She knew Meg was right; this was
an opportunity she was unlikely to have again. In the feverish atmosphere of competition, the
Variétés might be willing to overlook her history and give her another chance – and there was also
the question of money to consider... It would mean doing everything all over again. A chorus girl
in the limelight, the newspapers snooping for another scandal, just when she had thought it was
over.

"I can't. I am out of practice."
"But it is only the *Marseillaise*, not a real opera..."

Madame Giry came to her rescue. "There are better uses for a singing voice than belting out vulgarities about slaughter, Meg; it is bad enough that the two of you must dance them. Let Carlotta have her *Marseillaise*, if she has the heart for it."

She stood up, folding away her napkin, and the meal was at last at an end.

"Do you not miss singing?" asked Meg, while she and Christine cleared away the dishes.

"I do," Christine said quietly. "That's just it. I miss it far too much."

"Then you should sing. Uh!" Meg stopped Christine's objection with an impish look. "I'm finished. I promise; I won't breathe another word about it – after you have auditioned."

"Meg!"

"Singing! Singing! SINGING!"

Christine leapt after her. She never knew afterwards how they managed not to break the crockery in the chase around the dining table, the room, the kitchen, ducking this way and that, laughing, until exhaustion at last forced them to call a truce. They dropped into the old armchairs in the parlour, grinning stupidly at one another.

"Singing," Meg managed, between breaths.

"The neighbours must be on their way right now."

"Let them come." Meg kicked a dusty game box out from under her chair. "Draughts?"

Christine had caught her breath. She thought of Raoul and could not believe she had been laughing. The smile on her face felt like a mask, no longer hers. She remembered the letters.

"I'm going to bed, Meg. I want to read those letters, too."

Meg gave her a small nod as she stood up, gentle and serious once again. "I hope there is something about your father there."

Once in her own room, Christine lit the candle by the bed and took out the three envelopes. She turned them over, curious. None had been marked with a date, but the paper was obviously old. After a moment's hesitation, she picked up one at random and opened it.

Inside was a single sheet of paper, folded in half and in half again. Christine smoothed it out and saw that it was covered with precise, handsome calligraphy. To her surprise, she recognised Madame Giry's own handwriting: the letter was not addressed to her; it was from her. The occasional inkblots suggested a rough copy. Christine sat down at her dressing-table, reading.

The first line made her pause.

*Jules,* – she read;

*I do not wish to marry you.*

The letter was not about her father. It was about Meg's.

о о о
Shortly before the train was due to pull into Sedan, it started to rain. Erik remained in his compartment with the other passengers, all of them suspended in the restless silence of anticipation with nothing more to do than to stare at the interior of the compartment reflected in the impenetrable darkness of the window. Now that the bags had been retrieved from under the benches and the conductor had been paid his tip, entirely unearned, Erik had the impression of a gradual awakening, a return to himself as after a particularly engrossing piece of music. Raindrops hit the glass in rapid diagonals, but their noise was masked by the slowing rattle of the wheels as the train approached town. Watery lights swam out of the distance. A few minutes later the gas-lit platform came into view, and the corridor filled with the now-familiar voices and slamming doors.

"Well, my friends," summed up Egrot, the rotund gentleman who had regaled Erik with his political views – "It has been a most pleasant journey. I thank you all for your company."

"Yes, quite," the others agreed. "Pity about the weather, is it not?" Politenesses were exchanged all around, along with handshakes, bows to the lady, and the a couple of calling-cards. Erik found himself being farewelled for all the world as if he was a dear friend rather than the chance acquaintance of a few hours' travel. He could not decide whether he detested their false intimacy or envied it.

"Whereabouts in Sedan are you staying, Monsieur Andersson?" inquired Egrot, as they filed out into the narrow corridor and crammed themselves into the queue of chattering passengers all waiting to alight. "I can recommend one or two good hotels. You would wish to be somewhere in town, I'll wager, since you're to work on the courthouse."

"I've made my own arrangements," Erik replied vaguely. He had not the least intention of revealing his address to a perfect stranger. It was bad enough that he had been forced to admit to his profession and the nature of his stay in town; he had done this simply because he had not anticipated being asked such things point blank, as if this was a perfectly normal mode of conversation.

He hopped off the train onto the wet platform, after the puffing Egrot.

"Ah, well – then I shall bid you farewell, and the best of luck." Egrot wedged his hat onto his head and opened an umbrella. "If you have cause to visit outside town, I would be delighted to welcome you to my house in Bazeilles, though I vow I shall not risk another game of piquet with you, monsieur!"

Erik decided the last was meant as a compliment to his win. The man was not a bad sort really, despite his love of politics. "I have your card, Monsieur Egrot. Au revoir."

"Au revoir. Ah, there's the baggage now. Porter!" Egrot called, hurrying to where he could see the larger trunks being unloaded from the last car onto the baggage-carts.

Erik's only baggage was his bag and a half-size folio containing his sketches for the courthouse; he would not have allowed his things to be handled by random strangers even if he had been forced to carry an entire trunk of supplies. He threw his cloak over his shoulders, enclosing the bag and folio as well, and set out towards the interior of the train station.

Inside, it was warm and dry, but noisy with the echoing dissonance of bad acoustics he had come to associate with all train stations. At only ten in the evening, the place was nearly deserted; the only voices seemed to belong to the passengers who had come on the Paris train with him. Sedan was evidently no Paris, to come alight in the small hours. Erik purchased a map of town and, as a concession to the demands of his stomach, a hot greasy pie filled with a green gloop which the vendor assured him was 'mostly peas'. What the remainder was, Erik deemed it safer not to inquire.
It tasted better than it looked, and he managed to wolf down another three while he located an empty hansom cab outside the station.

"Where to, sir?" asked the soggy-looking driver, slapping the reins lightly when his horse turned with an appreciative sniff at the smell of the last pie in Erik's hands.

"Rue Saint-Michel."

The horse trotted off. It was a brown shaggy animal, which constantly flicked its wet tail in Erik's direction, showering the bare half of his face with tiny droplets in the open cab. Erik took a good look at the map before putting it away, and he mentally traced the route as the cab pitched and slid through the flooded streets. The town was not as small as he had been led to believe, but the wet, dull facades meeting his curious gaze were completely unlike those of Paris. Erik made a mental note of the medieval fortress on the hill, its walls visible only as a darker shape against the rainclouds; of the spire of the church; of the old industrial building identified on the map as a textiles mill. The houses looked provincial, solid and wholesome and rather underdecorated. The footpaths, where they existed, were of cobbled stones rather than asphalt, and in this weather they seemed to be all gutter, foaming and chattering with the rain. Nowhere could Erik spot a dance-hall, a café or so much as a tavern, but he did notice a soggy poster on a news-stand, advertising a performance by some church choir.

By the time the cab came squeaking and squelching into rue Saint-Michel, Erik had decided that Vincent Fiaux was likely right: the town's motto could well have been "Sedan: Puritanical And Proud Of It." It would be easy work to design a courthouse to suit this place. The outlines of the portico, pilasters, staircases rose in Erik's mind as easily as if his hand had started to trace them. It was not music, but it was something.

Perhaps it could be enough.

o o o

Christine tried to slip the sheet of paper back into its envelope, but her hands would not do as she wanted.

It was one thing to know vaguely that Meg's father and Madame Giry had not married, had gone their separate ways before Meg had been born. It was quite another to be confronted with it directly. Christine could not understand Madame Giry's purpose; she had no wish to know the particulars, it felt too much like prying, like a violation of the past. Surely Madame Giry did not intend by this means to persuade her to reconcile with Raoul? Christine half-wished she could return the remaining letters unread, but she knew she would not.

She took out the second letter with a sharp, defiant tug, ashamed at her curiosity.

Mademoiselle Giry,

Forgive my impertinence in thus contacting you directly, particularly on what could only be a difficult and personal matter. I assure you that I would not have taken such a step had I not been compelled to do so by my discovery of the conduct of M. Robuchon, who has been my dearest friend these past ten years, and whose actions I must therefore regard in the same light as I would the actions of my own brother or myself.

I have been given to understand by M. Robuchon, upon my return from Marseilles, that the connection between him and yourself has now been severed for some weeks, and that he has no further intentions in this regard; this, despite your delicate state. Naturally, I expressed my dismay
at what I felt to be an ill-made decision, at which M. Robuchon further informed me that he had in fact offered you a certain sum of money, which you have refused, and that he therefore considers the matter to be out of his hands.

Our acquaintance has not been long, mademoiselle, but I have always felt you to be a young woman of great good sense, and I imagine you must have your reasons for refusing my friend's offer and thus leaving yourself in what seems to me an unnecessarily dire predicament. It is only for the sake of honour that I am thus forced to trouble you with my concern; I own it has occurred to me that the situation may not be entirely as M. Robuchon has described it. Should this be so, I consider myself honour-bound to extend such help as I may, where my friend's thoughtlessness (for I cannot believe it malice) has failed you.

I assure you that you may rely on my utmost discretion in this matter.

The letter was signed "Jean-Marie Duchamp". The date in the corner was June 15, 1853; six months before Meg's birth. Christine shook her head, mystified. Surely it should be Meg reading this, not her...

Evidently, Madame Giry had declined the offer of money once again, because when Christine opened the third letter, she found no text at all, but only an address. The town was unfamiliar, but from the name – Mme. Duchamp-Pierot – Christine understood it to be the house of some female relation of Monsieur Duchamp's. A sister, perhaps. In the same envelope was a small drawing, another watercolour like the one Madame Giry had been looking at earlier. Christine took it out. A white ballerina stood alone on a blue-dark stage, with the hazy white line-up of the corps behind her. It had been signed, For 'Giselle'. Jules R. 1852.

There was nothing else.

Christine re-closed the envelopes and held them with both hands, lining up the edges nervously against the dresser. An awful suspicion had been growing inside her; the more she thought of it, the more certain she became. She knew why Madame Giry had meant for her to see these letters. Christine recalled her own words, blurted out that very morning: I opened the window, and the Phantom came inside.

And Madame Giry had assumed—

Oh God. For some reason Christine wanted to laugh. Or cry. The edges of her mouth tightened; her eyes prickled. She had never been so grateful for the absence of a mirror on the dresser. She rose from the chair, paced around, sat on the bed, got up, took the letters again, went to the window. Stood there, her hands scrunching the heavy curtains.

A thought flitted through her mind: If she opened the window, would he come back?

She released the curtains and went back to her dressing-table. There, she took out the first letter again, then the second, then the note from the third, arranging them all in front of her. Somehow, knowing that it was a misunderstanding made it easier; she could stop thinking of herself. Christine opened the first letter again and began to read, carefully and without resentment. Some time passed, and she forgot everything else; there were only these few terse words, a piece of another's life entrusted to her hands. She felt a peculiar admiration for this woman who was the closest thing to a mother she could recall – but who was not her mother, who could make mistakes like her own. It was kinship, of a sort. Perhaps that was what Madame Giry had wanted her to see all along.

When she finished reading, Christine blew out the candle and went to take the letters back to Madame Giry.
She padded in her stockings across the cool parquet of the dining-room, and into the short corridor that led to Madame Giry's dressing-room. The door had been left open. Beyond it, a slice of candlelight under the bedroom door told her that Madame Giry was still awake.

"Come in," Madame Giry's voice called from within when she knocked.

Christine opened the door a little. Madame Giry turned around; she was sitting at her dressing-table with the candle lit and a book lying open before her. She still wore her day clothes, but her braid fell loose down her back. The dresser was hardly more ornate than Christine's own, save that it had a mirror and there were drawings and clippings pasted all around the frame, as a sort of scrapbook. Christine smiled a little, remembering how she and Meg had used to climb up to get a better look at the pictures. She closed the door and came inside.

Madame Giry accepted the letters from her hand. "You have read them?"

Christine stood near the second chair near the dressing-table, but did not sit down. "May I ask you something..."

"Certainly."

"Why did you not marry Monsieur Robuchon?"

The shadow of a smile touched Madame Giry's eyes. She closed the book she had been reading, not bothering to mark the page. "Life is not a novel, my dear. Or an opera. Come, sit down."

Christine pulled out the chair obediently, settling her skirts against the worn plush seat.

Madame Giry looked at Christine's face in the mirror for a moment, the two of them reflected side-by-side. "I was a dancer, ambitious – I did not wish to marry him, and he did not wish to marry me." She spoke gently. "It was not clever of us, to do as we did. The young are not always clever."

Christine had no choice but to nod agreement.

Madame Giry looked at her, seriously. "We need not talk about this now, if you do not wish to. But you must be aware that if something comes of this..."

"It won't," Christine said quickly. She struggled to find the words, painfully embarrassed all over again. "You mistook my meaning, Madame Giry. About that night... It was not like that," she explained helplessly. "He did kiss me but – nothing more. I was angry, and——"

She broke off. Madame Giry had closed her eyes and raised her hands to her face; then, to Christine's complete horror, her shoulders began to shake. She was laughing.

"I'm sorry to have made you think otherwise... Madame Giry?"

"It is all right." She was still laughing, quietly and with tears running down her cheeks. Christine had never seen anything like it.

"Do not look at me so; I am only – relieved. It seems I would do well to take my own advice."

"What advice?" Christine wondered.

"That life is not an opera."

Madame Giry brushed the tears away, impatiently. She gave Christine's hand a rueful pat. "Christine Daaé, you must promise me something. You will never again invite a man into your
room through the window."

"All right," Christine agreed, "But then I shall need another tall mirror..."

She saw that she had startled Madame Giry, and so she grinned, feeling somehow light-hearted.

"You must not joke like that," said Madame Giry, and this time her tone was very dark. "It was unforgivable, the things that were done to you."

She was blaming herself, Christine saw – and she wondered at the strange mood lifting her up, this lightness inside her that made her want to embrace Madame Giry in friendship, in forgiveness, without awe. For the first time since the awful conversation with Raoul she allowed herself to catch up with the thought: I am free.

"It is in the past," Christine said aloud, marveling. She sought Madame Giry's troubled eyes in reassurance. "I am free now."

Madame Giry studied her a moment. Then she nodded in the familiar, brisk way, and said:

"We must meet with him."

Christine thought she had misheard. Her lightness crashed to earth, hard. "What... What do you mean?"

"Only that. A dinner, perhaps, here."

"A dinner."

"Or supper. I assure you, he does eat."

Christine was certain the floor had moved somewhere from under her chair. She felt weightless and sick, falling down into an endless well. All she could manage was an appalled, "Why?"

"Because you are not free, Christine. Not while he remains thus, unreal."

Madame Giry unlocked the drawer of the dresser to put away the letters. When she spoke again, her voice was thoughtful. "He has been too long a ghost. We have all come to believe it, even he, and that illusion is dangerous – you would never have allowed a man to do as he did that night, and no man would behave so. Yet he is a man. That is all he is."

She turned the key to lock the drawer, and raised her eyes to Christine. "I will do nothing you cannot bear, you may have my word. But there cannot be another morning like this one. Not again. Christine, do you understand?"

After a moment, Christine rose, unsteadily. The fragile sense of camaraderie was gone; she felt adrift again, alone.

The worst of it was that it was true; she did see a ghost. The ghost of a man, the shadow of a voice. Nine years of hearing his voice through the walls; nine years. How could she be free?

"I would like to... think on it."

"Yes," Madame Giry said, "of course."

Chapter 16: En face
To all my reviewers: I can't thank you enough for your support, guys! Reviews are my window into the reader's mind, they help me enormously, so thanks for giving me so much fantastic, thoughtful feedback (and please do keep it up!).

Editing this A/N to add a response to a review: The word 'comprise' is used correctly here. It means 'contain', rather than 'consist', and as such does not take a preposition - so something that "consists of" several rooms can be said to "comprise" them. As it happens, I do some professional writing as a part of my job, so grammar doesn't tend to be a problem, but I figured I'd say this here in case anyone else is confused. :)

Briefly addressing some queries regarding my take on Mme Giry: Giry is her maiden name, that's why M. Duchamp's letter is addressed to her as "Mlle Giry". She is called "madame" because a woman of a certain age, especially with a grown daughter, would not be called "mademoiselle", just as Carlotta is not called "signorina". It would be a bit embarrassing.

Today's trivia: The average marriage age for women in Paris at the time was 27. From this figure alone you can surmise that Paris was no 1950s suburbia, particularly when it came to the artistic circles, but really this was true to some extent across all classes. I make a point of this because I want to make it very clear that Mme. Giry's backstory is in no way meant to represent her as a "loose woman" or a victim: she is neither, only a former ballerina who has had her own life, not so different from the lives of many of her contemporaries.

Trivia for this chapter: All the locations mentioned here actually existed.

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**Chapter 16 – En face**

Sedan in the morning was a surprisingly different prospect from Sedan of the night before. The rain had given it the aspect of a newly washed toy-box, sparkling with sunlight. The same façades that had appeared so drab in the dark were revealed as a gingerbread palette of ochres and reds, and even the modern balconies slapped onto Louis XV window pelmets were made less ludicrous by the profusion of geraniums.

Erik contemplated this from his private study in what turned out to be a decent little lodging-house in rue Saint-Michel. It was not a pretentious edifice like the much larger Hôtel de la Croix d'Or, but it was spacious enough for his needs, and he had the entire top floor to himself. The landlady, a small wizened woman who had been only too happy to humour Erik's reluctance to make smalltalk, had shown him the apartment upon his arrival. It comprised a bedchamber, a small sitting-room, and a study that seemed made for an architect: in addition to the usual bureau there was also a wide table suitable for draughting, and the two oversized windows facing the street could be opened to flood the room with light. Erik knew at once that this study had been the reason for Monsieur Duchamp's recommendation of the lodging-house, and he had to concede that the place was well-chosen.

It was, without a doubt, the furthest he had ever come from his lair in the Opéra.

He went to the windows, flung the curtains wide and opened the frames. Light poured into the room. Erik appraised the work-table, the paper, his tools. It will do, he decided. Except for...

His eyes fell on a portrait that hung on the wall opposite, above the bureau. It was a likeness of the Empress Eugénie, an inexpensive charcoal drawing in a gilded frame, of the sort sold to adorn the empty spot above the mantelpiece in every respectable home. Even Jean and Louise owned one, although theirs was displayed prominently in the store to discourage the police from uncharitable
thoughts. Erik took the portrait down, holding it between his hands. He inspected the haughty Spanish profile, the sharply parted hair and the half-lidded eyes to which pale lashes imparted an almost sleepy look, with the mild distaste of a man looking at a silk flower. Its ersatz perfection was beautiful only to those who had never seen a real, living rose.

Setting the portrait face-down on the draughting table, he carefully slipped the backing off and removed the drawing. The blank side was clean, unfaded by time. From his drawing box, Erik selected a stick of red chalk and set to work. The paper took well to the soft touch of colour, the smudge of shadow that suggested the curve of a cheek, the line of an eyebrow, the curl of an earlobe half-concealed by shining hair falling free as the night. White chalk added highlights and charcoal the deeper shadows, bringing out the play of candlelight in Christine's beautiful, unsmiling eyes. Each line was perfect, drawn with a confidence born of long practice.

Yet when less than an hour later the portrait was complete, Erik studied it with dissatisfaction. At first he thought it a trick of the light – he had not attempted such a drawing in full daylight before – but he knew, looking at the frozen moment he had captured so faithfully, that he had done no more than the anonymous author of the portrait of the Empress. He had reproduced the image in his mind, cured of any imperfections and retouched until it was nothing more than a silk flower.

Once again he picked up the chalk, but not to draw familiar lines. Hesitantly, he added a tiny mark on Christine's right cheek, changing the perfect symmetry. Closing his eyes to call up the image of her face as it really was, as he had seen it last, he began to draw her, with heady recklessness putting to paper everything: the shadows under her eyes, the anger in the curve of her mouth. The perfected mannequin disappeared. In its place was Christine.

The charcoal stick shook in Erik's fingers as he surveyed the result. With unsteady hands, he did what he had never dared to do before: moved the corner of the drawing up, and signed his name.

Erik.

It remained there, a tiny charcoal squiggle under this unsettling, real, dizzying likeness of Christine. His name, her face.

Before he could change his mind, Erik slid this new drawing into the frame and hung it back on the wall. Already the fear was returning, the knowledge that he ought not to have done this, that he was supposed to have left all this behind him in Paris. Yet in the locked drawer of the bureau was the ring Christine had given him – him, or the wreck he had been – and perhaps the portrait was just the same... Only something to remind him of her, something to keep him from madness. Only that.

Resolutely, Erik turned from Christine. Picking up his sketchbook and hat from the bureau, he headed downstairs. It was time to get to work.

So late in the morning, the coffee-room on the ground floor was empty, save for three or four stragglers still nursing their cups at the tables on the veranda. Erik strode past them, under the dappled shade of the vine-covered trellis, and out into the street. He was not hungry enough to breakfast with strangers, and in any case he wanted first to satisfy his curiosity as to the present state of the site designated for the courthouse.

A restless energy compelled him, as though he was still driven by the momentum of his escape from Paris. Despite the puddles and mud-clogged gutters, he wanted to walk. The shimmering, sundrenched streets were as strange as any he had known: too empty and prosperous to bear any resemblance to the bustling bohemia of Montmartre, too provincial for the grand boulevards of Paris. Walking down the rue Saint-Michel, Erik felt he was still in a train, looking out at the world through the window of a tiny compartment. A few locals hurried past, mostly market-women or
the occasional errand boy, and once a pair of ladies dressed in what they must have assumed to be the latest fashions in Paris.

The site designated for the courthouse was not far from Place du Château, among some old houses and overlooked by the immense fortress with pointed conical roofs, its old masonry glowing rose in the morning light. There was no sign of either fence or overseer. All that met Erik's eyes was a levelled foundation, turned into a little desert with dunes of rubble and sand. Piers of grey stone stuck out awkwardly from it where the first level was to have been raised, like an ancient labyrinth gone to ruin. Erik stepped over a pile of debris to take a closer look.

This courthouse had been a project shunted from architect to architect for several years, falling victim first to a lack of money in Sedan's public coffers, then to a string of disagreements on the proposed appearance of the building's façade. Having walked through the town, Erik could scarce believe that the same people who disfigured 200-year old buildings with bland ironwork balconies should be so finicky about their courthouse, but of course a courthouse had to be beautiful: only then would its rulings be believed. Beauty was truth, truth – beauty. Erik smirked bitterly to himself. He was looking forward to starting on the design. An escaped murderer with the face of a gargoyle, paid by the mob to build their temple to Beauty and Law. It would be his private joke on the world.

A rag-tag group of local urchins had turned the foundation into a fort. Erik stopped his inspection when he saw them: three boys and one curly-headed blonde girl were heaving crates and rubble to the centre of the site, trying to move their fort to higher ground after the night's rain.

He had hesitated a moment too long; the oldest of them noticed him. The boy moved at once to a defensive position, putting his tall gawky frame between the others and Erik.

"Who're you?" he demanded, raising his chin.

Erik touched his hat-brim, with chilly irony. "An architect. And you, monsieur, are trespassing."

The kid blinked, unsettled by being addressed as 'monsieur', or perhaps by the bandage masking half the stranger's face. "Huh?"

Erik translated: "Run."

"Yeah? Or what?"

Erik gave him a languid, dangerous smile, until a genuine spark of fear appeared in the kid's eyes. "Or it will be too late."

The boy took a step back, stumbling into the other three. Then they turned tail and bolted, screaming, across the crunching gravel and into the trees. Erik grinned to himself: there were ballet rats everywhere, even here in Sedan. Yet his flicker of amusement vanished almost before he had felt it. He looked at the miserable fort the brats had abandoned, and felt something akin to embarrassment. It was not pleasant.

"You have a way with children, Monsieur Andersson!" guffawed a man behind him.

Erik turned around, displeased. "Monsieur Egrot. To what do I owe the pleasure? I had thought you reside in Bazeilles."

"A fortunate chance, monsieur, a fortunate chance indeed!" Egrot, red-faced as ever, shook Erik's hand, indicating at the same time the young man beside him: "My son, Henri."
"Monsieur," Erik said by way of greeting the son: a tall youth of no more than twenty with his father's round face, wearing the red trousers and navy jacket that Erik had seen soldiers wear at the Reims train station.

"Pleasure to meet you, sir. Father, we had best be going... Mother wanted to visit aunt Thérèsa next."

"Yes yes, go on; don't keep her waiting alone. I'll join you shortly." Egrot watched his son retreat to the street, where a woman sat waiting in an outmoded carriage, before turning back to Erik.

"His number came up, and he's rearing to go. The young! Boundless energy for these things. My wife insisted we come into town with him, you see – he must be shown off to all the relations now he's a soldier. She coddles him senseless of course, but the army'll put him right, never fear. Still, the poor woman won't have a moment's peace until Henri is back safe."

Erik interrupted this string of cheerful nonsense by hefting his sketchbook: "My apologies, monsieur. As you see, I am busy."

"Of course, of course!" Egrot made an effort at grasping the concept that a man could be more interested in his work than in idle chat, and failed completely. "You've looked at this old ruin, then?"

"I am still looking. If you don't mind."

"Right you are. If anyone can make something of it, a clever chap like you ought to manage. The last one they brought in – another young architect from Paris, wet around the ears and clutching his degree – well, you can see how far he got!" Egrot gestured at the empty foundation. "No idea of what makes this town tick, none at all. Have you someone to show you the town, then?"

"I am quite capable of seeing it myself," Erik said; "I have in my possession an adequate map."

"What, no guide! Well, I shall be glad to show you around, if you would allow me the honour – and see if you don't find the place more to your liking than that map of yours might suggest! This wreck," he nodded at the courthouse foundation, "has been here for years, another couple of hours will do it no harm."

Nothing Erik said appeared to make the least impression on the impenetrable wall that was Egrot's hospitality. The man had a provincial's conviction that his little corner of the world was Paradise for all, most particularly for Parisian architects with no concept of the wonder that was Sedan and its surrounds. In addition, he was obviously itching for another political discussion, and was determined to seize his chance to get one. Erik had no notion of how to evade this barrage of unwelcome goodwill. At last, it occurred to him that perhaps there was no need to evade it. Any time spent listening to Egrot and his half-baked ideas of politics was time not spent thinking of Paris and Christine.

"Come to think of it, I shall take up your invitation." He favoured Egrot with an indulgent look. "I am, indeed, quite unlike your other architects. I should like you to show me the town."

"Splendid! A moment; I must let my wife know to go on without me." Egrot pronounced this with such obvious relief that Erik realised he had underestimated him: The man's hospitality may have been genuine enough, but what drove him was a simple unwillingness to spend all day showing off his soldier son to ageing relations.

Cynical as this was, Erik decided it was a motive he could trust. At any rate, the alliance required
nothing more of him than to listen to Egrot's anecdotes about the town, and it gave him the opportunity to examine the buildings at closer quarters without the risk of drawing too much attention to his bandages or his obviously out-of-town appearance.

The tour took most of the day. Erik spoke little, merely observing and allowing Egrot to demonstrate proudly all of Sedan's dazzling attractions, from the windmill on the Meuse river to the brothel in the rue des Laboureurs. The one place Erik himself had been curious to see was the fortress, but this was closed for the use of the army and only soldiers were allowed either in or out. At one point they went into a church, where a bloodied effigy of a man was hung in front of a genuine pipe organ.

"My sort of place," Erik had remarked dryly. At Egrot's curious look, he merely smiled and gestured for him to proceed outside. The image of the organ prickled Erik's imagination for a while afterwards, whispering of music; he quelled those thoughts with what was becoming almost a habit.

The afternoon would have been surprisingly enjoyable, was it not for the way it ended.

They had made their way to the railway station with barely enough time to see Henri off, which seemed to be the way Egrot had intended it.

"Terrible things, farewells," he told Erik, "Can't stand them. This way, monsieur."

The train was an army transport, half of it cattle-trucks and half third class carriages, taking supplies and soldiers down to the main camp at Châlons. Clouds of thick black smoke already issued from the locomotive, filling the air with the smell of burning coal, and the platform was packed solid with mothers and sweethearts weeping heartily. Erik indicated that Egrot should precede him, while he himself remained behind the barricade of human backs and heads, content to watch this forest of upraised hands and fluttering handkerchiefs. He caught sight of Henri Egrot's round face as the boy mounted the steel step of the carriage and turned to wave to his parents: a single face among dozens of other young men hanging out of the windows and doors, all of them hollering cheerfully and searching for familiar faces. The train began to move. The human barricade was briefly dragged alongside it as people ran forward, trying to keep their sons and lovers in sight a little longer. After a moment the slower ones fell back one by one, until the train gained speed and with a piercing hoot left even the fastest of them behind. Erik could not understand why some women continued waving long after the train had vanished from view, when they must have known the soldiers could no longer see them.

He spotted Egrot and his wife walking back towards him. Egrot raised his hand cheerfully, but Erik barely noticed: it was the expression on Madame Egrot's plain, pointed face that gave him a sharp jolt. He recognised that look.

She was not weeping, nor had she waved a handkerchief after her son the way other women had done – but in that very blankness was something familiar. Erik identified it, and was at once frightened and repulsed: he himself had felt that same numbness when he had watched Christine leave him, disappearing into the murky distance of the canal. Loss, death. Love, futile love.

Losing her son, this stranger of a woman wore his face.

Egrot greeted him and Erik responded with a nod. He could not speak, he did not want to. The woman's face had spoiled everything. No longer was he watching everything from afar, he was here among them, momentarily one of this crowd of nameless creatures with their many griefs. A part of him hated it. A stronger, monstrous, undefeated part of his soul longed to get back to his rooms and the portrait of Christine. She was human. She was human, too.
"Would you do us the honour of spending a few days at Bazeilles, Andersson?" Egrot asked. "Madame Egrot and I would welcome the diversion of company, and perhaps you'll appreciate a little country air for yourself."

"Yes," Erik agreed sharply. He could not see that portrait again, not now. It was too hard, nobody could ask such strength of him. He was only one man. "Country air would be most welcome."

That evening, in the beautiful village of Bazeilles, he began work on the first drawings for the courthouse. No music, no mirrors, no Christine – no portraits. Erik Andersson examined the precise lines he had ruled in his sketchbook, and thought he was learning.

Chapter 17: Snakeskin

Thanks so much for the reviews, guys! I was particularly happy about the different reactions to M. Egrot's character. A bit of ambivalence is a good thing. ;)

More Erik in this chapter.

Chapter 17 – Snakeskin

"Away from Paris?"

Madame Giry gave a slight nod. "It is an out-of-town commission for an architect's office. I am told he should be back within a fortnight."

Christine put down the stocking she had been mending. She was alone with Madame Giry this evening; Meg had gone to call on Helena Weiss and Christine had declined to join them, shrinking from the idea of such a visit after her shameful scene at the Variétés. She should have known better than to hope for a quiet evening in her room. Madame Giry seemed determined to keep her from wallowing in self-pity, and to this end they were now sitting on the divan in the parlour with a pile of mending between them. It was necessary work, but Christine could not concentrate. Not after this news.

"An architect," she repeated. "He is an architect, in a city office?" She heard her voice rising in bewilderment.

Madame Giry acknowledged her surprise. "I'm sorry. I should have told you sooner."

"Two weeks..." Christine was at a loss. It had cost her a horrible, sleepless night to come to the decision to meet with him, only to find out now that he was out of town. He was busy.

She struggled to juxtapose the image of the Phantom with that of a city architect: one of those polished gentlemen with a folio under one arm and a ivory-topped cane in the other, striding purposefully along the boulevards to some office in town. It was neither ridiculous nor amusing. It hurt.

Thinking of him these past months, she had imagined the man she had seen so briefly, only twice: a scarred man with unkempt hair and bare face, with eyes that burned her with their pain and fury, a man whose mouth she had wanted to touch... In her mind, she had learned to call him by name. Yet now she thought of the way he had looked long before that: the elegant suit and the gleaming, spotless mask. She could picture that man as an architect, easily – but she could not give him his name.
So he had moved on with his life, left behind the Opéra and the things he had done, the burnt
theatre, the murders, the broken lives.

While she was at home, in the parlour, sewing up stockings and petticoats, without a fiancé,
without her singing, with her entire future turned to a mess of uncertainty. Afraid to visit her
father's tomb, jumping at shadows because she imagined the walls sighing her name, carrying
memories of horrors she would keep to the end of her days. This was all the life he had left her...
And she could not meet with him for two weeks – because he was busy.

Madame Giry's needle flashed in the lamp-light as she fixed the last stitch and snipped the thread.
Christine picked up her own sewing, attacking the torn stocking with a renewed determination.

"Then you still wish to meet with him?" Madame Giry asked from the other side of the divan.

"Yes." Christine did not look up. She softened her voice slightly, not wishing to be rude. "Yes,
please write to him. What is his last name?" It occurred to her that she did not know it.

"Andersson," Madame Giry said slowly. "It is the name he gave Monsieur Duchamp; I have not
heard it before."

"All right." Christine turned the stocking around to finish darning the toe. "Then I'll see Monsieur
Andersson. I don't think we have ever had a civilised meeting before. There are things to say." She
shook her head slightly, at herself. "You were right, Madame Giry. I have had more than my fill of
mystery."

And for the next two weeks, she strove to convince herself of that. She went to dance rehearsals for
the huge gala in support of the soldiers; she ate and slept and went to art shows with Meg and
Madame Giry, she strolled through the park. Yet she still woke up in the night thinking she had
heard the shadows crying, and when she tried her voice, she found she could not sing. Once, she
and Meg caught the omnibus from the theatre up to the cemetery. She had known by then there was no
angel, but still she could not resist his voice. Grabbing Meg's wrist, she all but dragged her off the
omnibus, jostling the other passengers in her haste.

If the supper with Monsieur Andersson could be tomorrow, Christine thought, it would not be soon
enough.

o o o

In all the years of existence that had passed for Erik's life, he had never imagined he could become
a guest in another's home.

This victory was so unexpected, so unlikely, that at first he felt only a confused cheer, like a man
clubbed over the head who awakens to forget all about his wallet. Egrot and his wife had invited
him in, blissfully unaware that he was a murderer who knew little more than the descent from a
cage to the lowest cellar, from hatred to madness to death. Erik watched them at dinner, this
provincial woman and her husband whose only claim to distinction was a monthly trip all the way
to Paris. They ceded him the empty chair that had been their son's, and served him their food, and
they seemed to want nothing from him. Erik wondered what would happen if they knew.

Their home in Bazeilles was a short ride from Sedan, and he found himself lured again and again
by the warmth of that sturdy house, by the squares of light in the windows, by the glimpse of a life
that was not his and could never be his. In a different way, this dream was almost as dangerous as
the portrait of Christine in the lodging-house in Sedan, but he could not give it up. There was
power in the knowledge of who he really was, and in their ignorance.

Sometimes, Erik imagined telling them, before they could stumble on the truth themselves. He thought he could kill them both, and have this dream remain with him forever, unspoiled.

Mostly, however, he found he was content in that village.

He walked the forest paths, moving through the cool green light of summer, breathing in the moist smells of life that were so unlike the chill dampness of the Opéra. There was nothing like this in the city, and Erik found himself continually amazed by the details: the shape of an oak leaf that was like and yet unlike the gilded leaves in picture-frames; the quick dart of a squirrel; the sound of water that lapped at pebbles and grass instead of cold stone.

It was only natural that he should incorporate these things into the design for the courthouse. The preliminary sketches he had brought with him from Paris were duly consigned to the trash pile. Instead Erik expanded on the ideas he had put to paper on his first night in Bazeilles, interpreting for builders and engineers the lines of forest and river, the view from the windows of a train, the tendrils of grapevines and pots of geraniums spilling from the windowsills. The Egrots seemed flattered by his requests to see more of the surrounds, and Erik rewarded them occasionally by a display of one or other of his drawings. A fragment of a decorative pilaster or some other trinket was enough to fascinate these uncomplicated minds.

He did not entirely abandon his rooms in Sedan, but he had shut up the bright study with the nervesingeing portrait on the wall, and never went inside. When he had to work there, he cleared a space on the small table in the bedchamber and made do with that. More often, he took his work to Bazeilles.

Two days before he was due to depart for Paris, the news came through that the army had need of extra transport carriages and locomotives. Egrot questioned Erik incessantly about the significance of this, eager to share his opinion that this could only mean a push into German territory, and thus that a great battle was imminent. These speculations invariably sent Madame Egrot flying white-faced to her chambers, and brought on grumbles from Egrot about losing his wife along with his son while this nonsense continued. Erik, whose already limited interest in the whole affair had evaporated completely in recent weeks, could condone only so much pointless debate before his irritation surfaced.

"Did you not suggest fishing, Egrot?" he asked at last, in the hope of diverting the man's attention to something that would not require him to talk of politics, or indeed, at all. "I had some hope of seeing your famed fishing sites before I must leave again for Paris."

"Ah yes! Yes, indeed. Blast it, why did you not remind me sooner? We shall have to go tomorrow, first thing! The early fish catches the worm... or was it bird? Well, you and I shall catch that early fish, my friend."

Erik assured Egrot that the prospect filled him with unspeakable delight, and true to his word, Egrot met him in the kitchen at the crack of dawn, bristling like a hedgehog with rods and fishing tackle. Curious about the function of all these odd-looking items, Erik joined him. They made their way past shuttered houses to the outskirts of the village, then through a patch of tame woods still dim with pre-dawn shadows, heading down to the river.

The forest air grew lighter as they walked, becoming noisy with the trill of birds, which Erik had learned to identify by their voices. Occasionally Egrot would point out the name of a shrub or tree, as he often did on these walks, and Erik took these lessons with better humour than he thought he could have managed two weeks ago. They came out onto the riverbank, into the bright sunlight of
true morning.

"Now you'll see how it's done, mind my word!" said Egrot, and Erik quirked a brow in response, humouring the challenge.

"Be wary, Monsieur Egrot. I may not have done this before, but I am a fast learner."

"We shall see, we shall see," Egrot chuckled as he unfolded the two fishing-stools and began to set up the rods.

Soon after they had set themselves up in the shade of a willow, in Egrot's preferred spot on a little elevation above a bend in the river, other fishermen appeared. They nodded their good-mornings as they passed them and, Erik noticed with amusement, cast an eye to the empty bucket between him and Egrot, in what could only be a superior fashion.

The morning wore on in a pleasant, sleepy near-silence. There was no talk, but dragonflies and clouds of gnats buzzed over the water, and a light wind made the river mutter to itself, glittering in the sunlight. Erik shifted in his seat, trying to arrange his long legs around the fishing-stool. Although he could not seem to find the same comfort in the pose that Egrot's stouter, shorter frame suggested, Erik thought he could appreciate why people did this. He looked down the riverbank, at the distant clumps of other men bent over their fishing-rods. They gave the impression of people who were content to do this all day, snoozing in the sun.

He was still trying to imitate their laziness when all of a sudden, Egrot leapt up with a whoop.

"Here he comes! Oho, look at that!"

Erik found himself on his feet as well, caught up in the man's excitement. Egrot fought to keep steady, reeling in the line as the rod flexed under the weight of something living – and there it was. A silver fish rose out of the water in sinuous jerks, scales glittering and flashing in the sun. Egrot gave another cry of pure triumph, reaching for his prey.

Erik backed away.

He was gagging; the fish seemed centimetres from his face. It stank. It stank foully of death. Blood trickled out of its mouth and its eyes bulged out...

A corpse. A corpse dangling on the end of a line. Blood and bulging eyes, a dead man, a dead ballet girl in a white dress. Egrot's look of triumph was ghastly as he pulled the steel hook from the corpse's mouth and flung it into the underground lake... no, the bucket of water... the water turning a thin pink from the blood.

"Beauty, isn't he? What did I tell you!"

Egrot's joy-distorted face, his pride at his catch, was worse than a mirror. Erik recoiled, nauseated. He took a step back, then another.

Was this how he himself had looked when he dropped a man from the flies to plunge to his death? This bright sickness in the eyes, a killer's glee – was this the face Christine had fled from?

No, his was worse. Of course. Christine's voice whispered in his head: *Hardly a face in the darkness... The darkness...*

"Andersson?"
"Get away from me!" he roared. With an immense effort he managed to hold Egrot's bewildered gaze, enough to say – "I must have eaten something – I am not well – forgive me..."

Egrot let him go. For that alone, Erik thought later, he would be grateful to the end of his days.

That night he could not breathe. Back in Sedan, the air came in sharp, hard convulsions that had nothing in common with tears, so that he had to force strips of bandage between his teeth to keep the sound from carrying in the darkness.

He had returned to the lodging-house with no explanation for his departure, leaving Egrot and his wife in Bazeilles to think what they would. He could not be their architect right now, he could not be anything at all. Never had he felt such a strong urge to return to the Opéra, to shed his ugly carcass and become a ghost, to dissipate, to forget who he was. Perhaps if the catacombs had still been there, he would have returned that very night, across a hundred miles of open country – but the catacombs had collapsed long ago, and he was left outside, alone with himself.

He bound his chest with a white sheet like a shroud, airtight linen to shut him in, to stop moving, stop thrashing. Sweating like a beast, he was terrified of himself, of the night, of every sound he could not hear. Later, he remembered that he had burst into the study and saw Christine's face there, the anger in the curve of her mouth. He had thrown the sheet away and stood naked before her face, like a blind pallid creature from the filthy depths of the ocean, torn out of its shell – and laughed and laughed...

Daybreak came slowly, wedging light between Erik's swollen eyelids with the tip of a knife. He realised he had slept, or else had abandoned sanity for a time. The bedchamber was in a frightful state. Sketches of the courthouse were strewn all over the floor, some crushed with boot-prints over them, others bulging with splashes of candlewax. All ruined. The results of two weeks of work, one night's despair.

Erik's eyes travelled dully over the destruction, uncaring, until he found what he searched for. The portrait from the study lay on top of a pile of drawings on the floor. The frame and glass were undamaged, but the drawing inside had been turned around, and it was the foreign face of the Empress that looked out at him from within.

Erik realised that for the first night in months he had not dreamed of Christine, but it was at best a hollow triumph. He faced a simple truth now as he had not dared to do before: This was his life. This was all there had ever been, and no girl's hands would come and rest against the malformed part of his soul, no amount of playing the architect or the refined gentleman would change what he was, what he would always be. This was all.

A bugle sounded from the fortress, and the windows of the bed-chamber rattled with the now-familiar heavy rumble of ammunition wagons, the echo of war. Erik got to his feet and began to gather up the drawings.

When the elderly landlady came in, hours after he had packed up what remained of his sketchbooks and cleaned up the worst of the mess, he was ready with an explanation – wine and cards – but she did not ask. She informed him only that the post had arrived from Paris. Erik accepted the letter dutifully and followed the directives. Monsieur Duchamp warned him of delays on the Paris line, caused by the shortage of trains after they had been requisitioned by the army, and advised him to set out early and return by mail coach or farmer's wagon, or any other means he could find.

Erik therefore paid for his rooms, adding more than enough to cover the damage from the candlewax and crushed charcoal on the floor, and set off for Paris. A pointless energy made him
go through the motions of the role he had been playing for so long, and he remained the architect, the gentleman. It was easiest that way, and Erik found a mean sort of comfort in this indifference. Like a piece of driftwood or a corpse being washed downstream, he had no need of decisions. The role carried him back to Paris, and he let it. He had left the portrait behind in Sedan but brought Christine's ring back with him; he could not have said why.

The journey that had been so easy by railroad stretched into two gruelling days by a wagon, coach and finally suburban train, so that when Erik found himself at last back at the entrance to Louise Gandon's store in Montmartre, he summoned enough strength to feel glad. It was not home, he had no home, yet he was glad to see it all the same.

"Well, the prodigal tenant!" she exclaimed, looking him over from head to foot and raising her eyebrows. "And don't you look a sight. Could pass for one of them country folk, with that rumpled suit of yours. There's a letter come for you a few days ago."

She rummaged through a box at the side of the shop counter, and handed Erik a small envelope. "Says here it's from a Madame Giry."

"My thanks," Erik said wearily. He tucked the letter into his folio alongside the crumpled and ruined sketches, and trudged upstairs. He felt too drained even to wonder what Madame Giry could possibly want from him.

Louise knocked on his door later, at what seemed like the middle of the night. Erik lifted his head from the bed where he lay, momentarily disoriented by the sunlight in the window. It was perhaps three o'clock in the afternoon. He wondered vaguely if it was even the same day.

The knocking resumed, gaining a few notches in volume, so that Erik deemed it best to open the door to her and get it over with.

Louise stood on the threshold with a saucepan and spoon, looking annoyed. A delicious smell of onion soup rose from the saucepan, tricking Erik into awareness.

"For God's sake!" She screwed up her bulbous nose at the sight of the room, and Erik's dishevelled appearance. "Eat something, man." She thrust the saucepan and spoon at him. "You'd think you're one of them returning wounded, sneaking in all quiet-like from the front."

Erik glowered at her silently. His eyes felt like sand.

"And cut your hair for pity's sake, before you bring lice into my house."

"Wounded?"

"Border skirmishes, don't you know? We've taken Saarbrücken. Big sodding victory for the Empire, Jean'll tell you." She shrugged dismissively. "You get cleaned up and have a rest before you come downstairs, you hear? I've worries aplenty without a living ghost to scare the shit out of every customer what pokes their head through the door."

Before Erik could figure out how to respond to this mixed offer of insults and food, Louise had turned to go.

"Eat!" she threw over her shoulder, before cluttering down the clean-scrubbed stairs.

Erik slammed the door and shoved the saucepan of soup onto his work-table. He thought to go back to sleep, but his stomach growled in protest. There was nothing for it; he had lost all discipline in the time he had spent above the ground... A day without food had become sufficient to make him
nauseous. He would have to cure himself of that, but not now. Now, he decided it made more sense to eat.

A square of white attracted his attention; it was the letter from Madame Gir\y, fallen out of his folio onto the floor. Erik picked it up without much interest, opening it as he started on the soup.

The spoon froze mid-air in his hand. Slowly, he lowered it, and turned over the card.

Yes, his own writing was still there... He turned the card back, and read again Madame Gir\y's empty threat: *Kindly recall the difference between a man and a ghost... The gendarmes... A.G.*

He upended the envelope, and a second card fell out. It was an invitation, politely phrased and addressed to Monsieur Erik Andersson. An invitation to supper. It seemed he should have amends to make to one Mlle Christine Daa\é.

Erik set the card aside and clasped his hands on the table before him. He noted, impartially, the jagged tremor that had begun in his fingertips and spread down to his wrists. It took a long time to bring it under control, but he managed it.

When at last he rose from the table, he had come to a decision. He could be an architect. He could make amends. He could be the gentleman Madame Gir\y thought to make him; he would play their game and attend their ludicrous idea of a supper. Mirrors, music, portraits, death and Christine: those were in the past.

Erik shuddered, sloughing off his lethargy like the old skin of a serpent, beneath which gleamed the new, iridescent layer of scales.

He replied to the invitation at once.

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**Chapter 18: The Moonlight Sonata**

So, here it is: the long-anticipated supper, which I've been longing to write for the last four months! The last chapter's reviews were fascinating to read, guys – thank you for all your thoughtful comments, and please keep them coming! It's a huge help to me to have that feedback. In answer to Phantomy's question re Mme Gir\y: sometimes facing the mysterious and frightening is the only way to rob it of its power. Erik has a dangerous hold over Christine, and Mme Gir\y is trying to help her break it.

Trivia for this chapter: the painting referred to here is Manet's *In the Garden* (1870); and the history of *Almost a Fantasy* is true.

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**Chapter 18 – The Moonlight Sonata**

The invitation said eight o'clock; it was now five minutes past the hour. The front door was still shut.

Christine dragged her eyes away from it and fixed her gaze on the rug at her feet. The geometric patterns stood out clearly in the bright light of the parlour, and Christine tucked her heels to the divan where she sat, mechanically flexing the arches up as though rising on *pointe*. The pose made her feel like a dancer in a garden scene, a soubrette perched daintily on a swing, awaiting her rendezvous. She slammed her feet flat and stood up, annoyed.
"I'm going to help Josette in the kitchen," she announced to a surprised-looking Meg, who stood by the piano, leafing through a perfunctory book: *A Young Lady's Needlepoint Sampler, Vol. III*.

"Meg, you don't embroider."

"And you don't cook." They both glanced to the doors to the dining-room, through which they could hear Madame Giry discussing something in the kitchen with Josette.

"Christine, you can't leave me here alone," Meg pleaded. "What if he comes now?"

"Then I'll hear the door and come back."

"I'm not opening that door!"

Christine looked at Meg's wide eyes and softened her tone. "Are you frightened?"

"Aren't you?"

There was a knock on the door.

Christine's heart thumped, and an icy tide rose all the way to her throat, spreading out as heat over her skin. He was here. It was not the concierge or a neighbour or anybody else, it was him, she knew it. For what seemed like minutes, she and Meg stood motionless, looking at one another.

"No," Christine said. "I'm sick and tired of being frightened."

She took the embroidery book out of Meg's unresisting hands, closed it gently and stowed it on the bookshelf above the piano.

Then she crossed the room to open the door.

He had raised his hand to knock again. For a second, Christine saw nothing except that closed black-gloved hand, frozen near her throat; then her gaze flicked along the arm and shoulder of his jacket, and then to his face.

In the reflected glow from the parlour his features were almost painfully bright, cut in half by the white line of a bandage that was his mask. She saw a shadow on his cheek where he had shaved. He looked at her, and his lips came apart a little, as if to breathe.

*Erik*, her mind prompted.

"Monsieur," she said.

Slowly, he lowered his hand.

There was a crease at the corner of his mouth that Christine had never noticed before, and another where his brows jutted together, pushing at the mask. The bandage seemed to cling to a normal line of cheek and brow, and Christine realised he had padded the linen to give it that shape. In a peculiar way, it seemed almost ordinary.

He stood motionless over her as she watched him, as though he did not mind being seen in the light. For one head-spinning moment, Christine felt there was a mirror between them and she was the reflection. He was real.

He was dressed just like any other city gentleman: polished shoes, immaculately tailored suit, silk top-hat. His own dark-brown hair fell from under the hat on the unbandaged side. It was long
enough to give him a bohemian edge – and in that off-handed shrug at fashion Christine saw yet another step he had taken away from the Opéra, and into the world. He had moved on.

He cleared his throat. "Mademoiselle Daaé."

The voice was his, but subdued. He sounded sincere, calm and polite, as though the ruined lives did not matter. An architect.

"Monsieur Andersson." Christine dipped her head in a stiff greeting. "Welcome. It is good of you to come... busy as you are. You honour us."

He gazed back at her mildly.

"The honour is mine." He smiled easily, startling her, and glanced past Christine's shoulder to where Meg and Madame Giry had come up behind her. "Madame Giry – Mademoiselle."

"Good evening, monsieur," came Madame Giry's level voice. "Do come in."

Christine moved aside to admit him into the parlour. She stepped back as he passed, afraid of a touch, even accidental. He brought with him a faint scent of the street, a whiff of summer dust and horses and tobacco that faded almost before Christine could become aware of it. There was nothing in it of the lake, of opera, of murder.

Christine held out her hand to accept his hat and gloves. She felt watched, as though she was on stage.

"Thank you." He put them into her hand without touching her, and turned away. Christine set the things on top of the chest of drawers. A kind of hurt calm was seeping into her. He had a new life.

"Come through to the dining-room, monsieur," Madame Giry said, leading the way. Christine caught Meg's anxious eyes for a moment as they followed, and tried to look brave for her sake. She owed it to Meg and to Madame Giry to get through this evening, to forgive and forget, so that all of them could move on. Just as he had done.

They took their seats around the white-clothed table. Christine felt part of an awkward tableau, a sculpture group in wax like the awful doll in Erik's lair. He was seated across from her and Meg, with Madame Giry was at the head of the table, her back to the little balcony. Josette, happy enough to be paid for an extra evening's work, bustled about in her usual dimple-cheeked efficient way, filling bowls and setting out the wine.

Christine saw Madame Giry give Erik a long, appraising look, as though she too was trying to come to terms with the changes, but she said nothing. Josette left; the soup bowls steamed.

Beside her, Meg fumbled with her napkin and nearly dropped it, stifling her exclamation of dismay. Christine decided she had had enough.

She looked straight at Erik. A guarded flicker crossed his face behind the mask, as though he was not sure what to expect, but Christine only said graciously, as if addressing one of Raoul's friends in his parents' salon: "I hear you are an architect, Monsieur Andersson."

"I am."

Their two voices sounded distorted in the small room. Christine felt her lips twitch nervously, not quite a smile. She pressed on.
"May I ask what you are working on now?"

His reply was equally correct: "A courthouse for the municipality of Sedan, mademoiselle. The office is hoping to complete the project this year – but as you can imagine, the war makes it difficult to avoid delays. I intend to spend some time there myself to ensure the thing is done properly."

"I see." Christine tried to assimilate this. He spoke as freely of his future as if he had no past.

"There are some who say the war is just about over," Madame Giry cut in to steady the fledgling conversation. Christine cast her a grateful glance. "You do not agree?"

"I rather doubt that either side should be satisfied with the siege of one Prussian city, when there are half a million troops still at the border," Erik said.

"Then this victory they have been celebrating will not be enough?"

"Saarbrücken is only a small city, madame; the victory is of little consequence."

There was something so hypocritical, so false in hearing him discuss the war like anyone else that Christine could not stand it. She put down her spoon with a clank.

"You seem well-informed on the subject. Monsieur."

The bare half of Erik's face became instantly immobile, completing the mask. When he spoke, his tone was acidly polite. "You mean to say – for a man who three months ago crawled out of a sewer."

Christine heard Meg and Madame Giry stop breathing. The words echoed around the room with the aftershock of a whip.

She held Erik's eyes, refusing to back away. "I would not have phrased it so uncharitably."

"Indeed? And what would you have called it?"

"A larger room in the Opéra than was home to the rest of us. And more comfortably appointed."

She continued looking at him. The pause stretched unbearably, like a note held down on an organ. Then at last, the coldness dissolved away from Erik's face.

"Of course," he said, breaking off a piece of bread, "there was the rising damp. I doubt it was a problem you experienced in the dormitories."

"Perhaps not," Christine conceded, returning to her own plate. "But we had rats."

"Ah, yes. Difficult to catch, but excellent with red wine sauce."

Meg gave a small snort of laughter, next to Christine, and somehow that took the charge from the air. Christine breathed, and then the four of them seemed to come to life.

"You didn't really eat rats?" she ventured, and for a moment Erik's eyes seemed to laugh, more warmly than she could have imagined:

"What makes you believe I stopped?"

"What nonsense," Madame Giry huffed, pretending she was not amused. "The dormitory kitchens
cooked plenty to go around."

"Maman!" Meg was horrified. "You stole food?"

"Give our guest some credit, Meg. He was more than capable of stealing it himself."

"I see you are determined to reveal all of my secrets," Erik said, with a note of caution in his voice. Madame Giry fixed him with a serious look. "Yes, Monsieur Andersson. I am determined to do exactly that. Pass the salt, please."

Josette brought in the second course a few minutes later, and looked startled to find them all talking, even the strange gentleman with the bandaged face. They moved from topic to topic, meandering through architecture, the differences between buildings in Paris and the provinces, the disruptions to rail lines. Erik told them a little about the town of Sedan, and the surrounding villages. Christine tried to picture him sketching buildings, walking out on the street with people all around, in the daytime... It was difficult, but it was not impossible. Neither he nor anybody else brought up theatres or music, or darker things, and Christine was content to leave those dangerous subjects well alone.

Madame Giry mentioned their recent visit to an art exhibition, where they had gone as much to see the paintings as to escape the madness of the war-fever in the theatres and streets:

"I confess, I have small appreciation for that sort of modernity." She raised her shoulders in bafflement at the new direction taken by some of the younger artists they had seen: crude brushwork and sketchy lines, awkward poses and ripples of unexpected colour. "It seems little more than the skill of putting an impression to canvas, without bothering with the details. It is no more a painting than the recounting of a ballerina's movements by an enthusiastic theatre patron, complete with hand gestures, is a ballet."

Here Madame Giry waved a hand melodramatically, as a speaker might do in imitating a dance number. Christine and Meg laughed, and when Christine stole a glance at Erik, she saw that he, too, looked amused. The effect was strangely pleasing.

"It might not be like regular art, but I liked Manet's garden," Meg said, helping herself to more of the chicken Marengo. "The morning light on the path – it looked so real."

"It must be nice to be able to do that," agreed Christine. "To take what you see and put it onto a canvas, just that moment."

"It's what they try to do, I think. Capture the light."

"A dangerous pastime," said Madame Giry, "trying to capture that which ought to be free."

Before the conversation could take an awkward turn, Josette brought in coffee and sweets. Christine smiled to herself. She had never imagined Erik liked marzipan.

When the meal was done they returned to the parlour, somehow managing to arrange themselves around the few available seats. Christine shared the worn divan with Madame Giry, and Meg took one of the armchairs. Erik sat down in the other chair, leaning one elbow against an armrest in a way that made him seem almost relaxed. Christine saw his eyes linger a moment on the piano in the opposite corner of the room.

"Will you play something for us?"
The words escaped before she could have time to stop them.

It had seemed so natural to ask it in that moment of peace, as if they were gathered for a genuine social occasion, as if this was normal and real. Christine sensed an uncomfortable silence opening out around her, gaping wider and wider as Erik sat up, his back turning rigid. She could see his eyes, but his expression told her nothing.

"What would you have me play?" he asked quietly.

Christine could think of no polite way to take back her words. She felt Madame Giry's hand come to rest on her shoulder, keeping her calm.

"Perhaps just a short piece," Madame Giry said evenly. "I daresay we should have a good fifteen minutes of music before the neighbours come to add the vocals. If you would do us the honour, monsieur."

Erik looked back to the instrument.

There was the strangest mixture of yearning and contempt in that look, as though he wished he could destroy it. Then without another word, he rose and went over to it. He sat down at the bench and opened the lid, his foot finding the pedal.

He did not even look at the keys. It was as if the piano did not exist. He simply lowered his hands to touch it, hesitating only a moment at the contact – and there was music.

The first notes were almost inaudible.

Christine caught the sound on the very edge of silence: simple, dark, disturbing. Three rising notes, repeated again and again. Trying to rise up, going nowhere. A moment's change, then nothing. Three rising notes, the bars of a cage and a shadow on the wall behind them, lurking.

Following an instinct she could not understand, Christine rose and went to stand beside the piano. The music changed, and did not change. Another theme cut across it as a shaft of light from a window of a cell cuts through the gloom, and the three rising notes were subdued by it. Subdued, but not silenced. The shadow remained. The shaft of light trembled, hovering as a reflection over black water: it spoke of longing, of the fear of the night. It trembled, pleading with a desperate breaking voice, pleading love...

He shut the lid.

Christine jumped, as if he had slammed it on her hands, and yet he had closed it very quietly, simply stopped in the middle of a bar. Three rising notes, silenced.

Erik sat, looking down at the polished lid.

"Do you know the music?"

Christine heard the question, but did not see him speak the words. He did not look at her and she felt invisible, aloof as a ghost.

"Yes," she said. Her own voice shocked her. It was too clear, too strong. "Beethoven. The Moonlight Sonata."

"That is the name given it by others. Beethoven called it 'Almost a Fantasy'. Do you know why?"
Erik raised his face to her and Christine saw a dark stain in the white fabric of his mask, beneath his eye.

She shook her head slowly. "Perhaps because... It's dedicated to a woman he loved. Contessa Giulietta Guicciardi."

"Is it?" he asked indifferently, even though Christine thought he knew the dedication as well as she did. "But, you see... On the margin of the manuscript, he wrote this."

Erik lifted the piano lid part of the way, and with one hand played a phrase.

"Mozart?" Christine wondered, and then recalled the fragment. "Don Giovanni."

"You remember the scene," he said, not as a question.

"It is after he – after Don Juan kills the Commander."

"Murders him," Erik corrected her. "You must always say what you mean, and what you mean is murder. A beautiful melody, is it not? 'Almost a Fantasy'."

He shut the lid, and stood up. Christine did not know what to say; the room had retreated somewhere, into the distance.

"I don't understand what you mean."

There was something ghastly in the smile Erik gave her: it was frightening not because it was mad, but because it was precisely the opposite. He was sane. He was completely sane, and he stood before her with the music still filling the space between them, and Christine did not know if it was a hymn to love – or to gruesome, unrepentant murder.

"I'm sorry," Erik said. "I came here because I wanted to tell you that, mademoiselle. I am really very sorry."

Christine stared at him, appalled. In her mind, the insidious funeral dirge played three rising notes, going nowhere, repeated.

"Could you forgive me?" the architect asked. "One day?"

"I... suppose so. Perhaps one day."

"Then I thank you for your generosity, and for a delightful evening."

He turned around, and the rest of the room came into being again.

Christine realised Madame Giry and Meg were standing in the middle of the parlour, watching them in uncertain silence. They had not heard their words, and Christine felt a stab of anger that nobody had intervened, that they had allowed these few brief moments to happen. It seemed an eternity since the music finished, and still she could hear it now.

Erik put on his hat, took his gloves, and gave a small, courteous nod to each of them in turn.

"Good night, Madame Giry. Mademoiselle Giry."

Madame Giry shook herself slightly, as though dispelling a dream. Then she went to see him to the door. "Good night, monsieur."
The door shut. Christine heard his footsteps on the stairs. Three notes, repeated.

"Well, that wasn't so bad." Meg bounced on her toes, stretching her cramped legs. "Was it, Christine?"

Christine darted past her to the window. She caught only his silhouette crossing the pavement, a gentleman in a top-hat striding over the patch of light from the streetlamp. He disappeared.

She let the curtains fall shut. An entire evening, she thought. An entire evening with him, and he never once called her Christine. He was sane, he knew exactly what he had done... But she did not know what he meant by his music. Forgiveness, he said. For being a murderer? For deceiving her for so long? For love?

"What did he say to you, Christine?" Madame Giry asked gently.

"He asked for my forgiveness."

Madame Giry looked relieved. Christine gave her a crooked smile, the best she could manage. It dawned on her that, just as Madame Giry had hoped, there was no longer a ghost in her mind. He had disappeared along with the angel, the madman, the murderer... So many masks, and there was nothing left. He had turned into an architect, he was no longer here. There was no ghost with her.

And without him – who was she?

It was not until later that night that Christine remembered her ring. She wondered what had become of it.

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**Chapter 19: All the Little Lies**

Thank you, guys, for the reviews for the previous chapter – I was thrilled by how many different takes there were on the questions it poses!

Emotionally, this chapter continues from the previous, so it's probably best to read the end of Chapter 18 before you start this one.

Trivia for this chapter: Carlotta's cameo here is based on a real incident involving Marie Sass, a prima donna at the Opéra.

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**Chapter 19 – All the Little Lies**

Erik raised the ring to the sunlight from the office window and tilted it, scattering fractured rainbows across the sketch of the courthouse façade. The drawing of a stained-glass window on the table before him blazed bright red. Such a deceptive colour. Christine had worn a red dress to supper: a muted, smiling red, with a high collar buttoned tight around her white neck. So respectable. Such a perfect match to his top-hat and suit. Only the red lace trim at her throat had foamed like spit around the mouth of a dying creature.

The page swam with colours, and for a moment Erik was again in that tiny yellow-lit room: inside it, not outside in the night. How bold of them, he thought viciously – to invite him in! As if they had nothing to fear from him. As if it was enough to have ground him into the shape of a gentleman and now their job was done. They just expected him to go on as if he had a soul like all men, as if he could simply shrug off his entire life like a bad dream. Christine would have him
believe that his lair had been nothing but a large room at the Opéra. Perhaps he should also believe
that his murders were accidents with a piece of string, and that the Angel of Music had been a
charming little game they had played together!

Christine had laughed, and talked, and finally asked him to play something, as if she could no
longer see through his mask, or did not want to. In place of the wounded girl who had plagued his
dreams he found a respectable young woman. Christine had moved on. She had discarded her
singing and even her precious Vicomte, as though the boy, too, was a figment of her past and she
had no more need of protection. She could sit back in perfect comfort, a mere table-width away –
and talk about art. She could listen to the music pouring from his bloodstained hands and pretend
that she did not know what he meant. And Madame Giry could watch all this with benevolent
approval.

They had abandoned him. Abandoned the gentleman more completely than they had ever
abandoned the monster.

Erik rolled the ring between his charcoal-stained fingers, smearing soot over the crystal he had
kept pristine for so long, and remembered the rain outside the burnt-out Opéra. He had wanted
Christine to be happy... It was so easy to worship an angel. But when he thought of Christine
standing over the piano in her polite, dull-red dress – he wanted to rip the choking collar from her
throat and terrify her. Anything to break this second, final abandonment. Anything to have her hate
him, fear him, tear the mask off his face – anything was better than this!

He threw the ring into a desk drawer, out of sight, and slammed it shut – just in time to avoid the
eyes of the young man who now approached him, weaving between draughting tables.

Vincent Fiaux took in at a glance Erik's ashen face and bloodshot eyes, and leaned back against a
chair with a cheerful, knowing grin.

"Rough night?"

"You could say that." Erik gave a sour smirk, more for himself than for Fiaux.

"Absinthe? Theatre? Girls?"

"Nothing so amusing, I assure you. A number of my sketches were damaged in transit. Restoring
them took longer than I had anticipated."

Fiaux laughed as if Erik had made a fine jest. "Girls," he diagnosed, adding in a tone of mingled
envy and admiration: "The Montmartre ladies must have welcomed you back in style, Andersson!
You look like you haven't slept in days."

"I suppose one might call it a welcome," Erik said acerbically. "It certainly kept me from sleep."

"Must've been some beauty."

Erik hesitated only a moment. "Nothing special. A dancer."

He knew a moment's keen satisfaction – and then a sudden, ugly flush of anger. He scowled at the
young man. "Have you anything of importance to say, Fiaux, or is it your intention to keep me
from my work all morning?"

Fiaux shrugged, unoffended. "Duchamp wants to see you when you have a minute. I thought I'd
give you fair warning – he'll likely be looking to dump my projects on you."
"You have resigned?" Erik frowned in surprise.

"In a sense. I'm only here on special leave, two days – it's back to Châlons for me tomorrow."

Before Erik could react to this news, Fiaux had jumped off the chair back and strolled back to his desk, hands thrust into his trouser pockets. Erik stared after him. He wondered what possible use this scrawny boy could be to any army. He shrugged the problem away, wiped the charcoal from his hands and went to Monsieur Duchamp's office.

"Ah! Come in, Andersson, come in." Monsieur Duchamp half-stood at his table to grip Erik's hand in a solid handshake. "Take a seat."

Erik drew a chair up to the table. "I understand Fiaux has been called up to the army."

"Yes. A real misfortune, that." Monsieur Duchamp tugged at his moustache miserably. "I tried to arrange a replacement of course, the office would have paid – but they wouldn't hear of it, not for an engineer with a military college degree. Politics, always politics! I do hope you have no inclination to join the Garde Mobile or some such nonsense yourself?"

"None whatsoever," Erik assured him.

"Excellent, excellent. In that case, I trust we can rely on you to continue the Sedan project? Pending the mayor's approval, naturally."

"Certainly. I'm keen to begin construction as soon as the funds have been approved. I trust I shall not be kept waiting long."

Monsieur Duchamp gave a small grunt of approval. "This is what I like about you, Andersson: your single-mindedness! A most commendable trait in this profession. I appreciate that you chafe at the delay, but do understand that we are on shaky ground here. I foresee no trouble with the approval, but we may well be forced to wait for funds and labour." He sighed in frustration. "It is, I fear, a difficult time to be in business."

"The process would be speeded up considerably were I to return to Sedan and deal with the mayor's office in person."

Monsieur Duchamp gave him a look that was shrewd but not unfriendly. "You liked the place that much, did you?"

Erik leaned back in his chair indifferently. "It is a pleasant enough town, monsieur, but my concern is solely for my project."

"I don't doubt it, Andersson, but for the moment we have need of your skills here in Paris. Fiaux's departure has left us with a number of impatient clients. Naturally I sympathise with your concerns about Sedan, and you may have my word that the moment we have the papers you will be back on it. But in the meantime, I would ask you to cast an eye over Fiaux's current files and assess the outstanding commissions. You may find several of them to your liking."

"May I," Erik said, barely concealing his derision at being so presumptuously ordered about. "I have no interest, monsieur, in working on other men's hand-me-downs."

Monsieur Duchamp considered him for a second as one might consider a flawed sketch, apparently unperturbed by the coldness of his response. Then he turned around, indicating Oppenord's exquisite Opéra of Mount Olympus on the wall behind him.
"You admire this drawing, I believe?"

"Some aspects of it. Perhaps."

"Its author designed this building for his patron, and was paid a significant sum for the work."
Monsieur Duchamp turned back with a patient, quizzical expression that somehow made Erik both angrier and more uncertain.

"What do you imply?"

"Only that there is no shame in directing your talents to the benefit of another party beside yourself, my boy. We are artists, but we have also a duty to the client, and to our fellows here at the office. Allow me to be frank: I ask you to take on these projects because you are, quite simply, the best man for the job. It would be a pity if you turned them down because you perceived it to be an order. A great pity."

Erik felt the prickle of sweat beneath his bandage. The words pierced right to the cause of his anger, in unexpected understanding. He had been caught off-guard, still raw from the sleepless night and the evening before it. Monsieur Duchamp watched him expectantly, waiting for his decision as if it mattered to him. As if the fate of Erik Andersson mattered to him.

"Take the files, Andersson. I need your help."

The dry lump in his throat took Erik by surprise. "Very well," he said harshly. "I agree."

"Well, well," Monsieur Duchamp rumbled, turning gruff. "Off with you, then. There is work to be done."

Erik went. He felt he had lost a duel, but somehow, he did not seem to mind it. He returned to the office and sought out Fiaux to retrieve the files. The young man tried a few good-natured jokes about Erik's apparent inability to say 'no' – whether to his boss or to the ladies of Montmartre – but gave it up in the face of Erik's equanimity, and wished him luck.

Erik took the files back to his table, leafing through the unfinished plans and papers outlining the work to be done, and sat down to examine them thoroughly. He had decided on two projects that appealed to him – a private residence in the second arrondissement and some restoration work on the Ménilmontant church – and was considering the wisdom of taking on a third, when he looked at what he was doing, and stopped.

You are an architect, Christine had said at supper. I am, he had thrown back at her, thinking it a lie. But he saw now that it was true. This mask had grown to his face, to his very skin.

He reached for the drawer where he had thrown Christine's ring, but did not dare open it. This was his life now. This was all there would ever be.

And he wished with a crushing, desperate yearning for the feel of Christine's hands on the scar that was his real face. He slid his fingers under the edge of the bandage and felt the familiar deformity, the ruined skin slick and damp and hot from the layers of linen. He had a violent urge to be free of it, to take it off. The Moonlight Sonata weaved again through his mind and he did not know whether it was shame he felt, or hatred, or a haunting, unbearable love.

He wanted to be free. He wanted to be free.

He did not. He wanted Christine. But all he had left was freedom.
Erik forced himself to turn the page and return to work.

o o o

Christine lowered the latch on the washroom door and turned to the mirror. It was just a little round mirror above the sink, with stains of silver peppering its edges and absolutely nothing behind it except solid, tiled wall. She reminded herself that she was home. That nobody was watching. That nobody would care. That there was nothing to fear.

The girl in the mirror opened her dry, cracked lips, as she had all the previous times. She stared back at Christine, this paper-thin girl, and waited.

And waited.

Christine felt her lungs take in air, the way a sinking ship takes in water, and knew she would not sing. She tensed herself anyway, doing everything exactly as she knew was right, preparing to produce the opening notes of the *Marseillaise* even as her mind splintered in two and one part laughed at the other's pathetic exertions.

*I can't*, she thought at the mute creature staring back at her from the mirror. *I can't, I can't, I can't.*

In her head, the infernal Moonlight Sonata started again. Three rising notes, suffocating the *Marseillaise*. Every night since the supper she had gone to sleep hearing it and woke up with the melody still there, burning with Erik's unanswered question. The cruelty of it was that she caught herself forgetting the music sometimes, and then she would hum it quietly, until it returned. She had thought it a curse to feel him always with her, to fear that he could find her again – but knowing that he would not, that he had moved on, was a curse worse than the old one.

And she still could not sing.

"I can," Christine told herself firmly. Meg was right. She had to audition, they needed the money and this was no time to play games. It would be nothing like her aria in *Hannibal* and certainly nothing like *Don Juan Triumphant*. It was just a gala, a stupid concert with an easy song that she could have sung in her sleep two years ago.

And therein was the problem, Christine thought. One way or another, she had always sung in her sleep: in the halfway world of illusion, supported by the spirit of her father, guarded by the invisible angel he had sent. Now she was wide awake, every illusion turned to grisly reality, with nobody to support the notes or coax her voice from within her. It had happened before, after her father was gone – yet Christine knew this time it was worse.

This time, no angel's voice would whisper to her in the chapel as she came to light her candle. There would be no angel's song for her to hear. She recalled the day when she had first heard the strange sound in the chapel – a voice that burned through walls right to her skin, bitter and hot like tears. *An angel weeps*, she had thought then. A child she had been, an innocent little fool.

"Why are you crying, Angel?"

And the voice had stopped. He had heard her.

"Do not cry. My father said he is gone to Heaven, and that it is a good place. You come from Heaven, don't you?"

"No," he had said. Petulant, like a child. "From Hell."
"That isn't true," she objected, "for then you would be a demon, and demons don't cry."

"Perhaps I am a demon."

"You aren't a very clever angel," she said patiently. "I know you were crying. I heard you. Angels cry, and demons don't. Why do you cry, Angel?"

"I do not cry."

"I heard you," she insisted. "You are sad, and so you cry. It is all right to cry. My father said so, and Madame Giry says so."

"That is very clever of them."

"Well," she confided, "my father does not say it anymore, or if he does I cannot hear, because he is in Heaven. But he told me that when he went to Heaven he would send to me the Angel of Music. That is you, isn't it?"

Silence. But an alive kind of silence.

"Why are you sad, Angel of Music?"

"I am not."

That had been the moment, Christine thought. I am not. Not sad? Or – not the Angel of Music? A cruel thing, to give a child such a choice: to believe or to disbelieve. To permit herself to be deceived or to back away and run, run like all the others.

Had she known even then that by her words she would create the Angel of Music? She had. She had understood all along, a tiny spark of knowledge in the back of her mind. Yet her father had promised to send her the Angel of Music, and so there had to be an Angel. And so there was.

"If you are not sad, Angel, then why do you cry?"

A long time passed, until she thought he was gone. Then the voice returned, more resonant, lighter – an angel's voice in truth:

"Because you are sad, child, and you do not."

"I will sing for you, so you don't cry anymore. Will you sing with me, Angel?"

And so they had sung then, and later, and later. He listened, and perhaps because she knew he listened, she had found the right song. The song that had shrivelled away while her father lay dying came alight again inside her, like a guttering candle cupped between two hands, protected from the wind. Her angel told her to sing, and so she sang.

There had only ever been a voice, no body, no face, no fear except that old, sneaking spark of knowledge in the back of her mind that it was all a lie, ticking away like a clock set to strike at midnight. And she had known, God help her, she had known all along that midnight would come, the clock would strike, and the illusion would end. It had frightened her, so much that she did not want to think of it ending, would not think of it. It frightened her and it fascinated her, and it sent her straight to the mirror on that awful, wonderful night, to the place where illusions ended. The same place where, a few months or many centuries ago, she had taken a man's scarred face in her hands, and opened him to her.
She had created the Angel of Music. It was her own innocent, stupid fault. She had longed so deeply for the angel that she had taken a piece of herself, and out of it had fashioned his wings. Now she had no angel, and the man who had been him was gone. She had only herself – and it was not enough.

"Sing, you stupid girl," she snapped at the washroom mirror, and the reflection threw back her grimace, mindlessly.

"Christine!" Meg was hammering on the door. "Are you ready? We'll be late for rehearsal!"

Hastily, Christine turned the tap and splashed cold water on her face. "I'll be right there!" She could not do it. She could not face a theatre of people and be mute.

She unlatched the door and came out of the washroom.

Meg was standing there with both their ballet satchels at the ready, looking anxious. "We'll miss the omnibus."

"I... won't be able to audition." Christine hated saying those words; it was humiliating. "I can't do it."

"Never mind," Meg said as if it meant nothing. "Here, take your things, and hurry!" When Christine still hesitated, Meg gave her an impatient look uncannily like Madame Giry's: "Look, if you get there and don't want to do it, I'll just tell them you have laryngitis! Now come on!"

Christine gaped for a moment – then laughed, momentarily feeling better. She grabbed the bag with her gear and rushed out with Meg, leaping the stairs two at a time so that both of them all but tumbled past the concierge's lodge and out onto the street.

"Run run run!" Meg chanted, while they sprinted across the footpath and, surprisingly enough, managed to catch the omnibus after all.

They plopped themselves onto one of the two facing benches, ignoring the disapproving frowns turned on them by the sedate ladies in the remaining seats. The day was hot and the carriage was sweltering; Christine vainly wished that she and Meg could go upstairs to the open deck, but women were banned from riding there for fear of falls. She tried not to think about the audition.

The omnibus was still less than halfway to the Variétés when there was a loud commotion outside.

Christine and Meg made for the window, squeezing themselves between the other passengers, as everyone attempted to see what was going on.

"Where are they all running?" asked the woman next to Christine, and they heard a man on the top deck shout down to the street:

"What's going on?"

"A telegram!" someone shouted back, jubilantly. "There's a telegram outside the Bourse!"

Christine saw new crowds join the existing ones, blocking off the traffic on the boulevard as their omnibus ground to a halt. Everyone seemed to be running in the same direction, towards the Stock Exchange where news of the war were always posted.

"Twenty-five thousand Prussians taken prisoner, and the Crown Prince among them!" someone hollered the contents of the telegram. Men cheered, throwing their hats high in the air.
"Victory! Victory! It's the end of the war! Vive la France!"

Christine sank down onto the bench. Her heart was thudding in her head, and she realised, shamefully, that her immense relief at this news was entirely selfish. There was no need for the audition now. She wouldn't have to try to sing after all.

As if her thought had been the cue for some unseen orchestra, the riotous crowd outside seemed to have fallen quiet.

"Christine, look!" Meg tugged at her elbow frantically, making space at the window. "It's Carlotta!"

And it was. Her open carriage had been stopped, marooned in the crowd some distance from their omnibus, and as Christine watched, Carlotta climbed up to stand high over the crowd, with the air of one who had done this many times before.

"What is she..." Christine began, and then heard the all-too-familiar strains of the song she had not been able to sing:

"Aux armes, citoyens!
Formez vos bataillons!
Marchons, marchons!
Qu'un sang impur
Abreuve nos sillons!"

To arms, oh citizens!
Form up in battle ranks!
March on, march on!
And drench our fields
With their tainted blood!

Carlotta's ear-splitting soprano was not nearly so shrill when heard above the noise of the crowd, and the chorus blazed clearly through the summer air. Christine listened to this stirring call to death and blood and violence, and felt profoundly glad that the madness of the war was over.

The world would return to normal now, and she, too, would find some peace.

Yet when she and Meg finally made it to the Variétés, there was no peace there. People were whispering that the news was false and the telegram announcing the victory had been nothing but a rumour. Helena Weiss said that she had gone to the Bourse herself and had seen nothing posted there, a blank wall, but others shouted her down, swearing that they had seen it themselves and calling her a Prussian.

Helena turned out to be right. The next morning, Christine came outside with Meg to find an ominous silence in the street. The celebrations were over. Instead, the news-stands were surrounded by groups of grey-faced people, who did not speak to one another but only stood staring at the headlines, as if a terrible spell of illusion had shattered and they found themselves unable to comprehend the truth.

The army had been defeated at Wissembourg, at Spicheren, at Fröschwiller. The Prussians had entered France. The more optimistic papers suggested that this had been the plan all along, that General MacMahon intended to lead his troops north to the Belgian border, to catch the invading Prussians in a trap...
The Belgian border, Christine read, and felt a hard jolt. Erik had worked in a town on the Belgian border.

And he had been planning to go back.
Chapter 20 – Invasion

"This way, citoyens, and mind you close the door." Louise ushered the last of the stragglers through the back door and into the store-room, where a space had been cleared for an emergency meeting. Those already present shuffled aside to make room for the newcomers, moving the crates and soap-boxes that served as rows of makeshift chairs.

Erik remained where he was, leaning casually against the stack of boxes lining the back wall. Every one of the newcomers walked right past him unaware, though some were near enough to all but tread on his shoes. Erik felt a rush of nostalgia: it had been too long since he had been a ghost. He had forgotten how enjoyable it could be. Neither Jean nor Louise had mentioned this meeting to him, let alone invited him along: evidently they did not deem him trustworthy enough to be informed of the things taking place right under his nose. It was a pity really, Erik reflected, because had they invited him, he would certainly have refused to attend, having little interest in their griping against the Emperor – but they had not asked him, and consequently had irritated him into deciding to stay. At any rate, it was proving more entertaining than wandering the dead streets of inner Paris, where people asked one another over and over again: "Is it true about the invasion? Are we done for?"

There was not a hint of that sheep-like despair here. The day was Sunday and so the shop was shut, but in the dimly lit store-room the atmosphere was one of concern and brisk action, as if the milliners and post-clerks gathered here thought themselves a Parliament.

The door to the main area of the shop was opened briefly, admitting Jean. His unruly red hair had been smoothed down and for once there were no ink stains on his hands.

"Quiet as the tomb out there," he said, coming over to stand at the front of the room. He clipped on his spectacles to survey those who were present, his nearsighted eyes skimming over Erik, unseeing. There were perhaps ten or twelve men gathered, most with the look of local shopkeepers or minor clerks, and a couple of women in patched frocks and kerchiefs. Some of them Erik recognised as neighbours, others he had never seen before.

"Good to see you all here, and at such short notice," Jean began. "I'll get straight to it, then. The Montmartre committee is meeting tonight, and we need to be firm on where we stand on the situation. As of this morning, the invasion of Alsace-Lorraine is an open secret. What all of us have been saying for weeks is finally out in the open: the army is a mess, the commanders are worse than useless – the Prussians are on the move, and I believe we're all of a mind that the Empire cannot last much longer."

This produced a chorus of agreement.

"Unfortunately," Jean continued over them, "for the moment Ollivier's holding firm in the Assembly. Worse still, we are now officially under martial law."

"They can't shut down the committees!" protested one of the women, while others insisted that Paris would not stand for this, and that the time was ripe for the Emperor to abdicate and give way to the will of the people. Others insisted that the people must take what is rightfully theirs, Emperor or not.

"Order!" Jean snapped, and the meeting subsided. "Have a care, citoyens, before the police come
sniffing round. What is clear is that we need to move, and move quickly. The Jacobins in Ménilmontant are talking of removing Ollivier."

"They're always on about removing someone or other," grumbled a man in the front row. "Bloody useless, I say. The Assembly's a beast with two hundred heads – and Ollivier's not the worst of the lot. The bastard sold out the Republican cause, but we touch him and next it'll be de Gramont or some other moron at the reins."

"I agree," Jean said. "It's not the Assembly we want but the Tuileries. The Emperor's a sick man and all the way in Châlons besides; he wouldn't dare show his nose in Paris, not now. But if the Empress abdicates we've got ourselves a republic right there, simple as that."

"Pah," sneered a woman in a red kerchief, "You think they'll just let us walk into the palace? An audience with the Empress, what? They've the right notion in La Vilette; the place has been rumbling since before dawn and mind if the shit doesn't start flying by sundown! We should join with them, is what we should do."

"Aye, and soon!" Louise agreed, from her seat near the door. "There's a damn lot of us, and they know it down in Paris. You think they're not afraid, in their pretty cafés, sipping coffee while our boys are being bled alive by the Prussians? You don't see them sending their own fat sons to the war, do you now? No, they got money to buy a replacement should their kid get drafted; a thousand francs is no skin off their backs! It's our boys out there fighting their damned war, *citoyens*, and while Ollivier's lot dilly-dally with politicking, there's more of ours dying. So we join with La Vilette now, others will see the way of it, never fear – we'll have Ménilmontant at least, and the rest will follow."

"A revolution, now?" Jean shook his head. "Impossible; it'd be chaos. We need a plan—"

This caused another uproar; people spoke over each other with apparent disregard for the prospect of the police bursting in. Jean was calling, "Order! Order!" without much success, while Louise and the others bickered over the possibility of a revolution. Some were of the opinion that the police would crush them before they got a chance; others thought that they could sweep through Paris if they got the numbers, while Jean as a few others counselled caution in replacing the government until a plan could be formed for a new one.

One voice stood out over the general din; the woman in the red kerchief, pink in the face, continued to insist that rising up together with the workers was the only solution.

"If a massacre's what they need to listen to us, then we'll give them one!"

Quick as thought, Erik stepped away from the pile of boxes behind him, releasing his hold on the one he had deliberately loosened before the meeting had started. The structure wobbled and pitched, but by the time it started toppling, Erik was already at the top of the stair landing. From there, he watched boxes thumping and thudding to the floor one after another, raising clouds of thick, choking dust. Candles rolled and cakes of soap went whizzing over the floorboards while people yelped and cursed, leaping out of the way and sneezing in all the dust.

Erik retreated upstairs to his room and locked the door. He could still hear their muffled curses as they tried to clean up and keep quiet about it, blaming one another for getting too rowdy – yet this small revenge for Jean and Louise's distrust did not please him as it should have. The anger did not go away but only built, seething.

He yanked a clean sheet of paper from the stack on his shelf and clipped it to the drawing board. Gritting his teeth, he threw pencil lines like darts against white paper, drawing a floor-plan but
picturing before him the faces of Jean, Louise, Madame Giry: all those who had abandoned him. *Christine*.

He slashed a line through the sketch, took a fresh sheet of paper, and started again.

* o * * o *

The cab stopped several blocks before the Moulin de la Galette.

"That's as far as I take you for a franc, mam'zelle," the cab driver said, dismounting. He opened the door for Christine to get out. "You want to go further, I'm charging triple. For the risk, see. It's not safe around here with the reds buzzing about the war. I show them a nice clean cab like this when they're all fired up – it's a red rag to a bull." He half-grinned at his own pun. "And if you want my advice, you'd be staying home too. Not a time to be wandering about after dark."

Christine gathered up her skirts and stepped down onto the pavement.

"Thank you," she said, smiling to hide her annoyance. No cab driver had ever dared lecture her when she had travelled with Raoul, let alone set her down half a mile from where she had asked to go, and demanded triple payment to go further. Still, she had no more money to pay him and there was no choice; she did not come this far to turn back. She would walk.

"Watch the *gendarmes* don't pick you up, mam'zelle. Martial law, see – you'll be in jail before you know it if you so much as breathe wrong, never mind that you're but a little thing."

"Is it this way then, monsieur?" Christine asked, ignoring his unsought-for admonitions.

The cab driver scratched his clean-shaven chin thoughtfully. "Walk up this street, and then turn left at the *cabaret* on the corner and straight on until you come to the square. It's a little street on your right."

Christine thanked him and set off. It was not yet completely dark, but she had never been in this part of Montmartre before, having previously come only as far as the cemetery, and so she tried to pay attention to the landmarks in case she got lost and was forced to retrace her steps. The *cabaret* on the corner was the only well-lit building she could see; it was a small, crowded bar where men sat drinking. Most of the windows in the smaller houses that lined the narrow, winding street were curtained, although every now and again a patch of yellow light from an opened window coloured the cobbles. There was no sign of the 'reds' or the *gendarmes*. Nevertheless, Christine quickened her pace, keeping to the shadows. She had to admit it was unnerving to be out alone in this unfamiliar place, and the cab-driver's insistence that it was dangerous had made her jumpy.

A few catcalls followed her as she passed the *cabaret*. Christine winced at the flush of fear and kept walking, head down. Without a doubt it would have been safer to stay home this evening: to sit in the parlour and play draughts and talk with Meg while they waited for Madame Giry to return from her night job. And all the while she would have been gnawing her lips bloody, wondering whether Erik had indeed left Paris again, whether he was – in danger. A preposterous thought. The Phantom, in danger... Yet Christine could not put it from her mind.

It frightened her, this gaping uncertainty left behind from the supper with Monsieur Erik Andersson. She kept going over small, meaningless fragments of the evening as if she could find the answers there: in a memory of Erik's hand closed over his fork, or his elbow pressed into the armrest of the chair, or the sharp delineation of bandage and skin when he had raised his face to her from the piano, silencing the music... Who was he? Where was he? She dreamed of the night when she had seen him on the balcony, of his hands and his mouth and of reaching for him in the dark, of
danger and blood. Christine wondered what he was doing. What he had meant by his music. Whether he even thought of her in his perfect new life, or regretted anything at all.

It was unthinkable that he could have vanished from Paris and taken all the answers with him; unthinkable that he could be hurt or die by some stray bullet and leave her with this uncertainty for the rest of her days. The faultlessly polite thank-you note he had sent after the supper had bothered her endlessly with the possibility of answers, until Christine could no longer resist. She needed to know. The address she had copied from the envelope could prove to be false, but then his entire story about architecture and the Belgian border could itself be a lie, and Christine had never felt so fed up with all the tangles and half-truths. If it was a lie, at least she would know that much.

She turned right at the deserted square, where a few ragged, empty-faced beggars huddled beside an abandoned market cart, and started up the street. It had to be the right place, Christine mused, looking around. The houses were old but not run-down; most had shops on the ground floor and three or four levels of apartments above that. The shops were all closed, as it was a Sunday and late besides, but many of the apartment windows were bright, and Christine felt a moment's elation when she saw she was at the right number.

It was here; 15, rue Fontenelle.

The elation froze in her throat. Christine stood looking up at the building. It was no different from the others around it, but it seemed bigger, filling her view. The storefront was barred and the window above it was black and quiet. On the third floor, there was a light.

As if playing a game with herself, Christine thought: it is the second floor, the dark one. He is not there. He has gone from Paris.

Or it is the wrong building, and he never lived here at all.

Or the third floor. And he is home.

A noise on the other side of the street startled her; Christine was halfway up the alley beside the store before she realised it was just a cat. She stopped against the wall, catching her breath, trying not to panic. The alley opened into a tiny courtyard behind the house. The back door would be there, and perhaps a sign listing the names of the occupants of each floor, like in some of the older buildings that had no concierge. Then, Christine decided, she would have her answer.

She went into the courtyard.

There was a shed of some sort built up against the brick wall. Christine walked around it, and found the back door. She could see no list of names or any other sign: just a blank door before her, wide enough for crates and other deliveries for the store. Christine looked at it, wondering what to do. She put her hand out, to touch the wood.

The door was open.

Erik heard the back door creaking. At first he thought it was Louise and Jean returning from their meeting, but the sound was oddly hesitant. Erik put down his pencil. The door continued to open, and somebody stepped inside, but he could hear neither the clomping of Louise's boots on the stairs nor the mutter of their usual conversation. Whoever it was was trying to be very quiet.

The door from the back room to the shop itself was locked; Erik listened for the scrape of a lockpick, but there was nothing. No sounds of boxes being moved, either. Not a thief then. Either a
particularly stupid gendarme who believed that Jean and Louise kept their papers in the store-
room... Or the gendarmes were after somebody else.

Erik looked down at the floor-plan he had drawn, then at his pencils, compasses, a slide rule, pages
of calculations... It was not much of a life, but it belonged to him now. He had nothing else, but this
– this was his. They could not have it.

He reached up and put out the lamp. Easing the door open soundlessly, he stepped out into the
stairwell.

Three steps down, he put one hand over the banister, and jumped.

Chapter 21: Ghosts Dissolve By Daylight

Chapter 21 – Ghosts Dissolve By Daylight

Christine lost her footing and fell forward an instant before a huge weight swooped into the space
where she had stood. The side of a crate slammed her chest, driving air from her lungs. She
stumbled, whirling onto her back, scuttling away from whatever it was. Then her breath returned in
a rush, and she gasped.

Something moved; a gust of wind slammed the door, sealing the darkness.

Christine struggled to her knees, then to her feet. Dust made her mouth dry. She felt lightheaded;
the pain in her ribs was the only thing pinning her to her body. Erik.

"You're here..." She could not see him, but she heard his intake of breath.

For a time there was no sound but that: his ragged breathing, loud and painful.

Christine searched for a word, a sentence, anything. Why was she here?

"I heard the news," she stumbled. "I needed to know. If you've gone."

She heard a hitch in his breathing, but nothing else. Darkness ate at her eyes. She searched for his
face, his eyes, but there was nothing.

"The papers said, the invasion..." Christine's voice fell until it was almost inaudible. "But you're
here."

She looked at where she thought he was, aware suddenly of just how stupid, how dangerous it had
been to come here. She should have stayed home. She should never have come.

"I'm glad you are well," she said into the blackness. Bits of dust squeaked on her teeth. "I just...
needed to know that. I'll go."

She turned back to the door, but his breathing stopped. This new silence was blind, thick. She
could not move.

"Liar!" snapped a hard, empty whisper. Behind her.

Christine whipped around, but her eyes picked out nothing; blackness.

"What did you really want?" The voice was right at her ear now. His voice. "Did you think to see
where I lived?"

She turned again to the voice; nothing.

"You thought it was a trick, perhaps? Did you! A joke, Christine?" There was a sudden rush of air and his hand clenched on her elbow, fever-hot. "You came to see the Phantom in a hovel in Montmartre, the Phantom working in an office – is that it? The supper wasn't enough for you?" He gripped her arm harder, shaking her. "Go on then! Feast your eyes!"

He wrenched her elbow forward and Christine stumbled after him, up the stairs, higher and higher. "Where," she gasped, "Stop it! Erik!"

He threw open a door at the top of the stairs and Christine found herself released; a moment later white-hot light blazed, dazzling her.

"Here it is! Look around!"

Christine did, her eyes swimming from the light. A moment's confusion resolved into an old room with a sloping ceiling and a single window she had seen from the street, and pale, yellowing wallpaper. It smelled like lamp oil and smoke. Right in front of her was a heavy work-table cluttered with drawings – and there beside it, stood Erik.

He was gripping the chair back with one hand, the other was held out as if to encompass the room, an ugly parody of the way he had shown her his lair. Christine felt her eyes make an inventory of his face, the shadow around his masked eye and the line at the corner of his mouth. His hair was wild over his bandage and his clothes were rumpled; he wore no jacket and one side of his shirt stuck out from under his waistcoat. His chest rose and fell quickly, with each breath. My God, Christine thought. I found him.

"Is your curiosity satisfied, Mademoiselle Daaé?"

He was afraid of her. Christine saw it, and could not look away.

"I heard the news." There was a strength in that truth, mad as it was, she clutched at it. "I needed to know if you've gone."

"Gone."

"Yes. To Sedan, to work."

He laughed. It was a strange, echo-less sound, more like a sob. Then he turned away towards the window, as if he did not want to see her. Between them, the old floorboards made a moon-path, gleaming where they had been polished by too many treading feet, and Christine thought she could cross so easily, like walking on water.

"You believed me, then. You really thought I would go."

His tone mocked her, but Christine refused to hear it. She was vaguely aware of other furniture in the room, an iron bedstead, a chest of drawers, an easel, but she paid these no attention. Defiantly, she looked only at Erik. "Yes."

He gave another bark of laughter. "You trusted I was an architect, working in the daylight, designing buildings?"

Christine glanced at the plans on the work-table, then at the easel that held an unfinished drawing
of an apartment block. The plan had a precise, sharpened beauty, almost like his music. She could not doubt it.

"Yes," she said. "I believed you."

His back jerked angrily, as from a touch. "You credulous little fool. Before, you thought me an angel."

"Perhaps... And you thought yourself a ghost."

"I am a ghost." He sounded far away.

"No. I can see you."

He whipped around; his face was ugly, sneering. "Is that what you're here for, Christine? To see me? Don't you know," his voice twisted, "what happens to respectable girls who go sneaking through Montmartre at night? Who come into a monster's house, alone?"

Christine realised she had bitten the inside of her cheek; she fought to unclamp her teeth, to speak. "The papers said there was fighting... In the East."

"Yes," Erik gave her a nasty smirk, "one might expect fighting, during a war. You thought to join the resistance, perhaps? If that's the case, I'm certain the Montmartre comm—"

"I don't want you to go."

The words snapped inside her, a lock breaking. Something terrible lay beyond that door, but the sheer relief Christine felt overwhelmed her – it didn't matter now. Nothing mattered.

The sneering lines disappeared from Erik's face, leaving it taut, expressionless. The open window behind him made a black frame: a strange motionless portrait in the too-bright room.

Christine smiled, and that smile hurt deeper than any wound. She had found him. It was not enough.

Erik watched as she came forward, past the chair, stepping over the shining moon-path towards him. His eyes darkened in warning when she was a pace away. "Christine..."

She stretched out her hand and held her palm to his cheek. It was not a caress; she pressed down hard, learning the strange texture of his skin: coarse stubble beneath her palm, smooth under her fingertips. Where her finger lay against the hairline at his temple, she could feel his pulse. He was here, not gone away. Here.

"Christine..." he said again, as she moved her hand down to his throat. The sound made a low vibration there, as if she was holding his voice in her hand. The voice she had loved so blindly.

He tensed when she tightened her fingers on his neck awkwardly, but did not pull away. Under her skin, under his skin, his blood ran faster, and Christine knew then she could hurt him still, the way he hurt her. But she did not want to...

With a sudden, swift move, Erik grabbed her hand and flung it aside. "Leave," he said hoarsely. "Leave, now."

His eyes were enraged and terrified, twin mirrors reflecting the light. Christine cradled her wrist in her other hand, but did not retreat from him.
"I tried that. It didn't work."

"I let you go, Christine!" he hissed. "I allowed you to leave, do you understand that?"

"But first, you locked the door."

"What?"

She smiled at him, dismally. He understood, and she could see him fighting it, willing it to not be so, as if the past could be escaped. "You locked the door. That night, in the dressing-room. Meg told me, and Madame Giry. I never even knew I was trapped."

She raised her hand to his cheek again; his skin was alive with tension and it was difficult, very difficult to remember the Phantom. She stepped closer, lacing her fingers into Erik's hair. The sensation was so dangerous – and she wanted this so badly, to feel his living hair, not the wig.

"I can't leave..." Christine spoke past the lump in her throat. "And I don't want you to go."

She stretched up tentatively and put her lips against his.

For an agonising moment nothing happened, he was solid and immovable against her and she thought it was over; he would turn away. Then, so slowly that Christine almost believed she imagined it, she felt his mouth open a little, to let her inside.

It was a shock to taste him suddenly, to find him open. In a flash of fear Christine knew what he was doing: they had poured a cup of poison and she had given him a sip, but this next draught was hers. She had no choice; she pulled him against her fiercely, drinking deep, entering his mouth, unable to hold back when she felt the sound he made. He remembered her; he wanted this, he had to want this – and then his tongue flicked past hers, into her, and Christine felt him grip her shoulders and knew at last that she was not alone.

She had never kissed him in the light before, it was so strange that Christine wanted to open her eyes, to see what he looked like now, but she could not stop. Erik raised his hands to her back, and she clutched at the back of his neck, at his head. The bandage was a rough, unfamiliar thing there; Christine tugged at it, needing again the Opéra cellars and the window of her room, but the mask was bound tight. She turned her head, her chin rasping against the damp skin beneath his mouth.

"Erik... Take it off."

Everything stopped. Christine opened her eyes and saw that Erik had not moved; he had merely gone very still, like a predator threatened.

"What for, Christine? Shall I let you pity the monster? Would you like that?"

He was so close that between them they made their own small darkness, an island of shadow in the unfamiliar lighted room. Christine moved away, and said:

"I want to see you... As you are."

Erik looked at her in their shadowed space as if he could not believe it, as if he would grab her head and kiss her again with the mask. Then a deep line cut between his brows, and Christine knew he fought a silent battle within him now, against himself.

"Show me," she asked, and waited for what seemed like an eternity before Erik took her hand and guided it to a tiny knot just above the nape of his neck.
"There." His voice was so low that Christine heard it with her spine. The disturbing pressure of his hand on hers was almost enough to make her want to keep still, to let him hide from her if he so chose. That snapped her out of it.

Erik sank down on the chair to let her reach and turned away, and Christine untied the linen and unwound it, revealing strip by strip the ruined side of his head, the scars made angrier by the chafing of the cloth against them.

"Don't touch it!"

His skin felt hot and inflamed there, but when he jerked from her touch, Christine did not think it was from pain. He took up the rest of the bandage, with the padding that had gone over his cheek and brow, and threw it to the table in disgust.

"Well?" he demanded, staring into the tabletop. "Is it pretty?"

Christine hesitated a moment, then reached over to his shoulder, drawing him back towards her. Before he could pull away, she kissed that side of his head. It was a clumsy, misjudged kiss, but Erik froze at the contact. More certainly now, Christine traced his reddened scars with her lips, then with the tip of her tongue. He gasped when she did it and it gave her a dark pleasure to hear him make those sounds, to feel him respond when she followed the ridges from above his ear to his brow, around his eye, to his cheek. When she thought nobody had ever touched him, kissed him, she felt a curious tightness in her belly; it made her half-mad, powerful.

"No," Erik moved her around to the other side, pulling her almost roughly to straddle him, trying to turn his head away. "Don't – Christine...

She shook her head, refusing to stop, until Erik drew his hand up along her leg and suddenly Christine could not move; he had frozen her as she had him, by the lightest touch on her body. She realised she was sitting above him, a bizarre position that almost reminded her of ballet, full plié, but this was new, perversely exciting. Skirts bunched up between them as Erik moved his hand above her knee, past her stocking, then hesitatingly to her bare thigh. Christine heard a sound, 'ahh' and then felt herself making it. Erik slid his fingers against her skin, under the edge of the stocking, as if it too was some kind of mask.

"Show me," he said, and his voice hurt her – but his eyes beseeched her with a deep, desperate hunger.

They were frantic after that; Christine felt her hands shaking madly as she untied Erik's cravat, opened his waistcoat, his shirt, trying to find him under all the impossible layers, impatient for him to unbutton her dress and loosen her corset, cursing laces and frills. She wanted only to be with him then, to see, to touch, to taste, to know what he felt like. It was not right, but there was no other way for her anymore; she had become lost long ago and now she had grown too wild, too different ever to go home.

In the bed, under the thin blanket, Christine was aware of his warm scent on the pillow – it surrounded her as Erik planted feather-light kisses on forehead, her cheek, her throat, her collarbone, as though he thought her a delusion or a dream. When his lips brushed against a nipple, she caught a sharp, violent breath. Erik stopped and Christine became painfully aware that there was no more contact between them, and then she could not stand it. Erik made a sound of shock when she buried her hands in his hair, and she guided him back to her, shy and wanton and terrified.

"I'm here," she said. "I'm here..."
"Christine..." Erik muttered against her skin, the name like a spell to bind her to him, to keep her, and Christine squirmed at this new caress of sound. "Christine, Christine, Christine..." he repeated, and her own name in his voice seemed to wind a coil inside her, tighter and tighter until she was aware of every light touch, of the accidental bump of his hip against hers, of the slight tremor of his body as he moved up. His hair brushed her mouth, and Christine rose under it to kiss his throat, to memorise the taste of his skin. He tasted like tears and smoke, the slow melt of a candle weeping – and Christine wished she could quench that bitterness and hide it from him, make him whole. She tried what he had done to her, her tongue darting out over his chest, the light hair there, until she found the spot and Erik made a low, stifled sound that lanced through her body, urging her on.

They were too rough, too impatient to experiment, drowning too fast to think about anything but the moment: the unknown sensation of lips on skin, of kisses that broke into something harder, more painful, the burning strangeness of being touched. It was not pleasure Christine felt when Erik pressed up against her and she opened to him, it was more like need, a painful longing that did not diminish with the pain but only sought more, enough to be filled.

Erik raised her over him roughly, his hands hard on her hips, and at last Christine felt the pain yield, and something dark, beautiful transformed Erik's eyes. She looked down at him, wanting to remember this, the gaslight white-hot on every curve of his face, on his swollen mouth, on the scars and the shadow of stubble on one cheek.

"You are..." She was afraid he would say 'mine' or 'beautiful', but he said only "Christine!" – and then Christine felt her body give way and she fell, over him, with him, spiralling down into the void.

He clung to her, moving, a strange swaying in which Christine heard fragments of words she could not understand; then he cried out against her and she held him, shuddering, lost.

They lay tangled in the narrow bed, breathing together, two survivors of a shipwreck thrown out into the light. There was a heaviness in Christine's bones that made her feel she had really struggled against an ocean, against a current that would tug her away. Gradually, she became aware of herself again, then of Erik. He lay motionless next to her, as if he was not there at all. Only the faint movement of a curl of her hair, where it fell against his face, gave him away.

She was afraid to speak. Erik stirred slightly and moved away; Christine felt a sudden coldness where his hip had touched her leg, and now there was nothing. The sheet was coarse and sticky under her sensitised skin, and she tried not to wonder if there was blood, if the pain she had felt had meant she was broken. She did not feel broken. She felt numb, as though another's soul had possessed her body, and now she had her body back but could not recall how it worked.

"Christine..." Erik's voice startled her. He did not move, but when Christine met his eyes, she saw an infinite pain there, beyond tears. "Why did you have to come here? I told you to leave."

Christine forgot the mess of the bed and the bright light above them that made everything too real, too palpable. She raised her hand and touched his face, the only side she could see, the scarred side. He did not shrink from her touch, but neither did he welcome it. His skin was smooth as warped candles, and cold.

"Erik, tell me something..."

"What?"

"Anything," she said, moving her hand away, conscious of a sudden shyness. She had touched him, possessed him, allowed him inside her, thinking that was all she needed. But lying here with him,
she ached with a painful, impossible desire for him to stretch out his arm and embrace her to him, to sing to her, to tell her the things he thought about.

"What was your mother's name?" she asked, and saw by the twist of his mouth that he did not want to tell her, that he wished she would go. Christine thought she might cry.

"I don't know," Erik said after a long, long silence. There was no hardness in his voice, only a kind of muted note that made Christine remember the Moonlight Sonata, the three rising notes, trembling. "I suppose she had a name like all women. I called her Mother, before she sold me." He paused again, and then added grudgingly, "She could sing. I remember that."

"And your father?"

Erik shrugged. "I'm sure he was nothing like yours."

"I don't remember my mother," Christine said thoughtfully. "But I remember when she died. My father locked himself in his room, and would not come out. I remember that door, every crevice on it. I scratched at it with my nails, when he wouldn't let me in. He never did. A fat woman who lived next door heard me, and she dragged me to her house, screaming all the way. My father heard that, and came outside, and he never left me again. Well – until... But he could not help that."

Erik gave her a long, half-distant look, as though he was studying the shape of her face. Then he surprised her by asking, "Do you remember Sweden?"

Christine nodded. "A little. Sometimes I don't know if it's Sweden I remember or some other place we travelled to. I remember the trains mostly, and the inns. We got to stay at good hotels now and then, but I liked the inns better. I'd climb up on a table and sing. Father frowned at it, but I loved to stand above all the grown-ups, singing..." Christine shook her head slightly. "I imagined I was on stage with him."

"I travelled too," Erik said. "With the gypsies." Christine caught his eyes, but there was almost no bitterness in them. "I remember nothing of it, except the cages. They put the other freaks into my cage when the caravan moved, to save space: a girl with a beard, an old man with sooty skin and a smile carved into his mouth. None of them talked to me – Paolo, the keeper, told them I was cursed and they'd catch my deformity."

"They would not talk to you?" Christine asked, aghast.

Erik's mouth drew into a tight line. "I did not encourage it, you understand. I did not want to talk to freaks either. It's bad enough having this face; I hardly needed to catch a deformed mouth into the bargain."

He gave her a crooked smile, and Christine did not know if he wanted her to join his mockery of his own past, or if he was saying this to hurt himself, and her. She reached up and touched her fingers to his lips gingerly, outlining his mouth. He covered her hand with his, and Christine feared he would push her away. Instead, he said, "It is too bright here. The lights..."

Christine felt him move across the blanket, over her, standing up. She averted her eyes, sensing instinctively that he wanted privacy, that she should not look at him now. Then the lights went out and it was completely dark again. Christine moved aside as Erik returned to bed, and this time she felt something had changed in him. He slid under the covers behind her and Christine felt soft, dry fabric on her burning shoulder: his shirt. He put it on her, tucking up the sleeves awkwardly, and then raised his arm to gather her close, breathing into her hair – small shallow breaths that somehow comforted her. Christine curled up inside him, and pretended they were happy.
Thanks for your continuing support of this story, guys! Your reviews mean a great deal to me. A belated reply to Faust about Chapter 20: this is not the Les Mis revolution but the embryonic stages of what eventually grew into the Paris Commune.

Trivia: This chapter's events take place on August 8, 1870. That might give you a hint of things to come. ;)

Chapter 22 – As You Are

The first thing Erik knew was an extraordinary warmth permeating his entire body, and a dim, infinite sense of peace. He drifted down through the last few moments of near-sleep, drinking in this unexpected gift as greedily as a freakish child whose cage had been left out in the sun. It was always half-dark behind the burlap mask of the sack, but on an early morning like this one, the sun could slant past the bars of his cage and pierce through the slits in the sack. He would shut his eyes against it, and then the light would become gentler, spreading in a languid glow over his demon-face, stroking him with a lover's tender hands. Yet it was not just his face that was turned to the sun now. Erik felt its warm caress on his chest, on his thighs...

His heart lurched, and his eyes flew open.

Christine.

Like a sleepwalker at a cliff-edge, Erik realised he woke up a moment from mortal peril. There was no sun; the room was still dark with the bluish shadows of pre-dawn.

The warmth he felt came from Christine.

Her tiny delicate body was curled against him, a cascade of dark curls tumbling forward over her face. Erik was suddenly, disturbingly conscious of each ridge of her spine where it met his chest through the fabric of his shirt, of the proximity of the sweat-damp little hairs on her neck, caught under the collar. His own shirt on Christine's... He fought for a breath.

Memory came as an explosion of white, an unbelievable confusion of sensations he could not untangle one from another, did not want to. For one delirious moment he believed it, and wondered whether he could have possibly pleased her, and then whether she had been hurt by his clumsy demands; he felt newly made, a paradox: at once anxious and triumphant. Above all of that was the simple, incredible truth. Christine, his Christine had come back to him – she loved him!...

Then the moment was over, and he remembered.

A sick terror strangled the peace Erik had felt, turning his own skin into a cold shell. He could move again; he rolled back. Icy sweat doused him where Christine's soft, warm body had been.

He had brought her here. Brought her to this.

He staggered to the floor, away from the bed. His lingering desire was a monstrous thing he could not control. God, he was naked... Christine – her hands – he had wanted her to touch – he had dragged up here, screaming, exactly as in his nightmares – she had told him she could not leave – she'd kissed his awful face, and then – oh God. The world swayed and Erik nearly fell, only catching himself at the last moment on the top of the chair. His heel slipped on a piece of clothing;
he lifted his foot: Christine's dress.

Erik stood and stared down at it, his chest heaving. There were black smudges of dust all over her skirts, from when she had scrambled away from him down in the store-room. A couple of buttons were missing; was that him, too? He was not sure, but it didn't matter. He could not look down at himself, he was terrified that he would see a reflection of his face all over his body: maggot-eaten flesh, a demon's skin.

He had done this to her.

He had called Christine back to him again with his music, his vengeance... The Moonlight Sonata. Erik remembered his decision to play it: a malicious choice, a snake's venomous kiss. He had done it as payback for Christine's abandonment: dark, unbearable music to haunt her mind and erode her calm, masquerading as a popular piece, seemingly innocuous. He'd had a vicious urge to prove to Christine that she was not free of him. It had seemed nothing more than a moment's rage; he had believed it was over, had never imagined ... this.

I told you to leave, he remembered saying – and Christine's terrible smile: But first, you locked the door.

This was worse, infinitely worse, than awakening in Sedan to piles of mutilated, destroyed sketches. Erik bent down painfully to pick up Christine's clothes, his clothes. Every movement required the utmost concentration, and for the minutes it took to clear the floor, he felt almost sane, in control. He dragged himself over to the washstand and managed to clean up a little, then found a fresh shirt, undergarments. Fumbling with urgency, he pulled all these on, trousers, suspenders, the rest of it. The thought that Christine could wake up any instant and see him spurred him on; yet Erik could already feel new layers of perspiration dampening the clean fabric. His memory surged with the image of Christine on top of him, brighter than any light, of his own hands slamming her slender hips down...

Erik grabbed at the window-frame, holding on to the splinterly wood, and stuck his head outside. Cold air swept his face, but the horror throbbed within him, unabated. He had finally done it; robbed Christine of her will and imprisoned her again. Locked the door. Mindlessly, Erik noted that dawn was starting; against the lightening sky, roofs and chimneys across the street zigzagged like rotting, pointed teeth.

The world had treated him as a monster, but Christine had never treated him as anything but a man... And he was a man. A man who could not be content with the miracles he had been given, who had to take everything, destroy the one beautiful thing that had breathed joy into his life. Christine had come to him last night because of the music; and savagely, he took the desperation she offered, with his entire body crying out her name, as though it was love.

Erik looked back to the bed. Christine lay still, curled up in his shirt with the blanket around her waist. Her pose was defensive somehow, hurt. She was so thin; his shirt seemed enormous compared with her small hands, and Erik felt shame rise inside him like tears. She was more beautiful than he had ever seen her, more than everything, everything he had ever wanted. And he had no right to this stolen joy. He had to let her go.

"Christine..." he said softly, into the air. It was shameful, he knew, but he could not restrain himself from this last caress, from bringing her awake with his voice. She stirred a little and stretched, sleepy and heart-stoppingly beautiful. "Christine..." he said again.

She sat up, and Erik found himself mute. Her dark, luminous eyes found him in the dawn-light and held him there, helpless. He saw the exact moment when understanding returned: Christine's
eyelashes flicked and her pupils went wide; she grabbed the blanket to her chest, then remembered
the rest and her grip loosened, as if she had to tell herself not to hide from his gaze anymore.

The silence fell between them.

"It is morning," said Erik finally.

Christine looked him over. "You're dressed..."

Erik winced; of course she felt exposed opposite him, with nothing but his shirt and a blanket.
"Forgive me," he said. "I did not mean to embarrass you."

He started to turn away to give her a chance to get dressed – and in that instant, discovered that had
not put on the bandage. For the first time in his entire life, he had completely forgotten his mask.

Unable to reach for it while Christine was dressing, Erik looked around the bare wall, out the
window, anywhere but at Christine, feeling cold and naked, as exposed as she. He heard her
moving around uncertainly, trying to collect her clothes. Then water splashed; she had found the
washstand. Using the moment, Erik seized the bunched linen off the table and arranged the
padding around his eye, wrapping the rest over his head with quick, accustomed motions. Its touch
on his skin seemed to calm him somehow, making him more rational. He slowed, taking care to fix
the knot tightly in the way he had done for many months.

By the time he had finished, he could turn and meet Christine's eyes. She had dusted off her dress
as best she could, but there was no hiding the reddened skin where her mouth and cheek had been
marred by his kisses. He saw her fingers tugging at a button that hung by a thread. Three more
buttons were missing.

"It's all right," she said in reply to his silent inspection. "It's not important. Just a dress." Yet her
fingers continued toying with the button, rolling it around. Erik wanted to stop her hands and move
them away, but he was afraid that he would not be able to let go, that he would hold her hands and
press kisses to her knuckles and then he would fall apart.

Christine lowered her eyes to the tabletop, where the previous night's unfinished sketches were still
spread. "Are these for your work?"


"May I see?"

He moved his arm aside. "If it interests you."

She stepped up to the table, making him draw an involuntary breath. Erik tried to keep his self-
control. "There is nothing of note here, I assure you. I am only redesigning part of the plan to allow
for better lighting."

"All right. I won't judge it harshly." Christine spoke lightly, but Erik could see what it cost her by
the tension in her hands as she held them above the drawing, not daring to touch it. She looked up:

"Do you enjoy it?"

Her face was serious and achingly beautiful in the weak light from the window, and on it, the
scarlet marks left by his stubble and his coarse fingers were vivid as blood. White skin, so easily
bruised.
He had done this.

Erik felt himself recede behind the mask, into the deeper ugliness of his mind. Christine had told him, *I want to see you, as you are.* That was what he had to show her then. Himself, as he was.

"There is the occasional interesting project," he replied, "certainly. Did you know, for instance, that the de Chagny family were building a house in Saint-Cloud?"

Erik saw the shock strike Christine's face, and then the spreading blush, merging with the red marks. He had reminded her of Raoul.

"Erik, why are you telling me this?"

"Because my firm has the commission to build that house. I found this out the day I began work. Can you imagine the effect this extraordinary discovery had on me?"

She was silent; clever girl. Erik felt stronger.

"I was furious, Christine. I do not mean that I was angry; I was quite beyond that. Call it madness. I assumed that the house was yours and that the situation was quite deliberately arranged by the one to whom I owed my presence in that office in the first place."

"Madame Giry?.."

Erik nodded slowly. He looked straight into Christine's eyes, her beautiful, disbelieving eyes, and said, "You remember that night on the balcony? You saw the rope."

She did not move.

"The latch on the balcony door. Was it not broken that night?"

She believed him. He saw it in her whole aspect, in the way she unconsciously drew back, appalled. Yet her voice was steady: "That isn't true. You said you were not there to harm us."

"You, Christine. I would not have harmed you."

A sickly pallor replaced the heat in her face, as if he had stolen her breath and she was turning into wax, into the statue in his lair. Erik leaned forward and sealed his numb, unmoving lips to her cold forehead.

"You want me to go," Christine whispered, barely audible.

Erik moved his lips to her hair. He could not kiss her. "Go."

She turned for the door, wrenching it open with a strength Erik could not have imagined, and flew down the stairs. The door swung on its hinges, a long *squeeeeeeeeak*, and thudded shut.

Erik sat down slowly at his table and picked up a pencil. He looked it dumbly. A foreign object. What was he doing here? In this room, in this life? Morning had dawned grey and empty, the night was long gone...

Christine's muffled footsteps flitted over the stairs – then there was a sudden confusion of noise.

A split second later Erik's door flew open, crashing violently into the wall, so that the whole house gave a shudder. Louise Gandon barged into the room, heading straight for him, dragging Christine in by the wrist.
"What the hell do you mean by this!" She shoved Christine at Erik.

Erik's heart dropped as Christine made a sharp cry of pain.

"Salaud! Will you sit there like a turd in a chamber-pot or will you explain what this chit is doing here?" Louise stabbed a finger at Christine's dress: "This is how you like them, is it! Young and pretty in fine clothes?"

Her face had gone a terrible shade of purple. "Sale cochon!" she hissed. "You filthy swine, any lackwit can see she's not even a whore! No whore would stand for this, turned out half-dressed into the street! No, only a brainless little bourgeois twit—"

Erik threw himself at the woman, grasping her shoulders. He bared his teeth at her, all animal in this one moment, conscious of nothing but Christine's whimper in Louise's vice-like grip.

"Release her," he managed between his teeth. "Release her, or I swear, they will not find enough of you to bury."

Louise struggled against his hold, but Erik gripped her brutally; digging into the flesh of her shoulders until moisture beaded on her broad forehead. She had not expected such strength from him, he could smell her fear. He wanted her dead, he would kill her, kill the meddling hag.

"Erik, stop."

Christine's quiet voice startled him, a single note of sanity. Erik realised Louise was no longer holding Christine; Christine had stepped away. He sucked in a breath, and threw Louise backwards, away from him.

She lurched, but did not lose her balance. Tears of pain stood out in her eyes, but she only turned to Christine and jerked her chin in the direction of the bed. "What does your maman say of this, mam'zelle?"

"My mother is dead, madame."

Louise blinked, then gave a mournful toss of her kerchiefed head. "How old are you, girl? Sixteen?"

"Seventeen," Christine said in a stronger voice than Erik had expected. "I thank you for your concern," she went on, "but I am all right."

"Middle-class respectability, my arse... Ruddy Empire." Striding over to the bed, Louise ripped the blanket away.

Erik saw the specks of blood at the same time as she did.

Christine made a pitiful little sound, and Erik could not look at her. He wished she had not stopped him killing Louise.

"Merde..." the woman swore wearily.

Erik reached for the door. "Leave us," he demanded.

Louise glanced at him in profound disgust, and Erik abruptly identified the burning in his chest as shame. For the first time, he wondered exactly how he had expected Christine to get back home, or – his gut squeezed uncomfortably – whether she had been missed this night, or... There were too
many 'or's, and none of them were pleasant.

"I'll get a cab," he told Christine, quietly. She nodded, and he reached for his hat, moving slowly, as through water.

"Come along, Mademoiselle Skin-and-Bones," Louise directed eventually. "We'll get that dress fixed up. I'm Louise Gandon, your so-called gentleman's landlady."

Christine managed a curtsey. "Christine Daaé, madame."

Erik snapped the hat on his head and fled the room. A cab, he had to find a cab. He was a shaking, rattling mess of nerves but he knew he had to do this thing now, for Christine. He could not think of anything else, not yet.

Near rue Lepic he finally found a hansom and had to restrain himself from hauling the driver back physically, or knocking the old fool off his box and driving the damn thing himself. He had left Christine alone in the company of a woman who had dragged her by the wrist and humiliated her after all his abuses, who thought nothing of violence, who knew him for a murderer and didn't care – a woman who, Erik recalled with a start, had spoken of a revolution only the previous morning. What if she hurt Christine?

Getting back to the store seemed to take forever; and Erik was convinced that Christine was surely dead and it was his fault, when at last she came outside. Louise shepherded her out, telling her something and shaking a fat finger in her face, and then went back inside. Christine looked unharmed. In fact, she was a great deal calmer, and her clothes seemed in better shape.

Erik opened the door of the cab for her, forgetting all about Louise and everything that had happened when Christine put her gloved hand in his. She was so strong, he thought, this strange morning. How could she bring herself to touch him?

"Erik," Christine muttered, and he realised he was still holding her hand when she was inside and seated. He looked up at her, not knowing how to let go.

Her hand slipped out of his. "I saw the ring. It was there on your shelf, when you were showing me the sketches..."

"I'll get rid of it," Erik promised, but Christine shook her head:

"Keep it. Please keep it."

Then the snap of a whip got the horse moving and the cab rolled away, taking Christine with it. Long after it was gone, Erik could still hear the carriage-springs squeaking. He waited until that, too, was gone.

Then he went back inside the store, found Louise, and told her very calmly: "I am leaving Paris."

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Chapter 23: Family

Thank you so much for your reviews, guys – they keep me going even when the going is very tough! A bit of quickie housekeeping for those confused by the title of Chapter 21: ghosts may indeed dissolve by daylight, but there is no daylight in that chapter. There's the rub. ;)

In reply to Fantomenfan1, and also because I think this has to be admitted at this point: this fic is
not going to have an R/C end. Okay? All on board? Great. Then back to the story.

Chapter 23 – Family

In the cab, Christine sat with her hands folded in her lap, trying to look only straight ahead at the trotting horse. She was unused to being outside at this early hour, when the pale light painted buildings on the boulevards into things entirely unknown, stretching lilac shadows at improbable angles, throwing doorways into stark relief. It made her feel distant from it all, an alien in a city she had lived in since childhood. The Opéra had looked just like this on her return from the candle-lit cellars below: subtly altered without appearing any different, as if it was she herself who had changed.

And had she changed? Christine allowed the thought to spread through her, questing fingers searching for damage she did not feel. All she found was a kind of relief, a resignation to having done the inevitable. It was as though for the longest time she had been drowning, sinking through heavy water, and last night her feet had finally found the rocks and silt at the bottom and she had pushed instinctively upwards, desperate to break the surface and breathe. In a detached sort of way, Christine thought she ought to be appalled by what she had done, or ashamed, but she did not feel it. Perhaps there was simply nothing left inside her after the evening’s terror, the night's need, the morning’s humiliation... Yet in this numbness dark longings stirred like serpents waking, and she could not help seeing Erik's face open to hers in the light, his hair falling against her mouth. He had not, after all, moved on, leaving her behind like debris strewn across the dance-floor after the end of a masquerade. He did not want this thing they had created between them, any more than she did – but the knowledge that it existed in him, too, was sharp and clear inside Christine, the shards of glass from a broken mirror. It hurt, but it was nonetheless a tremendous release, almost freedom.

It was still very early when she got home, less than an hour after sunrise. Christine took off her wrap, hat, shoes, and put everything away in its place, all the familiar actions made a little surreal by the morning light. There was still plenty of time to take herself to her room, change her clothes, maybe even get some sleep. She felt unnaturally calm and empty, almost indifferent. Spirit-like, she drifted through the parlour, opened the doors to the dim, sleepy dining-room and came inside. It took her a moment to realise the room was not empty.

Meg was standing in her nightshirt with her back to the table, watching Christine. Behind strands of blonde hair, her face was white and utterly blank.

Christine halted, not knowing what to say. A tiny movement of Meg's hand caught her attention, and she saw Meg was holding the envelope with Erik's thank-you note. From where she stood, Christine could just about read the address: 15, rue Fontenelle.

The skin of her hands was turning damp. She ran her palms over the sides of her skirt.

"I didn't go to the cemetery," she admitted.

Meg made no response, did not even acknowledge that Christine had spoken, and this silence bore down on Christine more heavily than anything she could have said. In Meg's red-rimmed eyes she saw the sleepless night reflected as clearly as if it was being played out before her.

All the shame Christine had not felt before filled her lungs at once, choking her.
"Meg, how long have you been up?"

"Hours. I waited for you all evening, then I fell asleep in the parlour. Maman came home after midnight, woke me and told me to go to bed. I thought you were back. I got dressed for bed and looked in your room, but you weren't there. Only this." Meg held out the envelope.

Christine took it from her, feeling faintly sick. "Meg..."

"I didn't know what to do," Meg was almost whispering. "I thought of waking maman, but to what end, in the middle of the night? The police would do nothing until morning, and even then, with the riots..."

Her voice cracked, and for a dreadful moment, Christine could see exactly what Meg had gone through this night: her uncertainty, her fears, imagination picking over the worst possibilities like rosary beads, around and around. She, who had spent so much of her own life in fear, had thoughtlessly done this to Meg. The monumental selfishness of it took her breath away.

She wanted to apologise and could find no words except, "I'm sorry, I am so sorry..."

It was weak and silly, the kind of apology one might make after borrowing a ribbon without asking. Christine stared down at her hands, at her skirt, at the way the shadows fell into the folds of fabric. She wished she could disappear.

"Did he hurt you?" Meg asked unexpectedly.

Christine glanced up and followed the direction of Meg's gaze to her own dress, noting the pins on her bodice that replaced missing buttons, and the faint remnants of dust which Erik's landlady had not managed to brush out of her skirts.

"I fell." The truth of it sounded absurd in Christine's own ears. "I found his house, but it was dark..."

She thought to explain; all the half-sensible reasons about the war and Erik leaving Paris were already poised on the edge of her lips, but then she closed her mouth with a snap and said instead:

"I needed to see him again. To make sure that I wasn't crazy." Christine heard her voice stretch thin but strong somehow, like spider-silk. "Meg, I just needed to see him."

"Naked." Meg supplied.

Christine gaped, and in that flustered moment Meg shook herself, casting off the stupor of the night, and became pragmatic:

"You can't tell maman, she'll kill you. You better go and change out of that... I think I have some buttons that match, I'll go look now."

"Meg," Christine called after her quietly. "Thank you..."

Meg looked back for a moment, dishevelled in her unslept-in nightgown. She paused, seemingly debating something with herself. Then her eyes widened slightly, as if she asked against her own better judgement:

"Did he do something to you? When you sang with him on stage that last time, your eyes went all strange, like you couldn't fight him. Perhaps at the supper..."
Christine moved her head from side to side, No, until Meg fell silent. "This was me, Meg. All me."

"But you don't regret it."

"No."

Meg looked at her for a moment longer, then shrugged in that resigned way she sometimes did at rehearsals, when they encountered an impossible, unnecessarily complicated dance step.

"Go on, before maman finds you here. I'll bring the buttons."

Christine nodded gratefully. She was about to head to her room when her gaze landed on the balcony door. The new latch was polished brass, a replacement for the broken one. With a stab of belated fear, Christine imagined Erik out there, behind the curtains, waiting like a silent black shadow in a cloak and mask. Madame Giry had sat right here at the table, and then Christine had joined her after the Tuileries ball and they talked. Had her own arrival saved Madame Giry? It was an odd, disquieting idea. Christine did not want to think about it, but her mind resolutely turned to Erik's room, to the recent but dreamlike memory of his eyes in the greyish light of morning as he told her about this.

He did not want her forgiveness, and she did not want to give it – yet he had looked at her as if she had been a priest, as if she must hear his confession. There had been resentment in that look, and anger, but Christine felt a sudden fierce desire to protect the moment, to keep it as he had kept her ring.

With a swift movement, Christine flicked the latch and swung open the door to the balcony. Fresh air blew into the room. It ruffled the curtains, her hair, her skirts, and Christine took a deep breath, then another. And then she was simply standing there alone with the morning, inhaling lungfuls of cool air that smelled of horses and dew and some neighbour's early cooking, and in this one moment she felt she needed nothing else.

"It'll be all right," she said aloud, and it felt good to hear it. "Everything will be all right."

o o o

"It is nothing short of a disaster."

The Comte de Chagny said this in his usual calm, clipped tone, but Raoul had no trouble spotting the anxious edge in his father's movements. The Comte rose from his place at the head of the dining table and moved briskly to stand behind his chair, as though taking the floor at the emergency session of the Assembly for the second time this evening. Raoul saw his mother's frown of disapproval.

The Comte wrapped his hands around the oak chair, his fingers indenting the heavy upholstery. "A crowd of a hundred thousand cramming the quays." He turned to Raoul, "I assume you did see them?"

"Yes, Father. I saw them." Raoul suppressed a twinge of annoyance at the question, and made an effort to continue sawing at his steak. It was done to perfection, and he wished it was not, so that he could pretend to be engrossed in the process of consuming it. In the time since he had lost Christine, his father had become the more determined to make a politician of him, and Raoul was rapidly tiring of these misguided concerns for his welfare imposed on him every time he obeyed his filial duty and paid his parents a visit.
Yet this time, his father did not press more questions on him, but merely resumed his speech, as if delivering a prepared peroration:

"A crowd of a hundred thousand outside, calling for a Republic, and what happens in the chamber? Nothing but bickering! Jules Favre and the Left are wringing their hands as usual and debating the logic of starting a riot – while the Right are heaping blame on Ollivier and us with him, as though it was not de Gramont but I who, two months ago, was demanding immediate action against Prussia."

"Really, my dear," the Comtesse remonstrated, "cannot this keep until after supper?"

"I'm afraid not." The Comte ran his hands through his silvered hair, and sat down again, heavily. "Ollivier is finished. The Right have taken over the government."

In the ensuing silence, Raoul could only stare at his father. There was nothing in his bearing to suggest a man defeated; his shoulders did not stoop and his eyes measured Raoul as coolly as ever, and yet Raoul understood very well that he was looking at the end of his father's career. The Comte de Chagny had thrown in his lot with Ollivier's party, rejecting the hard-line imperialists on the Right in seeking a constitutional monarchy, a Liberal Empire. These aspirations meant little to Raoul, but in the face of his father's calm demeanour at delivering such news, he felt a pang of fellow-feeling. This sudden sympathy for his father was oddly disturbing.

Across the table, his mother set down her knife and fork, saying in a neutral voice, "What happens now, Arsène."

Raoul could not remember the last time she had addressed his father by his given name.

"Ollivier is taking his wife to Italy. I imagine they will not delay their departure any longer than is necessary."

The Comtesse considered for a moment. "You are proposing we join them?"

"That seems best."

Raoul watched as their conversation continued in silence, without gesture or expression, as if his parents had withdrawn to another place where he could not hear them. He wondered that they could be so accepting of this, as if the two of them made a habit of going into exile every now and then. He supposed it was for the best: if they left the country, it would make the decision he had come to over the past few weeks somewhat easier.

Finally, the Comtesse touched a fingertip to the corner of her eye, briefly, and then the usual charming smile returned to her face. "I admit, it has been entirely too long since we have had a holiday abroad. I should very much like to see Florence again. Raoul, darling, do you remember Florence?"

The question took Raoul by surprise. "I can't say that I do."

"No, I suppose you wouldn't; you were rather young. You will find it delightful, I'm sure. It will be just what you need: a complete change of scene and society."

Raoul's heart skipped. So they expected him to come with them. He tried to make his voice gentle, but when he spoke it sounded strained:

"I am not going, maman."
"Don't be silly, darling, of course you are," she waved him off – at the same time as the Comte demanded: "What do you mean, you are not going?"

Raoul took his starched napkin, folded it carefully in half and then in half again, placed it beside his plate, and stood up. He squared his shoulders.

"Forgive me, but I cannot come with you to Italy. You have my deep sympathies, Father, on the matter of Monsieur Ollivier's misfortune, but I am unable to leave France at present, and unwilling to do so. I do hope you will understand that I have my own affairs to attend to."

His father's stern brows lifted in an ironical way Raoul did not like. "Dare I hope that these 'affairs' are not another wearisome round of frivolity and melodrama involving Parisian chorus girls?"

"They are not." What sympathy Raoul had felt for his father's plight was evaporating.

"Come darling," the Comtesse said peaceably, "of course you must be unhappy at this news. Your father and I completely understand your reluctance to leave all your friends behind so precipitously, but what affairs could you possibly place above the safety of your own family?"

The Comte gave a long sigh. "My dear, I believe all our son's affairs may be safely archived under the name 'Christine Daaé'."

Raoul reached into his pocket and withdrew a letter. Without saying another word he opened it and placed it on the table where his parents could see the official stamps from the War Office.

"You may file this under whatever name you like," he told his father. "I hadn't wanted you to find out this way, but perhaps it is best after all."

For a moment, both his parents were speechless. Then the Comtesse made a stricken, birdlike sound in her throat. "You cannot do this. Raoul, this is a cruel joke."

"It is no joke, maman. I'm sorry."

"Very well." His father sounded tired. "I wish I had discovered these papers sooner, but no matter now. How much is this folly going to cost us?"

"This is not a conscription," Raoul pointed out. "You cannot buy a replacement."

"Nonsense; it is a question only of price."

"Quite to the contrary." Raoul picked up the letter, and tucked it into his pocket. "It is a question of decency. I admit I have not your political acumen, Father, but I will not allow another man to die in my place."

"Then you are a fool," the Comte snapped. "Were you not paying attention to anything I have tried to teach you? The army of France is a shambles, and your presence in it, untrained as you are, is completely superfluous!"

Raoul shrugged. "My presence in Italy would be no less superfluous, and likely more so. At any rate, it will be," – he gave his mother a tight, apologetic smile – "a change of scene and society."

He went to his mother, kissed her cold cheek, and then stood before his father with his hand held out, until at length, the Comte shook it, and turned away.

"I will write to you in Italy. I hope your journey is a pleasant and safe one."
Raoul waited for them to say something, for an answer.

"Berthe." His mother raised her voice, calling the maid over. "We will have the coffee now."

Chapter 24: L'amourette du Fantôme

Sorry about the long absence, guys – I've been out of town and now I'm in the middle of a serious work overload and unfortunately writing time is hard to come by. Here's a long chapter to make up for it!

Instead of random trivia, this chapter has an epigraph of sorts: a stanza from a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, Duineser Elegien, published in 1923. The translation is from German. (Thanks to Carly for drawing my attention to the book wherein this poem was mentioned.)

*Every angel is terrifying. I know it, yet still, alas!*
*I must sing to invoke you – you, great near-deadly birds of the soul! Where have they gone, the days of Tobias when one of those brilliant ones stood at the door of the unexceptional house? Dressed for the journey he was not at all terrible, a youth to a youth who eagerly spied him. But should the Archangel – dangerous, masked by the stars - should he tread but a step lower and closer we should be struck down by our hammering hearts. What are you?*

There you go. And now, back to the story.

Please note: The title of this chapter has changed, because I finally found a suitable replacement to "fille", which was originally (incorrectly) used here in the possessive. Thanks to Cathy, Jessica and Lizou for their help in hunting down suitable historically correct terms!

Chapter 24 – L'amourette du Fantôme

Jean reached for the bottle of absinthe on the table and refilled Erik's glass, then Louise's and finally his own. His grave manner gave this the weight of a religious ceremony conducted in the cluttered store-room, by the dusty sunlight streaming through the half-open back door. The afternoon breeze wafting in seemed to carry with it the unidentifiable smell of poverty which always clung to Montmartre, but was particularly angry and bruised today, following the announcement of the new Assembly, composed entirely of right-wing imperialists.

"To France. She will survive this black day." Jean drank, wincing, and Louise tossed hers back as if it was poison.

Erik did not touch his glass. He could not believe he was still here. He and the Gandons were sitting around Jean's sign-writing table, on the same damned crates with which he had interrupted their meeting two nights earlier, the same ones that Christine had fallen against. Erik tried not to remember the terror in Christine's shadowed face when he had crashed down beside her, and everything that had come afterwards...

He raised his glass sharply, and gulped the vile stuff down. He longed to be gone from this room and this city, but yesterday's crowds had prevented even Monsieur Duchamp from opening the
office, and Erik had felt an inexplicable reluctance to depart Paris without settling matters with him. This morning, while the new Assembly was being sworn in, he had gone to the office, thrown the Fiaux projects on Duchamp's desk and at last obtained the required paperwork for the languishing work on his courthouse.

It had been an ugly day, and Erik had no interest in continuing its ugliness with pointless drinking to an equally pointless cause. He would not have been here at all had Louise not pressed him into joining them while the store was shut for dinner. There were still several hours before the Sedan train, and it had seemed easier to accept than to explain that what he really wished was that Louise Gandon, her house, her politics, her store, and the rest of Paris would go to Hell in a small and uncomfortable handcart.

Jean moved to refill his glass; Erik did not prevent him, but did not drink. He saw Jean cast a questioning look in Louise's direction, and her answering nod – and finally understood why they had insisted on his company.

"There are several of us meeting tonight to discuss things, Andersson." Jean set down the bottle, sending a toxic whiff of something herbal in Erik's direction. "You might like to come. We can always use a clever man who knows what they're saying down in Paris."

Two days ago, Erik reflected, this offer would have pleased him. Today, he could not have cared less. "I'm afraid I have a train to catch this evening, but I trust you can get by without me."

"You've really made up your mind to leave Paris, then?" To Erik's surprise, Jean sounded genuinely sorry.

"I have."

"Well. Perhaps another time."

"A last drink," Louise decided. She raised her glass, nodding at Jean. "Then you'd best open up before the customers are hammering on the shutters."

Their glasses flashed green in the light; then Jean set down his and turned to Erik. "I'll leave the new Lanterne out the front."

"My thanks." Erik rose for the obligatory handshake and farewell, assuring Jean that he would of course continue to read the Lanterne as closely as ever while out of town. He chose not to mention that for the denizens of Sedan, including its architect, political awareness was not a priority.

Jean went out to re-open the store. Before Erik could extricate himself from Louise's company as well, she clapped her hand to the tabletop, making the glasses clank.

"Right. About the girl."

Erik halted. Louise was glaring up at him from her crate, eyes bloodshot from the drink but her gaze razor-sharp. Under the bandage, Erik's face tensed. He had to force his voice to remain low. "She is no concern of yours."

"Nor anyone else's, obviously. For pity's sake, sit down."

Erik remained standing. "I am rather in a hurry."

"For your evening train? I bet." Louise lumbered to her feet, pushing her kerchief back over her hair and assuming a determined expression. "Look here: if a pretty bed-warmer is what you're after,
you find yourself a good sturdy working-class girl and have your fun. But that little creature from
the Opéra is a different sort. You leave her alone and she won't last a week."

"Madame," Erik said coldly, "You may recall I once asked you not to discuss Mademoiselle Daaé.
I do not like to have to ask again. Now, if you'll permit me to take my leave—"

Louise gave an impatient snort, like a horse badly harnessed. "You ass. She looks at you like
you're Christ transfigured, the Devil knows why! Now you've taken her for a tumble, she'll fancy
herself in love, I know her kind – all dewy skin and great big eyes, then one day a man comes
along and there you have it: it's high tragedy, and she's a wasted old maid at twenty-five!"

Erik's eyes felt suddenly hot and it was painful to swallow. He wished he had been born tone-deaf
and without a voice. "Mademoiselle Daaé will find a suitable husband when she wishes to."

"Well, isn't that noble! And was that what you were thinking two nights ago when the bed was
doing a jig over my head? Suitable husband! You don't just take her like she's a laundress, you
great fool. A girl like that wants fine dresses and a wedding, and what'd you leave her? Here I
thought your Opéra 'demoiselle was one of them actress-women, a vixen, knows a thing or two –
not a dirty little mouse, all tears and snot, with a lover who stands here telling me she'll find herself
a husband! She'll melt like a candle the moment you've gone."

Erik picked up his hat off the nearby crate, dusting it off to conceal the shaking in his hands. It was
intolerable to listen to this woman speak about Christine. He should never have allowed this to
happen, should have left Paris the moment Christine was gone. Louise Gandon knew nothing of
Christine's life or his; she understood nothing. He did not want to harm her. He just wanted to
leave. "If you are quite finished?"

Louise looked him up and down, taking in his travelling clothes. She made a grimace of distaste.
"That girl is best off without you."

"You are quite right. She is." Erik put on his hat, located his gloves and put on those as well.
"Good day to you, Madame Gandon. A pleasure to have met you."

"Pah!" spat Louise. It was a sound of such revulsion that for a moment Erik thought his mask had
slipped. He grabbed at it, but it the bandage was firmly in place.

"I told Jean, I said, we'd do well to have him on our side. He's a brave man, made a better scene at
the Opéra than any of us could've done. That's what I told him. Pah!" she spun around to the door
leading to the shop, and slammed it shut behind her.

Erik heard her clomping away into the store. There was a heavy pressure in his chest that was not
anger; it seemed to go with the moisture seeping uncontrollably from his right eye into his
damaged side. He stood there for a moment, then picked up his travel-case, newly bought and still
smelling of glue, and walked out.

He did not realise until after the cab had turned down the Boulevard Montmartre that he intended
to stop there.

"The Variétés, monsieur," the driver called from his box, as if Erik needed to be told.

"Yes. Right here."

ooo

Christine almost tripped over the little boy who tugged at her skirts in the noisy corridor, when she
and Meg came out of the ballet dressing-room to go home after the matinee.

"Please, mademoiselle, are you Christine Daaé? I have a message for you." He dragged his cap off his blonde head, looking awestruck by the backstage chaos and the exotically painted people darting around them in the corridor.

Christine frowned. "Yes... What message?"

"There's a fancy gentleman outside wants to talk to you."

Christine glanced at Meg's puzzled expression – then brightened: Raoul! She had not heard from him at all since the end of their engagement. She could not blame him for needing this silence, after what she had done. Yet, fairly or not, she had missed his friendship, longed to know what was happening in his life. Almost at once, hope became a nervous knot in her stomach. What would she say to him?

"Mademoiselle?" The boy was waiting, kneading his cap in his small hands.

Christine turned to Meg. "You have to come with me! It's Raoul..."

Meg squeezed her hand, understanding. "Lead the way, monsieur," she said gravely to the boy, who blushed a vivid radish colour all the way to his hairline, as though paid a deep compliment.

Twisting on his heel, he made for the exit and Christine and Meg followed close behind. A group of chattering ballerinas swept up behind them when they rounded the corner. The group was smaller than usual, Christine noted, wondering at the absence of a few familiar faces.

Helena Weiss hooked her elbow through Meg's, grinning. "What's the hurry? Are you not coming to the Café Anglaise?"

"I can't—" Meg began.

"You two are always so serious!" Blanche pouted, her tiny pink mouth becoming no bigger than a child's. "Come along, girls, they're off to the Bourse tonight to watch for war news or something."

"Blanche." Helena's rebuke silenced the laughter for only a moment. "Will you come, later?" she asked Meg, more quietly.

"Later," Meg agreed, and much to Christine's relief Helena and the others continued on their way, resuming their chatter.

"Lighten up, amourette du Fantôme," Blanche winked at Christine in passing – but instead of the usual sting of anxiety, Christine felt an unexpected relief. Nothing had changed. Nothing at all.

They followed the errand boy out the side entrance to the street. Several carriages were still waiting at the kerb, but people were few; the performance had finished some time ago, and most theatre patrons were long gone. The warm afternoon breeze was a welcome change after the stuffy theatre and Christine inhaled a deep breath, searching apprehensively for any sign of Raoul's carriage.

"Over here," the boy caught their attention, pointing, before dashing off out of sight to find new errands.

Christine's only warning was a faint exclamation from Meg. She stared at the occupant of the cab in front of her, her skin prickling.
"A fancy gentleman..." she echoed the boy's words with an inflexion she herself could not recognise. Perhaps she was glad to see him. Perhaps.

"You don't have to." Meg gripped her wrist urgently. "You don't have to talk to him. We can just walk away."

Erik stepped down onto the pavement. He was dressed for travel, in boots and a light coat, and there was a sturdy case of some kind on the foot platform of the cab. He made a small bow to each of them in turn:

"Mademoiselle Daaé. Mademoiselle Giry. I am sorry I could not attend your performance this afternoon."

"You're leaving," said Christine, flatly.

She saw the tiniest movement of his cheek that could have been a wince, or nothing at all. "This evening; yes. I must return to work, but I had hoped to..." He trailed off. "I would like to say goodbye, mademoiselle. If I may."

Christine hesitated.

"Would you care to join me?" He indicated the cab. "Perhaps we could go for a walk. I will not keep you long."

"Christine..." Meg muttered, very quietly. "This isn't a good idea."

There was a glimpse of dread in Erik's eyes: he understood that Meg knew.

"Mademoiselle Giry." He addressed Meg, but continued looking at Christine. "I would be obliged if you let your mother know where Mademoiselle Daaé is."

He was silent long enough for Christine to recognise he was offering his life as security. He looked as tense as Christine had ever seen him. She wondered if he expected her just to walk away.

"Meg," she took a deep breath, "I will see you at home, soon. Before you leave for Helena's."

The concern did not leave Meg's face, but she nodded reluctantly. "All right."

Erik held out his arm for Christine. She hesitated another moment, then gave Meg a tense smile, and went to the cab.

She did not dare take Erik's arm. Awkwardly, her legs still sore from dancing, she climbed to the seat herself, settling down on the far side of the bench. Erik mounted the step after her. He left as much distance between them as the narrow bench allowed, but even so he was close, so close that Christine was aware of his warmth. She felt ambushed, confused by his sudden appearance. This man who belonged to her nights had burst through the fabric of her day, taking the place beside her that had belonged to Raoul... She glanced at Erik, but all she could see was his mask.

The reins tightened overhead at a word from the driver, and the horse trotted off. Warm air blew Christine's curls into her face.

"Where are we going?" She pushed her hair from her eyes, wishing Erik would turn around so she could read his expression. Meg was still watching them from the pavement as the cab turned into the boulevard, joining the rest of the wheeled traffic.
"The cemetery."

Christine's heart gave a thump. "That isn't funny."

"No. I would be concerned for your sense of humour if you found it so."

"Why are you taking me there?" She tried not to panic. Erik's mask was as impassive as his voice.

"It is nearby and the grounds are beautiful. We can walk."

"Around the cemetery!"

Erik half-turned to face her, and Christine saw the tension was still there, in his eyes. "If you would like to stop, you need only call to the driver."

Christine glanced around; the ornate façades of the Boulevard Montmartre were falling back quickly. Despite the crowds of people everywhere, strolling, riding in carriages, chatting and eating at the outside café tables, nobody spared their cab a second look. She felt at once invisible and exposed.

This was ridiculous, Christine decided. She could not fear Erik. She would not.

"All right. The cemetery, then."

He turned away again, apparently satisfied.

_They call me 'l'amourette du Fantôme' at the theatre_, she wanted to tell him, but didn't. She wondered whether he really was going back to work, and whether it was anywhere near the war. In recent days the front seemed to have moved away from the Belgian border, but the papers contradicted one another and it was impossible to discover what was happening. Perhaps he was going somewhere else entirely... She had no answers, even now.

They travelled the rest of the way to the Montmartre cemetery in silence. Every time the cab slowed to allow other traffic to pass, Christine half-expected to see a _gendarme_ or hear a passerby shrieking, but nothing happened. Gradually, her heartbeat slowed down, and she found herself growing accustomed to the notion of sharing a cab-seat with Erik, of driving with him in broad daylight through the bustle of Paris.

The cab passed through the cemetery gate, jolting over the uneven paving-stones, and rumbled down the wide leafy alley between the oldest of the graves. The tree canopies above them scattered the afternoon sunlight over the pathway, and birds called to one another intermittently, clear and very high. Christine could almost believe this strange outing was nothing more than a carriage-ride in the Bois de Boulogne.

"The next left," Erik called to the driver when they passed Adolphe Adam's grave. "At the end of the rue."

Christine turned sharply at the familiar directions. "Erik, not there. I don't want to talk with you there."

Erik locked his gloved fingers together, staring ahead. "It will only take a minute, Christine."

His voice lingered for the briefest moment on her name, and Christine felt a small shameful thrill at hearing him say it. She remembered his whispers against her skin in the night, and had to look away.
They dismounted near the entrance to what she had once thought of as the Angels' Garden, when she had been young and Madame Giry would bring her here to pay respects to her father. Now that she was older she could see it was not really a garden, but only a fenced-off block of cemetery land owned by the Opéra, where several of the performers were buried. The graves and crypts were half-hidden by trees, and among them stood figures of angels with wings folded, bowing their heads under veils of white marble.

"Wait here," Erik directed the cab driver, who shrugged indifferently in agreement. Erik held the gate open for Christine.

She shook her head, perturbed. "My father's grave?"

"Would you rather visit Piangi's?" He nodded at a crypt on their right near the fence, with a massive wreath of slightly wilted pink roses.

"I would rather not visit either!" Christine flared. "Erik, this place is – it's special, it means something to me..."

"I know." Something in the way he said it made Christine fall silent. He did know. He had not brought her here to torment her with the grave of Piangi, a man he had murdered; he did not like being here. This was something else.

Christine stepped through the gate into the garden. It was shady under the trees, cooler than the path. She had not been here in a long time. Guiltily, she noticed the fresh flowers in stone vases at some of the graves. Her own father's crypt stood grey and bare, the steps unswept, as a wordless rebuke to a daughter who could not face the ugly memories she might encounter here. There were too many of those, crowding her mind: the clash of swords; Raoul's blood dripping in the snow; and a strange light beckoning to her from within the tomb, luring her away from the world, seeking to break her will.

Erik did not stop when they reached her father's crypt, but continued up the steps towards the tomb itself. He turned around when he saw Christine was not following.

"Come. There is something you must see."

She looked up at him uncertainly, biting her lip. His figure was dark against the pale stone and the breeze lifted the edges of his coat, so that the whole effect was disconcertingly theatrical. She recalled Madame Giry saying, he has been too long a ghost. Perhaps that was true. Steeling herself, Christine went up the steps after him.

A wrought-iron grate covered the entrance to the tomb. Erik gave it a hard push and the grate swung inward with a long thin cry.

"Up there." He pointed to the lintel above their heads.

Christine frowned: it was dim inside the crypt, and she had trouble seeing anything but the dust on top of the open grate. Then she noticed it: a tiny pulley. The moment she realised what she was looking at, the entire mechanism popped into view, standing out from the black iron as if by magic. Twin pulleys were attached to the top of the door and the lintel, joined by a thin strong cord of catgut which looped over them and continued into the gloom within.

"There are air vents under the roof on the side," Erik indicated the wall to their right. "I cannot imagine their intended purpose in a crypt, but nevertheless there they are; you may satisfy yourself as to their location if you wish. The rope leads out through them."
Christine looked at the pulleys, at the whole silly rig. She could not tell if she felt more angry or stupid. "And the light in the niche?"

"A lamp inside," Erik admitted. "I fed the lit taper through the same vents."

"It looked like magic."

Erik studied the tomb intently, his shoulders stiffening. "It was intended to. You had to believe it was real."

"I did, Erik. I always believed you."

Christine left him and went around to the side of the tomb, finding the air vents in the wall. She would never have noticed it had she not known to look for it, but there was the end of the cord, knotted around a metal protrusion from a rough patch the masonry.

So simple. A clockwork trick desecrating the grave of her father.

"Erik, how long..?"

Christine started; he was right behind her.

"Enough of this."

Erik jerked the cord forcefully and it came off the metal bolt, snaking back inside the tomb. He vanished around the corner and a second later there was the sound of brackets giving way. Christine rushed back and saw him breaking off the last of the pulleys, crushing them with such explosive, manic violence that it looked almost like an act of revenge.

Erik bundled the broken pulleys together with the catgut into his hands, and offered the tangle to her. "An angel's wings." His voice was harsh with irony. "There, keep it."

The wooden wheels spun madly in his wide palm, like beetles turned on their backs. Repelled, Christine stepped aside. "I don't want it. Throw it away."

Erik closed his hand slowly. Then with a sudden twist of his arm, he threw the tangle sideways, into a patch of shrubbery beyond the stairs. The string caught on a branch briefly, slipped and disappeared.

Christine looked back from his empty hand, to his eyes. Erik met her gaze unwillingly and with a sudden clarity she understood what he was trying to do. He wanted to give back to her the memory of her father.

Christine felt her chest expand painfully, her breathing growing shallow and quick as though she would cry, but she did not want to cry at all. There was sunlight on the wall of the tomb, patches of it dancing on the stairs and on her dress and on Erik's coat... The Angels' Garden was beautiful.

"Thank you..." she said, when she could speak.

Erik turned his face aside, his jaw setting. Christine saw the sun touch his bare cheek, and for an instant she trembled because the light seemed within him, calling to her – because he could be like this.

When he looked back at her he was completely himself. "Let us return, Christine."

Erik studied her as though trying to find out the cause of her madness, but Christine saw the thirst in his eyes. "Scales?"

"You remember. Do-re-mi-fa-so..." She spoke the words, but they came out as a half-smile. She waited – and then Erik was singing.

His throat moved to shape the note, and it sprang fully formed from his lips and flew, soaring in freefall like a man launching himself off a precipice, gliding on thin air, indifferent to the inevitable death from the earth below. Not scales, not opera; it was a song Christine knew, a very old song she had once heard coming from the walls of the chapel in the Opéra.

Without thinking about it, she opened her mouth and then the harmony was there, entwining with the melody Erik showed her, while in her heart a child asked of a grey stone-faced wall: "Angel of Music, why do you cry?"

Erik stopped, and so did she. A verse, no more. Christine felt rest of the music become tangled again in her throat, all the unvoiced songs coiling like strings of a broken violin. She didn't care. She breathed as if she had been flying.

"Christine..." Erik spoke into the returning reality. A cemetery, the tomb of her father. They could leap from the precipice, but there was always the ground beneath. "We must go."

Christine smiled at him, just because she wanted to.

"Yes... In a moment."

Erik touched a lock of her hair where it lay against her arm. Christine watched, her heart knocking in her chest, as he brushed his knuckles against the curl, barely disturbing it. There were calluses on his thumb and his index finger from holding a pencil, and a smudge of charcoal under a nail – no blood. Then he took his hand away.

They walked down the steps side-by-side into the shaded garden, strolling slowly between the trees and graves, back towards the waiting cab.

It was not enough, Christine thought wistfully. In another world, perhaps, there were two people who looked exactly like them, save that one was not a murderer, and the other had never raised her voice before a wall in prayer to a made-up angel. She could sing by herself in that other world, and Erik could find freedom from the darkness tainting his mind, and then they could touch willingly, as lovers.

"Erik? Do you think there are other worlds?"

He stopped just inside the open gate of the garden, on the edge between shadow and sun. Her question made him raise a brow. "There are millions of them, I'm sure. It is only our rotten luck to be condemned to this one."

"I think there is only this one. No angels, no demons. Only this."

"That is a sad philosophy," Erik said grimly. "I would hate to miss out on my share of the brimstone."

Christine smiled. She wondered what he would do if she asked him to stay. Then the moment was gone.

Erik offered her his arm and she took hold of it lightly, thinking that perhaps there were other
worlds hidden inside this one, worlds within worlds. They left the cemetery together.

Chapter 25: An Evening In The Country

Here it is, the horrendously delayed Chapter 25, a.k.a. proof that the author is still breathing. I would love to promise to update regularly from now on, but unfortunately I am still working on my thesis, and will be doing so until late March or a nervous breakdown, whichever comes first. So, please be patient with me – and if you are still reading, please leave a review, you'll make my day!

Trivia for this chapter: A bit of historical background, for those of you who are interested in such things. Towards the end of August 1870, France had two armies, both of which were in serious trouble. The first, under the command of Marshal Bazaine, was hopelessly besieged in the fortress of Metz. The second, Marshal MacMahon's Army of Châlons, was hastily brought up to strength with a bunch of new recruits and half-baked officers, and sent off to try to break the siege. MacMahon's army, in total disarray, was in no fit state for such a manoeuvre. Meanwhile, the Prussians were closing in.

A quick reminder: When last we saw our characters, Raoul was heading off to the army, and Christine and Erik had just visited her father's grave, before Erik left Paris.

Chapter 25 – An Evening In The Country

Night was falling fast. The tiny town of Le Chêne was uneasy, filled as it was with officers and surrounded by army tents as far as the eye could see. The 12th corps had been camped there through most of the day, having roused the town from its sleepy life with the tremendous confusion of arriving officers and orderlies, foot soldiers, cavalrymen, gun layers, artillery wagons and, as a the centrepiece of this chaos, the baggage train of the Emperor Napoleon III, who was still accompanying the army despite having officially relinquished command.

The townsfolk had of course opened their houses to the officers, but the illusion of welcome was wearing thin. Raoul saw the way their eyes tracked the soldiers sullenly, heard their muttering in the streets. The army would not remain to defend them, they said, but would march onward in the morning, retreating further and further north and abandoning them to the Prussians.

"What will happen to us?" women kept asking him, just as they asked the others, catching his sleeve, looking into his face with despairing eyes.

Raoul was forced to admit that he did not know, that it rested with the superior officers and he was only a sub-lieutenant. Each time he said it, he felt the betrayal in their eyes like a slap across the face. It was one thing to be useless in Paris. To be useless out here, worse, to know himself to be just one more untrained officer among so many others – that was maddening. He had held few illusions about the army after the reports he had studied in Paris, but he had thought that somehow, being here would be better than watching it from afar, that somehow he could take a rifle in his hands and stand with those who would drive the Prussians back over the border.

Well, he had his rifle. He even knew he was a good shot with it – unlike some of the green recruits who had never before seen a breech-loader – thanks to his father's involvement in provisioning the army. At the time, Raoul had thought that using a châsepot for hunting fowl was ridiculous, but right now he was glad to have had the practice. Yet no amount of practice would do him any good, when they had not so much as caught wind of the Prussians in the two weeks since he joined the regiment in Châlons. All they seemed to do was march endlessly across the countryside, trudging
across chalky plains, fields, mud, often going for days with no more food than potatoes and coffee
when the supply train was lost or delayed. The physical strain of those marches, the nightmarish
days when Raoul thought he would die before reaching camp – all that would have been bearable
had there been something to march towards, a confrontation, a fight. But the enemy eluded them.

Raoul knew he was not alone in his frustration. The other officers and the men had grown
increasingly restless, especially after yesterday, when news had come that the Prussians were
massing at Vouziers, offering battle. They had marched at the double, rushing gladly to face at last
these phantom enemies. Yet here they were at Le Chêne, a stone's throw from Vouziers, and there
had been no sign of the Prussians anywhere in the area. They had ended up spending the entire day
in camp, waiting for nothing, until in the afternoon a telegram arrived, saying that the forces of the
Crown Prince of Prussia were at Châlons, catching them in a pincer between two armies. There
was no choice. Even with the limited knowledge of tactics Raoul recalled from his schooldays, it
was obvious what the marshal's decision would be. They would have to retreat.

How, Raoul wondered, could he look the people of Le Chêne in the eye and tell them that?

He did not meet the gaze of any of the passers-by as he walked. On the corner of the town square
and the Vouziers road, an entire house had been commandeered for the Emperor and his entourage.
Several officers loitered outside, hoping to catch some news from the aides-de-camp who came
and went through the open front doors. Raoul joined them.

"Take a look at that!" Cloutier, another lieutenant, a tall broad-shouldered man with the bearing of
an old soldier, said by way of greeting. He flicked a cigarette end in the direction of the Emperor's
brightly lit lodgings. "Cooking up a storm, while we've been down to marching rations for three
days."

Behind the rain-spattered windows of the kitchen, Raoul could see three chefs hard at work on the
Emperor's supper. The upper windowpanes were open, and the escaping steam clouded the evening
air with smells of roast chicken and the faintest suggestion of melting butter. A fleeting image
brushed Raoul's memory, of a café in Paris and Christine taking a seat at their table... He turned
away from the house.

"He is the Emperor. In any case, we have been waiting here the whole day. The supply vans cannot
be far now."

"Save your optimism for the men, Chagny. Chances are, we'll be gone tomorrow before they even
know where to send the baggage. Another day of marching rations for us." Cloutier released a
cloud of bitter smoke from his stinking cigarette, grimaced and tossed it into the mud. "Ugh. Half
tobacco, half cow-pat. Can't buy anything in this godforsaken town."

Raoul fished in the inside pocket of his coat and tossed him the wrapped packet. "Here. Left over
from Paris."

Cloutier took the tobacco pouch from Raoul, shook some out, and rolled the cigarette between his
blunt fingers. He lit up, nearly choking in surprise: "This is good! How is it you haven't polished it
off yourself?"

"I am not much of a smoker."

"Not much of a smoker, not much of a drinker – what the hell are you doing here?"

Raoul gave a bitter shrug. "Walking up a healthy appetite, same as you. Back and forth until we get
to Paris and find the Prussians are there already."
Cloutier humphed into his moustache, in agreement. "They've made a fine mess of things here, that's for certain."

A young aide-de-camp rushed out of the Emperor's house, heading for the Hôtel de Ville. Raoul hailed him as he passed by. "Any news?"

"A general retreat," the aide said tersely. "The marshal has sent a wire to Paris to let them know."

"It's done then. We're falling back." Cloutier gave a resigned sigh, breathing a cloud of smoke.

"Yes, to the Northern fortresses. The artillery is going out in an hour or so, to give them a head start. Excuse me."

Raoul stepped aside, adding his nod of thanks to Cloutier's as the young man continued on his way. So the retreat would continue; they would go on marching without a battle in sight, as though this was not a war but the migration of a horde of half-starved men... Raoul was suddenly aware of just how tired he felt, and how futile this whole escapade was. Tomorrow, there would again be no food; tomorrow the raw blood blisters on his feet that had begun to heal after a day's rest would open up again. Tomorrow, they would be running away from the Prussians... And he was so sick of running away.

"I shall see you in the morning, Cloutier."

He waited for the soldier to acknowledge his departure, then turned around and walked briskly across the square, towards the house where he had been given lodging. Only now did Raoul realise that it had grown completely dark. Around the square, many of the windows glowed gold, but their poor lamps could not dispel the peculiar, unnatural blackness that was the night in a small town, so different from Paris. Groups of other officers hurried past him, towards the Emperor's house or away from it. Raoul crossed the stone bridge over the canal that split the town square diagonally in half, then turned into a narrow street that ran out to the edge of town. The rain was starting again; the water shivered with goosebumps, and the thin slick of dirt on the paving stones was deepening to ankle-deep mud that sucked at his boots.

When he reached the house, Raoul lingered outside for a moment, despite the rain. There was a narrow gap between the buildings at this end of the street, and beyond it he could see the ground fall away, paving-stones yielding to grass. He was almost grateful to the light rain for breaking the eerie silence of this place. Ahead lay the vast empty fields, an infinite nothing. After a while, he could distinguish the faint edges of the army tents. They rose out of the rain like an armada of ghostly sails, and Raoul was reminded of the harbour in Perros-Guirec, of a rainy evening many years ago and a boy and girl racing headlong along the pebbled beach, out towards the cold, beautiful sea.

The twenty-seventh of August... Tonight was exactly a year since he had become the patron of the Opéra Populaire.

Raoul shook himself and went to the house where he was staying. The maid, a thin girl huddling into her shawl, admitted him and led him upstairs, raising her lamp before her to light the way. Although it was scarcely nine in the evening, people seemed to retire to bed early in the country, and the house was already quiet and dark. The girl lit a lamp on the bedside table for Raoul and replaced the glass chimney over the flame. The second wick flared, brightening the neat little room.

"Will you be needing anything else, monsieur?"
Raoul had started to say no, then changed his mind. "Yes. Paper and ink, if I may."

The girl bobbed her head, returning a moment later with a stack of writing paper, an inkwell and two pens. Raoul thanked her and she left, closing the door behind her.

Raoul got rid of his officers' cap, gloves and boots, then took the lamp and writing implements over to the heavy desk that stood by the wall near the window. He shrugged out of his wet jacket, hanging it over the back of the chair. A chill draught blew underneath the window-frame, rustling the paper and heralding autumn. Raoul moved the inkwell to hold down the pages, then dipped his pen.

My dear Mademoiselle Daaé... He paused, then went on: my dear friend. I hope I may still be permitted to call you that. I beg you to forgive my long silence—

He thrust the pen back into the holder, and sat back in the chair, running his hands over his face. Everything he could think of to say to 'Mademoiselle Daaé' sounded either accusing or presumptuous. Could he call Christine a friend? Could he ask her if she was well, if she was still dancing, if there had been any more sightings of the Phantom – if she was safe? Could he ask if she was happy?

It was impossible. He could not write to her. Hating his cowardice, Raoul took a clean sheet of paper and started again:

Dear Madame Giry,

I hope this letter finds you in good health, and likewise Mlles Giry and Daaé...

He scribbled the rest of the uncomfortable missive as quickly as he could. At least the post still worked, despite the chaos of troop movements. The letter would leave Le Chêne with the morning post and perhaps reach Paris in the next day or two, although Raoul could not be certain how long it would take for any reply to find him. If the retreat went well, perhaps a few days from now he would be walled up in some fortress in the North... And in the meantime, the Prussians would have occupied this town and dozens of others.

Raoul folded and sealed the letter, then took out the tobacco pouch from his jacket on the chair and walked around the desk to the window. He opened it and stood smoking in the cold air, studying the dark.

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"I'm telling you, we must leave! Pauline, are you listening!"

Erik halted in the doorway. The maid who had opened the door for him glanced up towards the stairs, where Monsieur Egrot's yells were coming from. Their house in Bazeilles had not changed a bit since Erik had been here over a month ago; there were still the same carefully tended plants in the window-boxes outside, the same comfortable, lived-in furniture and old watercolours on the walls. He had arrived here looking forward to resuming the acquaintance with Egrot, particularly because he was in need of a clerk to manage the courthouse project. He had even let the coachman go, certain of a welcome... How stupid of him. Beyond the entrance hall, the empty parlour was lit with an achingly familiar warmth.

"Pauline! Open that door!" There was the sound of a doorknob being rattled.

The house may not have changed, Erik concluded, but the owners clearly had.
"I'm so sorry, Monsieur Andersson," the maid babbled, her plump cheeks turning colours on her masters' behalf. "It's just – a bad time, that is... If you would wait, I'm sure..."

Erik was already leaving. "Kindly convey my regards to Monsieur Egrot, and commend him on his vocal range. Bon soir."

The girl looked on the verge of tears as she shut the door behind him. Erik wondered how long this concert had been going on. He picked up his portfolio and strode back along the garden path towards the Sedan road. From an open window upstairs, the sounds of a woman crying carried down to him on the evening breeze. Erik's skin crawled with disgust, as though he had reached for a handshake and instead encountered something rotten. A domestic quarrel was not what he had expected to find here.

He reached the road and resigned himself to the long walk back to Sedan. The night was clear and moonless, and once he had left Bazeilles behind, he found he could put the Egrots from his mind. Insects chirred in the hedges, falling silent at his approach, then resuming their noise. Ahead, Erik could see nothing but the stars and the ghostly, uneven surface of the road. He shifted the portfolio in his hand.

He did not need Egrot, he decided. He would find a foreman for the construction site and manage the paperwork himself. If they thought him crazy at the mayor's office for insisting to begin construction at a time when everyone else was obsessed with the war, then so much the better. He would be the eccentric architect from Paris and perhaps even his bandaged face could be simply part of his 'charm'.

Unwillingly, Erik reached up and adjusted the bandage. It was chafing at the hot, deformed skin again and making it itch, and the padding had grown damp and unbearable. A dangerous idea seized him. He looked back over his shoulder. The road was completely dark and silent, save for the sounds of insects and the crunch of stones under his own feet. There was no sign of any human presence. Setting the portfolio down briefly, Erik untied the bandage, took a breath, then before he could change his mind, slipped the thing off. The breeze was a sudden cold blast on his scars, then the shock dissolved into a vague, guilty pleasure. He stuck the bandage in his coat pocket and resumed his walk, trying to ignore the clamour of sensations on his face, trying not to think of Christine touching him there...

He gave up. The night was too dark and lonely to divulge his secrets, and there was nothing to stop him from exploring the memory of Christine's hands, of her mouth, her voice when he had dared to touch her – so surprised... He did not have to think of how he had hurt her, not now. She had smiled at him in the cemetery. She had smiled at him.

In the safety of this night, he could unfurl all his impossible fantasies and look at them as at a priceless, stolen tapestry. He would return to Paris, a successful architect, and court Christine all over again, with flowers and music...

"Andersson!"

"Merde!" Erik threw down the portfolio to catch at his face. His heart slammed into his head. He thrust his hand into his pocket, turning his back to the road and grasping for the bandage.

The carriage stopped, someone jumped out and Erik heard hurried footsteps, unmistakably Egrot's. "Wait a moment, won't you? It was about the war, you see!"

It was too late. Egrot's hand landed on his shoulder. "Blast it, Andersson, I am sorry you had to... Oh. Oh – my God."
Erik shut his eyes.

Somebody was knocking on the door. Raoul concluded this with relief, feeling the dream unravel like a rope and slip harmlessly away. Where had he been? Perros-Guirec, a beach... Christine, no longer a child, walking slowly through the cold water towards him – no, towards another man – and he, standing still as only happens in nightmares, powerless even to cry out as Christine kisses the murderer right before his eyes, her small hands cradling his face – she is saving them both, because he is useless, he can't move...

Raoul sat up. His damp shirt stuck to his body and he shivered in the draught from the window, still tasting the foul water from the cellars. Somebody was knocking on the door. The dream that was no dream slipped away, leaving behind only the sense of despair, the awful helplessness of it. He swung himself off the bed and reached for his boots and jacket, trying to wake up completely. The clock on the wall showed four in the morning.

He splashed some water on his face from the ewer on the washstand, and managed to get the door.

An aide-de-camp stood there, flanked by a maid who looked as sleep-rumpled and confused as Raoul felt. Was there a rumbling outside? Oh, he recalled, the retreat. Of course, they are moving the artillery.

"The retreat is off," the young man said. "Orders are to report back to camp immediately; we're moving on to La Besace first thing. The 1st will be coming through there."

The last vestiges of heavy sleep dissolved. Raoul stared at the aide. "But the Crown Prince's army at Châlons – the pincer." He frowned. "The march is back on?"

The aide gave a single sharp nod. Raoul realised the boy was terrified. "The marshal had a wire from Paris, from the Empress and Count de Palikao. We've been ordered to forget the retreat and keep advancing, an all-out march to meet the Prussians."

"But..." Raoul began, and then understood: "They're afraid of a revolution. They're afraid of what Paris will do if we retreat."

He glanced at the sealed letter on the table, the letter he had not dared to address to Christine. He knew he ought to be terrified, but the fierce emotion he felt surprised even him. "We're going to battle."

Chapter 26: The Birds They Put In Cages

Thank you so much for your patience, guys! For those who asked, my thesis is in Molecular Phytopathology, which sadly has nothing whatsoever to do with 19th century Paris. The thesis saga is continuing, so updates are still irregular – but at least this is a nice long chapter for you! The title comes from a song from the wonderful 1998 French musical, "Notre Dame de Paris" (highly recommended!):

Les oiseaux qu'on met en cage
Peuvent-ils encore voler?
Les enfants que l'on outrage
Peuvent-ils encore aimer?

Translation, adapted from the official English version:
Chapter 26 – The Birds They Put In Cages

Erik clutched his mask to his face, his eyes shut. His ears were ringing with the sound of gypsy coins. Egrot's hand dropped from his shoulder.

"My God," the man said again. And then, "That doesn't look so good."

Erik swore and twisted aside to fix his bandage. He yanked the knot tight and straightened up, the bandage gripping his skull like a vice. Egrot's curiosity burned so bright Erik would have sworn he could see the man's crimson face and glittering eyes in the darkness of the roadside.

"It was a hunting accident," Erik threw savagely, in a low voice. He could practically feel Egrot strain to catch the words.

"Good God! What were you hunting?"

"I was not hunting. I was the prey."

He watched the thoughts chase one another across Egrot's round face like changing backdrops: a hunt in the woods, a nobleman's rifle, a stray bullet, a terrible accident, oh the humanity... Bravo, he seethed at himself. A tale fit for an opera libretto.

"Andersson..."

Erik picked up his portfolio. Egrot caught his arm; Erik thrust him off, incensed, yet Egrot's next words were a surprise:

"I was glad to hear from you again. After the way you departed last time, I was not sure – but that's in the past." He flung his hand wide: "Come, my friend, Madame Egrot will have my hide if I don't bring you back in time for supper."

"Supper." Erik looked from Egrot to the carriage behind him, then back to Egrot. Then at the carriage. The coachman gave an elaborate stretch on his box-seat, pretending he was not eavesdropping.

"Roast beef and an excellent red from the cellar. No fish, I swear it." Egrot beamed for all the world as if the ludicrous tale of stray bullets had somehow cemented their friendship.

The edges of Erik's vision spun and wavered dangerously. This man had seen him without his mask. This man – this man was alive – was offering him a supper invitation. Christine, he shaped the word like a man crossing himself.

Egrot cleared his throat. "Look, I'm dreadfully sorry about all that nonsense earlier, but you must come back with me. I absolutely insist on it."

As if on cue, the coachman popped down off the box and held open the door. There was a long pause. Then Erik stepped forward and walked towards the carriage as in a dream, a nightmare of a cage. Come, come inside... Come and see the Devil's Child.
If it is a trap, he thought, I'll kill him.

But he would not. Erik knew this as clearly as if he had heard Christine say it. He mounted the steps of the carriage and sat down, took off his hat and placed it carefully on the worn upholstery of Egrot's ancient conveyance. Egrot heaved himself into the seat opposite and shut the door. The horse whinnied; the springs cried out; the wheels skidded on the gravel, then turned. The moment of death had flashed past, as if he had glanced away from the window of a train and missed it.

"So." Egrot clapped his hands to his pudgy knees. "What are they saying in Paris? It's true, isn't it: the army is on its way here?"

Erik leaned into his seat. The back of his shirt was soaked through. He locked his hands together and felt the pulse between his fingers: beating, fluttering life.

"I don't give a damn about the war, Egrot," he said pleasantly. "I am here to build a courthouse."

"But, the army – the Prussians! Now wait, Andersson. You can't mean to remain here."

"Can't I."

Egrot groaned, "Not you as well! My wife has family in Bordeaux, but she is determined not to move from the house. It is insanity, you must help me convince her! Towns are being looted from here right to the border, all those soldiers needing supplies... Our men, the Prussians. If they pass through here, we'll have nothing left!"

"No," Erik said simply.

Egrot stared at him with frank disbelief. Then, quite suddenly, his expression changed. "A hunting accident, you say."

Erik's silence lasted only a heartbeat. "That's right."

"Because if you know how to shoot, perhaps I could – uh, ask your aid... If we are to remain here, we could at least protect ourselves from the looters."

Erik measured Egrot with a long look, taking in the man's flustered expression and the anxious way he was twisting his gloves. "You are asking for my help."

"You did say you were the one who had been shot, but I thought..."

Erik felt his mouth curve in the beginning of a hard smile. "My help does not come cheaply, Monsieur Egrot. But perhaps you will be willing to aid me in return?"

"Naturally, my friend, naturally! What is it you require?" Egrot looked so relieved, Erik could hardly believe his luck. Was a man's house really worth so much to him? Then again, he thought, he had had a home once, too. Of a sort. And it had been looted.

"I am in need of a clerk for the construction site, Egrot. And someone with local knowledge when it comes to recruiting labour."

Instead of looking annoyed, Egrot actually puffed up with delight. "I would be honoured! And in return, you will remain to help guard the house?"

"I will," said Erik. After all, he decided, the army would never come as far as Sedan anyway. Then before he could stop himself, he added, "I should be glad of some writing paper and ink later, if
you would be so kind. There is a letter I would like to write.

Madame Giry put up the 'closed' sign on the ticket window and pulled out the account-keeping book to record the day’s takings. Deep inside the Théâtre Français, the dull roar of applause marked the start of the night's performance. Even after all this time, Madame Giry noticed wryly, she still waited for the orchestra to launch into the overture. Old habits died hard.

At first, she had thought of this job as a temporary measure, only until the Opéra was rebuilt and everything and everyone returned to their place. Or almost everyone, if she dared to hope that Monsieur Duchamp's architect had truly left the Phantom behind. But instead of restoring the old building, the Emperor had commissioned a new one, and a project that might have taken a year now seemed set to last a decade. The war, of course, put a halt even to the work on that. There was no use dwelling on it. They all had to move on. Both Meg and Christine seemed to have taken well to the Variétés, even if their dancing was no longer strictly ballet, and in the few months since they had been living away from the theatre, both girls seemed to have grown up faster than Madame Giry would have believed possible. The Opéra had never been a good place for either of them; there were too many secrets and too much grief in its catacombs. And yet, Madame Giry admitted to herself, she had loved it. Even when the horrors had started, even when the disturbed child she had grieved for showed himself to be a man far more dangerous than she could have guessed. She had loved the Opéra all the same, as one loves a once-brilliant aunt who is growing old and losing her mind, dying a slow death.

It might have been nice if this dying aunt had left them some inheritance. However, the Théâtre Français did pay enough to cover the rent, and the rest, as Meg had pointed out, would have to take care of itself.

Another round of applause reached the box-office, and Madame Giry gave the accounts book a wistful smile. She could not help expecting the music to start. She did miss the music.

She reached across from her chair to shut the door, but someone on the other side gave it a push.

"May I intrude?" Signoret, the managers' junior secretary, ducked his head into the tiny room. "A gentleman from the Variétés is asking after you."

Madame Giry acknowledged him briefly, then returned to totting up the figures in the book. "I would be obliged if you could tell him to wait, monsieur. I will be there presently."

But he had already opened the door, to reveal a sharp-featured, angular man in an impeccable suit and kid gloves. "Camille Michaud," the gentleman introduced himself brusquely. "Secretary to Monsieur Offenbach. Forgive my abrupt intrusion, but I'm afraid I need to speak with you."

Madame Giry rose from her chair, resting her hand on the chair-back. "What is it about?"

"You were the ballet mistress for the Opéra?"

Madame Giry lifted her brows slightly. "You know that, monsieur, else you would not be here. This is about my daughter?"

"No, no," Camille Michaud reassured her. He looked uncomfortable. "It concerns another of the Opéra Populaire girls. A young lady by the name of Weiss."

Madame Giry glanced at the young secretary, who was still shadowing the doorway. "Thank you, Monsieur Signoret."
"Er, yes." He sketched a bow to Camille Michaud and retreated down the corridor. Madame Giry returned her attention to the gentleman.

"Helena Weiss," she prompted.

"That's right." Camille Michaud looked grave. "You are aware that her father is a Prussian?"

Madame Giry regarded him steadily. "It has not been my habit to investigate the parents of my students, monsieur."

"I see." Camille Michaud took out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead, then sighed. "Come with me, if you will."

"Impossible. I must finish the accounts—"

"I'm afraid this is urgent. The girl is asking for you."

And there it was again. That irritable, slightly baffled expression of a manager with a crisis on his hands, demanding that she make it go away. How many times had Madame Giry seen it in her years at the Opéra? Enough that the response to it was instinctive, as much a reflex as expecting an overture after the applause:

"Of course." Her hands were already moving of their own accord to lock away the accounts ledger in the drawer. She shut the box-office door behind them.

Not ten minutes later, they were backstage at the Variétés. The corridors were quiet; too much so. Knowing how gossip flew through any theatre, this apparent indifference to whatever the trouble had been seemed peculiar, but Madame Giry set the thought aside for now. She followed Camille Michaud down a corridor she recognised as the way to the ballet dressing-room, from the few times she had been able to meet Meg and Christine here after their performances.

"Right here." He opened the door slightly for her, enough to be polite. "I shall be in my office upstairs. Thank you for your help, Madame Giry. If there is anything we can offer you..."

"Twenty thousand francs a month and a box on the grand tier," Madame Giry sighed. She waved off the secretary's blank look with an impatient gesture. "I shall find you if I need you, Monsieur Michaud."

"Very good." He touched his hat-brim and made his grateful escape towards the stairs.

Madame Giry took a moment to pin a stray lock of hair back into the coiled braid on her head. Then she opened the door, and walked briskly into the dressing-room.

"All right, mademoiselle," she said when she spotted the hunched figure in the corner, on one of the benches that ran the length of the far wall. The benches and the wooden floor were strewn with usual clutter of clothes, bits of ribbon, stockings and jars of greasepaint discarded by the other ballerinas on their way to the stage. "Would you be so good as to tell me what has happened?"

When Helena looked up, Madame Giry stopped still. The girl had been weeping, but that was not the cause of her red and swollen eyes, nor of the puffy left cheek across which white tracks slashed three curved lines. Somebody had raked their fingernails across her face, from the corner of her eyelid right to her mouth. The other eye was bloodshot and already half-closed; it took no great experience in such things to know that by tomorrow, it would be black and swollen shut.

"I stumbled, coming offstage... an accident," Helena managed, but when she saw Madame Giry's
appalled expression, her courage seemed to crumble into a grimace. She hunched over again, hugging her stomach and pressing her forehead to her knees as if she was afraid she would fall apart. Hanks of her messy blonde hair hung down in wet points. It was not water in her hair, Madame Giry realised with a start. It was red and sticky, and as sickeningly familiar as an envelope sealed with a death's head, floating down from the rafters into her hands.

For an absurd moment, Madame Giry caught herself wondering in horror what the idiot boy in the basement could possibly have against this girl. Then it was over and she was here, and this young woman, whom not even the most strenuous rehearsal could ever drive to tears, was sobbing like a child. She still wore her leotard, and her shoulderblades protruded from her skinny back like half-buried knives.

"Helena. Look at me, my dear."

Helena complied, dragging the back of her hand across her mouth and nose. As gently as she could, Madame Giry put two fingers under her chin and tilted her ruined face up to the light. The blood had come from her nose, Madame Giry judged; her lips and teeth were pink with it. The fingernail tracks across her face told the story well enough. Her own girls had done this. Her own students.

"It happened here, in the dressing-room?"

Helena nodded against Madame Giry's hand. "They said my father was a spy."

Monsieur Weiss worked in Les Halles, delivering vegetables for the market – but ever since the news of the first Prussian victories, this spy-fever had been growing. Meg had mentioned that Helena's circle of friends had dwindled, and that a few girls gave her a hard time about having a Prussian father, but not in her wildest imaginings could Madame Giry have expected to see this, here. It happened in villages, in occupied towns... And here.

"You mustn't tell my parents, Madame Giry, please. If you say it was an accident, they must believe you. Please."

Madame Giry released the girl's face, promising her nothing. "Come, my dear, get up. You can walk?"

"Yes." Helena struggled to her feet, almost without Madame Giry's aid. "I'm sorry to be so much trouble. Madame Veilleux, our repetiteur, had already gone home, and Blanche and Meg and the others were only here for the matinee. I didn't know who else to call."

"It is no trouble. Come, you must get dressed."

When Helena was ready and Madame Giry had helped her fix her hair and clean up her face as best she could, they went out into the corridor.

"You won't make me talk to Monsieur Offenbach, will you?" Helena asked.

"No." There would be little point in asking Jacques Offenbach, himself a German, to take Helena's side in this. If the scandal got out to the papers, they would no doubt accuse him of being a Prussian sympathiser, and public opinion, fickle as ever, would have audiences snubbing his theatre within days. Besides, if Offenbach's secretary had brought her here, they already know what has happened. They would express sympathy and do nothing. No, Madame Giry decided, complaints to the management would not work.

They were nearly in the wings before Helena seemed to realise where they were going. Her eyes grew wide when she saw the line of dancers in their red-and-green peasant skirts, twirling onstage
in front of a backdrop of village houses. Out of time, Madame Giry noted mechanically, and struggling to control their breathing.

"No, Madame Giry..."

Just then, the dance number ended, and the girls trooped off the stage quickly, farewelled by half-hearted applause. Ignoring Helena's protests, Madame Giry walked directly into their path, holding Helena by the elbow. The first girl stumbled to a halt; the others stopped so as not to cannon into her.

Madame Giry gave them a moment to admire their handiwork, then let go of Helena's arm. She looked at each girl in turn, long and hard. She knew exactly what they saw in her face, and she waited until even the Variétés girls looked as uneasy as her former charges. "Those backdrops, mesdemoiselles. They look heavy."

Then she took Helena's arm again and led the girl through the stage doors towards the exit, leaving them all behind. For just a few breaths, she was fifteen again, and heartsick, while a crowd of ballet students around her laughed at a boy in a side-show cage.

She caught the crowded omnibus home, picked up the mail, and went upstairs. She was nearly at the door when she noticed the names on the two letters.

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Christine brought the plates and cutlery from the kitchen and began to set the table for supper. Her own plate went on the right side of the table, and Meg's on the left, and Madame Giry's in her usual place with her back to the balcony. The curtain billowed lightly, brushing the chair, and that was excuse enough to move it aside and leave the window bare and open. The tiny balcony was empty. Upstairs, they were hosting a dinner party, and the still-light air of early evening was full of conversations, laughter, the smell of roast goose, and the chatter of the coach drivers below punctuated by enthusiastic off-key singing. No shadows waited for her. Christine fingered the fine fabric of the curtain, then drew it shut. Sometimes, she thought, when one is used to being watched all the time, the most difficult thing of all is freedom.

She was determined that it would get easier. Time was all she needed; Raoul had not believed her but it was true. Whether it was the madness of going to Erik's house that night, or the equal madness of his own visit to the Variétés in broad daylight, something had driven out the frightened sleepwalking creature from her mind. Bit by bit, the rest of her was unfolding to fill up all that new space, stretching luxuriously like a thing uncaged.

"I am seventeen years old," Christine said to the empty room, and grinned at her own folly. There was a war going on somewhere, and everyone was afraid, and the papers were muttering that the army might have to retreat all the way to Paris. Workmen were packing up the paintings from the Louvre and sending them west to Le Havre, and cattle had been brought to graze in the once-elegant carriageways of the Bois de Boulogne. But she was seventeen years old, a girl like any other, and she was sick and tired of waiting for something magnificent and terrible to happen to her. Instead, she had started to visit her father's grave again, strange as the place was after her last encounter with Erik, and to accompany Madame Giry on her shopping trips. She had even gone with Meg and Helena the previous week to see if she too might be able to make some extra money, but the gentleman had said she was too skinny. In any case the place had made her nervous, and keeping one secret from Madame Giry was hard enough. One day, Christine promised herself, she would be strong enough to tell her about the night in Montmartre. But not yet.

She caught her reflection in the glass front of a cabinet, all dark curls and shadowed eyes, and only
for a second did she imagine a masked man behind her shoulder. In the next instant he had dissolved into a flush of guilty pleasure under her skin, into hands skimming her hips and white light pouring onto a forbidden map. Christine coughed, and hurried out of the dining-room and into the kitchen.

The kettle went on the stove, the bread went into the basket, the ground coffee went into the coffee pot. Christine lit the gas and the blue flames licked at the kettle merrily. She had everything under control – but she nearly leapt from her skin when Madame Giry came into the kitchen.

Christine cringed mentally at the quizzical expression on Madame Giry's face. "I didn't hear you come in. I was just making coffee."

"Indeed," Madame Giry said soberly, "That would explain the coffee pot."

Christine gave her a half-embarrassed smile, and Madame Giry touched her cheek in greeting. "These came for you." She held out two envelopes, one of which had been opened.

"Letters?" Christine asked in surprise.

"This one was addressed to me, which is admirably proper, but I daresay you may write back to the young Vicomte yourself. The other," – Madame Giry shook her head slightly – "is not so polite. But I think you had best answer them both."

Christine found the treacherous blush creeping up her cheeks again, but mercifully Madame Giry made no comment. She took the letters. One was indeed addressed to Madame Giry, and sealed with the Chagny crest. The other was plain, and bore a return address in some place called Bazeilles. The sender's name was M. Andersson.

Madame Giry took pity on her. "Go on, my dear, I can prepare the coffee."

With a quick thank-you, Christine took herself and the letters out to the living-room, not knowing what to make of this. Her feet seemed to float above the floor. She tried to keep her calm. They were only polite letters, she told herself, both of them. Social niceties, nothing more. Yet her hands were trembling with impatience.

Raoul's letter first, she decided. She uncurtained the window to let in the fading sunlight, then climbed up onto the couch and unfolded the single page.

_Dear Madame Giry..._

Relief welled inside her at the sight of Raoul's familiar handwriting. Madame Giry had been right, the letter was polite and brief, but it was warm, and reading it felt good. Like coming home, like finding an old friend again. Like being forgiven. The surprise came at the end, on the very last line. Should you or Mlle Daaé be able to reply, Raoul wrote, address the letter to the 12th corps, Sous-Lieutenant de Chagny.

The army. Christine set the letter in her lap, and looked at it for a while. She tried to imagine Raoul as an officer. It fit, somehow. He had worn an officer's stripes for the Masquerade at the Opéra, and she had teased him then about wanting military glory... _I have all the glory I need right here,_ he had laughed, and kissed her full on the mouth, right in front of everyone. _I have you._ But, Christine thought, he did not have her now. And this was no game of dress-up, but a real war, and people died... She tried to rein in her anxiety. She would write back to Raoul and find out everything, and perhaps he would not be at the front at all but somewhere else. Not everybody in the army had to fight, she knew that much. Why would they send somebody like Raoul, an
aristocrat and a new officer, into battle? Christine shook her head at herself, and her childish fancies. Not everything was a life-and-death struggle, and here was a letter from a friend, a boy she had known since childhood. If he was happy as an officer, then she would be happy for him, too. But still. She would write and ask.

She took a deep breath, and picked up the second letter. It felt as thin as the first one, and when she opened it, she thought at first there had been some mistake. There was no text, not a word. Instead, on a thin sheet of letter paper, with the ink soaking through to stipple the reverse of the page, there was a piece of music. It was not long enough to be a song, or even a vocal exercise. It was not even finished. But when Christine traced the vocal line with her fingertip, she heard the piano accompaniment as clearly as though it sounded in this room again, and Erik was here and playing for her. Three rising notes, silenced, and then – her voice. Her own voice. On this page at least, she was singing.

Christine put her hand over the notes, as if she could touch the music. Madame Giry's footsteps sounded behind her.

"My daughter did not say when she would be back?"

"Oh," Christine tried to recollect her thoughts. "No. But she should be home soon, I don't think she will stay at Helena's for supper."

Madame Giry's face changed, as though an invisible smile had died away. When she spoke, her voice was strained. "At Helena's."

Unnerved, Christine nodded. It was no lie, she told herself, Meg had indeed planned to go by Helena's house after they were finished for the afternoon, and the last of the good light was already long-gone. She really should have been home by now, but the omnibuses tended to be crowded... It was no lie, but looking up into Madame Giry's face, she suddenly felt exactly as she had on the morning when she had returned from Montmartre, and found Meg waiting.

Without saying another word, Madame Giry went into her own room, and emerged a moment later wearing her hat and gloves.

"Helena Weiss was attacked today," she said flatly. "In the theatre. I was called to take her home to her parents, Christine. My daughter was notable by her absence."

Christine felt her heart descend into her stomach, and remain there. "Um," she said inanely.

"You do know where she is?"

With Madame Giry's eyes boring into her, Christine could do nothing but nod miserably.

"Then please get your hat."

Chapter 27: Fireworks

Hm, I wonder if anyone is still reading?. For those who might be (and if you are, please take a moment to review!), a quick recap: Raoul is in the army, Erik is working in Sedan; Helena Weiss was attacked in Paris and Madame Giry has just found out that Meg is up to something. So, on to Meg...
Chapter 27 – Fireworks

Meg shifted her right leg further along the barre, until the slice of light from the half-open window fell on her ankle again, making the criss-crossed ribbons of her pointe shoe glow white. She bit back a pained breath. Her leg had gone numb and the movement seemed to set a swarm of bees buzzing in her calf. Determinedly, she resumed the pose, leaning along her leg to touch her pointed toe, as though caught mid-stretch.

"No, further to the left. In the light."

Meg stretched a little further. "Like this?"

Monsieur de Gas did not reply, so she assumed the adjustment had satisfied him. She froze, listening to the meticulous scratching of his chalk on cardboard behind her, back and forth. The pose was not as difficult as the one she had held on the previous two sittings, but it left her nothing to look at except the heavy green curtain in front of her face, a view that was not especially exciting. Meg directed her eyes down to the floor instead and tried to read the newspapers that lined it without moving her head. Between splashes of paint, the headlines threatened: "Siege of Metz Set To Continue", "Prussian Spy Arrested", "MacMahon Pushes North", and the latest: "Crown Prince of Prussia Marching for Paris! Citizens, To Arms!"

"Your foot," Monsieur de Gas's deep voice interrupted.

Meg steadied her wobbling ankle. "Is that yesterday's Le Temps, monsieur? I hope they're exaggerating about the Prussians."

"Am I am paying you twelve francs a sitting to read newspapers?" grumbled Monsieur de Gas. "I should throw you out and use Helena for all these studies. How is her father, by-the-by?"

"Still unwell." Helena had not dared to come to the previous day's sitting for fear of provoking her father, who was nursing a swollen jaw and a foul temper after somebody at the markets called him a spy. Even in the theatre, a few girls had made nasty remarks during the matinee.

"And was he really spying?"

Meg huffed. "Only if the Prussians need the price of turnips at Les Halles."

Monsieur de Gas made a gruff sound of amusement. Meg heard him sorting through a box of chalk beside the easel, before he resumed drawing. "All the same, this business with missing her sittings has to stop. I have clients waiting for that picture. And who knows how long they will be prepared to wait, with these news?"

Meg thought of the headlines under her foot. Raising her eyes, she determinedly focused instead on the moth-eaten backdrop. Monsieur de Gas had been particular about using an olive-green fabric, and Meg now turned the question over in her mind, wondering what possible effect its colour could have on a drawing done in chalk and charcoal. She thought of asking, but decided against it; to an artist at work, a model curious about art would probably seem much like a ballet slipper that started to talk.

This was what Christine had disliked immediately, the day Helena had brought them both here. Meg had fallen in love with the studio as soon as she saw it, with its skylights half-draped to cut the glare, with the dizzying odour of oils, with the paintings that slumped in various attitudes against the walls like a flock of migratory birds. But Christine's eyes had been riveted to the empty modelling platform, and she had looked uneasy and almost repulsed, as though the thing was a
spotlit stage or a guillotine. *We would be tools,* she had said quietly. The artist's model, the dancer's shoe, the carefully nurtured voice singing the passion in somebody else's music: neither the art not its creator, but an instrument in the hands of another. Under the eyes of the artist, the model became not a girl but an idea. The girl disappeared.

That was true, Meg supposed, yet when Monsieur de Gas had told her she could come back the next day, her heart had soared. She liked it here. And what was more, she would get paid. Who would have thought you could get sixty francs for five sittings, just holding a pose? It was demanding, even with all her ballet training, but it was also fun to be surrounded by art, to observe its creation. And, fun or not, they did need the money. She had checked her mother's household ledger only the day before, and no matter how carefully Madame Giry budgeted, they were constantly having to cut back on something else. Things were difficult with the war. Prices were rising fast, and if even half of what the newspapers threatened was true, they would continue doing so. The few extra francs that her mother made looking after the *Théâtre Français* might have been enough before the war, but not now.

Meg rolled her shoulders uneasily, trying to imagine having this conversation with her mother. Her neck was going numb from holding the stretch against the barre. She turned her head a little.

"Hold still!" said Monsieur de Gas. Judging by the impatient sound of cross-hatching, the drawing was giving him trouble.

"I'm sorry." It was becoming more and more difficult to force her legs to obey. The strain in her spine made the rest of her body tremble. Meg struggled for a moment longer, until Monsieur de Gas set down his chalk in frustration.

"Enough. If you can't stand up straight, go and rest."

Meg slid gratefully out of her pose, and into a whole new wave of pain. Her left foot felt wooden, her arms were stiff, and cold needles shot through her legs to her lower back. She sank down onto the floor beneath the barre, leaning forward to massage her calves. She was about to get up when Monsieur de Gas cried:

"Stay there!"

Startled, Meg saw he had snatched up a new sheet of paper and a pencil, his dark brows coming together over his eyes. The pencil's quick whisper replaced the chalk and all at once he was absorbed in drawing, her reprieve forgotten. Meg's heart sank.

"I can't hold this pose for long, Monsieur de Gas."

"No need." He made a note on the edge of the paper and leaned back in his chair, tapping the drawing with the back of the pencil. He nodded slightly, then waved her off. "Go ahead and change, this will do for today. In any case the light is bad now."

Relieved, Meg struggled to her feet and went behind the screen in the corner to change back into her street clothes. Even after five sittings, she still felt a little self-conscious about this arrangement, as though it was something indecent in donning her ballet gear outside the theatre. It was stupid, she told herself, considering how many people saw her in exactly the same costume in the theatre every night. She stepped into her dress hastily, arranging her skirts and buttoning up the bodice.

"When you are ready, I have a poster here you might want to see," came Monsieur de Gas's voice from the other side of the studio.
"A poster?" Meg did up the last button and walked out from behind the screen.

"Agathe Giry is your mother, is she not?"

"Yes," Meg began – and fell silent. From between some cardboard sheets that stood against one wall, Monsieur de Gas had extracted a large watercolour in shades of blue and lilac, an old advertising poster for the Opéra Populaire. An elegant young ballerina stood bathed in ethereal blue light, with the rest of the Wilis lined up behind her. Above, the ornate letters spelled: "Giselle". And below, "With Mlle. Agathe Giry in the title role. Music by Adolphe Adam."

"You may keep it if you like."

"Wherever did you get it?" said Meg in amazement. She had seen a smaller version of the painting among her mother's letters; it was one of the watercolours her father had done for the Opéra when he could not make money selling canvases.

"They had an auction at the old Opéra yesterday; old props and such." Monsieur de Gas regarded the poster critically, combing his fingers through his short beard and leaving traces of chalk. "Not a bad painter, Jules Robuchon – though too much in admiration of Delacroix's colour and not nearly enough attention to line. Still, there is one or two interesting works of his at the Luxembourg. The sketch of a tiger from the Jardin des Plantes is worth more than a casual look."

"Oh yes," Meg said warmly. "There is also the garden scene, with the light broken up by the trellis."

"So there is." Monsieur de Gas glanced at her in surprise. "You have a good eye. Here, pass me that newspaper, I'll wrap it up for you."

"May I really keep it? You don't mind?"

"Of course you may, what would I want with it? It is your mother, after all." He rolled it into a newspaper and handed the package to Meg, who was beaming.

"Enough, enough," he motioned at her in good-natured exasperation. "Get along home, and see that you're on time tomorrow! Here's your fee."

"I will be," Meg promised. She put the money away and danced out of the studio, hugging the poster to her chest. She could not wait to show it to her mother. The only problem was explaining where it came from, but she could always say Helena had bought it at the auction. It was a pity they had not known of it; they could have gone to see what was left of their old home, even if they could not afford to buy anything. However, neither thoughts of the destroyed Opéra, nor the ache in her muscles from holding the pose could dent Meg's good mood. Jumping over the last two stairs, she flew out through the front door, into the last of the mild afternoon that was already becoming evening.

Her mother was outside, waiting.

o o o

"Thanks." Raoul returned the map he and Cloutier had borrowed to the aide-de-camp, who took it away, down to headquarters. Raoul looked around. They had camped among the vineyards near the town of Mouzon, surrounded by green meadows and hills, with the silver thread of the Meuse shimmering in the distance. For three days now they had been marching from Le Chêne, via La Besace and now Mouzon, ever further north, pressing forward to join the other three corps and take up a position from where to give battle. More than once they had heard fighting, but it always
seemed to be just one or two Prussians up in the hills, and although some of the men shot at them, Raoul could tell it was nothing more than a show. The real battle lay ahead, and they were chasing the Prussians towards it. Only, as their marches filled up day after day, Raoul had the unpleasant growing sensation of déjà vu, as though the Prussians were not running from them but on the contrary, herding them directly into a trap.

"Not much of a map, is it," said Cloutier, chewing on the end of his cigarette. They had found some tobacco in Mouzon, which had somewhat revived the offices’ spirits. "I heard they took it from the school in town."

Raoul flicked the stub of his own cigarette to the powdery ground, extinguishing it with the toe of his boot. "I don't know where that map came from, but it'll be no use to anyone. The scale must have been calculated by a schoolboy. It's all wrong."

Cloutier grunted noncommittally, squinting into the sun as though to get his bearings. "How do you know?"

"I was born around here. Near Chagny."

"You don't say." Cloutier removed the cigarette from his mouth, appraising Raoul as though seeing him for the first time. He gave a deep laugh, "You're serious, aren't you! You've got ancestral lands with that title?"

"Hardly. My grandfather built a house there. I haven't been back here in years, but I know this much: that's the Dieulet woods up ahead." Raoul indicated the hazy line of forested hills. "Do you think they'll have us march before nightfall?"

"Who knows."

Their movements had slowed to a crawl of late, endless delays forcing them to stand around idle for hours and now to make camp for no reason anyone could see. Some said it was due to the worsening health of the Emperor, who still remained with the their corps. Privately, Raoul feared that if the map he had seen was anything to judge by, the generals had no more idea where they were going than the soldiers did.

"If that's the Dieulet woods," said Cloutier slowly, "how far to the Belgian frontier?"

"Perhaps thirty kilometres. We've just about got our backs to... What was that?"

In the next instant Raoul had his answer; the whistle he had heard exploded, shattering the sky. Another shell followed and another, great arcs that burst over the woods like New Year fireworks in Paris, with a deafening noise.

"Fucking hell," Cloutier yelled over the thunder, "That's the 5th! Has to be. We need to get back!"

This was fighting, Raoul realised, even as he instinctively ran from the hill down into the thick of the camp to find his regiment. Either his heartbeat had slowed or the rest of the world seemed to speed up; tents all around him were disgorging hundreds of angry soldiers, all beside themselves with nervous excitement, the camp like a beehive that had been kicked over.

"They're falling back this way!" a dragoon was shouting to another. "What the devil are we doing here if the Prussians are back there?"

"What's back there?"
"How the fuck should I know, some forest!"

"Lieutenant de Chagny!" an aide-de-camp with a stack of folders in his arms hailed Raoul. "You said you know this area?"

When Raoul confirmed it with a gesture, the aide motioned him forward urgently. "This way; the Emperor wants to talk to you."

Raoul had no time to consider his surprise as he followed at a run; the shells were rumbling and exploding, seemingly overhead. He fervently hoped he recalled enough about the terrain here to be of some use at headquarters. He tried to remember papers he had studied with his father, about the family holdings and about the provisioning for the war. Out the front of the squat farmhouse on the Carignan road where the Emperor was lodging, the aide-de-camp stopped.

"Wait here."

The explosions were so frequent now that they became a single roll of thunder that went on and on, reverberating around the hills and drowning out the noise of the camp. Raoul waited, growing anxious as minutes ticked by. High-ranking officers rushed in and out of the house purposefully; one of them shouted an order, but Raoul could not hear what it was, or see who it was addressed to. He cast his eyes around in the search of someone to question as to orders, or at the least to inform his captain that he was detained at headquarters, but it was no good; he was stuck in front of the door like a rock in mid-stream.

"Ah, Chagny. I thought it was you I had seen around the camp."

Raoul whipped around. The man who had spoken came down the porch stairs with difficulty, surrounded by officers. A servant was there at once, offering a campstool, but the Emperor motioned him aside. He leaned against the railings, hunched with pain, his face yellow and moist with the effort of fighting illness. It looked like he was losing.

"Your majesty," Raoul said, bowing. This was the first time Raoul had seen the Emperor this close since the ball in Pairs. The change the intervening three months had wrought in him was frightening. Something of his dismay must have shown in his face, because the Emperor gave him a terrible, pain-constricted smile:

"You are recalling the Tuileries, no doubt. A fine ball, but we have all changed a little since then, have we not? You, as I recall, made quite an impression with the little dancer."

Christine, Raoul thought. He is talking about Christine. The thunder of artillery fire seemed to be getting closer, but the Emperor went on in his creaky, pained way, oblivious, as though the talking kept him from other thoughts:

"The ladies talked of nothing else for weeks, you know, we were all putting bets on whether you'd marry her. I had ten gold louis on you myself, after I you did us the great honour of bringing her to the palace. I can't tell you how disappointed I was you didn't marry her after all. You cost me ten louis."

Raoul kept silent. He feared if he opened his mouth, he might say something that would be construed as treason. They had talked about him and Christine, he had always known it but it hadn't mattered because he would marry her – and he was a fool, because he should not care, least of all now. But he had never believed that invitation to the Tuileries was a high society joke, had refused to hear it when his parents had said as much. He had brought Christine there, before their filthy stares, and somebody had won their bet, and somebody else had lost...
Two shells exploded at the same time, a horrible parody of New Year's Eve.

"The battle, your majesty." Raoul said firmly. "It must be the 5th corps near Beaumont."

The Emperor winced in pain.

"Impossible," snapped one of the captains standing behind him, "Beaumont is ten leagues from there!"

The Emperor gave Raoul a long, heavy look, then turned to an aide-de-camp. "Show Lieutenant de Chagny to the map room."

Christine and Meg followed Madame Giry home in humiliated silence. Christine could not recall having ever seen Madame Giry so angry that she would not even look at them; she walked on ahead as though it did not even matter to her whether they followed. They did not catch the omnibus but walked on foot all the way home, a good hour through the crowded boulevards. Christine glanced at Meg; she still had the same stubborn expression with which she had met them outside the artist's studio. She clutched her paper-wrapped poster and stared straight in front of her, refusing to look at her mother's back. Passing the Gare Saint-Lazare, they almost lost sight of Madame Giry among all the passengers hurrying to and fro, peasants with bundles and furniture tied to carts, richly dressed Parisians hurrying so as not to miss the train from the city.

It was nearly dark by the time Madame Giry turned into their street. The streetlamps had been lit and the whole street glowed warmly against the deep blue of the sky. Laughing couples strolled by and two gentlemen stopped to greet one another, remarking on the fine weather.

"Tomorrow is the last day of summer," Christine said to Meg, as they walked past them. Madame Giry's heels clicked on the pavement ahead.

Meg looked up. Her eyes were red. "I would have told maman myself. I didn't need you to do it for me."

"I had no choice! You told me you'd be at Helena's and... Oh God" – Christine remembered – "Helena has been hurt."

Meg blinked, forgetting her own anger. "Hurt, how?"

"In the theatre. Your mother said it happened after we left; they called her to take Helena home. That's how she knew."

"Is she all right?"

"I don't know," Christine confessed. "Madame Giry didn't exactly give me time to ask."

Meg considered it, then much to Christine's surprise, ran forward to her mother. She caught Madame Giry's arm, making her stop.

"You could have told me about Helena."

Madame Giry looked from Meg to Christine, then said in a calm, quiet voice, "I would have certainly told you, had you been home. Helena Weiss is fine. Please remove your hand from my sleeve, Meg, you are making a scene."
Meg dropped her hand. They resumed walking, now side by side. "I should have told you about the modelling."

Madame Giry said nothing. The doors of their apartment building were just ahead. Christine thought with trepidation of the sort of supper they were about to have. Meg shifted her wrapped poster into her other hand.

"It's twelve francs a sitting, maman. All I do is put on my ballet things and stand there for an hour."

Madame Giry halted. She closed her eyes for a moment; when she opened them, all Christine could see was betrayal.

"If that's your way of looking at things, Meg, there are jobs in this city that pay more for less. In brothels."

Christine caught her breath. Meg's mouth worked, wordlessly, as Madame Giry went on. "I have taught you everything I could. And you take all you that know, all that you are, and sell it. Everything I have given you – for twelve francs an hour." Madame Giry's voice was so tight with pain it seemed expressionless. "Go upstairs, both of you."

Christine looked between Madame Giry and Meg. "What about you, Madame Giry?"

"I am going for a walk."

And she left them both there, staring after her back as she sliced a straight line past the pedestrians, with her shoulders erect and her steps light and precise, as though dancing on an injury at which the public would never guess.

"We should follow," said Meg, but Christine stopped her:

"Don't, Meg... Let's go upstairs."

Chapter 28: To The Death

Thanks again for supporting this fic, guys – your reviews and comments mean the world to me. Those who complained about the lack of Erik in the last chapter: take heart. All Erik, all the time, coming right up!

Chapter 28 – To The Death

The day had been unseasonably warm, and the construction site stank of a hundred unwashed provincials sweating into their work-blouses. Still, Erik acknowledged, they did well enough. The structure was mostly scaffold and heavy beams, but already the stonemasons had started to flesh out its skeleton, and Erik's sharp eyes could now discern, in the twisting galleries of stone, the ground floor layout from his own plans. There would be the doorways, the lobby, the mansarded roof that was at once modern and perfectly in tune with the Louis XV façades around it. His courthouse was beginning to take shape. Silhouettes of builders moved noisily between the beams in billows of white dust, shouting to one another, and the construction site resounded with the combined din of their voices, hammering, sawing, chiselling, all merging into a continuous ear-splitting crash like the percussion section of an orchestra being struck by a falling piano.

If they had thought his opera loud, they should have heard his architecture.
Peeling the edge of the bandage from his scars, Erik rubbed at the corner of his lip. The chalky dust got into his mouth, squeaked on his teeth and caked onto the exposed skin of his face, where it mingled with perspiration, so that by the end of each day he and all the builders had enough plaster on their faces to pass for the chorus in *Il Muto*. He was torn between a distaste for the dirt, and the thrill of seeing so many faces unintentionally masked. In the noise and the dust, they were working. Working for him.

He was not unaware of the war. Every day brought news of the Prussians skulking around the countryside, of ambushes, minor skirmishes, even a battle rumoured to have wiped out the entire French 5th Corps at the nearby town of Beaumont. None of it concerned him, however. He had a courthouse to build.

Stepping between some scaffolding, Erik raised a hand to attract the attention of an engineer working above. "Up there! What's keeping you?"

"All done, sir. Looks good!"

The youth swung himself off the beam, gripping a rope as nimbly as a monkey. The sight annoyed Erik; he did not want to feel he was running a circus here. The engineer thumped on the ground, throwing the rope aside, and wiped the sweat from his face with the crook of his elbow.

"The lads did good work, Monsieur Andersson, the beams are sound. We can start laying the pipes here."

"And on the rue Saint-Michel side?"

"There too."

Erik dismissed him with a nod and headed around to the rue Saint-Michel, where the façade of the courthouse would eventually rise.

Half a dozen men in caps and blue work-blouses were unloading sections of lead pipe from a wagon harnessed to a team of horses, while a group of ladies watched them curiously from the pavement. Erik resolutely ignored them. Bored by their small-town amusements, the good people of Sedan made it their business to stroll into the rue Saint-Michel at least once a day, there to position themselves in the path of the builders and exclaim over the speed of construction. The men predicted with assumed authority that the building would be finished in record time; the women chattered and pointed from behind the dainty handkerchiefs they held to their mouths to block out the dust. Extraordinary, he heard them say, how fast it was happening. Supernatural.

*Supernatural*, Erik thought sardonically. Certainly; whenever someone got things done, it was always first impossible, then supernatural. Three weeks ago, this same crowd had declared that it was preposterous to begin construction at such a dangerous, uncertain time, and that Monsieur the Parisian Architect was a fool to think he would get so much as a single stonemason for his work. They had been silenced quickly enough. Egrot, with all the smiling persistence of a short and fat battering ram, had secured workers for Erik within a day of his arrival in Bazeilles, recruiting from surrounding villages men who had lost their jobs to the general apprehension about the war. Erik paid well and they worked willingly, with all the zeal of men with nowhere else to go. Having had the foresight to incorporate into his design the existing foundation laid by his predecessor, Erik cut the time-consuming task of ripping out the stone and laying it anew. Day by day, the courthouse rose.

"Good day, Monsieur Andersson!" trilled one of the women who were watching the pipes being unloaded, giving a little wave at Erik's approach. She was young, plump, and wore a gigantic
yellow hat with a brim that would not have fit through an omnibus door. Still, this was his audience, such as it was, and Erik supposed a bit of gratitude was in order.

He spared her the sight of him smiling through the cracked layer of dust, and instead opted for a stiff bow. "Good day, madame. If you wouldn't mind moving – these men are working."

She gave a musical laugh. "It's mademoiselle, actually. Mademoiselle Birkon, my father runs the café near the mill."

"Delighted. Do step back from the horses, mademoiselle, unless you mean to supplement their diet with your hat."

Mademoiselle-Not-Madame Birkon sprang back with a cry of dismay, just in time to keep the horse's soft lips from reaching her hat-brim. Her friends pulled her further away from the workmen and from Erik, giggling behind their handkerchiefs and eyeing his bandaged face with open curiosity, as though he was a part of the building.

Erik passed them without comment. The ability to ignore their bothersome staring was perhaps not the most noticeable of his recent accomplishments, but he felt particularly satisfied by it. He still did not like crowds, nor did he feel any obligation to like them; but thus far, their hats and handkerchiefs had shown no sign of turning into muskets and pitchforks. Gone were the days when he would turn away from every oversized hat and its wearer. If they were awed by his efficiency, he could do little to dissuade them.

The women's chatter behind him was soon drowned out by the construction noise, and Erik continued inspecting the site in relative peace. Past the end of the street, the late sunlight was turning fortress walls into liquid bronze, the exact colour of Christine's eyes in the gaslight—

No. Not that.

He twitched his bandage into place, swallowing dust. Bad enough that he had sent her music, that first evening in Bazeilles. Bad enough that every night seethed with dark, secret memories of Christine trapped in his room. He would not stand for being pursued by day as well, he refused to be. Tell me, her voice brushed his mind, a lover's voice, hot in his ear. What was your mother's name? Tell me about the gypsies, about the Phantom... Give me all your secrets.

He was not listening.

The devil take it all, he wanted to see her again.

"Monsieur Andersson!" called the foreman, a hulking fellow with rolled-up sleeves and a nasal accent that marked him a Breton.

"Verdier," Erik acknowledged. Grateful to be pulled back to himself, he listened closely to Verdier's concerns about obtaining the right sort of glass for the rose window and about getting the bricks locally, in case train lines should be interrupted.

"Minor hold-ups aside, we're well on track," the foreman finished, scratching his bristly moustache. "Unless the Prussians get in the way of the supplies, I'd say we should have the structural work done in four months."

"Four months," Erik repeated, neutrally.

"Yes sir, we're working fast. I better call a halt here; the sun is going down."
Erik let Verdier release the workers and see to securing the site for the night. *Four months*, he thought later, trundling in a squeaky carriage towards the flickering distant lights of Bazeilles. Four months for the major work, and at least as long again for the rest: for decoration, sculptures, paving and design of the interior spaces. None of that would absolutely require his continued presence in Sedan, but all of it loomed heavy between him and Paris – and even the faintest possibility of seeing Christine.

The courthouse was a test, he knew. He knew. It was the condition he had set himself for his return from exile; its completion would confirm him an architect in deed rather than in word. Then, and only then, could he come back to Paris, triumphant and with every right to a little thing like inviting Mademoiselle Daaé to supper. Christine Daaé would have nothing to fear from Monsieur Erik Andersson, Architect.

In Bazeilles, Madame Egrot and her husband welcomed him in their cosy, old-fashioned dining-room, with the same warmth as they did every night. After all, he was their friend, the man who would wield their son's hunting gun to protect their wine and potatoes from would-be looters. Erik let them believe it. With the dust washed from his face and hands, he felt even more the architect here than at the construction site. He slipped easily into his chair, politely fielding the usual enquiries about his progress, playing his part in their conversation. "I trust you have had a pleasant day, Madame... No, I haven't read it yet... The Prussians in Raucourt, indeed? Yes, quite worrying. The turbot is delicious, Madame Egrot, more than the equal of any I've had in Paris." He was pleased with himself, almost at peace.

Madame Egrot, with her pale features and the quick movements of a small animal, served him herself, studying his bandaged face with a vague hope in her eyes, as though his supposed survival after being shot was a talisman for the return of her son. Her husband meanwhile drew Erik into the usual discussions of the war, which continued over coffee in the parlour. Just when Erik felt he had humoured the man long enough, Egrot set his cup aside:

"But, my friend, there is one bit of good news in all this. Our cellar is all finished; the workers left this afternoon."

"I'm aware of that," Erik said. "They are, after all, my workers." To allay Egrot's fears about looters, Erik had condescended to design a concealed cellar for the couple's more valuable possessions. He had intended it merely as incentive for Egrot to find the construction workers quickly, but the couple's delight at the idea knew no bounds. Imagine, they said, an architect from Paris designing their cellar!

"Come; take a look." Egrot said, beaming. "I must have the architect's opinion!"

"A secret shared is a secret lost, Egrot. I have no need to see it. Believe me when I say that I've seen more than enough cellars in my line of work."

"What secret? It was you that designed it. Besides which, I dare say I trust you a great deal more than those workers who built it. Pauline!" Egrot called. He knocked on the kitchen door, where Madame Egrot was talking with the cook. "We're invading Rachel's kitchen for a minute!"

Erik stood aside, half-amused and half-uncomfortable as the women stepped out. "Take a candle," Madame Egrot advised, in the thin-lipped way that suggested she disapproved of her husband dragging this big-city gentleman around kitchens and cellars. "Forgive him, Monsieur Erik; he is like a child with a new playpen."

The entrance to the cellar was in a corner of the kitchen. Erik took a lit candle from the counter and followed Egrot down into what appeared at first a regular store-room filled with wine bottles and
sacks of potatoes – until one located the niche in the wall that hid a trapdoor, designed to be all but invisible to anyone who was not expecting it there. This opened into a short corridor and then, Erik knew, into a second, smaller cellar. That was all.

"Fascinating. Four walls and a door." He tried not to breathe too deeply. The raw smell of earth and the burning candle wax were bringing back memories; he struggled against them.

"But what an ingenious design," Egrot enthused. "Look, you cannot see it at all except if you are standing right over here."

"I know," Erik said tightly. "I designed it. Excuse me, I am going upstairs."

He felt better upstairs. Madame Egrot served more coffee and they sat in the little parlour, with the steady monotony of the Egrots' conversation chasing away the ghosts. Erik gulped the scalding coffee and let it burn a trail to his stomach. The past was in the past; it was done with; he had made himself an architect. He was Erik Andersson, the architect of Sedan's courthouse, people knew his name and he tipped his hat to them in the street. He would finish the courthouse. He would be able to see Christine again.

The ghosts returned at night. Then, in the stuffy dark room with the window shut against even the faintest sliver of light, the musty smell of the cellar filled Erik's mouth and nostrils. He was small again, half boy and half man, alone in the underground grotto near the lake, while above him the Opéra pulsed with light and music, a frenetic paradise of laughing people.

The grotto was gradually changing. He was furnishing it with beautiful things, scraps of props and scenery he pilfered from the storage cellars above, occasionally from under the very noses of the stagehands. He was so good at it that he knew he had never needed help, least of all from the ballerina who had showed him this place, only to leave him here alone. She had kept trying to talk to him after she rejected his invitation, but he never answered, and after a while she stopped. He had not seen her for a long time, not since she had become fat with child and disappeared. It made no difference. He had learned to read and figure just fine by himself, words and music both, listening and watching obsessively from spaces in the rafters or behind walls. There was nobody in the vast paradise of the Opéra whose knowledge of it could compare with that acquired by the Devil's Child. Regretfully, he recalled that the ballerina had used to call him Erik.

The footsteps appeared one night after he returned from a trip upstairs for provisions. Dark stains on the shore. Whoever it was must have waded across the canals. The prints were wide and sparse, a man's tread. Much bigger than him, Erik judged, just from the pattern of those boots. He knew, because Paolo the gypsy had worn boots that left imprints in the sawdust, and they were exactly the same size. The prints peppered his house, stamping on things that belonged to him alone. Grabbing a coil of rope, he followed them upstairs.

He could not remember the way the stagehand had looked or what words he had screamed – only the low, bubbling F sharp that distorted his whole face with its bulging eyes. Being dragged down twelve sharp-edged steps on the end of a rope shut him up. Erik shoved the corpse into the lake; it scraped on the cement and made a gentle splash, and clouds of blood pinkened the water around the split scalp. He stared at them, calmly, until all of a sudden his stomach lurched and he gagged – because he was pitiful, weak, he deserved to be found. The corpse stared at him in mute horror; it knew too much; he had to get rid of it.

In one of the many canals in the labyrinth of flooded corridors, they found a dead man. Some said it was suicide. Others said it had been a ghost.

The stairs could not be scrubbed clean, and so the Opera Ghost had been forced to obtain a carpet
to cover them. It was a rich red weave, perfect for one who was the soul of the Opéra, but it demanded things to go with it. A polished leather mask instead of sack-cloth, a black wig to cover the rest; costumes, gloves and mirrors. Mirrors most of all, because mirrors never lied. The Phantom had looked into a mirror and believed his eyes.

When the ballerina returned to the Opéra with her child, he forgave her. She understood about masks, having exchanged Mademoiselle for Madame, and so the Phantom found her useful. Only sometimes, the smell of raw earth and blood returned to claim him, and he fled up to his hiding space behind the wall of the chapel, where he had first entered the Opéra. At one of those times, he had found Christine.

The night was peaceful in Bazeilles, in the shuttered bedchamber where Erik lay prone on his back, stretched thin, hardly breathing.

He exhaled and closed his eyes, and there again was Christine, but not the child, not the angel. She was a woman, beautiful, naked as the statues in the Opéra, her eyes burning amber and bronze in the gaslight and her cool fingertips insistent on the awful contours of his face, eroding it like rain, like the splash of water in a lake. Give me all your secrets, and her voice was impatient and so full of desire that, God help him, he did. He told her of murder and she kissed his mouth, hard, demanding more; he told her of the gypsies, of his sack-cloth mask, of pain, humiliation, hunger, woe, and of the night he had first heard her voice and knew that this, at last, was his reward. She held his delicate face, gripped the back of her neck, the round of her shoulder, claiming her body, her voice, all of her for himself. She was his, she belonged to him, he had wrought that voice from her and she would never be free, never. But she was not listening, she thrust him down and raised her face to the light, the angle of her jaw exposing her throat, and then there was only her unbearable beauty and the heat and the pressure and the fire of release that tore from him the last of his pathetic defences.

My God, Erik thought, subsiding. The demons leached slowly from his body, laughing at the tangled sheets in his clenched hands.

He groped blindly for the candle, lit it. The room floated in shades of gold. He went shakily to the table, sat down. There was writing paper there, and ink. Egrot had given him plenty for his letter to Christine, but Erik had sent her only music, goddamned music, always music for her voice. The paper had been sitting on his desk ever since, untouched.

Dipping a pen in ink, he tore a sheet of paper free and scrawled: "Christine, tell me about Sweden. Tell me about your father." Give me all your secrets.

He fetched the candle and held the paper to the flame, afraid that in the morning he might have sent it. There was a low rumble outside, like distant thunder. Perhaps it would rain. Then tomorrow, he would return to the construction site and there would be no dust, and everyone would work unmasked. Erik leaned across the table to open the shutters, letting in a gust of cool air that extinguished the candle and scattered the letter's ashes. He sat back, completely worn out, and breathed the smells of the leaves from the night-time garden, waiting for the rain.

What roused him was a vague unease, a sort of sixth sense he had long ago learned to trust. He listened. The thunder was still there, closer now. And sure enough, somebody was coming upstairs.

He swung the door open before Egrot could knock.

The man jumped back so fast he nearly hit the opposite wall. He clapped one chubby hand to his heart, the lamp in the other throwing startled shadows on his face and dressing-robe.
"Good God, Andersson! You could give a man a heart attack, leaping out of the dark like that."

"With pleasure," Erik agreed. His eyes darted to the sash across Egrot's shoulder. "Ah. But there are more certain means of murder, are there not? For example – with a rifle?"

He advanced light as a cat and caught the sash of Egrot's hunting gun, nearly jerking the man off his feet. "You had better be suicidal."

Egrot's usually ruddy face turned the same colour as the plaster behind him. Erik ripped the rifle from him like a toy. He flicked the strap in his hand, forming a noose.

"Bah-bah-but," Egrot babbled, "But you said – Andersson, you promised..."

"How much! The reward, how much is it?"

Egrot blinked at him rapidly, pink-eyed as a rabbit. "Re-reward?"

He had trusted this man. A frightful roar was building in Erik's ears, growing to a crescendo; he tried to curse, but it came out as a sob.

"I was an architect, damn you!"

He raised the noose, hearing nothing now but the roar of blood in his head, knowing in this split second that he had never been anything but himself, that he was born a freak and would die a freak. His breath hitched in his throat. The roar became a rapid barrage of sharp sounds, like running feet.

"There it is again, they must have entered the town!" Egrot exclaimed suddenly, as though he was no longer aware of the noose. He weaselled out from Erik's surprised grasp. "That noise, that's soldiers. You were awake – you must have heard it too... Andersson, what's the matter with you? Give me back my gun."

Erik felt the rifle taken from his yielding hands. His mind flailed for purchase, trying to reconcile Egrot's words with his purpose. Then, like an illusion of a blank wall snapping into sudden focus, he understood.

"The Prussians are here."

"Yes, man, yes!" Egrot's nervous excitement made his voice shrill as a woman's. "Whatever is the matter with you that you go taking my gun and talking gibberish at me?"

"With me?" Now his surprise had worn off, Erik was incensed. "Need I remind you that it was you who turned up at my door at three in the morning with a loaded firearm!"

"Need I remind you," Egrot retorted, rabbit eyes flashing, "That you swore, Andersson, solemnly swore, to help me protect my home? You cannot mean to have another of your fishing incidents at a time like this!"

"You know nothing about it!"

"Monsieur Erik?"

Erik raised his eyes to see Madame Egrot at the top of the stairs, hastily throwing a wrap over her dressing-grown. She looked between the men, puffy-eyed and blinking behind the lamp. "What is it? What about the Prussians?"

"Nothing, Pauline, go back to bed." Egrot's voice trembled far too much to be soothing. "I'll just go
up to the attic and have a look. Likely it is our own men moving through."

Madame Egrot hugged her wrap closer, crossing her arms. "Even if that's true," she said after a moment's pause, "the Prussians can't be far behind."

Egrot gave up on his attempt to be a dutiful husband and resumed panicking. "They must have turned north from Raucourt. They couldn't have marched this fast, it's impossible. Impossible!"

Just then, there was the sound of someone yelling outside, and a shouted order.

"Oh, my God... There is going to be a battle, isn't there." Madame Egrot's voice seemed to be begging someone to contradict her.

Her husband clutched at his rifle, and said nothing. The two of them turned to Erik, like twin statues of Panic and Terror in some forgotten temple. They seemed to be waiting for him to say something.

Erik's mouth twisted, and he laughed. "It seems the mob has arrived."

Chapter 29: No Man's Land

I'm back! A big thank-you to everyone for your patience and your encouragement over the last few months.

A recap: we left Raoul witness to the battle of Beaumont, and Erik at the Egrots' house in Bazeilles just as the war arrives on the doorstep. Back in Paris, Mme Giry has discovered that Meg has been posing for Degas.

Chapter 29 – No Man's Land

It took hours for what was left of the 5th to trickle in from Beaumont. The 12th's first division had been sent to disengage it from the ambush and allow a retreat, but Raoul was not among them. Marshal MacMahon and General Douay required him at headquarters with the maps, arguing over river crossings – while a few short kilometres away men were being slaughtered by the thousand. The officers had to raise their voices over the constant boom of Prussian artillery. Raoul calculated the necessary routes, accounting for the lay of the land, forced to swallow his resentment and shame at thus being placed out of reach of danger. There were Prussians out there. The enemy had eluded them for weeks, and he was here, without a shot fired from his rifle. What was the use of the maps? It was obvious there was only one way out: through the fortified town of Sedan and towards Mézières, where they could regroup and face the Prussians.

When the final shells died away, the room resounded with oppressive silence. Nobody said that the 5th was no more; nobody spoke a word about the Prussians, still alive, still out there, invisible. After a while, they returned to the maps. Raoul excused himself; the Marshal dismissed him.

Outside the house, Raoul rolled a cigarette with shaking fingers and lit up. He joined a group of other officers, who were grimly watching the escaped soldiers already appearing on the Carignan road. They climbed the vineyard slopes of the camp in twos and threes: shaken, wild-eyed men, their uniforms turned to rags encrusted in blood and mud, moving in a stupor of horror. A man who must have been his company's bugler still carried his instrument, the polished brass spattered all over with red. He averted his eyes. Raoul would have liked to do the same. Instead, he was compelled to stare into the closed faces of the survivors as though he knew them, as though each
one was walking out from the cellars of the Opéra. They had been men. Now they were slaves, ambushed and useless, freed from certain death by the intervention of others.

Raoul wished he was anywhere but here; anywhere but safe. The bitter smoke he dragged into his lungs burned its way down. It didn't matter. As soon as the 5th was in, they would be marching to Sedan and the northern fortresses, marching fast enough to outrun the Prussians. They would regroup and fight back. They would win.

The 12th broke camp within the hour and marched at the double throughout the rest of the day, without stopping for food. The nearness of the enemy was now a palpable pressure, a heaviness in the air, and the remnants of the 5th among them only added to the sense of urgency. The Prussians harassed their rearguard constantly, scattered gunfire following like laughter in their wake. The march became a stampede, a race to be the first to claim some defensible position, somewhere they could fight. They kept their heads down and marched.

When they finally crossed the river at Douzy that evening, Raoul was too exhausted to be relieved. Yet they had done it. They had made it here before the Prussians; there was no more gunfire, no enemy in sight. Every man Raoul could see, Cloutier, the other officers, were filthy with streaked dust and sweat. When they grinned at one another, their teeth were blinding in their grimy faces. The valley of Givonne lay wide open before them, peaceful and untouched. Ahead, patches of dark forest alternated with clusters of houses marking villages Raoul had last seen riding with his father as a boy. He could just make out the spire of a village church, and beyond that, the longed-for fortifications of Sedan. They had done it.

Cloutier nodded at the village ahead of them. "What's that one, Chagny?"

Raoul felt the dust crack around his mouth as he spoke.

"Bazeilles."

Another order rang out from the street, making Egrot and his wife jump identically, like spectators at the circus. Erik glanced over his shoulder, listening until the sound of running grew quiet.

"The attic," said Egrot, but Erik was a step ahead. He sprang up the narrow stairwell without bothering to wait for the huffing man and pulled himself through the trapdoor into the dusty space above.

The attic window opened onto part of the road to Sedan. Erik unlatched it, carefully in case the creaking shutters should attract the attention of some marksman below. The night revealed a crude barricade across the unpaved street. The soldiers around it were not wearing the red and navy of the French army, but Erik did not recognise the uniforms. Through the rustling treetops, he saw two other barricades under construction at either end of the street. He cursed inwardly. Getting out of here would be complicated, and it appeared he did not have much time. He looked again at the strange uniforms.

"It's pitch black out there, I can't see a thing!" hissed Egrot behind him, in a stage whisper that would have been heard across the street.

Erik turned sharply and clapped one hand to the man's mouth. Egrot held on to his rifle, as though seriously determined to protect his house. Instead of whispering, Erik pitched his own voice deep enough that it was near-inaudible:
"Be silent. There are sixteen men below, all in blue, more down the street. They are not Prussians."

Egrot blinked his rabbity eyes over the gag of Erik's hand. Erik released him, almost gagging himself at the contact with the man's slimy, sweaty skin. Egrot wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Marines," he mouthed, not quite a whisper. "Ours."

As though to confirm this, a string of curses in pure French came from below. Erik did not relax. If they were building barricades, they were not merely passing through; they were expecting Prussians. The war was here. Egrot seemed to have come to the same conclusion, because he moved away – but then instead of running downstairs, he went to the trunk. With ceremony, he lifted the second rifle out of the nest of household oddments and his son's boyhood toys, and offered it to Erik.

Erik watched Egrot hold the gun out to him: a sombre little king in dressing-robe and slippers, knighting his champion. Right. Ten minutes ago this man had been terrified of looters; now he would join the battle.

"Go back," Erik said, not cruelly. "Hide in the cellar with your wife."

Egrot chose to ignore him. His shining round face seemed to say, This is our moment, our fight. Time to protect our own.

Erik could not have agreed more. He took the gun, found his grip, and slammed it sideways.

When Egrot crumpled to the floor, Erik was almost certain he was merely unconscious, but he had neither the time nor the inclination to check. The Prussians might already be marching through Sedan.

He considered taking Egrot's other gun, but decided its weight did not justify its necessity. A quick search of the trunk revealed several magazines of cartridges; he took these along with a length of cord that could be of use. Shadow-quiet, he slipped out of the house, through the back door Egrot had used to leave open when they went fishing. The road to Sedan was barricaded, but there were small streets he knew by now, back alleys and gardens he could take. For someone accustomed to the blind tunnels of the Opéra, these were hardly an obstacle.

When he was some distance from the house, he glanced back, and saw a white oval in the kitchen window. Madame Egrot's face, watching him.

o o o

Madame Giry crossed one illuminated street after another, through clouds of twinkling laughter around the cafés, through flocks of glittering couples hurrying to the theatres. She did not dwell on the image of her daughter clutching her ballet things, her clothes still giving off the sharp smell of the artist's oils and turpentine. She did not ask herself how many other times Meg had told her she was visiting Helena Weiss, how long this has been going on. She thought of the day she had learned she was with child, of the oil paints and turpentine and of Jules dropping the posters he had been working on. A whole sheaf of ballerinas had slipped from his hands onto the backstage floor, ruined.

Twelve francs an hour, her daughter had said. That's what it was worth.

She might have understood it had it been about love. Had it been a young girl's foolish infatuation with art, a bohemian romance, she might have forgiven Meg for not knowing better – but it was
nothing of the sort. Meg had taken things that were not hers, things that belonged to the world of the stage behind the footlights: the pain, the music, the endless training, the magic of it. She had sold ballet to pay the bills as another girl might have sold her mother's jewellery.

Madame Giry turned into the rue Le Peletier. The boarded-up bulk of the Opéra rose like a spectre out of the morass of smaller buildings, more grey than black after months of decay. The doorways and colonnade were blocked, yesterday's auction banner drooping limply above the locked and barred main entrance. Dark shadows licked the masonry over the upper storey windows; above, pigeons flapped and cooed on the high ledges. The walls were plastered with newspapers and flyers of every kind, their proclamations obscenely loud in the theatre's graveyard:

"Nine Prussian Spies Arrested Today! Plot to betray Metz foiled!" read one beneath the circular windows of the old dormitories. And beside that: "Massacre at Beaumont, 5th corps destroyed! Paris, to arms!" Madame Giry tore both down as she passed, tossing the wads in the gutter.

Around the side of the building little had changed, save the boarded-up windows and the pile of rotting props behind the stairs where months ago she had come upon the former Opera Ghost. Even the walls were almost unscarred. The cobbled lane was dark and empty, just as though the night's performance was underway within. There was no sign of people – or, indeed, ghosts. This much was a relief. She could not be confronted with any more surprises this evening.

Stepping over the running gutter, she found the loose grille. It had not been boarded up. Madame Giry bent down and removed her gloves, tucking them carefully away, gripped the damp iron bars and pulled. The rusted hinges screeched in protest, then abruptly gave way. The Opéra lay ahead.

The passage was barely wide enough to accommodate an adult, but Madame Giry was in no mood to concern herself with the comfort of this egress. She had not so completely neglected her body that she could not drop from the stone sill down onto the dark wet floor below, nor had she forgotten her way around. The drop jolted her spine, but the pain was momentary. Water splashed under her shoes. In the space between the grille and the ruined stained glass window of the chapel, the lone gas-jet was dead, fringed with cobwebs, and the darkness smelled only of stray cats and mould. Madame Giry reached out and touched the wall. That was all. It was rough and chilly, and she stood like that for some time, running ungloved fingers over the old cement.

She did not open what remained of the stained glass window into the chapel. Beyond it would be stairs, then the side-corridor leading to her former apartment. She had seen them all after the fire, when they had come here to assess the damage. It was not a journey to be made twice. By touch, she located the ladder beside the stained glass window, and descended into the Phantom's passages.

Her footsteps echoed all the way down the damp corridor of the first cellar, quick and heedless of the noise. There were fewer rats than she had expected, perhaps because this place no longer held anything for them to eat. No doubt the former Opera Ghost would claim to have scared them all away personally.

Directly above her were the ballet practice rooms, with their austere tall windows, mirrors. She remembered her daughter, aged three, struggling to reach for the barre. Her daughter, aged seven, turning perfect fouettés one after another, four, five, six, until her intense concentration turned to disbelief, then to such shining joy it had taken Madame Giry's breath away. She had overheard Christine asking Meg afterwards, quiet and shy, "Teach me to do that." Twelve francs an hour. A bargain.

The door to the storage room where the old ballet posters were kept was open. Madame Giry paused outside, in case some squatters had made this unlikely place their home, but there were no
sounds save the occasional creaking of the wrecked building. In the mouldy darkness, she examined the boxes that lined the wall, throwing each lid open and searching inside. To her disappointment, the older ones at the back were empty, presumably sold at the auction. The more recent ones were untouched.

Without a candle, Madame Giry could not tell what posters remained, but she trusted whatever she found would be enough to keep Meg's interest: a whole sheaf of ballerinas, not constructed in a studio but alive, onstage. Jules Robuchon had never sketched in a studio, had never needed to pay a ballerina to pretend to be what she was. He could find the true line of a movement, catch the fleeting pain behind a girl's smile. And she had loved him for it, for a time. When other girls had searched for wealthy patrons, she had danced, and Jules had painted her dancing. She had never taken a sou from him. But Meg was not her. Her daughter had made her own choice.

Collecting several posters at random, Madame Giry rolled them up tightly and retraced her steps back to the surface. She did not bother closing the boxes behind her. Let the past rot with the building.

In the street, two working-class men with buckets of glue were pasting new placards over the old, the text blaring something or other about the war. One cracked a joke; they both laughed. Madame Giry swept past them, carrying her own posters.

Erik was nearly outside Bazeilles when he heard the first gunshots. He had taken winding paths behind houses and gardens to avoid the barricades, and although he doubted that he was much closer to Sedan now than he had been before, he was at least out of the worst of the barricaded area. From his place in the lee of a hedge he could not see the men who had fired, but it sounded close. The shots woke the dogs in the entire town; their frenzied barking filled the range of Erik's hearing, every octave. The next volley of bullets found its mark and then even the dogs could not disguise the shrill cry of a man struck down. The sound kept echoing in Erik's head, finding a harmony. There were other men running now, more shots.

The sun had not yet risen and the night had barely thinned, yet the firing continued. Erik kept moving. He was no part of this. His courthouse in Sedan was what mattered, without it he was nothing but a freak, an escaped murderer, not an architect at all. He had to make sure it was untouched. He had built his new world so carefully from the ground up; he was not about to let it go, not for anything. The Prussians were in Bazeilles; very well, that was fine with him. He did not intend to stay here and wait to lose his courthouse. Two rifles against an army were odds no fool would take.

Slipping along the hedge, then along the whitewashed wall of the adjacent house, Erik peered into the street. A barricade bristled with blue-uniformed soldiers aiming their rifles, in the distance were others in plumed helmets. Those helmets marked them as Bavarians rather than Prussians, but they were the same mob. Even with his sharp eyes, Erik could not make out much of what was going on; a haze of foul-smelling smoke concealed much of the barricade. He surmised the Marines had orders to occupy the village and hold it against the enemy, but as he could not tell where the Bavarians were coming from, this was little use in helping him get out. Possibly he should have paid more attention to Egrot's newspapers.

Something whizzed past, like a beetle. Erik had ducked back behind the wall before he was consciously aware it had been a bullet. It glanced off a tree, splintering bark. More bullets followed, then a wave of screams from the barricade, an order to "Hold!", then nothing. He crossed the street in a half-crouch, a hunchbacked spider, and continued past the next house while the quiet
spell held. The bullets were left behind.

In stops and starts, he made his way to the fields west of the village, keeping back from the Sedan road. The dew-covered greenery – beets, radishes, whatever the hell it was – was planted in neat rows; his shoes sank half to the ankle between them. He was running without moving, getting nowhere. At this rate it would take another two hours to get to Sedan. By now the sun was rising and a bright line had edged over the mass of cloud behind Bazeilles, silhouetting the village. White puffs of smoke rose over the rooftops where the barricades were.

Erik wiped the sweat that poured into his eyes, nearly dislodging his bandage in the process. The village was waking up. He had passed people coming out into the streets in their nightclothes to offer cups of water and wine to the soldiers; others dragging stones, filling sacks with dirt, anything to add to the barricades. The more sensible ones shut their windows, barricading themselves indoors.

He could not see the Egrots' house. There were too many roofs and trees in the way, and in any case, Egrot and his wife were no doubt holed up in their cellar by now, just as he had advised.

On the road below him there was a constant rattling noise, the sound of many booted feet hitting packed dirt. Leaving the field, Erik crouched down in the tall grass and looked down to the base of the slope, towards the valley. The troops on the Sedan road were French. They poured into the valley in an endless river, a thousand, fifty thousand, he had no way to judge the numbers from where he hid. Thick dust hung over them. The column snaked into the shadowy distance, its head vanishing into the retreating night in the direction of Sedan. He had imagined soldiers marching in step, but these ones staggered and lurched and swayed like no men he had ever seen, barely lifting their feet. As Erik watched, a man tripped over a stone and sprawled face-down in the dirt by the side of the road, asleep. His cap rolled away.

Erik shadowed the column as far as Balan, the next village between Bazeilles and Sedan, careful to remain concealed by the grass and trees that lined the road. Getting into Sedan itself would present no real difficulty. There were other civilians among the soldiers, villagers seeking the relative safety of Sedan's fortified walls, townpeople hurrying home. Erik did not join them. The morning light made him aware of his state of undress: all he had on were the rumpled shirt and trousers he had fallen asleep in, now caked in dust and dirt from the streets and fields. He imagined this to be the reason for his growing discomfort, the sensation that he was walking naked out into the light. It was not the real reason.

The truth was, he had reached a no man's land. Ahead lay Sedan and his courthouse, a hollow structure of beams and stone that was no more defensible than Egrot's pathetically exposed house back in Bazeilles. Just what was it he intended to do, truly? Would he stand atop the construction site with a rifle, like Egrot in his attic? Or would he rather scramble about the scaffolding like a rat in a maze, waiting for a Prussian shell to send the whole thing to bury him alive?

He turned around. There was Bazeilles in the distance, its church spire dark-grey under the overcast sky, veiled in smoke. The silence of it was unnerving: he could not hear the battle, only the birds in the tree above him, the wind flapping the back of his shirt, the soldiers trudging along the road below.

Erik's throat closed up, making it hard to breathe. He had made a mistake somewhere. He had walked right out of the architect's skin, and now he was here between Sedan and Bazeilles, in the middle of nowhere, a ghost. He did not know what he was supposed to do.

Chapter 30: Ein Leid
Thanks so much for your reviews of the previous chapter, guys, I truly appreciate your support! I've had a request for more trivia, so here's a little bit for this chapter: The division of the 12th army corps that was ordered to occupy Bazeilles, made up predominantly of Marines and associated troops, was called the Blue Division because of their uniforms. They were some of the best troops the French army had at this point, although as you will remember, the 12th was also full of green recruits and untrained officers like Raoul.

Please note this chapter contains scenes of violence. Keep the M rating in mind.

Chapter 30 – Ein Leid

Christine could not remember when she had last felt so frustrated. Meg had retreated to her room and was stubbornly pinning the Giselle poster to the wall, standing on her bed to straighten it out, taking exaggerated care in smoothing the edges. She was determined to go back to the artist’s studio tomorrow. The money for her sittings lay on the dressing-table under the lamp: sixty francs in rumpled banknotes. It was enough for a pair of gloves, more than enough for the gas bill. Christine had no right to argue with it, but the pain she had seen in Madame Giry's eyes pricked her with hot needles of guilt. To make things worse, Madame Giry must return to see Meg's poster, this copy of the little watercolour sketch she had seen in her letters. Christine dreaded the silent standoff that would follow. It was rare for Meg and Madame Giry to quarrel, but when they did it was always like this: with icy, brittle politeness. Meg would become stubborn and silent, Madame Giry distant and implacable. Sometimes Meg apologised. This would not be one of those times.

It made Christine want to scream. She could half-see herself grabbing Meg by the shoulders to spin her around and say, "This is your mother!" It made her think of Sweden, the stink of seaweed, the cold granite that was all that was left to her of her own family. The unfairness of it numbed her to the very tips of her fingers. People died. She knew that. Meg knew that. Her mother could come down with influenza, could be driven over by a cab, could be killed by some madman... The war was coming closer, maybe even to Paris, and Meg was fighting with her mother over this, over money. Christine thought she would give up all the money in the world for the chance to apologise to her father for the childish hurts she had done him, for every one of her silly complaints, for all the times she had pretended to pay her respects in the chapel but waited only for the Angel of Music.

She could not tell these things to Meg.

"Do you want coffee?" she asked more brusquely than she intended. She had to address the question to Meg’s back where she stood on the bed.

"No." Meg gave the poster a final smoothing. When she turned around, her mouth was as small and hard as Madame Giry's became when she was upset. "Don't ask me to give this up, Christine. I won't. Not even for maman."

"I didn't ask," Christine said quietly.

She closed the door behind her and went to the parlour, turning down the lights in the corridor and the living-room as she passed. There was no sense wasting gas; she was no longer a child to be afraid of the dark. When she got to the piano, she lit the two lamps above it and found the letter where she had been forced to abandon it on the divan earlier that evening. There was a vocal line, piano... She ran her hand over the paper. It calmed her a little, even as it made her think of the chapel again, of the music in the walls. A single page. It was so easy to pretend the music came from an Angel, from a friend who knew her.
She picked out the first few bars with one hand, the notes rippling through silence like a handful of skipping stones. She had not played in a long time, but it was not a difficult piece, simpler than anything she might have expected from him. Christine moved the bench to the piano and played properly this time, letting herself see only the keys yielding to her touch, the black and white, alternating.

She forgot herself. The music was eerie, low; she followed it like the great turns of a spiral staircase. When she came to the abrupt unfinished line, she skipped right over the incomplete last bar and kept going, drawing out the theme he had been building, strengthening it, changing it subtly. She added Sweden, her father's violin, the whisper of waves in the winter fog. Once, she got up to fetch more paper and ink, put a line through the three bars that recalled the Moonlight Sonata and replaced them with an echo of the music in the chapel, a child's voice raised in counterpoint. They had sung the same melody at the tomb of her father, and she could not bear to be ashamed of it now.

"Do you know what *ein Lied* means, little Angel?"

"Yes. A Song."

She crossed out the vocal line, all of it, with a fat wavy line of ink over all his hastily penned notes. Then she wrote a title across the top margin, changing the vowels around: *Ein Leid*. He would appreciate the variation, she thought. *A Sorrow.*

When Madame Giry came home, it was very late. Christine heard her making coffee in the kitchen, the muffled, light sound of her footsteps in the dining-room. If Meg came out to meet her, Christine did not hear it. She turned her head to the wall and thought of the music she had written. She wished she could have told her father about it.

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"Chagny, stay put. Keep the men back."

Raoul gave a sign to Cloutier that he'd heard, and the lieutenant vanished again into the near-darkness. The men of their company remained where they were, down on one knee behind the barricade, apprehensive. Raoul crouched behind the pile of paving stones, rifle aimed at the end of the street. Further along the barricade were several Marines; grim battle-hardened men who knew what they were doing. Experienced troops who were not dropping with exhaustion were few, and for once Raoul was glad of it. It meant he was here, instead of with the rest of the army behind the walls of Sedan. Their orders were to hold the village and keep the Prussians from taking control of the only pass out of the valley. Raoul prayed silently that his numb, sweaty fingers would not slip on the trigger.

Time passed slowly as they waited. There was little talk; they were too nervous, too hungry, too sore from the march to waste the energy. Chatelin, a sullen kid from Paris, tried to roll a cigarette; Raoul snapped at him before he could light up. The kid made a crude gesture in response, but obeyed. Raoul did not push it. What authority he had over these green recruits came from his being singled out by the Emperor at Mouzon, and he knew it was tenuous. Even experienced officers were having trouble. There were other units in position closer to the river, Raoul strained his ears but could make out nothing from that direction. Perhaps the enemy were further away than they had thought.

He was not prepared when he saw them. One moment there was nothing, a quiet village, a barricade in the street. Then all at once a gunshot rang so loud Raoul nearly dropped the rifle, coming from somewhere near the river. A hundred more shots, dogs barking, shouted orders in
French and German – they barely had time to load – then plumed Bavarian helmets were filling the
street and chunks of plaster the size of books raining down on their heads, exploding on the
cobbles, the air zinging with bullets.

"Fire!" bellowed the man next to him, a corporal, doing what Raoul knew was his own job. Raoul
opened his mouth but no sound came out. All around, others were shooting into the night, hardly
able to see enough to take aim.

He sighted at a silhouetted group of Bavarians ahead, braced himself. The gun was alive in this
hands, shaking violently. A bullet ricocheted off a stone over his head. It clanged against
something metal in the distance, and Raoul's hand spasmed on the trigger, almost accidentally. The
rifle slammed back into his shoulder; one of the Bavarians went down heavily. He could not tell
whether the bullet had been his. He reloaded.

"Hell!" swore Chatelin, and kept saying it with each shot, like an angry young judge condemning a
line of convicts, his thin moustache moving as he took aim. "Hell, hell, hell." Two more Bavarians
went down, one clutching his shoulder, but others came from behind them at a run. From the
abandoned houses on either side of the barricade, General Reboul's Marines picked them off with
rapid fire, but there were more coming, wave after wave.

The smoke thickened to pale grey, almost white, screening the street. Raoul fired indiscriminately
now, on impulse, like the others. Everything stank of gunpowder and hot metal; they kept shooting
at where they knew the Bavarians were, but could hardly see the man next to them. Above them, in
the house which they had thought abandoned, a child began to cry. The high-pitched wail sawed
through the noise of battle, discomfiting the soldiers, and it was so out of place there that for a few
precious moments the shooting stopped. Raoul felt the others glancing up at the shutters even as he
knew it was a mistake; in the next instant Chatelin shrieked in agony and lost his rifle.

Raoul slung his own gun back and dropped down beside him.

The young man was face-down on the cobbles, a black pool spreading around his head. Raoul
seized his shoulders to turn him over, and felt himself falling, swaying back, faint with horror.

He had no jaw. The bullet had ripped right through his teeth and only a hinge of purple bone
remained on the right side, wedged into red meat under his moustache. He was still alive. Raoul
saw the whites of his eyes appear all around his widening pupils.

Then, mercifully, incredibly, he heard Cloutier's voice over the din:

"The park! Move on, Captain wants us to push them back!"

Raoul tore his gaze away from the dying man. The Bavarians had penetrated a barricaded street
that led to Montvilliers park; if they seized it, they would as good as have the village.

"This way!" he called out, rising into the smoke that seared his eyes, trying to keep to what cover
there was as he and the men struggled across the street. Somebody had broken down the door to
the nearest house, where Marines were still firing from above. Raoul and the others ran through the
carpeted corridor into some family's living-room, vaulting over armchairs, then out through the
dark kitchen into the garden and the back street. Behind them, the barricade was already swarming
with Bavarians, but they could not spare the men to defend it until the park was secure.

A shot tore straight through the opened house.

"Close the doors!" Raoul shouted, and two men ran to do just that. For a split second he saw the
blue flash of a foreign uniform, and then, horribly, knew his order had been too late. Fool; he should have made them shut all the doors at once. The first man collapsed on the back stairs, his red-trouser leg turning dark. The other managed to slam the door, then crouched down beside the wounded soldier. Raoul hesitated.

"Let's go!" said the corporal, giving Raoul a shove in the back with his beefy palm as though he were not a commissioned officer but another of his young recruits. "The medics will get him; there's nothing we can do." Two men with a stretcher were already hurrying out of a nearby house.

Raoul ran after the others across the across the garden and the back street, climbing through a broken fence into one of the gardens on the other side. They had to get through the next line of houses. There was no sign of Bavarians in this little street yet, but that would not last.

The second garden was obviously well-tended; there were neatly raked paths, grape vines over the back wall of the house, young apple trees tied to stakes for support. It was the apple trees that stopped them. Soldiers clustered around, hunger momentarily more important than the battle, stronger than fear. With their bayonets, they knocked down the little red apples, eating them in two crunching bites.

"Lieutenant!" called one, and threw him a stolen apple.

It was looting, Raoul knew, but he ate the apple anyway, the juice wonderful in his parched throat, washing down the taste of metal and dust. He saw the house was still occupied, for washing had been hung out behind the kitchen window and the geraniums in the window-boxes were not dry, but all the windows were firmly shut and the heavy doors barred.

The men had started breaking down the back door, but Raoul called for them stop. He looked along the side of the house to where the ground rose up towards the park. In the grey morning light, the distance was still hidden by smoke.

"We'll go around."

For a moment he feared the soldiers would refuse to leave the shelter of this house, but when he led the way out onto the next street, they followed.

They emerged straight into chaos. The street was black with bodies and metal: no barricades, hardly any cover except what the fences and walls could provide. Nowhere to run. Before he could give an order, Raoul turned – and saw a skinny Bavarian taking aim.

He froze. The rifleman was as clear before him as an oncoming train. He had reddish hair and long drooping moustaches; his hands were steady and certain on his weapon. Behind him, a solid line of German bayonets was approaching like a tide, step by step.

The Bavarian's gloved hand squeezed the trigger. Raoul thought of Christine in Perros asking him if he played the violin, and started to laugh. He was going to die.

He did not expect the shot from above. As the skinny Bavarian collapsed, Raoul realised numbly that there must have been an open window in that house after all. Gasping, he turned to see a little attic room facing the street. A second shot from it made him whip around; another Bavarian fell. He could not see the man shooting above, but it had to be a civilian; the bullets came too infrequently for the gun to be a breech-loader of the sort soldiers carried.

Counting on the cover from the house, he tried to get his bearings and work out where his company was, how far they were from the park. He turned this way and that, searching for familiar
A chunk of ice ripped through his side. Surprised, Raoul looked down at himself. A patch of fabric on his hip was missing. In the oval hole, he saw bone. Then his leg folded out from underneath him and he fell.

o o o

Erik ran, stumbling across the muddy open fields, no longer seeking cover, forgetting where the road was. Tears and snot leaked from his face, but his mouth was dry and bloody, his chest raw from the wind. Sedan was chock full of soldiers; by now they would be camped in town among the freshly mortared walls of his courthouse, ripping his precious scaffolding apart for firewood. If he turned he could see its medieval fortress beneath the low mass of clouds. Even higher were the hills all around the valley – and upon these were black dots by the thousand, lined up in formation like a diagram from a strategy book. They were Prussians, and there was more of them than Erik could have imagined, more men than he had ever seen in one place. They made the French column staggering into Sedan seem laughable. When they crested a rise he could see them taking up positions against the lead-coloured sky, encircling the valley, installing artillery on the high plateaus, tightening the noose.

If he remained in this place he would be strangled with the rest of them. Architect or no, he would never see Christine again, not even from afar, not even as a stranger on the street. Twice in his life he had been hunted, and twice he had evaded pursuit – but he had been guilty, he knew, he did not deny it. But now? To be caught now, when he had done nothing wrong?

He had to run. Once he reached the woods to the north, he could cross the border into Belgium.

He stopped abruptly and leaned his shoulder into a tree, breathing hard. The morning air was like razors in his throat, and his arm was sore from the weight of the rifle. A bugle played in the hills; the Prussians were moving. He had to keep going.

"I don't want you to go," Christine had said, in his lodgings in Montmartre.

Erik squeezed his eyes shut, but she was still there, in his head, in his body, in the ring hidden in his shirt pocket. He ground his knuckles into the rough bark. It did not help. In another moment he was running again, a fugitive, a piece of filth, not even a man.

He did not know how he lost his bearings. All he knew was that when he found himself in the same damn radish field he had left that very morning, it was not a surprise, and when he saw the dark church spire of Bazeilles ahead, all he felt was a low bubbling fury. Cowards ran away. What kind of coward could not even bring himself to do that?

It was this fury that propelled him through the town, through the fighting, the screaming bullets, as he slipped between Bavarians and French alike in his muddy trousers and shirt. The ground was littered with paving stones and debris; he leapt over them without looking, without pausing. He refused to see the corpses. Nobody could shoot him now, nobody could see him, he existed in a dimension their world could never touch. He was the Devil's Angel, the Opéra Child, the Ghost of Music, he was...

He was lost.

He came to a halt near a fence. This was somebody's garden but he had no idea to whom it belonged. The fence had been smashed; most of the windows in the house were bolted shut. Bravo, he thought. In a town of some fifty houses, where he had lived for nearly a month, he could not
find a single familiar wall or a street corner. He was losing his mind.

A gun went off right behind him, followed by an agonised shriek.

Erik turned around slowly. It took an effort of will, as if the sooty air resisted his movement. He recognised this street now, but that was of no consequence.

He had heard that scream before. It was impossible that he should hear it again, here, now, yet it there it was again, as solid as a blade pressed to his throat or a heavy rope in his hands.

With no regard for the soldiers running, shooting among the ruined barricades, he stepped out into the street. He did not hurry. He walked forward with his back erect, not seeking cover, stepping over corpses as if he was the patron god of this place and nothing dared touch him.

"Ah," he said at last. "So it is. Monsieur the Vicomte de Chagny." The noise of bullets masked his voice.

The man who had tried to take Christine from him sat on the cobbles with his body contorted into a monstrous knot over his extended right leg. He was no longer screaming. Erik would never have recognised him in his muddy officer's uniform had it not been for that first sound.

Perhaps the Vicomte had felt someone standing over him, for he craned his head up and stared at Erik with bloodshot eyes, dim with pain. The movement exposed the dark blood pulsing out from between his fingers where he clenched his trouser leg. The gaps in the cobbles were filling up with red.

"You're... Opera Ghost..."

"The same. And you are dying."

The Vicomte's shock was lost in his pain-contorted features, but to give the man his due, he continued to cling to awareness. The army must be truly desperate if they were taking pups like Christine's would-be protector.

Erik lowered himself to one knee, avoiding the blood. With the butt of his rifle, he sent the Vicomte's gun skidding out of his reach.

"My... gun," the Vicomte ground out. The effort made veins stand out on his aristocratic forehead. Erik had to lean in and shout to be heard over the noise of battle, but he would have dearly loved to stand tall over him now:

"You have no further use for it, Vicomte."

"You want ... to kill me. Now ... it's easy."

"It was always easy," Erik said contemptuously, but he could not help a tremor of revulsion at the memory of sharp steel at his throat.

The young Vicomte gave a sharp, ugly little laugh. In the face of a dying man, this laugh was a horror Erik could not have imagined, worse than the bubbling last breath of the stagehand in his lair.

"We are both dead," the Vicomte said, and his voice was suddenly clear, as if the pain had gone. "Look up there, Phantom."
Erik raised his eyes. The attic window was a little black square high above the roiling mass of men, and against its frame rested the barrel of a hunting gun exactly like his own. Egrot's house.

Even as the gun swivelled towards him, Erik refused to believe what he could plainly see. It was not Egrot reloading it. It was his wife.

Pauline Egrot's hair was down around her shoulders over the gun in her thin hands, making her seem a mad, feral creature, something he might have seen in a neighbouring cage at the circus. She still wore her dressing-gown.

She tilted the gun until it pointed square at his face. She was going to kill him.

Chapter 31: The Prodigal

Lots more Erik in this chapter. Thanks so much for your reviews, guys, it's very helpful to me to know how what I write is being received and understood. Every one makes my day!

Chapter 31 – The Prodigal

There was no time to think. Erik wrenched the Vicomte's arm up and heaved him backwards like a sandbag shield between himself and the gun. Freed from the force of his hand, the Vicomte's barely staunched wound spurted anew. He howled, mingled rage and pain, loud enough to drown out the roar of battle, and his blood leaked down onto Erik's trousers in a quick, sickeningly warm drip.

Madame Egrot's gun was aimed at them. The Vicomte's howl became a low moan, then stopped. Erik felt him begin to slip down and tightened his grip until his fingers were claws, until he was half-choking on the stink of the Vicomte's sweat and the coppery heat of his blood. The abyss of a remembered nightmare yawned open beneath him; it took all his strength not to fall.

Madame Egrot did not shoot.

Erik saw her look away from the gun that was now aimed at a fallen French officer, the steel barrel shuddering in her thin arms as though she had been struck with palsy. Perhaps she thought of her son in the army. At last, mercifully, the gun disappeared. The window was dark.

Erik let go the Vicomte's shoulder, and he tumbled down onto the dusty cobbles like a puppet and lay still.

Perhaps he was dead. Erik stared at his would-be corpse and a powerful sense of déjà vu swept over him, as though in a labyrinth he had come upon a path he recognised. He recalled how Christine had surged forward towards the lake only to stop, appalled, as the rope dropped from his hand onto the Vicomte's white neck. When she turned her eyes to him, her pupils had been black as death, and the monster Erik had seen reflected there was himself.

A volley of bullets whizzed through the front garden of Egrot's house before them, hitting the wooden door. The Bavarians were across the street.

This was madness, Erik thought, even as he gathered up the Vicomte's limp body onto his back like a heavy meat carcass, dislodging the gun he carried, even as he lurched, spurred by terror, towards that same door.
He had no idea what he was doing. Every part of his brain screamed at him to run, but he plunged doggedly onward. A bullet ripped through the shrubbery and sang past his cheek, so close that he thought it would slice clear through the bandage. For a wonder, the door was unlocked. Erik never knew how he managed to keep hold of the Vicomte's body while he negotiated the stairs to the porch, or how he succeeded in closing and bolting the door behind him.

He let his burden slide to the floor – and saw the reason for the unlocked door. Madame Egrot had descended the stairs, intending to come outside. She had been reaching for the door, but now she backed away and held up the gun across her chest with both bony hands, the way she might have raised a candlestick against a thief.

"Don't shoot." Erik did not have the breath to raise his voice.

Madame Egrot looked down from him to the body of the officer on the floor. Beneath the Vicomte's hip, the worn carpet was slowly turning red. Someone shouted outside; Erik saw her eyes flick to the door.

"I locked it," he answered her unspoken question. The bloodstain under the body continued to spread. "The Vicomte is wounded."

Madame Egrot made no move to help. Erik stared at her, feeling nauseous and dizzy in the sudden confines of the dark house.

"He's wounded!" he bellowed, surprising even himself.

She blanched and clutched the gun harder, as if that would save her. Erik moved towards her. He was no longer aware of anything except the spreading blood behind him, creeping up on him:

"He is bleeding to death! Do you understand me? He is going to die!"

"You swine," she spoke quickly, backing away from him, "you lying, cowardly – you... My husband is too ill to be moved and there're Germans at the door and you bring my son's own gun here... How dare you touch it! How dare you!"

"He is going to die. Get the maid. Now."

"Rachel is tending to my husband!"

"Then damn you, tend to this one yourself!" Leaping forward, Erik grabbed the gun from her and tossed it to the floor where it skidded against an armchair. Madame Egrot was hysterical; Erik snatched the shawl from her shoulders and thrust it into her clutching hands:

"There, now bind his wound!"

She sank to her knees. Erik thought she had fainted, but she half-crawled towards the body and pressed the bulk of the shawl against the Vicomte's wounded hip. Twisting the rest of the fabric, she wound it over his thigh and pulled the knot tight. Then she rocked back on her heels and clenched her hands to her mouth, as if to stop herself from crying.

Erik stared at the result. The shawl made a crooked bandage that was already turning red, but not as fast as he had anticipated. Perhaps that meant the Vicomte would live. Or perhaps he was already near death, and there was no more blood to lose.

"There are bandages and lint in the kitchen," Madame Egrot said quietly, without turning around. "You can take him to the cellar. Then you can go away."
Erik hesitated. "Your husband will live."

"My husband..." Madame Egrot stood up with difficulty, her hands pulling at her unkempt hair. She looked haggard and old. "He trusted you. After you disappeared last time, he said, Andersson must have been a soldier in Algiers or Mexico, they can be strange afterwards. It isn't true, is it."

"He will live," Erik repeated.

"You liar! You leave my husband for dead but you carry this boy through the bullets – why? Why him!"

Something metal banged against the closed door, making the hinges groan. "You should hide in the cellar," Erik said forcefully, even as Madame Egrot picked up her gun again.

"What is he to you?" She motioned at the body of the Vicomte. He was as waxen as a corpse, and his wound was no longer bleeding.

"We fought together," Erik heard himself say. It was almost true.

A bullet smashed an upstairs window, sending a shower of glass down outside the door.

"The cellar, Madame Egrot. Unless you mean to die here."

"Pauline!" Erik heard Egrot's voice from upstairs. "Pauline! Are you down there? Are you hurt?"

Madame Egrot hefted her gun and rushed back up the stairs. Erik heard her calling up to Egrot that she was all right, that she was on her way.

He was left alone with his folly. There were Bavarians just outside, the rattle of German orders and German guns was now near-constant. If they caught sight of the idiot woman shooting upstairs, they would storm the house. He could still make it out alive, perhaps, via the back door into the garden.

He glanced down at the Vicomte's slack face. With revulsion, he picked up the heavy body, balancing as best he could, and wended his way through the living-room into the kitchen. The trapdoor was open. The cellar below was a black grave; the damp musty smell hit Erik's face like a fist. Gritting his teeth and cursing, he struggled down the ladder, then pulled the Vicomte down after him, trying his best not to jar the wound. He carried him through the hidden niche.

In the second cellar, the Vicomte opened his eyes.

Erik barely kept from dropping the body. The Vicomte did not scream or speak a word, even as Erik lowered him to the earthen floor and stepped back. What faint light trickled in through the opened trapdoor above the outer cellar was presumably insufficient for the Vicomte's eyes, and for a while he stared blindly in a sort of stupid shock.

"I'm dead."

"Not yet," Erik said. He saw how his voice struck the other man's face with horror.

"Phantom!"

"Vicomte."

"Where am I? Why are... Ohhh," he made a low sound so full of pain that Erik had to step back. He wanted nothing more than to turn and run. He forced himself to search for the lamp Egrot kept
hidden here somewhere under a bench.

"My leg," the Vicomte groaned. "What have you done?.."

"If I were you, I'd conserve my energies, monsieur. Your last heroic effort nearly cost you your life."

"What have you done to me? I can't see!" His face contorted in a grimace of pain. Panic crept into his voice.

"That is because you are in a cellar, my dear Vicomte. A dark, damp cellar beneath the ground." Erik's searching hand finally closed on the lamp. He laughed without humour. "Welcome to my world."

The Vicomte did not reply, and Erik turned to see that he was weeping, fighting agony.

"There is a lamp here," Erik said grudgingly. "But I must go back up to get matches."

"I have... matches... My pocket."

Erik watched him trying to reach for the pocket of his army jacket. It was pathetic. He left him to his efforts, and went back up to the kitchen to get matches and the bandages Madame Egrot had mentioned, along with scissors, a pitcher of water and a bowl. If the Vicomte was determined to survive, he supposed he should at least be given a chance to wash out that wound before it festered.

To Erik's surprise, the lamp had been lit by the time he returned. The Vicomte was slumped next to the bench, breathing shallowly. There was a dark smear on the floor where he had dragged his leg.

"Bandages," Erik said tersely. It annoyed him that the Vicomte just nodded silently over his injury instead of babbling and weeping and fainting again. He tossed the bandages down on the bench near the lamp.

The Vicomte managed to cut away the fabric of his trouser leg around the wound, then dampened Madame Egrot's shawl and removed it. Even at the sight of the bloodied hole in his thigh, he only cursed and hissed in pain. Evidently he was determined not to lose consciousness again. Erik watched his clumsy efforts for a while, before exasperation made him pour the water into the bowl himself and pass it to the Vicomte.

In tense silence, the Vicomte washed the wound. Erik listened for the sound of fighting outside, but all was quiet. If the Bavarians had started to storm the house, he could not hear it.

"She didn't shoot you," he heard the Vicomte say. He glanced down, but the sight of the bloodied bandages did not agree with his gut; he sought something else to draw his attention. The lamp sent bizarre shapes leaping across the opposite wall.

"That... woman," the Vicomte persisted. One would think he kept himself talking to pretend he was not in pain.

"Yes. You made an excellent shield, Vicomte. Fortunately for you, Madame Egrot chose not to shoot an officer."

The Vicomte appeared to ignore this. Erik risked a glance down; the fool was reaching for the bandage.

"I suggest you pack that first. With the lint. Yes, that."
Erik looked away again as the Vicomte struggled with lint and bandages. For some reason he was reminded of Vincent Fiaux, the young engineer, leaving the office after he was conscripted, walking with a jaunty bounce in his step and his hands thrust into his pockets.

"It comes as something of a surprise to find you in the army, Vicomte. I had thought that pretty masquerade costume was a show."

"And I had thought your mask and hair real," the Vicomte countered. "It seems both of us were mistaken – Erik."

Erik could not help it; he felt the shock of his own name being wielded by this boy, this former enemy, and he knew that the Vicomte had looked up in that moment deliberately, to see the sharp fear in his face.

"So Christine was right. You have a man's name after all. Have you also a man's honour, then?"

Erik could barely think for the blood rushing to his head. Christine had spoken to her fiancé about him? She had told him his name?

"Why did you save me?"

"You are lying," Erik cut him off. "Christine told you nothing."

"She had not meant to tell me," the Vicomte admitted. He hacked with the scissors at the end of the bandage and held his palm flat to his hip, as though to draw the pain away. His trembling body was soaked in perspiration, and for a moment Erik felt almost sorry for him. He looked close to collapse.

"Why did you save me?" Erik saw the question was real; it burned in the Vicomte's feverish eyes. Perhaps it was all that kept him awake. "I don't know why you're here, but... You could have... left me to die."

Erik rose. "If the Bavarians come, I advise you to scream very loudly. I just might hear."

"Where are you going? Phantom!"

Ignoring him, Erik left the cellar and climbed back out into the kitchen. He considered closing the trapdoor, then felt a flush of anger at the thought. It was beneath him. The Vicomte may think he did not have a man's honour, but he would not leave him to die in the darkness.

He took the stairs two at a time, and was in the attic before he could determine what exactly he was intending to do there. It was full daylight now, and sunlight streamed into the room through the little window, revealing clouds of dust and gunpowder. The sounds of battle were no longer coming from directly below, but carried from either end of the street.

Egrot was lying on a straw mattress on the floor near the window, with a bandage around his head. His wife was beside him; her gun left forgotten near the window. The maid was nowhere in sight.

"Andersson..." Egrot called, spotting him when he emerged from the stairs into the daylight. "Pauline told me you had returned."

Erik elected not to hear the implied invitation to explain himself.

"She also said that – you brought back a former army mate?"
One look at Madame Egrot was sufficient to assure Erik that unlike her husband, she did not believe a word of it. She knew he was no soldier. Her mouth was tight with anger.

"I left him downstairs in your new cellar, Egrot. Where you had best join him."

Egrot studied him for a while from beneath his bandage. How odd, Erik thought, that he should cause another man to wear a mask like his own. There was a disquieting wrongness about it, about the sight of Egrot lying prone with his head bandaged and the split skin that must be hidden underneath. Fresh from confronting the Vicomte's wound, Erik did not wish to think about yet more blood.

He had never come back to see what it looked like, before. There had always been somebody else to clean things up. He did not like this at all.

"Well, don't just stand there," Egrot said genially, yet with no more genuine friendliness in his voice than he would have afforded a casual acquaintance. "It is good that you returned; my wife can use the help."

Erik nodded, accepting the truce. He went to the window. Despite the daylight, the smoke hanging over the town made it difficult to see much further than the Place d'Eglise. What he could see of the square was overrun with the tiny shapes of Bavarians.

"How far have they got?" Egrot asked from his mattress.

"At least as far as the square." Then, driven by what he could only think of as compassion, he turned to Madame Egrot:

"Help me carry him downstairs, madame."

"Do not take me for a log!" Egrot exploded. "There will be no talk of carrying me anywhere. Take that gun, Andersson, or prop me up and let me at them!"

"There is nobody down there," Erik began, but just then a dozen Marines gave the lie to his words. They ran out onto the street, rifles at the ready. One stumbled over a corpse; there were other bodies strewn across the cobbles where the Vicomte had fallen earlier. Almost immediately, one of the Marines fell. More shots echoed, and Erik realised a new wave of Bavarians was rolling this way. Unlike the Marines, they looked neither dusty nor exhausted; their helmets gleamed in the light. These had to be reinforcements.

"You load it like this." Madame Egrot had come up silently behind him and now stood holding up her own gun and a new cartridge.

Erik watched her demonstrate this. He knew Egrot was watching too, and that this was certain to convince him that no former soldier such as he supposed Erik to be would have needed this instruction. Perhaps that was why Madame Egrot did it. Yet Erik thanked her with deliberate politeness. Let them think what they would. He had not needed to come back. He could have been approaching Belgium and safety by now.

He loaded, and took aim.

The first two shots went wide, and the third succeeded only in alerting the first of the ranked Bavarians to the location of his gun. The next one, however, hit one of their officers in the neck, cutting short an order.

Madame Egrot made a small sound of triumph. Erik thought he had dropped the gun, but he hadn't;
he was reloading even as he thought he should go away now, that he did not need to be here. The
stricken officer was gurgling in the street below. Erik did not look. He reloaded and fired. Another
went down.

It was so simple. The gun was old and inaccurate but he could compensate; it took only a few shots
to work out that he had to aim slightly to the left of his target, and he quickly learned to brace his
shoulder for the rebound shock. It was ridiculously easy to squeeze the trigger and fell the
explosion rip through the steel and launch lead through the air, through flesh. It was all so much
easier than the rope, so much faster and cleaner and he didn't have to look...

But he looked anyway. He watched the men go down, a spectator outside his own body counting
the uniforms on the corpses filling the street. Egrot was saying something behind him, but he
could not hear him for the cracking of gunpowder. A Bavarian screamed and a shot ricocheted off
the windowframe, shooting splinters past Erik's face. More kept coming, scattering through the
street, getting closer. Erik fired.

He did not want to stop. He felt he was standing at the top of a great tower, with all the mobs of the
world below him, and from here he could keep them all back. Some tried to fire into the attic, but it
meant they had to squint into the bright white sky to aim, and Erik had the advantage of height. He
picked them off. It was easy.

Chapter 32: The Defence

The battle of Bazeilles continues. Please take a moment to leave a review, you'll make my day!

Chapter 32 – The Defence

The pain sewed through Raoul's side like a thread pulled by a needle, jabbing him sharply then
abating to a hot dull ache, jabbing again. For a time he could only hover on the edge of awareness.
Perhaps he slept, or perhaps he merely drifted on the ebb and flow of pain, counting his heartbeats.
It was impossible to tell in the dark. The lamp had burnt out. Vivid colours swam before his eyes,
but if the shapes they formed were dreams, he could not decipher their meaning. He desperately
wanted water.

This was a cellar. He knew that much, but he could not recall how he had come to be here, nor how
much time had passed since he had fallen in the street. Memory played tricks on him: one moment
he was firing into the dusty street from behind a barricade, the next he was outside a café in Paris
on a hot July evening, anxious of losing Christine in the crowd surging and bubbling through the
doors. Then Christine caught sight of someone on the pavement and stopped. There, before Raoul's
eyes, her face transformed: her eyes grew dark and strange, the colour rose in her cheeks, her lips
parted. A faint blush crept over her skin. It was almost obscene, except that Raoul had never seen
her more beautiful, and when she called out – "Erik!" – he had known whom she meant even
before he, too, saw a creature with a bandaged face vanish in the crowd. He could not forget
Christine's expression afterwards as she turned to him, the twin flames of fear in her eyes.

The sound of approaching footsteps gave him a jolt. A dazzling yellow light near-blinded him and
he saw a dark-haired girl holding a candle. Slowly she came closer, until she was standing over
him.

"Christine?.." Raoul whispered.
The candle jumped. "No, monsieur. Begging your pardon. I'm Rachel, I'm the maid."

"Oh." Raoul tried to focus. This was not Christine; that had been a momentary illusion. In his delirium he was starting to see things: the Phantom, now Christine... He was so thirsty.

"Forgive me." Raoul forced the words out with his dry tongue. His whole body was throbbing. "I must have ... been asleep, mademoiselle. I took you... for a friend I left... in Paris."

He made an effort to sit up. His head felt too heavy to lift, and he only managed to roll onto his good side and prop himself up on his elbow. Even this small movement set his hip on fire. The plump housemaid in her servant's dress and stained apron looked nothing like Christine; of course not. Next he would believe the Phantom had indeed brought him here. The girl lit the lamp and stood back, wary of the stinking, bloodied soldier.

"I brought you some food, sir. It's only cold; I couldn't light the fire on account of the fighting, but it's as good as what they are having upstairs. Will you eat?"

Raoul thanked her, emboldening the girl to set down the tray she was holding. To his immense relief, she picked up the pitcher and started filling a cup; clean water tumbled into it like diamonds, cool and wonderful. Raoul could barely restrain his impatience until she finally passed it to him. He drank deep draughts, feeling the water rush into every part of his body, into his arms and legs, restoring him a little. She poured two more cups before he could stop to speak the question in his mind.

"How did I come to be here?"

"Madame said you are Monsieur Andersson's friend," the girl offered as she cut the cold meat on the tray. She passed him the plate.

Raoul had no idea who this Andersson was, but the sight of meat and bread made him aware of the raging hunger that had lurked under his thirst and drove all questions from his mind. Even his throbbing hip ceased to matter when he bit into the meat and felt the texture of each individual fibre on his tongue, the slight tang of bay leaves and onion. It had been days since he had eaten anything other than the hard biscuit and potatoes that made up their marching rations.

It was only after he had washed the food down with a bit of wine that it struck him that something strange was going on. Why was he being offered meat and even wine? In his time with the army he had seen how farmers barred their doors to half-starved soldiers, afraid to encourage looting. Even in the towns, Raoul had never been offered food except grudgingly. Yet here he was apparently being treated to the same meal the master of the house was having upstairs... He passed his empty plate to the maid, stretching his side painfully.

"You are generous, mademoiselle." He made it a question.

"They are still fighting outside." A slight tremor crept into her voice. "Might be, we'll be feeding the Germans tomorrow."

"Better one of us than them, then."

The girl looked offended. "I mean to say, there's no rainy day to save for. They've been at it since dawn. Nearly broke into the house, twice. Here they come again, hear that?" She glanced back the way she had come, as though expecting to see Bavarian guns streaming into the cellar.

Only then did Raoul become aware of the muffled sounds of battle. From here, the guns were no louder than the crackle of logs in a fire, but they indeed seemed to be getting closer. What was he
doing in here when the battle went on outside? He had to rejoin his regiment. Quickly, he groped around the earthen floor and realised in dismay that he no longer had his gun. Whoever had carried him here must have left it behind. Apprehension made him sick.

"How long have I been here?"

"Most of the day – it was not yet ten when Monsieur Andersson brought you in, and it's just gone five."

"Five o'clock! I can't stay here, I must get back."

The girl looked at his hip mistrustfully. "You can't walk, monsieur."

Raoul tried to stand, levering himself up against the bench, and at once discovered she was right. The moment he put weight on his leg, the pain shot from his hip down to his heel and up to his shoulder. He cried out sharply, and saw a new bloom of red on the bandage.

"Tut, sir, you'll make it worse with your moving about. And all the same there's no way to leave the house now, not with Monsieur Andersson shooting above."

Could it be somebody from the regiment then, Raoul thought, using the house for cover upstairs? If he was a superior officer, he could report to him instead of trying to seek out the others in the chaos of battle. Yet he seemed to remember looking up at this house from the garden below and thinking the man shooting was a civilian... Unless this was a different house? Raoul frowned, and decided to confess.

"Forgive me, but – I can recall no Monsieur Andersson in my regiment."

"But he isn't from your regiment," the girl said in consternation. "Leastwise, I don't think he is. It's Monsieur Erik Andersson, you know, the architect. From Sedan. Though I suppose you might not know, seeing as you're not from around here." She went on to explain something about a new courthouse in Sedan, but Raoul was still caught up in the first part:

"Erik. _Erik_ Andersson?"

The girl nodded. "Your friend," she reminded him. "You're hurt, monsieur. You should rest. I'll come back if there's any news." She picked up the tray and her candle and went out. Raoul heard her climb up a ladder somewhere out of sight.

He let his head drop back against the bench. Monsieur Erik Andersson. Raoul refused to believe it. He could not afford to believe it; if he did, he would have to assume that the wild incoherent memories of the Phantom bringing him to this house were true. The Phantom was here. He couldn't be here, it was impossible. But he had been outside the café in Paris, in July, hiding behind bandages and a gentleman's suit... Raoul's thoughts whirled and tangled against one another. He could not believe it.

Painfully, he dragged himself up until he was half-sitting on the bench. His right leg was a dead weight as if he had slept on it, and his hip and thigh were swollen tight almost to the knee. Panting with the effort, Raoul managed to loosen the bandage a little. It took several attempts to stand on his good leg, and even then he had to lean on the wall for balance. He thought he might be able to hobble if he could find something to use as a crutch, but the cellar was full of boxes and nothing suitable presented itself. He was forced to half-stagger, half-slide along the bench and the floor towards the doorway.

The battle was more audible from the outer cellar. Raoul could distinguish voices, shots and then
the sound of broken glass. It was darker here, as he had not been able to take the lamp, but a square of thin light marked the trapdoor above. He picked a rake from among some gardening tools lined up against the wall and tested to see if it would hold his weight. It did. It made an awkward crutch without a handle, but it was better than nothing at all. Raoul propelled it up the ladder ahead of himself then followed, pulling his body up by his arms and catching each step with his good leg. Right at the top he slipped, and for a split second had a vivid image of himself landing square on his hip, tearing flesh. His foot caught a step before he could fall.

He was lucky. He sat on the kitchen floor above, his hands flat on the cool wood, trying not to look at the bandage. He could feel the blood still seeping into it, and when he moved to stand, a smear of it was left behind on the floorboards. A bullet slammed into the wall, right outside.

The rake proved little use in negotiating the stairs from the dining room beyond the kitchen, and on the first landing Raoul discarded it. He could hear someone firing above, the click of the cock followed by the gunpowder charge exploding, and what sounded like two voices, a man and a woman. The man's voice was alternately frightened and soothing; it did not sound familiar. Raoul gripped the banister, dragged himself up, pulled again. The muscles of his arms burned and trembled with the effort.

He all but fell into the attic above. Pain pounded through his side, whipping up a frenzied assault on his head and his senses. He could not feel his arms at all, and his vision pulsed red and black.

"Good God!" somebody exclaimed; a woman holding a hunting-rifle. She was crouching beside a mattress, with a tray of half-eaten food and an open box of cartridges at her feet. Raoul heard her as through a red fog. "Monsieur, what are you doing! How did you get up here?"

Raoul could not spare the energy to answer. There was a man with a bandaged head lying on a mattress. The side of his head was brown with blood. No, Raoul thought, that isn't him. His eyes travelled up until he found the small window, the same one he had seen from the street. A man in shirtsleeves and muddy boots was aiming a rifle. He fired; a German began screaming outside. The woman forgot about Raoul; quick as a mouse, she passed him the gun she had been holding, exchanging it for his, and immediately reached for a new cartridge to reload it. The man took the loaded gun without looking.

"Andersson," Raoul said. The foreign name was no more strange than this place itself, and even as the man turned around, Raoul knew he was right. The Phantom's masked, bandaged face stared back at him. Motes of sulphurous dust flickered around his rifle.

Raoul saw how the woman and her husband watched them. The Phantom straightened his back. He held a loaded rifle. Raoul held nothing, not even the useless rake he had dumped downstairs. This was the man who had strung him up by the neck, forcing Christine to see it.

Raoul said, "I'm alive."

Nothing in the Phantom's face changed to indicate that he heard. Raoul saw that under his filthy matted hair, his eyes were hollow. No hatred, no madness remained, nothing living. Raoul had not feared the gun, but there was something about this hollow-eyed stare that raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

Outside, three bullets slammed into the wall in quick succession, spraying plaster. The Phantom did not move. Raoul heaved himself closer to the window and then caught his breath.

"Let me have the other gun," he begged the woman by the mattress. "Please."
She had set the second rifle by the window within easy reach; the Phantom now glanced at it as though he had forgotten it was there. Then he kicked it with the toe of his boot.

Raoul stopped the rifle before it could spin away from him. With a final effort, he lunged towards the window. The gun was loaded; the Bavarians were still below. Three of them had climbed into the front garden and were running towards the door; another moment and they would enter the house.

Without thinking, Raoul sank to his good knee, lined up the shot and fired. He fumbled with the gun, trying to reload it, then fired again. It was only after the second shot that he realised the Phantom was doing the same. A Bavarian's shoulder directly below him burst apart in a red epaulette; he dropped his needle gun. The two others were already down, their limbs angled oddly in the grass. One was an officer, a lieutenant like Raoul.

"You're a fool," Raoul heard the Phantom's voice beside him, low enough to be almost a growl. "If you had stayed below you might have lived."

"I will live."

The Phantom said nothing more, but accepted more cartridges from the woman and fired into the street. Raoul glanced back at the couple, the terrified husband muttering something and the wife with her unkempt hair. He wanted to ask them what they knew of this man, how he had wormed his way into their confidence. It was his duty to tell them they harboured a murderer.

He looked at the rifle in his hands, then at the fallen bodies below. He said nothing, but turned around, adjusted the rifle sash against his shoulder, and took aim again.

The heart of the battle was somewhere away from here, closer to the park, but Bavarian units continued to appear on the Sedan road, and there were barely enough Marines to repulse them. Raoul lost all sense of time and place. His wound became a separate agony, unconnected to his body. The man at his shoulder might have been any other soldier; the windowsill any other barricade. Between the two guns, they could loose two or three rounds each minute if they had to, but there would not be enough ammunition to sustain that and they fired like snipers, taking the greatest care to aim well. Raoul got used to seeing men when he sighted down his gun; he barely flinched now at the recoil. This would not be enough to push back a real charge if the Bavarians thought to storm them in earnest, but thus far they held their ground. The hunting rifles had neither the range nor the power of Raoul's discarded chassepôt. He thought he could see it down there in the dust, and he dreaded that some Bavarian would pick it up.

Dusk was gathering when the man beside him spoke. It had grown quieter outside, the black smoke in the direction of the church spoke of desperate attempts to finish the battle by nightfall. Somebody had set a building on fire; Raoul could smell charcoal on the wind.

"They're falling back. It's too dark to shoot, Vicomte. Your army is going to hold the town tonight."

It took a moment for the import of the words to sink in. Raoul came to himself, gasping as his wound flared again in full force, as though it had been lying in wait for him.

"They're falling back," the Phantom repeated more loudly, for the benefit of the couple behind them.

Raoul felt the gun fall from his hands onto the floor as he slid against the wall. The room spun briefly, making him queasy. His hands were black with oil from the rifle. There were more bodies outside than he cared to see.
The injured man was asleep on the mattress, his wife sat beside him with her head on her folded arms. When the Phantom spoke, she looked up as though she scarcely believed it.

"The Bavarians are leaving?"

"No," Raoul said, "They'll be back tomorrow."

"But they are leaving now?" The woman's pale face flicked between him and the Phantom, seeking reassurance. The Phantom lifted the sash of the rifle over his head and held it before him with both hands on the stock, as though he would lean on it. He swayed slightly.

"It's as the Vicomte said," he muttered. "They will be back. With reinforcements."

Raoul looked over at the Phantom and saw his bandage had slipped. The last pale sunlight that cut almost horizontally through the window outlined the knot of scars near his nose.

The man on the mattress stirred and sat up, grimacing. He checked the cartridge box, then craned his neck to look up at the Phantom. "We have twenty rounds left, Andersson. That's all. If they come back, we die here."

"They will come back." The Phantom's voice was emotionless; whether with exhaustion or with something else, Raoul could not tell.

"I'll go out there when it gets dark," Raoul heard himself offer. "There are plenty of guns there. And the Bavarians will have cartridges. The medics will not take them."

The woman and her husband both gasped. Phantom half-turned towards him. "Robbing the dead, Vicomte?"

Raoul had no answer for him, nor did the man seem to expect one – but as he looked at the Phantom's badly masked face with its bandage askew, a slow horror began at the base of Raoul's spine and spread upwards like a tide of ice. He was weeping. Droplets formed in the corners of his hollow eyes, and crept down his unshaven cheek.

As though he was completely unaware of his own tears, the Phantom merely scowled at Raoul's scrutiny and then gave a small shrug:

"If you think you can get outside with that leg, Vicomte, and avoid being shot like a turkey by the snipers who will no doubt remain through the night – then by all means, try. But don't suppose I will carry you a second time."

The man on the mattress tried to object, but Raoul interrupted him.

"I don't," he said. He observed the tears rolling down the Phantom's cheeks and the man's utter unawareness of it with a sort of morbid fascination. There was something less than human in this disconnect, as though the Phantom was no longer entirely aware of himself. The crooked mask only added to that impression. Finally, Raoul could stand it no longer.

"Your mask," he said.

The Phantom lifted a hand to his face and felt the gap that left his scars visible to all. Raoul expected him to tug it into place, but he merely stretched his lips in disdain.

"Your leg, Vicomte."
Raoul looked down at himself. His hip was bleeding again. The movement when he turned from the window must have torn the wound anew. He tried to adjust the bandage.

"I will call for Rachel," the woman announced, as though she had now decided to assume the role of a hostess. "We will have dinner."

"An excellent idea," her husband chimed in.

Raoul raised his head and met the Phantom's gaze. The mask was in place and the tears were gone.

"Yes," the Phantom said, "food would be most welcome, Madame Egrot." When she had gone downstairs, he lowered his voice so that only Raoul heard the rest.

"Well, Vicomte. How does it feel to be a murderer?"

Raoul flushed with disgust. "I am no murderer."

The Phantom did not argue. He glanced at Monsieur Egrot, who was watching the exchange between them with no sign of following it, then at the two rifles on the floor between them. He fingered something in the pocket of his shirt, then simply leaned back against the wall and shut his eyes.

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Chapter 33: Being Yourself

Thanks for your support, guys. I hope you're still enjoying the story! Much thanks to LadyKate (and her violinist father) for help with music theory.

Chapter 33 – Being Yourself

The polished wood of the rifle stock buzzed in Erik's tired hands, as though he was holding some peculiar musical instrument after a long recital. He tried to believe it, and could not. His shoulder was bruised from the gun's recoil. His clothes reeked of gunpowder. He needed a bath. The Egrots were asking questions, moving things about, creaking up and down the floor. The maid set to changing the wounded Vicomte's bandages while he moaned through his teeth and beat his hands against the bare wooden floor. It was all so ugly. Evening advanced, draping its black crepe of smoke and shadows. Kill them now, Erik thought. He dangled the idea before himself like a rope, testing whether it held any appeal. Kill them and escape. What difference would four more bodies make?

He did not want to kill them. He did not want to have killed anyone at all, not Bavarians, not Prussians, not even drunken old Buquet. He wanted a bed, a room, an architect's sketchbook covered in green velvet, Christine's shoes by the foot of their bed, the smell of her hair, her sleepy voice calling his name. He wanted these things so much they stuck in his throat. But damn it, what he was going to get was more death, death without count, distant, ugly, faceless murder. Perhaps it was not murder for the Vicomte. Perhaps if you were born into silken sheets with a family crest, killing was the work of a hero, and women adored the sight of a bloodied uniform. Perhaps the Vicomte would return to Paris and Christine would love him again, love him all the more for his bravery.

In two long strides Erik crossed the attic to where the Vicomte lay stretched out on the mattress Egrot had vacated. Having proclaimed himself sufficiently recovered to leave his bed, the master of the house was helping his wife to drag the trunk in the centre of the room to make a table for
their supper. Erik glanced in their direction, but they paid him no mind. He squatted beside the Vicomte. He did not bother with preliminaries.

"What are you doing in Bazeilles?"

The Vicomte rolled his eyes up to try to see Erik. The whites glinted like bone in the dark. "Fighting," he said tersely.

Erik wondered that he did not ask the maid for more wine to dull the pain. "Men of your class are not conscripted."

"I am... an officer. Commissioned." He spoke in short gasps, swallowing half his words.

"Ah. You father bought a place."

"I have... own... money. It's... of no concern... to you."

Madame Egrot had thrown a starched white tablecloth over the old trunk, a ridiculous little scrap of domestic comfort. Egrot was helping her tuck the corners under. Glancing down, Erik saw the Vicomte was watching them too.

"You think your uniform will impress her, Vicomte? You'll come home covered in glory and bandages and Christine will fling herself into your arms?"

"No," the Vicomte replied quietly and, Erik could not help hearing, sadly. "She will not. Let me be, Anders... Andersson. Please."

"Admit you're a murderer," Erik said. "Say it."

"It isn't... murder. They're... soldiers. Like... me."

"It's death."

"Yes," the Vicomte said. He raised his eyes again to where Erik sat. "That night... at the café. Were you... following us? Her?"

Slowly, Erik shook his head. After a moment, the Vicomte returned to watching the Egrots set up the table. He had accepted the answer. His face was pasty and his hair lank and stringy with sweat; were it not for the officer's uniform, he would have appeared every bit the drowned rat arriving at the portcullis in the cellars of the Opéra. Erik would never have believed he had this much fight left in him. Remembering that portcullis, he supposed he should have expected it.

"You asked why I'm here," the Vicomte said. Erik had to strain to make out the words. "It's... my duty."

Erik knew he should laugh, but he did not feel like it.

"Why... are you here?" the Vicomte went on.

Erik was saved from having to answer by Madame Egrot announcing supper. He rose smoothly to his feet and helped Egrot to turn the Vicomte's mattress around so he could sit up against the wall. It must have jolted his side, but the Vicomte made no sound of protest.

They made a peculiar dinner party. With no lamps lit for fear of alerting snipers or looters, they sat around the old trunk in the dark, like gypsies clustered in a tent, yet the crisp linen of the tablecloth and the bright silverware upon it gave them the dignity of kings. The maid brought the same cold
meat, bread and butter they had had earlier that day, but she had also found some cheese and apples and even chocolate, and had managed to make coffee. Erik could smell it brewing in the pot and the aroma was almost enough to drive the smell of death from the attic. Almost.

"Our last supper," said Egrot, raising his wineglass.

Erik looked up from his own glass, surprised at his gallows humour, but Egrot was apparently in earnest. "You are certain they will be back, Andersson."

"Quite." 'Andersson', Erik noted, not 'my friend'. He was annoyed that it should matter.

"And there are snipers outside."

"Most probably."

"Then the women will hide in the cellar, and we'll pile more furniture against the doors and windows," Egrot decided. "I'll keep those savages from my house as long as I can, Andersson. I will not sit in my corner and have them just walk in. I will not."

It was dawning on Erik what he was suggesting. "And then? You cannot be serious, Egrot. You have twenty rounds. Your heroic stand would not last five minutes."

"And then... what comes will come." Egrot downed the rest of his wine in a single, terrified gulp.

Erik felt ill. He could not be proposing this.

"And you agree to this?" he demanded of Madame Egrot.

"Perhaps they will not return," she said, but it was a feeble lie that even she did not believe. "We are holding the town. There must be reinforcements coming."

Erik stared at her, then at her stubborn husband with his injured head, then at the Vicomte, who was clutching a piece of bread without eating it, and seemed scarcely to hear them. He could not believe it. They were all mad. If possible, the Vicomte seemed even paler now, and his fresh bandage had grown a dark stain in the centre.

"For God's sake, give him some water." Erik's mouth refused to move. The mask was pressing on his jaw, making it difficult to speak. "He has lost a lot of blood."

The Vicomte winced to hear his weakness exposed, but he clutched at the offered glass and drank like a tippler kept for days without his wine. His dirty throat opened and closed around the water. Madame Egrot poured some more.

"If you wish to leave now," Egrot said to Erik, "if you know a way, that is... I shall not stop you."

"If I wished to leave, Egrot, you couldn't stop me. Pass me that gun. I am going out."

"What? Where?"

"To rob the dead, just as the Vicomte suggested." He rose to his feet. After a moment, Madame Egrot reached for the rifle; he took it from her pale, reluctant hands.

The Vicomte spoke up. "I did not suggest... you do it. I will go."

"Oh, be quiet!" Erik snapped, shouldering the rifle. "Don't pretend to fear my death, Vicomte. It is laughable."
"I do not fear... your death! I fear..." He hesitated, and Erik knew he loathed being forced to say it. "My own."

For a poisonous moment, Erik allowed himself to feel the full blast of triumph. He understood what the Vicomte feared. The Phantom would abandon him here to his fate with the Egrots, with no ammunition, with nothing but the slim hope of being passed over when the battle resumed. The Vicomte would rather face the dangers outside or bleed to death in the effort, than wait for death to come and claim him. He was actually begging him to come back. It felt so right, so – perfect, to have his former enemy in his power...

But it was not right at all. It was ugly and pathetic to be begged for anything by a man who had crawled from the cellar to the attic with a chunk of flesh torn from his hip, and who even now refused to faint.

"You underestimate me, Vicomte," Erik said. "I will return."

He left them staring after him as he descended into the depths of the house. On the stairs, the maid fluttered to the banister and clung there like a grey moth, watching him pass. Erik doubted the girl could see anything but a thicker darkness where he moved and the sharp contour of his rifle, but she stayed on the stairs all the same, watching, as if she too thought he was running away.

Dread trailed after him with the weight of her stare. She had no idea what he was capable of, Erik thought. None of them had the slightest idea what they were making him do.

The kitchen window was barricaded with boxes stacked high against it, and a cupboard blocked the door. Erik put his shoulder to it and shoved it aside. It scraped hard on the floorboards and threatened to collapse on top of him, but gave way with relative ease. Had the Bavarians tried coming through here, this sorry barricade might have held them off for all of half a minute.

Here was the door. Erik closed his eyes for a moment and took a long breath. He could do what they all expected and run. Run to Paris, to Christine. It was more a wisp of instinct than a plan. His fingers itched with the desire to remove the dirty, useless mask, but that would be mere theatre. Could he have ripped the very face from his skull, it would have changed nothing. He was what he had always been. No man could run from that.

The door was noisier in opening than he would have believed possible. Erik waited, counting to fifty, to a hundred. Nothing stirred. Silently, he rigged the door to remain ajar and edged into the night-time garden. He worked the rope from the pocket where he had secreted it when he had first taken Egrot's gun. His hands remembered the knot. The wind must have changed; he could no longer smell the burning houses, and the wild fragrances of night flowers enveloped him completely. He flowed down the stairs into the garden. Not far from the porch, two guns lay in the wet grass where they had been abandoned; one a gleaming chassepôt, the other an older German needle gun. The bodies that should have held them were gone, taken away to be either healed or buried. A shoulder pack lay open nearby with its contents spilling out. A grey half-eaten biscuit, swollen with damp. A messin.

Erik reached down for the strap of the nearest rifle. He would need ammunition to fit. A slick misshapen lump slid over the barrel and into the grass, swarming with black ants. Erik caught sight of a fingernail and a partly-severed tendon, and tugged the strap towards him sharply, dislodging the rest.

The tiny click of a rifle being cocked nearby was all he had needed to hear. The sniper never had time to move his hand on the trigger; in an instant Erik was upon him, a white ghost in his shirt and bandage flying through the night; and then there was a soundless death like the others before him.
The Bavarian was a well-built man with hard shoulders and a stiff neck, but he fell as easily as any child. He was only one more.

Erik held the body close as he slipped the rope off, in a macabre embrace. This, too, his hands remembered. It was all curiously anticlimactic, almost mundane. The wool of the Bavarian's jacket was coarse and scratchy, there was a cigarette burn in the collar. Erik rolled up the rope. He had thought his hands might seize, that the same fingers that had caressed Christine's living body would refuse to work for this, that the rope might break and he would die pierced by a bullet like some miserable hero, like the Vicomte with his notions of honour. But nothing happened.

The night still smelled like flowers, the air moved past the open half of his face with gentle indifference. The Bavarian had carried ninety rounds. It was not enough.

o o o

Music poured forth from the instrument under her hands. It had a tone richer, lighter, purer than anything she could have accomplished with her own voice, but Christine did not begrudge it this clarity, nor was she jealous. It was only an instrument, a tool in her hands, mute without her. It was she who made it sing.

She searched for a conclusion to the first movement, one that would both speak of the past and whisper into the pause, making wordless, tender promises. There was some music that could soar in darkness and some that could draw the living soul from one's body, but the music she sought now would only hush and murmur like waves on the shore. The chords she tried were all too heavy and plain, too dismal; they conveyed the longings in her heart with the officious, formal certainty of doctors or priests. She tried again.

Something touched the back of her neck. She smiled slightly but continued playing, the notes flickering ever so little, like candlelight. She felt Erik draw aside the curtain of her hair. His fingers on her scalp were cool but his palms were very warm; Christine could picture the dark lines where his hands had lifted ink from his sketches. He traced the edge of her high collar, seeking to distract her. She hid her smile, and did not turn around.

"It will never work this way," he murmured, and Christine felt his breath in her ear. He brought her gathered curls a little way towards him, coaxing her back from the piano, creating a silence. "You need a modulation if you want that ending. C minor."

She leaned back into his hand. "Too melodramatic."

"It was good enough for Beethoven."

"Don't be annoyed. I am no Beethoven."

He took one of her hands and set it lightly to the piano, just touching the keys, showing her what he wanted. "No. You are Christine Daaé. One day they'll breathe your name as reverently as they now do Beethoven's."

Christine turned her hand palm up and Erik interlocked his fingers with hers. There was red chalk from the drawings under his short nails, and the line of his cuff fell back from his wrist, revealing the fine marbling of veins. Christine pulled him down to sit behind her, feeling his chest move against her back as she turned around.

"I don't need their admiration." She revelled in the way he tensed between reluctance and desire as she touched his bare forehead, his scars, his mouth. "I would hear you breathe my name, Erik."
That's enough."

"Christine..."

He closed his eyes, as if in shame. And with that one gesture Christine suddenly knew – she screamed as she saw the hanged corpse drop behind him, its swollen tongue and black neck and hands raised in a hideous plea, and Erik was gone and she thought she was still screaming when she jolted awake.

She sat up in her own bed, gasping. A dream.

It was morning. Her heart slowed reluctantly in the face of the familiar, quiet room and the rays of light from between the curtains. Shivering, Christine slipped from her bed and opened the window, checking outside with what had become a habit. Nobody on the balcony, nobody in the courtyard below. Strings of sunlight danced on the windowpane as she shut it. A dream, nothing more.

She clenched her hands on her night-dress, crushing fabric. Desire still trembled inside her, making her legs weak, making her relive every note and every caress even as she felt each one become tainted with the terror that had ended them. To want to touch him again was disgusting. To accept music from him, to long for his return, was worse – and that was no dream, that was only the truth. Should she tell herself again that it was the Angel who composed with her, the Phantom she feared, yet only Erik in her bed? Even the Devil of her childhood fears did not have so many names. She let go of the folds of her night-dress and saw red.

Blood. Swift fear brought dream to clash with reality, Christine whipped about to look at the bed, convinced the dream's shadow was real. She flung the covers aside.

"Oh," she said softly. She did not know what she had expected. Perhaps a corpse. She felt like an idiot. A female idiot who could not count.

She sighed and set to cleaning up. This was all she needed to make the morning complete. Next she would no doubt have to suffer through breakfast, with Meg and Madame Giry still barely on speaking terms, and then find that some new efforts at city fortifications would keep her omnibus route from taking her on her usual visit to her father's grave. With her luck they had probably closed off the cemetery altogether and she'd have to walk from where she usually left Meg at the artist's studio.

Her mood lifted a little when she finally made it to the dining-room and saw that Meg was alone, reading some booklet over her breakfast, and that Madame Giry was not yet there. It gave her a chance to eat and make herself scarce before she could be caught between them. She had slid into her chair before she noticed the basket of sweet almond rolls on the table.

"Good morning," Meg said, stifling a yawn. She put her reading aside and grinned. Christine had not expected to find her so cheerful. "You'll never guess what maman did."

"Bought us treats?" Christine gestured at the pastries in astonishment. Madame Giry took a dim view of sweet sugary things, especially for breakfast.

"Actually, that was me," Meg confessed. "I thought as long as I'm in trouble, I may as well make the most of it. Help yourself."

"Meg! You'll get us both chained the barre for the next week at least."

Christine took a roll and flaked off a few almonds to let them dissolve in her mouth. "These are delicious; I'll have to go to the cemetery early, before your mother sees this outrage." More
seriously, she added, "I really don't think you ought to provoke her. She has a right to be hurt by...
what happened."

Meg wiped her hands clean, then stood to pick up a long paper tube that had been leaning against her chair. She held it by the edge to let it unroll.

"Take a look."

Christine studied the poster. It was old, but the colours were still vibrant and the ballet gala it advertised seemed to spring to life before her eyes. She recognised the signature in the corner: Jules Robuchon.

"There's twenty-six more."

Christine looked at her in disbelief. "You mother gave you these? This morning?"

Meg rolled up the poster slowly, with infinite gentleness. "I came back from the patisserie and there was a whole pile of these on my dresser. Don't look at me like that, nobody else comes into my room."

She caught herself almost before Christine could register what she had said – "Christine! Sorry, you know I didn't mean it badly."

Christine winced. "And then?"

"And then maman came in and we talked for a while. About my father, and about art."

"She has forgiven you?"

Meg put the poster aside and took her seat again. "I don't know. I don't think she really likes it, anyway. She isn't like you and me, for her ballet is... Well, it just is. Like God. My father worshipped it, but with Monsieur de Gas, it is the other way around. It's his art, not maman's. But she knows that. At least we aren't fighting anymore."

Christine gave a slow nod. "I'm glad."

There didn't seem to be much else she could say. They ate their breakfast slowly, waiting for Madame Giry to join them. Looking at Meg's neatly rolled poster, Christine wondered if her own father would have done this, should she have rejected the music he so cherished and taken up another path. Thinking of him made her remember her music, and that brought her back to the idea she had almost forgotten.

"I'll be right back," she told Meg, "I'm just going to my room for a while."

She found her scribbles where she had stashed them the night before, leafed through them until she came to the very end. Here was the conclusion she had struggled with. She looked at it for a while, sighed, then pencilled in the transient key change, resolving into C minor. All right, she conceded. It did sound better.

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**Chapter 34: Fire and Brimstone**

Many, many thanks to Waytoointoerik for helping me to upload this chapter. (For others in the same boat: apparently the trick is to export one of your other chapters into the document manager,
Guys, I know this is short, and I apologise for that, especially given my long absence, but it's a critical scene and deserves its own chapter. I wish I could promise that regular updates will follow, but I'm in the process of moving halfway around the world for a new and very demanding job, and as you can imagine, that doesn't leave much writing time. All I can promise is that I will try my best.

Please take a moment to send a review if you're still reading, it helps to know that there's still an audience out there!

**Trivia:** Cartridges for the Dreyse needle guns used by the Germans in this battle used a lead bullet in a paper wrapper. When fired, the wrapper burnt away.

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**Fire and Brimstone**

The sun had not yet risen when the first heavy boom of a German cannon shook the ground and the explosions – two, three, several at once – tore into the night. Then silence.

The Ghost looked up from the corpse half-hidden in the grass. He shuddered. The rumble had been distant enough that the front garden and the street before it remained perfectly still. Yet vibration too low for sound still lingered in the ground, crawled through the wet grass and twisted roots, echoed from wall to wall in the empty street. A cloud of dust hovered above the rooftops near the Balan road, where the shells had struck. Lazily, it dissolved into the dark-blue sky. The air grew still again, but there remained a tense, ringing quality to the silence, the expectation of another blow. In the east, pale frightened stars winked out one by one.

The Ghost glanced at the body before him. A familiar dread gathered in his stomach at the sight of the man's collapsed mouth and eyes, and the cooling skin that was already turning yellow and tight. What had he been a minute ago? Not a sniper... One of the wounded left for dead? Yes, that was it, the Ghost remembered in a rush; the Bavarian's uniform had been torn from shoulder to ribcage by a bayonet and blood had begun to congeal over the etched steel of the gun he had clutched. His every laboured breath had made his dying flesh twitch, clench, twitch again. The Bavarian had been dying, had been halfway gone before the Ghost had even reached for the rope – yet the moment it fell on his neck, he had raised a hand to his killer's mask in transfixed, cowardly gratitude, as though seeing the Angel of Death come to relieve his suffering. Unable to bear that look, the Ghost had summoned his clipped, operatic German and told him, "You are going to Hell!"

The fool had died with open horror in his eyes then, just like all the others before him. He had fine hands, the Ghost noticed now, strong and slender as a musician's. In its own way that was worse than the blood.

The Ghost jerked his noose off the dead man's neck, exposing bone. "Gott," he swore in the same false German, as if the corpse might hear him still; then added even more theatrically: "Tut mir Leid." *I'm sorry.* But it was a sham; the sorrow he voiced was as false as his mask, and gave no comfort. Indeed, he was not at all sorry. He was not anything; he was merely a Ghost sent to kill. Ghosts, angels, murderers – all had this in common: they existed only to fulfill their missions, and beyond that they had nothing. No future, no life.

The rope was damp and heavy with blood, hopelessly ruined. The Ghost let it drop into the grass – and in that moment two shells made whistling arcs in the sky.

The blasts did not take him by surprise, but they left him half-deaf and trembling, stunned by the fury of sound, the way it punched straight through the air. He scrambled to his feet gracelessly,
clumsily, all at once a frightened man rather than ghost. He had to get back, now. The ammunition the Bavarian had carried was pitiful: three rounds, scarcely worth the delay.

The past few hours were a blur, an endless rehearsal of the same scene: quick flight from street to narrow street, a brief struggle, then the expected, predictable cessation of movement. Between these, nothing, a void. Each time he had thought it was the last, there had been another and another, not snipers for the most part but stragglers, deserters, the wounded whose injuries made them moan or sob like children after a beating. Each body had to be searched for ammunition. That was a revolting task fit only for vultures, but the Ghost had performed it all the same. From a sense of duty, he thought angrily, flinging the phrase as an insult through the barricaded streets towards the Vicomte, the wounded hero, as if to say, Do you see? A murderer has his duty too. I have not forgotten my part.

The battle was starting again. From the direction of the park came the agitated shouts of French soldiers, and all along the street windowpanes creaked and slammed open as householders scanned the horizon for the source of the falling shells. The Ghost could have informed them it was the batteries on the plateaus to the north, near La Moncelle and Daigny, the very ones he had observed the previous day. Another shell exploded further away, raising dust. It was dawning on him that despite the dreadful noise, none of the shells struck Bazeilles. He was still out of range. Out of range, for now. The Ghost did not look towards Sedan, where the courthouse was, but ran, stumbled, cursed, ran faster.

Not fast enough. When he reached the river, he saw a commotion; the sloshing of pontoon bridges was suddenly obscured by muffled echoing gunshots, then a roar of men lurched forward in a great flood: the assault was repulsed, but only just. The Bavarians were back.

Which way? He ran into the maze of dead dark streets. There was no possibility of taking the Sedan road directly, for the rifle fire was rapidly moving from the river deeper into the village, and the streets he had come by had been barricaded in the night. He was forced to zigzag between houses that at another time had been familiar, but which now rattled with the din like scenery being moved, blank façades appearing and vanishing in the thick pall of dust that hung in the air.

Screaming, indeterminate shapes thundered into the street in the half-light, accompanied by hoofbeats and the snorting of horses. The Ghost flattened himself against a garden wall. He could not make sense of the human limbs and pikes and feathers and helmets that passed him and swallowed the entire street; he could no longer distinguish uniforms or guns. As the distant roar of artillery was joined by the sputtering of grapeshot, he swallowed constricted lungfuls of smoke and sulfurous dust that blurred his eyes.

He had expected the smoke to clear, but instead it grew thicker, and a moment later he understood why: a house on the corner of the street was burning, the flames near-invisible against the eastern horizon. Fire, fire again! Clutching the sack of ammunition to his chest, terrified of being cornered by the flames, he ducked into a narrow side lane bounded by high windowless walls. Here was less smoke, but no less noise. Shells still rained outside the town, but the more immediate threat was the rapid fusillade in the cobbled street ahead. There was the Sedan road, and Erik thought with growing dread that he must cross it to reach Egrot's house, and that he could not do it alive.

He watched from the precarious safety of the dark mouth of the lane as French soldiers, desperate, fell back and back before the relentless onslaught, fighting all the way, but losing more and more ground. Then, before he could quite grasp it, a strange thing happened. The French line parted neatly aside and there – through the sudden gap – burst forth a wall of noise so sharp that the Ghost felt himself cry out in agony, but heard nothing save that rattle of fire.
Stunned, he thought he understood. The Germans had fallen into a trap, lured within range of one of the French mitrailleuses, machine guns. Now men were screaming, some in victory and some in death, while a forest of bayonets rose up to pursue those who still remained standing, each individual blade catching the sharp, lethal glint of morning.

What came next was slaughter such as the Ghost had never imagined.

Creeping up as close to the corner as he dared, he followed it, avid as a sideshow spectator – bayonets slicing human flesh, men stepping into the open sticky abdomens of their fallen comrades, the ripe stench of loosened bowels – and all the while more Bavarian ranks were advancing from the river, crushing the dead beneath them, an endless grinding tide that rose and grew and spilled out of the opaque white mist on the river. Those Bavarians who had witnessed the slaughter of their fellows seemed to turn to stone momentarily, and then their fury spread and rippled beneath the plumes of their helmets, growing dangerously, oh so dangerously, into a thirst for revenge. French soldiers tried to push harder, but too many had already fallen by the roadside, and there were no more ranks behind them, no swelling tide of their own to withstand the many, many Bavarians pouring in.

The horror and beauty of it knocked the wind from the Ghost's lungs, and he watched the dead mount before him with no more thoughts of reaching the other side of the street, that house where a handful of men just like these waited for the ammunition he carried. After all, what made them so different? These ones falling dead in the street, still holding their own murder weapons, were no less deserving than Egrot and the Vicomte...

He hit the ground a moment before the gunshot tore through the air where he had stood. More shots followed behind.

There was no time to waste. He left the lane and plummetted head-first into the mêlée of the battle in the main street, amid blue-clad soldiers aiming rifles, uniforms with plumed helmets, the wounded, bayonets, the buzz of bullets. A door up ahead gave way, and he realised they were storming a house. Soldiers burst in, splintering the door-frame in their haste, where a woman, young and drab, her hair whipping like a blonde sheet in the breeze, screeched something about a child inside, her child. A spray of blood hit the inside of an upstairs window a second before the glass disintegrated under a bullet, and a soldier's torso fell out. He hung from the windowsill with his arms spread wide, like an upturned crucifix or a carpet left out to dry.

One of the soldiers below gave a terrible cry and would have rushed forward had his fellows not kept him back. There was more fighting within; the Ghost watched it with an abstracted fascination, as though it no longer concerned him.

When it was over, one of the Bavarians dragged the woman who had screamed into the house, crushing her wrist in a way that made the Ghost remember exactly what it felt like to hold that fragile bone in his hand and let his hatred crush it, crunch it, feel her bright agony as an exact mirror of his own. He was not surprised when the Bavarian emerged clutching a pile of drapes torn from the window, nor when he lit the dry fabric and demanded by gesture and force that the woman toss it inside. When she would not, he threw her off and did it himself, and a minute later the house was afire.

The Ghost stood quite still as the battle flowed about him, momentarily blinded to the prospect of his own death by the spectacle of that burning house. Fire ran from the remaining drape on the window to the upholstered furniture, distorted and twisted behind the window glass. Soon the wooden pane and then the shutters were burning too, and the heat seared the sweat from his face and his chest.
This was not Hell. This was real: the end of all nightmares, every secret wish of revenge on the world torn from the Phantom's mind. The world was consuming itself before his eyes in a tremendous conflagration of ashes and death, and the distant booming explosions spoke of the same thing happening in every village, every town, every city to the ends of the Earth.

The Ghost watched the destruction with a fierce, monumental triumph – but within him, a broken little monster whimpered like a cur behind the walls of the Opera's little chapel, and prayed silently that someone might hear, that someone there, in the chapel, would turn away from the candlelight to whisper, "Don't cry. Please don't cry."

But nobody heard.

The battle spread from house to house, pulling with it a sheet of fire that caught at doors and billowed in hot gasps out of broken windows, turning what had been a street into a glowing inferno. When at last the sun rose into a blood-red circle behind the smoke, new Prussian artillery boomed its crescendo from across the river, and the ground itself shook and splintered under this new assault. The Ghost had found cover beneath a half-collapsed building; beyond that grey stone space and bitter choking smoke, with his hands clutching at the grass, he knew nothing at all.

Later, he thought it could not have lasted long. Several hours, that was all; it was scarcely late afternoon when the guns had finally died away. Some of the fires still burned red-hot, but their crackle served only to outline the shape of the silence, the vast emptiness, and at length even the sound of boots on the paving stones disappeared. All that remained was the hot smoke of guns and the foulness of fresh murder.

He emerged into what had been the Sedan road. It was now a corridor of broken paving stones carved between smouldering, eyeless buildings, littered with the dead. There was a gap of silence in his mind; no music, no requiem, no Totentanz playing for these remnants of the living. He felt vaguely drunk, and could not be sure that he did not sway as he walked.

Along the street, doors stood wide open in a parody of welcome. Here and there, groups of people, neighbours, friends, milled in the middle of the crossroads, blinking confusedly in the smoky afternoon sun. Some clutched bundles of possessions, uncertain now why they had thought to take this old clock or that cracked mirror, or what they would do with these things. A young girl, standing alone before the entrance to what had been a milliner's shop, held a cage with a songbird. The cage door was open, but the bird lay inside, its small eyes fogged by a grey membrane, its feet clenched. The girl hugged the cage close and did not seem to notice. She followed Erik with her eyes as he passed, lethargically and without true curiosity, and he thought suddenly of the children playing in the dirt of the construction site in Sedan before he had frightened them away.

His construction site... He raised his sleeve to wipe away the sticky grime from his neck, and found he still carried the sack of pilfered ammunition, although he had lost the German rifle somewhere along the way. His construction site...

He raised his eyes towards Sedan, and in the brilliant afternoon sunlight he thought he saw a tiny white dot, sailing like a kite above the fortress. He looked at it for a while, until he was certain. It was a flag.

A tap on the arm made him turn around.

"I'm hungry," the little girl with the birdcage informed him. She set the birdcage down at her feet, ever so carefully, and waited.

Erik hesitated, then dipped into the sack he carried, and brought out a handful of powder charges,
wrapped like sweets. The girl studied these, then held out her two cupped hands and permitted Erik to pour the pretend sweets into them. She stood there a moment longer, then deposited the cartridges in her pockets and picked up the cage. Erik watched her stumble back over the rubble.

With a swift, violent spin, he kicked the sack, and the rest of the now-useless cartridges went rolling and bouncing over the cobbles. He ran all the way to the Egrots' house, but he could not outrun his shame, and he knew before he arrived what he would find there.

The house stood as it always had, with the geraniums fresh in the window-boxes, and the two surviving windows clean and sparkling in the sun. The front door hung open. Inside, beyond the pock-marked walls and fallen plaster, all was black.
A/N: Well, uh, hello! Or, as someone else more elegantly put it, fondest greetings to you all - did you think that I had left you for good? I know nobody really believed that I would continue this story, 8 years(!) after stopping, but I was quite serious when I said the characters remained alive to me and one day I would be able to write again. Somewhat incredibly, that day has come.

Huge thanks to every person who has taken the time over the years to write a review, send a message or otherwise read, think, and let me know that it's not just me who cares about this story.

Chapter 35 — Entr'acte

The first days of autumn came unnoticed. The old trees in the cemetery still stood tranquil and green, and the Angels' Garden was a welcome respite from the dust of the city, untouched by traffic or newspapers or fears of the war. Christine cleared the few leaves and twigs that had blown onto the steps of her father's tomb, and touched her hand to the sun-warmed stone wall, in brief prayer. It was so different, she reflected, to pray without expecting an answer, knowing that no answer was possible. Perhaps she would learn to like it, this certainty. But the words did not come, and at length she gave up and pressed instead a quick kiss to the stone, apologetically, before descending the steps and heading out. There were no rehearsals on Sunday, nor errands, and that meant she could afford a few precious hours at the piano with her music. The opening notes of the second movement teased the edges of her mind, begging to be set free.

She heard the distant shouting as soon as she left the Angels' Garden; by the time she reached the foot of the stairs that led up to the cemetery gates, the noise had grown to a roar. Another riot? No; the shouting was not angry, it sounded more like a theatre on a wildly successful opening night. Cautiously, Christine went up to the open gate and peered into rue Rachel. The motley crowd gathering there was bigger than she had imagined and growing fast as more people spilled from the side streets. All along the façades, every door and window had been thrown open, people jostling for a better view. Someone called out, "Vive la Révolution! Vive la République!"

The rest was lost in the clamour, but the flags and fists and faces all around her threw the same fierce joy through the air, and Christine had no moment to catch her breath before being swept into the midst of it. "At last! A Republic! It's done, it's done!" And on all sides, the same reprise, "Revolution! Vive la Révolution!"

"Revolution?" she repeated, staggering as people pushed past her. "What's happened?"

"You haven't heard?" came a shout in her ear, and she turned to see a young man in a cheap suit, with long scraggly blonde hair escaping from under his cap, and fiery eyes. She did not know his name but he was a local, one of the students who always sat talking in the little bar across from the cemetery. He beamed at her. "It's done, it's finished! The Empress has fled, the empire is history. The war is history!" His friends pulled him back into their group, but others filled his place at once, and Christine knew she would have to move with the crowd if she did not want to be crushed against the cemetery walls.

"You mean victory?" she shouted after him, "are the Prussians gone?"

The student shook his head violently, trying to make himself heard above the noise. "No such
thing! Forget about victory! Peace! We'll have peace, thanks to the goddamn Prussians, peace for the new Republic!"

What did that mean? Christine could make no sense of the slogans, but the jubilation was immense and palpable, and her heart quickened with it despite the confusion. Could the war truly be over? She craned her neck, trying to see how to get through the crowd to the corner where she knew Meg would be waiting, but it was hopeless. She concentrated on keeping her footing as the flow of people carried her out towards the boulevard. A tricolour flag was raised above her, unexpectedly majestic, flowing free in the afternoon sun.

Peace. It was a word she had not heard for a while, with the city awash in furious preparations to meet the Prussians head on, should they break through the north and march for Paris. Was it possible it was really over? Raoul's letter had made her think the war was only beginning: he had sounded calm and determined, but he had not yet seen the Prussian forces, let alone been in battle. She had hoped he might stay safe. Could so much have changed in less than a week?

The crowd thinned a little once they reached the boulevard, making it easier to breathe. Christine squinted into the light, holding her hair out of her eyes to get her bearings.

"Well! Mam'zelle Skin-and-Bones, if I don't mistake you?"

Christine whirled sharply, coming face to face with the woman she recognised as Erik's landlady. Her kerchief was askew, her broad face glistening with sweat. She looked years younger than Christine remembered, lit up with a wild joy. Losing patience, the woman said, "Louise! Remember. Your—"

"My... friend's landlady, of course," Christine said hurriedly, cursing her white skin for burning an obvious shade of pink.

Louise gave a great bark of laughter, "Your friend! All right then, your friend - your friend who's gone off adventuring, the devil knows where." She looked Christine up and down in friendly inspection, then nodded back uphill: "Come join us for a bit to eat then, mam'zelle, since you're here. Store's near enough."

"That is kind of you, madame," Christine began, "but I promised my friend - uh, Meg, my friend Meg, that I'd meet her here..." And my music, she thought in dismay. The second movement.

"Pah, you'll be searching for each other for hours, in this," Louise tipped her chin at the chaos of celebration around them. "Best have a quiet sit-down till the roads clear a mite. Heard what Gambetta said at the Hotel de Ville? We've got rid of the parasites, for now anyway. Know what a Republic is, mademoiselle?"

Christine nodded, but Louise only laughed, without much humour this time. "Ah, you're all the same, you lot. You think you don't need to know."

Christine opened her mouth to protest, but Louise had already started uphill, and there was nothing for it but to follow, up into the tangle of little streets that led deeper into Montmartre. All right, Christine decided, perhaps this was not such a bad idea. She could at least find out what all this talk of a Republic was all about. And a landlady might have news, another part of her mind put in treacherously. Rent had to paid in advance, letters written. She might know.

The narrow footpaths teemed with people of all ages, laughing, chatting, gleeful boys climbing lamp-posts to oversee this sudden party in the middle of the day. A girl on the corner was handing out green branches to passersby, freshly broken and smelling of tree sap. Louise was right, it would
have taken her hours to get through this. Christine didn't recognise the route they were taking, but the direction was familiar enough. A spark of unwanted curiosity spurred her on, stronger than propriety.

"I've seen you around," Louise said, glancing back over her shoulder inquiringly.

Christine did not deny it. "My father is buried at the cemetery here. And Meg works-

Louise made a rude noise at that. "And you, my girl, walk a mile out of your way to the wrong side of town, past my store. Twice a week. You think your friend might come back?"

"Yes," Christine admitted, acutely embarrassed. She had not thought her occasional detour had been noticed. Louise stopped suddenly, and it took Christine a moment to realise they were here, standing at the back door of the store. She remembered this door, and the storeroom beyond. She looked up, and found Louise watching her.

"Oh those eyes," Louise lamented, apparently to herself. She wiped her forehead and reached inside her voluminous skirt for a key. The door opened with the exact same creak, and then they were inside, in that busy dusty space that smelled of soap and ink, wending between boxes and crates and rolls of paper, to the back of the store. Yes, there were the stairs leading up.

"Come in then, come and sit. Phew, it's warm out there… There's bread and cheese."

"Coffee, too!" came a man's voice from the dim interior of the store, "in a minute."

"My husband," Louise said, nodding in that direction. Christine heard the note of pride in her tone. Louise indicated a scuffed table in the corner, with a couple of old chairs. There was a basket of fresh bread, a hunk of hard yellow cheese and an almost empty wine bottle. The delicious savoury smell of food momentarily made Christine forget her reservations about being; she had not eaten since breakfast.

"Thank you, madame, this is good of you."

Louise broke the bread apart and handed her a lump of cheese on a fork, taking another for herself. Christine bit into hers; it was sharp and creamy, much better than anything they had recently had at home.

"Grab another seat, would you," Louise motioned to her husband as he emerged with a pot of steaming coffee. "Found this one wandering over the Committee way."

Christine winced at this introduction, but he regarded her warmly enough over his spectacles. He set down the coffee and pushed an empty crate over with one boot, settling himself on it with practiced ease.

"Jean Gandon."

"Christine Daaé," Christine inclined her head politely, feeling a bit ridiculous at making introductions with her mouth full, being fed like a stray in this man's own house.

"Ahh," Jean said, exchanging a glance with Louise. "From the Opéra."

Christine bit her lip. "I'm at the Variétés now, Monsieur Gandon."

"Still singing, are you?"
"Dancing," Christine said, "In the ballet."

Jean unclipped his spectacles, cleaned them on a shirt-tail, and put them on again. To Louise he said, "I've a bad feeling about this. Only eleven of them in our new government and all elected on the spot."

"Fair's fair," Louise countered. "The people chose them."

"Based on what, that's the question. You, mademoiselle," he directed his shrewd gaze to Christine, "do you know Henri Rochefort?" He did not wait for Christine to confess her ignorance, but picked up a well thumbed magazine from a nearby stack and showed it to her. On the cover was a caricature of a drunken soldier, and the title, "La Lanterne".

"He's the editor. A clever chap, and good at what he does, but tell me, what does he know about getting France out of this mess?"

"Not that again," Louise grumbled, "got to start somewhere, haven't we? Better him than what we had before."

"Excuse us," Jean said to Christine, "it's an exciting time. What does Andersson say then? He was heading to Sedan, he must know what happened—"

Louise glared at him fiercely. "Let her be! What does she know?"

"Ah, I'm sorry, mademoiselle, I'd thought he might have written…"

He quelled under the weight of Louise's stare. Christine knew her own dismay must be plain on her face.

"That's why it happened, isn't it," she said, understanding at last. "The revolution… because there was a defeat."

"A rout, more like," Louise said. "Ruddy waste. All that posturing."

Last night it had seemed yet another rumour: a battle in Sedan, where Erik had gone to work on his courthouse. She tried not to imagine it, or to wonder where he was, whether his courthouse had been damaged... whether he might return. And Raoul... Christine gripped her bread, digging fingernails into her palm.

Jean gulped the rest of his coffee as he stood to go. "I've left a sign upstairs," he said to Louise. "Better stopper the ink at least, back in a minute. Excuse me, mademoiselle."

Christine watched him go up.

"A good man," Louise said quietly, making Christine turn back to her. Her eyes were dark with warning. "A very good man."

Now Christine understood her meaning. "Unlike — my friend."

Louise shook her head. "When we heard about the Opéra... We thought he might've been one of Blanqui's men, wanting to set the world on fire. But he was just another self-absorbed bourgeois —"

"Is," Christine said. "He is alive."

"Oh?" Louise said in surprise. "You've had news, letters?"
Christine hesitated. "Not exactly…"

"You think me old and dull," Louise said after a moment, "but you open those big sad eyes and look around you, mam'zelle. You see them every day here, the poor pretty rabbits, waiting, hoping. It's the oldest, dullest story in the world. Our men know it too, don't you think they don't, and our girls, the clever ones, they play that same game. It's the silly ones listen to their shit: My angel this, my saviour that, my only pure one. Then they fall, Mademoiselle Christine, all those angels fall by the wayside sure as the story's old. Your lover, there's thousands like him — going as he pleases, Empire, Republic, Paris, the provinces, it's all the same to them. I don't know what he is, but don't you go thinking you can save him, pet. Don't you fill your heart with his troubles."

Christine looked down at the crumbs on the table, at her fork. "I don't want to save him."

"Of course not," Louise sighed. "Of course." She removed the kerchief from her damp hair and tipped her head back, re-tying it neatly. "Suffer if you will, but don't you be stupid about it. He's gone and good riddance."

"May I… see the room?" Christine asked, surprising herself with her boldness.

Louise groaned, "For fuck's sake. Please yourself. We got Jean's signwriting things in there now, need the space, what with things heating up." She rose to her feet, "Up you go then."

Christine walked slowly upstairs, unsure of what she wanted here. Nothing, perhaps. Just to see it empty. On the landing they passed Jean coming the other way; he raised his eyebrows at Louise but she just shrugged and continued up.

The room had not really changed at all. Instead of Erik's sketches on the table lay a large banner, half-inked, and a few more by the wall. The bed was empty, bare stripped mattress almost hidden by stacks of books and leaflets.

Christine went to the centre of it, floorboards creaking beneath her steps, then stopped. Her heart was full of something she did not understand. Not sadness.

"What is it you're after, pet?" Louise asked from the doorway. "He didn't leave anything, not as I saw."

"It isn't…" Christine began - then shook her head, curls flying. "You think me seduced and abandoned, madame."

Louise spread her arms at the obvious empty room. "And no?"

Christine looked around, at the washstand, the window. She thought of Erik on stage with her, the duel they sang, flaying each other naked before the horrified audience in a vile parody of seduction, so frightened of being abandoned. She did not think it was what Louise meant.

"What is it?" Louise probed more gently, with sympathy. "True love?"

Christine turned back to her, pulling a folded letter from her pocket. "You wanted to know what he is, madame. Here." She unfolded the sheet of music and held it up for Louise to see.

The woman accepted it uncertainly, turning the thin paper to peer at the scribbled notes. It took a moment for Christine to realise she could not read it.

"Music? A code?" Louise frowned, and now Christine felt for her. She really could not hear it. But it was there, right there, how could anybody not hear...
And perhaps it was that moment of longing that broke the wall inside her - because she felt herself open all over, split from her lungs to her mouth, and the music came forth unbidden, as easily as if she was a child in a chapel, the notes rising light as smoke. His vocal line, the line she had heard the moment she had opened this letter. And beyond it, their old song, ancient, from the chapel. And beyond that, further still, her own music entwining with it, shaping sound…

She fell silent. The music remained in the air, carried on just out of hearing, like the ribbon of a river sparkling beyond the horizon. The second movement.

A quiet curse startled Christine. Louise Gandon stood very still, her calloused fingers at her mouth, her body frozen. She looked as though she had seen a ghost, or heard an angel.

"Forgive me, madame," Christine whispered. "I don't know what he is. What I am. I will go now - thank you for the meal. And… this."

She turned and flitted down the stairs, quick-footed, running out, out into the light.

The crowd engulfed her and carried her along, and Christine let herself float within it, hearing nothing of the slogans and celebration but only the music that pulsed again in her body and thrilled her with the magic of its return. Her voice, so long silenced, had come alive at last.

"Long live the Republic!" sang the streets around her, and "Live!" sang her heart. Live!

It took a long time for the crowd to clear enough that she could find Meg, and the afternoon had dwindled to evening before they at last succeeded in getting a seat on the omnibus home.

The defeat at Sedan seemed to have bypassed news and become history all at once, accepted as the pediment upon which the new Republic now stood. On the omnibus, as darkening streets fell away behind them, all anyone talked of were the eleven members of the new government, and how long it would take to negotiate peace with Prussia. Someone had decorated the inside with green branches, in celebration. A posse of National Guard soldiers passed outside under the streetlight, with branches in the muzzles of their guns.

"I wonder if Helena is really leaving," Meg said with a frown. Her bag of ballet gear was in her lap, she had done another sitting in Helena's place. "They're registering all Prussians, you know, she had to sign something yesterday and now her family is to leave Paris. It's crazy, the war might be over now anyway... Monsieur de Gas has family in New Orleans, in America. He'd promised her a letter of introduction, but it is such a long way." Meg sighed and rubbed a muscle in her shoulder. "Either way, maman is not going to like it, but I'll be doing extra sittings."

"Meg," Christine said, catching her eyes. "I sang."

Meg blinked, "What? When?"

Christine put her fingertips to her own throat, to where her voice buzzed when she spoke. "I sang," she repeated. "I can sing."

"Christine!" Meg looked at her in astonishment, then laughed and reached over to squeeze her hands, her bag sliding to the floor with a thump. "I told you. I told you it would come!"

"You were right," Christine agreed, smiling at Meg's enthusiasm. She handed the bag back to her. "Thank you."

"What for?"
"I don't know. For not caring either way."

"Hey!" Meg protested, "of course I care!"

"No, I mean that it doesn't matter. That it never did matter to you, if I could. You're a good friend, Meg. Better than I deserve."

"Pffft," Meg gave her a mock glare. "Don't go all maudlin now. We're supposed to be celebrating."

She pointed up to the omnibus roof, looking mischievous. "How about a Marseillaise then? They might let you up on the top deck if you're loud enough!"

"I take it back!" Christine laughed, chasing Meg off the omnibus as it trundled to halt, both of them tumbling into the evening. The air was still warm, smelling of greenery and smoke, and war seemed impossible.

They had a quiet private celebration at home with Madame Giry, sharing sweet wine and talking late into night. It was good, so very good, to feel hope.

Two days later, news came through that negotiations with Prussia had failed. Empire or Republic, it was all the same to them - inexorable and unswayed by beautiful rhetoric, more certain than ever of the strength of the German alliance, the Prussians were closing on Paris.

All around the city, the suburbs of Paris had been demolished to make way for a vast construction zone of fortifications. Huge trees and old houses came down one after another in a rustle of leaves and rumble of stone, leaving behind only a wasteland beneath a choking pall of grey dust. In that dust, hastily outfitted National Guard volunteers in their red trousers were drilling in ragged formation, civilians trying to become instant soldiers of the Republic. It was not going well.

"They're still coming, the people," Madame Giry said, passing the spyglass to Monsieur Duchamp. With other onlookers, they had come up on the wall to see the progress on the fort. Through the distant Neuilly gate, the ant-trail of refugees from the razed suburbs continued in endless procession: the elderly and the children upon rickety carriages, the women with scarves and handkerchiefs held to their faces in a futile attempt to keep out the dust. Men leading horses, the occasional Red Cross wagon loaded with ambulance men and supplies.

"I need to thank you again for the loan," she said. "We could not have managed this month. Monsieur Gaillard informs me he cannot help raising the rent, not with all these people coming in; it seems we are to count ourselves fortunate to have kept all three rooms. But it cannot last like this. They will need to reopen the theatres soon."

Monsieur Duchamp blinked against the dust, his eyes watering in the shadow of his hat-brim.
"Agathe, I implore you, stop this madness. Look at this place! You must get the girls out. It won't be long now, they will close the city. It will be too late. You know I must leave myself, it would give me the greatest pleasure to take all of you with me. Think of the country, the air you can actually see through. And the sea! You have not seen Perros-Guirec in years. My sister asks daily when you will come."

Madame Giry sighed. "I cannot." She held up a hand, forestalling his objections. "You are right, of course you are right. But this is all they know, this city. It is their home. You know Meg has it in her head to learn Jules' art and will not hear of leaving now, and Christine is as obstinate as she is. They are young, Monsieur Duchamp, too young to be afraid. And you must remember, they are theatre-bred. This is pure theatre, entirely irresistible. They will not go."
Monsieur Duchamp folded the spyglass away in the inside pocket of his jacket. "It is a grave mistake," he tried again, his eyes searching hers. "The girls are young, yes, and they will go where you take them."

"I will not force them."

"No," he agreed, shoulders sagging in defeat. "You will not. And that is why you are the most frustrating, disagreeable and remarkable woman I have ever had the misfortune to know." He tugged at his grey moustaches. "I would say you know what you're doing, but with all this," - he indicated the people and carriages coming into the city, "even you may find it too much."

Madame Giry smiled. "I thank you for the compliment. I daresay we shall all find out soon enough."

He surprised her by leaning over and pressing a bristly kiss to her forehead. "I shall expect letters. Every week! Or so help me God, I will come back and fetch you myself."

"Every week," she promised fondly. "You have my word."

Away from the gates and fortifications, Madame Giry made her way slowly through the military confusion of the city, barely recognising the streets she had known most of her life. The gigantic span of Avenue l'Impéatrice, which used to carry the most fashionable carriages to their promenades in the Bois de Boulogne, had been turned into a vast field hospital, with rows of orderly hospital tents of the American Ambulance. Flags of the Red Cross flapped above in the dusty breeze, their newly sewn edges crisp and clean, awaiting the inevitable first patients. Men with armbands proclaiming their Red Cross status zipped busily in and out of canvas doorways, or stood smoking outside, conversing in an incomprehensible mixture of French and English.

Madame Giry took one of the footpaths that ran alongside this shadow of things to come, leaving the tents to one side.

"Hey!" someone exclaimed behind her. She turned instinctively, but the man with the armband was addressing someone inside a large tent. His exclamation was followed by a rapid-fire exchange in English that she could not follow, but it obviously caused a stir. Several other medics came running up, stamping out their cigarettes on the way.

Madame Giry stood aside as they passed, crowding into the tent. She saw their distorted shadows within, but could not work out the source of the commotion until another onlooker stopped beside her:

"What chaos!" the woman remarked disapprovingly, eyeing the tent. She pointed an elegant gloved finger at the medical officers now rushing in. "The Americans are supposed to be the organised ones, if you can believe it, but there they go - did you hear what they said? Unbelievable."

"What is it?" Madame Giry prompted.

"They're saying there's a wounded army officer in a bed over there, and they have no idea who he is. Or how he got there." She laughed conspiratorially, the charming musical laugh of the entertained Parisienne. "Do you think it was a ghost?"

Theatre, Madame Giry thought. They could close every theatre in Paris, but the play would still go on.
Chapter 36: Homecoming

A/N: As a bit of trivia, the American Ambulance (temporary hospital) was fairly prominent; it was set up with equipment left over from the 1867 Exhibition and boasted some of the most advanced surgical care of the period, which, sadly, meant that the overall death rates were more like 20% instead of 50-60% for other Parisian ambulances.

Chapter 36 — Homecoming

Behind the tents of the American Ambulance ran a deep ditch, within which a single furnace was now lit, piping warm air to the officers' tent to protect its lone occupant from the evening chill. The ditch itself was new, its walls of freshly dug clay still untouched by rainfall, smelling only of living tree roots. It was not at all uncomfortable. The side of the furnace gave off a dry heat, and by some little experimentation Erik contrived to find a position that allowed him to stay near it, his back against one earthen wall and his legs braced against a rock in the wall opposite. It was as good a place as any for the Opera Ghost's homecoming, he thought: a ditch beneath what had been the most glamorous part of Paris. He waited for the blue dusk to become nighttime.

Inside the tent, the Vicomte was finally, mercifully quiet. The American surgeon who had come earlier mentioned opium; Erik wholeheartedly approved. Relieved at last of the Vicomte's low, monotonous hum of pain that had been his constant accompaniment for the past week, he revelled in being able to hear again all the usual small sounds of the world: the crackle of the fire in the furnace, the distant voices, the calls of birds going to roost in the gardens that bordered the avenue. His own breathing. He listened for the Vicomte's laboured breathing, but could not make it out at this distance. That was only to be expected. He refused to think of what it would mean if Chagny did not survive this last part of the journey.

But Christ, it stank here... Or rather, he corrected himself, he stank. He had managed to wash out his muddy and bloodstained shirt and trousers once, sloshing them in a creek somewhere along the way, but that must have been three, perhaps four days ago. His boots he did not even attempt to remove, lest the ruined leather fall apart in the process and he should be left to cross the country barefoot. In any case there had been no time for it, not if they were to keep in front of the steel teeth of the Prussian advance, snapping at their heels. The wagon he had commandeered from one of the abandoned houses in Bazeilles had not been built for speed, any more than the poor horse harnessed to it could manage anything more rapid than a walk. And so they blundered through day after identical day, the Vicomte alternately lucid and feverish on his stretcher in the back, Erik cursing uselessly on the box as he tried to guide the horse along unfamiliar roads.

He had scant recollection of that final morning of the battle, or of his own ignominious return. When he tried, he saw only fragmented images, slaughterhouse grotesques of dying men that morphed into ancient memories of freak shows. He did remember, much later, his feet kicking apart the burnt remnants of carpets and the twisted furniture, the crunch of plaster fallen from the bullet holes in the walls, the heavy thud of the trapdoor and then finally, the terrified people emerging, rising from their grave...

His heart had hammered until he thought he would grow deaf with the noise of his own fear. He could not have told whether these survivors were only phantoms of his imagination: did he dream the ragged couple and their maid emerging into the destruction? Were they all in fact lying dead in the godforsaken attic, in their last, futile defence?

"They've gone," muttered Egrot, or his ghost, as if he did not quite understand how the Prussians...
and Bavarians could have passed through and vanished so completely. "We owe our lives to your cellar..."

His wife, real or imagined, just stood there in the middle of the ravaged kitchen, her shoulders hunched. Erik thought he heard her say, "He's downstairs. Your friend."

In a kind of stupor, he found himself descending the ladder into the earth. In the inner cellar, he found the body, supine on a mat of empty potato sacks, a fresh bandage, hideously white, shrouding one thigh. The eyes sunken and shut.

Erik leaned down, listening for breathing...

Chagny's fist slammed into his jaw, sickening in its violence. Erik rocked back with the force of the blow and the Vicomte grabbed at his shoulder to stand, his body lurching alarmingly on his bad leg. He reeked of sweat and blood, too close; Erik gagged and knew without a doubt this was real.

He was alive. They were all alive. The world started to spin away, but the Vicomte was still holding on to his shoulder - and all at once Erik felt everything reverse, so that he was the one lurching down to steady himself.

"You coward," the Vicomte said viciously, throwing him off. "They waited. You swore you'd protect them."

"Did I?" Erik snarled, "Then just who do you think built this cellar?"

The Vicomte's confusion was suddenly the most comical thing he had ever seen. Erik laughed and laughed, until it hurt to breathe, until Egrot returned and together they managed to get the Vicomte, shuddering with pain, out into the daylight.

It ceased to be funny when he realised Chagny intended to leave.

"But you mustn't, they'll take you prisoner!" exclaimed Egrot, while his wife and even the maid added their voices to the hubbub of objection:

"Come, monsieur," the girl cajoled, clutching the Vicomte's sleeve, "Come and lie down. You mustn't exert yourself now."

Erik saw how she looked at him. A hero.

"If you have a death wish," he said, "I would be pleased to oblige you."

Chagny had rounded on him: "They're coming. Don't you get it? They're heading for Paris."

"And you intend to stop them?"

He did not reply, but only continued to glare at Erik, in challenge.

"I owe you nothing," Erik had said, in response to the unspoken demand. "I saved your life, Vicomte. It would be the height of rudeness to throw it away now."

"I'm going to Paris, Andersson."

"Then you're going to die."

"Fine. You can bury me."
When Erik said nothing, the Vicomte slowly stretched out a hand, and held it, waiting. "You're wasting time. I can't ride," he glanced at his bandaged thigh, "and without me, you do not know the way. If we fall behind the Prussian lines, we're through."

"You're raving," Erik said, not moving. After a long moment, the Vicomte lowered his hand.

"They mean to surround the city," he said, his voice dull. He glanced through the broken window, to the shelled ruins beyond the back garden. "They have cannon. If they do…"

He did not speak Christine's name. Erik was glad of it, but the decision had been made all the same.

"You said it yourself, you cannot ride. Do you propose we fly there?"

"Get a wagon," Egrot butted in, helpfully. "If you mark it with the Red Cross, they will let you pass, they must, even if you cross their lines."

The Vicomte thanked him with careful courtesy - then, as though relieved of the need to remain conscious, folded down to the floor like a carcass of meat, and was still. 

_Damn him_, Erik thought, _but he was right_. They had wasted too many hours already.

It took several hours more to find a wagon and horse, secure the stretcher and load the provisions. The Vicomte, though revived, was too weak to be useful and within an hour he was asleep on the stretcher, tossing and turning in the narrow wagon.

Despite her husband's fretting, Madame Egrot had the maid fill the wagon with what little food had remained unspoiled, carefully wrapping their share of potatoes and bread and apples, oats for the horse, matches, and more than their share of wine.

"He will need this," she had said to Erik, tapping one of the bottles and nodding in Raoul's direction. "It is the fever now, and you must know that is bad news. Very bad."

She, too, was right. By the following day, the Vicomte could no longer bear to put weight on the wounded leg. Erik had forced him to wash the wound out again, with boiled water and wine, then repeated the whole thing himself the following day, when the Vicomte could not manage. A foul, nauseating task, but it was not enough. The wound had started to suppurate.

Outside the ambulance tent, on the edge of the gaslit evening, Erik listened for the sound of the Vicomte's breathing, but heard only the bells, ringing for curfew.

Being out after curfew meant arrest; still, Erik had observed enough National Guard patrols since sundown to know they were more interested in the nearby bar than in chasing shadows. He waited until full dark, then slid among the tents, heading back to the boulevards and from there to the smaller, unlit, streets.

Here was home, here in the night, in the welcoming shadows that hid the ugliness of military preparations, in the old silhouettes of gargoyles and roofs. He had no fear of discovery, not here. For a perfect moment, his ragged bandage was a smooth theatre mask, his clothing a suit of the deepest, richest black. The flow of his cloak was music.

The Opéra stood silent, exactly as he has left it. Erik found the broken grille, lifted it free, and slipped into the passageway below.

"Mrrreoww!"
He stifled a curse as his boots hit something soft; a stray cat. It hissed, yellow eyes lambert below him, before vanishing soundlessly into the gloom. Erik stood very still, trying to gather his thoughts in the musty dark. He waited for his own eyes to adjust. Which way? The chapel, then onward to the spiral stairwell, then down, down, down… Yes, of course. He had not forgotten his own old haunts.

And yet, had the passages always been so foul? The deeper he went, the more repellent was the stench of damp and decay. The walls were slimy with algae, the stairs slippery as-

"Hell!.."

Very cautiously, Erik stepped back from the trapdoor that had sprung open under him, a hair's breadth from sending him down into his own water-filled lock. Perfect. Now this would have made a fitting punishment for his hubris. His chest rose and fell, belatedly aware of the danger.

With infinitely more care he made his way down the remaining turns of the stairs, to what had once been his own backstage, the obverse of the lair behind curtains and screens. He was gratified to see the mob had not found its way this far; the rotting drapes were still in place, the keyboard of the organ stood open but whole, and even the mannequin that had borne Christine's face remained discarded in its corner, unseen.

Erik felt his legs buckling and sat down before he could fall. This was it, at last. He had dreamed of coming here one day, not like this, but triumphant, indifferent, whole. "Take the lot away," he would have said to the army of workmen at his command, ready for their architect's orders. Other times he had dreamed only of the lake, of floating through the cold green water.

The reality was smaller than those dreams, and somehow pathetic. What was it Christine had said then, in the midst of his crazed antics… Pitiful. Yes, pitiful is what it now seemed. The mouldy velvet, the fake gold leaf and greasepaint and melted candles. Only the organ was still beautiful, truly beautiful without any effort at glamour. But that was a danger greater than all the traps and triggers combined; Erik did not dare look too long. He felt the weight of Christine's ring in his pocket, steadying himself.

Avoiding the organ, he went to the lake to wash as best he could, then found the boxes of props and costume cases hidden backstage. He threw them open one after the other, pulling out at random whatever seemed least damaged by the pervasive mould. Narrow fitting trousers and morning-coat - had these things ever truly looked the way he had imagined they did?

Erik studied his reflection in the sole remaining mirror that had cracked without shattering. Either his delusion had been greater than he might have supposed, or he had changed, irrevocably, in the short months outside the confines of this place. This costume had been made for a different man: his own shoulders were broader than the suit permitted, uncomfortable in the rigid seams; the trouser legs bunched above calves where there were new knots of muscle he had never noticed before, muscles that spoke of miles walked outside. At least the shirt still fit, and the boots were solid and far more comfortable than what he had been wearing.

He hesitated on the masks. The bandage, filthy beyond all hope, could no longer serve, but Erik could not bring himself to replace it with any of the collection of the Phantom's masks, leather or papier mâché or porcelain, white or black or corpse grey. They were props from a forgotten drama, a role in which he would be badly miscast.

He chose instead another shirt, ripped a panel from the side and tied that on. He allowed himself one final glance back. Then he ran.
"What's happened to all our ink?"

"Oh," Meg looked up as Christine poked her head around the bedroom door. "Come on in. Sorry, that was me. Mine was out." She shuffled across on the bed, where she was sitting cross-legged, surrounded by stacks of fat books, and passed Christine the half-empty ink bottle.

Christine looked curiously at the volumes. "Dictionaries?"

"Art catalogues." Meg riffl ed through the nearest one to show her the ruled pages and careful notes. "Well, inventories. They're taking whatever they can out to Le Havre, but the paintings need labels and descriptions and such, it's getting urgent. Monsieur de Gas asked if I would help. It's not much money, but it is interesting, going behind the scenes."

Christine eyed the number of catalogues. "You did all those?"

Meg laughed. "No, of course not. There's half a hundred people still at the Louvre, finishing the packing. I just did some today, and I'm supposed to check the copies." She paused, thinking. "It's exciting, in a way... All those enormous paintings wrapped and stacked and loaded into crates. And the bare walls left behind, just dark squares where the paintings had been."

Christine skimmed a page, frowning, then raised her eyes to Meg. "You think it's true, then? The Prussians are coming here?"

Meg shrugged. "Who knows. Monsieur de Gas thinks it is likely. He plans to join the Garde Nationale."

"He does? But what about his painting? I thought you're still sitting for him."

"For now. But if the Prussians really are coming..." Meg shook her head, "Helena left yesterday, with her family."

"To New Orleans?"

"I don't know. Their apartment was empty this morning. Someone had written all over their door - Death to spies, all that garbage. But there's nothing for her here anyway, not until the theatres open again."

That did not seem likely to be soon; the city was gearing for war. Uniformed National Guards patrolled the streets, and a curfew had already been imposed. Christine could barely recognise Paris in this dark, nervous city, where people cast furtive glances at each other, wondering if there were spies within the walls, where even the theatres and the cafés-concerts had been silenced. During the day, meetings were held at the Variétés: banners and red armbands, men in blouses and caps, and women shouting. Music was forgotten.

"I'll be done in a minute," she said to Meg, indicating the ink bottle. "But we should do something about supper."

"I'll go start it," Meg sighed, closing her catalogue. "It is my turn."

They could no longer afford Josette's help in the kitchen, and cooking was a skill neither of them had needed at the Opéra. Even Madame Giry had little patience with it, so supper was mostly bread and cheese, or perhaps eggs. Today there would be pears also, sweet and nearly overripe, with translucent yellow skin. Christine had seen prudent housewives buying them up at the markets to
make preserves, and it seemed such a sad waste, turning these beautiful things ageless and vinegary instead of savouring their one perfect moment.

She took the ink back to the parlour, thinking to finish at the piano, but Madame Giry was there, reading in an armchair under the lamp, and Christine decided to leave it for the night. Madame Giry looked up as she came to tidy away her notes, then returned to her book. Christine was grateful for this tactful retreat, for the space Madame Giry granted her, for understanding her need if not the deeper compulsion that drove it. Their apartment, never large, was becoming cramped with the cabin fever of three people deprived of their livelihood and their daily routine, but Madame Giry had had years of compressing her world to a tiny room in the Opéra and it was only now that Christine began to understand that this, too, was a kind of self-discipline.

"Shall we eat?" she suggested. "Meg has just gone to put the coffee on. I bought pears."

"Thank you, my dear." Madame Giry marked her page with a household receipt, and in the lamplight Christine caught sight of the illustration: a lavishly detailed drawing of a flayed leg, peeled of skin.

"Oh!" Christine knew her disgust and puzzlement must be plain, because Madame Giry gave her a tolerant, gentle look and lowered the book to her inspection. The title read, *Anatomie générale*. Christine felt more than a little foolish; it was an old anatomy textbook.

"We have much to learn from Bichat, when it comes to the understanding of dance," Madame Giry said, setting it aside. "He teaches how the movements are made, from within. Perhaps I ought to thank our sombre new government for giving us leisure to study."

"There may be no shortage of this if the war comes," Christine said, looking away from the book. Despite herself, she found her eyes returning to piano. But it really was too late to be thinking of playing...

Madame Giry rose to her feet and touched Christine's cheek fondly, discerning the direction of her gaze. "Your music is beautiful, child. Your father would be very proud."

"My father… Would you tell me something about him?" Christine found herself asking, as they went to join Meg in the dining room. "How did you come to be friends, when we first came to Paris?"

"Ah," Madame Giry smiled, "that is an old story."

"Oh please, maman," Meg added her voice to Christine's, as she finished setting the table. "Do tell us."

Madame Giry sat and took up her knife. "There is little enough to tell," she said. She cut a piece of cheese, but did not eat. "Gustave was… what some people would call a musician born. When he held the violin, you might lose an hour or half a day merely watching his hands, his fingers. The most unmusical of peasants would stop to listen. He had that power, but I do not suppose he really knew it."

"But there were those who did?" Meg prompted.

"Of course. He had patrons, wealthy men of the world…” She glanced at Christine, "Some of the brightest stars of society vied to have him play in their salons. The old Comtesse de Chagny, your young Vicomte's grandmother, was one such, though by no means the greatest. Gustave cared nothing for that, he would play in a roadside inn as readily as at a glittering soirée. And of course,
he played at the Opéra. In the summer, when the season was over in Paris, he was invited to visit with the Comtesse in Perros-Guirec."

"The house by the sea," Christine murmured, her own food neglected. She remembered those long days playing by the sea with Raoul, seemingly so much older and wiser, his pale hair lit by the setting sun. How beautiful it had been.

"That's right, the house by the sea. I had taken Meg there also, for the summer, to stay with a friend. Gustave recognised us one morning as you and the young Vicomte were playing."

"Was I there too?" Meg asked curiously.

"You were too busy with your own friends, each noisier than the next," Madame Giry laughed. "The ones you played with every summer, Madame Duchamp's girls."

"Raoul?" Christine reminded her.

"I'm afraid that is all I know of it," Madame Giry said. "Gustave spent many hours with the two of you, and we would speak sometimes of the future… He knew even then, I think, that his health was failing. At the end of that summer he asked me if I might consent to take you with me to the Opéra to study, when the time comes. He did not think it would come so soon."

The scrape of a key in the door made them all stop. Christine turned to the sound; it had come from beyond the parlour, from the front door.

Meg had started to get up; Madame Giry clasped her wrist firmly. "Stay here. I will go and see. Perhaps it is Josette."

"It is not Josette," Christine said very softly, her eyes on the dining-room doors.

Very slowly, she picked up her napkin and placed it before her on the table. Then she got up, and, watched by Meg and Madame Giry, went back through the parlour.

He had not lit the lamp. He did not need to. In the faint light from the parlour, Christine had no difficulty discerning the black figure outlined by her own shadow against the white-painted door: black evening frock-coat, boots, tall hat… The ghost of a ghost.

*Christine,* she heard, so low it might have been a wish in her mind.

His mouth was half-hidden by a frayed rag, tied loosely beneath his hat, so that she could not be sure he had spoken. Something was wrong with his clothing too, he wore it uneasily, like a dead man's suit, and a mouldering stench emanated from him in the little hallway.

She took an involuntary step back.

"Christine!" He had certainly spoken then, Christine saw the fabric mask flutter. It was a horrific thing, a rag with an eyehole ripped into it that hid his scars and shaded the open half of his face, concealing his eyes from her. Yet when she heard his voice, there could be no doubt. He was alive.

"Erik." She was unsure of her own voice, but it came out admirably clear. "You've returned."

"Yes."

*I waited...* She swallowed. "You might have knocked."

"I frightened you. Forgive me, I did not think you would want the world to see you receive visitors
after curfew."

He offered her something, Christine looked down: a wire mechanism, designed as a key, cupped in his bare hands. No gloves. His fingers trembled badly; the nails were thin black crescents, dirty and broken. In the near-darkness, she could not tell if it was dirt, or—

"Blood?" she whispered, dismayed.

Without warning, the hallway was flooded with white light. Madame Giry stepped back from the lamp, extinguishing a match, Meg behind her. Erik was shielding his face and Christine blinked, startled, conscious of having been caught in the spotlight holding his hands.

Madame Giry took in the scene. "Good grief, monsieur. You look freshly dug up."

Erik lowered his arm. "In a manner of speaking. Time is short, but could I trouble you for some soap? I fear the effects of dusty roads on bandaged skin are… regrettable."

"It may take more than soap," Madame Giry said wryly, looking from his damp-stained suit to the hanks of greasy, matted hair falling around his mask. She frowned at the rag: "Whatever you may think of your face, this is not an improvement. Monsieur, what is the meaning of this?"

"The war," Christine said, looking at him properly now. She met his eyes, forgetting the mask and costume. "You saw the fighting. Didn't you."

Erik inclined his head a fraction, in assent. "May I come in? I would speak with you, if you permit it... Christine."

She hesitated, then stood back, allowing him to pass. Behind her, she heard Meg mutter, "I'll heat some water," and retreat towards the kitchen.

Madame Giry went on ahead to the parlour, turning on the gaslight as she went. Erik paused by the chest of drawers, perhaps intending to remove his hat, but continued on as he was, and Christine followed him.

"Sit please," Madame Giry said, in the flat tone Christine recognised from the times she and Meg had been in trouble. "Monsieur Duchamp tells me his extraordinary architect has ignored all requests to return from Sedan. Explanations appear to be in order."

Erik glanced at the divan, but made no move to sit. Christine too remained standing.

"Forgive me," he said, "but I dare not stop to explain. I bear a message for - for Mademoiselle Daaé."

"Message?" Christine said, perplexed, thinking of his only letter, unfinished music. But he could not mean that.

Erik turned towards her stiffly, almost reluctantly, and she realised he was afraid:

"Yes. From the Vicomte de Chagny."

From a concealed pocket in his coat, he brought out something pale grey, rounded like a bone. Even before she heard its whisper, Christine recognised it: a poppyseed rattle. Her fingers found the corner of the armchair and gripped it. A chill wave crept over her body, cold seawater, turning her skin numb. Her lips moved:
"Raoul…" She did not want to know. "Erik, is he alive?"

"I cannot say. Come at once." She saw him make an effort to moderate his tone. "Please."

Chapter 37 — The Survivors

_The Vicomte._ Madame Giry felt a sickening dread, old as an injury that refused to heal. What had this man, this veiled stranger in the Phantom's clothing, done to his old enemy, that he now returned to seek out Christine? _No more blood,_ she prayed uselessly. _No more, I beg you._ She could not understand this nighttime visitation, what hideous role this was. He moved as she had never seen him move, haltingly, with neither the Phantom's predatory step nor the assured façade of the gentleman, as though deprived of his shell. It was, she thought suddenly, closer to the wary, darting movements of the freakshow child she had tried to protect. Yet he brought the stench of death to her door, again. Again! Had they not earned some peace? But Christine… It was already too late, Madame Giry thought. Christine was already gone, deep into the part he was creating for her, and would not be rescued. The image of the girl's palms hovering above his hands had stamped itself into her sight, so that even now, with Christine a decorous distance away, Madame Giry could still see it. And yet, she had to do _something._

"Stop," she said, hand raised. It took every ounce of strength to conceal her desperation. "Nobody is going out there in the dark. Monsieur, explain yourself."

The dishevelled man who was neither ghost nor architect started at her voice and dropped the grey thing he had carried; it fell against the parquet floor with a small crack. Christine gave a cry and dived down to get it.

A poppyseed pod, Madame Giry realised, baffled. Christine retrieved it gently, cupped in her hands. Her face when she looked up was whiter than marble, even the lips bloodless.

"I have to go."

"No," Madame Giry said, "child, no."

"It's from Raoul." Christine held up the pod, as if that explained all. She twirled the straw between nervous finders, producing a soft susurration.

"Please," repeated the masked man behind her, the word foreign in his inflection. Madame Giry glanced up; she could not recall having ever heard him use it before. He bore her scrutiny with difficulty, again making her think of that boy retreating behind the safety of the burlap on his face. Defiant and terrified, ready to run at any moment.

"Erik," she asked, risking it all. The name seemed to fit now as it had not in years. It struck him like cold water, and Madame Giry forced herself to go on:

"What has happened to the Vicomte?"

The full import of her question seemed to dawn on him gradually, so slowly that the beginnings of doubt came unbidden into Madame Giry's mind. Had he convinced himself he was innocent? Or was there even the slightest chance that he truly was here, incomprehensibly, as a messenger?
He took in a breath.

"There's hot water and soap," came Meg's voice from the doorway to the dining room. She looked in, a linen teatowel in her hands. "It's, uh, in the kitchen…"

The tension cracked apart; Erik shuddered, and Christine too seemed to shake herself.

"My thanks," Erik said, and with little more than a glance at Christine went the way Meg had indicated.

Madame Giry lowered herself slowly down on the divan. Her daughter and Christine looked at her like they expected a speech, some sort of guidance. Madame Giry could find nothing to say.

"I'll need to change," Christine said after a moment. "Something dark. So I am not easily seen."

Madame Giry nodded fractionally. "You may take my shawl. If you are gone over two hours, Christine - I shall be forced to go to the police, curfew or no."

"I'll go with you," Meg offered.

"Out of the question." Madame Giry rose again to her feet. "Marguerite Giry, go and fetch a book. A long book. For the next two hours, you at least will remain right here, where I can see you."

Christine's lips quirked in a crooked smile. "Do not fear for me, Madame Giry. I will be back soon, I promise."

Madame Giry removed her shawl and placed it around Christine's narrow shoulders. Her heart was bleeding, and yet she knew she was only paying for her own old sins, for the poor excuse for protection she had offered Gustave's daughter. She adjusted the shawl minutely, then let go.

"Very well then. Kindly inform Monsieur Andersson he may look within the medicine chest; there should be sufficient linen for a clean bandage."

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With his face clean and bandaged afresh, Erik seemed to have grown calmer, more resolute. When they first left the building, Christine had expected a cautious, shadowlike flight through the dark and deserted streets, but instead Erik's method seemed to be merely to stride quickly and silently towards wherever their destination was to be. She had to concede it was effective enough. With every step, her mind painted new images of Raoul captured, Raoul hurt, a hundred useless guesses that only deepened her anxiety. Taking her cue from Erik's ominous silence, Christine matched his steps and asked no questions. She wished he would say something.

They had been walking steadily for a quarter of an hour or so when she heard a sharp cry:

"Halt! You sir, and the lady."

Two Garde Nationale officers in kepis and cloaks over their uniforms stepped out in front of them, barring the way. The one who had called out was young and, Christine guessed, a little drunk; the other older and more officious in his bearing. Beside her, Erik stopped, apparently unperturbed.

"How may we be of service?" he inquired, with such deliberate politeness that Christine felt ill. She cut in before he could indict them both:

"Is there a problem, gentlemen?"
"There's a curfew, mademoiselle, surely you're aware?" The older guard addressed her pleasantly enough. He looked at her more closely, then suddenly beamed and raised his kepi in a much warmer greeting. "Why, aren't you from the ballet? I'm-"

"Monsieur Michaud!" Christine laughed in surprise and relief, recognising Monsieur Offenbach's secretary from the Variètès. It was beyond strange to see a familiar face from the theatre in the uniform of the guard. He looked as harassed as ever.

"My apologies, but I really must insist you return home at once, mademoiselle - and you, monsieur. I really am sorry to ruin your evening."

Christine was more than happy to assure him they were on their way home that very moment, and after exchanging the obligatory commiserations on the closure of the theatres, they went their separate ways. Christine risked a sideways glance at Erik; she wondered what his plan had been.

"It is here." He interrupted her thoughts, pointing directly in front of them. Christine peered into the darkness, unbroken by any streetlights. Trees, she saw, and then-

"Army tents?" The image made no sense, it looked like a deserted camp pitched among the pomegranate trees she now recognised as the gardens on Avenue l'Imperatrice. Then she remembered Madame Giry telling her and Meg of the new ambulance to be constructed here. Ambulance. The word brought back every fearful guess about Raoul.

"Erik…"

"The entrance is on the other side of the larger tent. I shall meet you back here. Do not linger, there are more medics here than patients, and there is no telling what these people may do if you are seen." He gave her a wary look, "They will not be from the theatre."

Christine bit her tongue. He had brought her this far, all she could do now was see for herself.

She wrapped the black shawl more closely about her and cautiously went around to where two flaps indicated the entrance to the round tent. Another canvas flap covered the doorway, with the emblem of the Red Cross sewn into it.

Christine lifted it and went inside.

It was warmer within than she had expected, and there was a peculiar faint odour, not unpleasant. Metal cots were arranged at intervals around the tent, separated by canvas screens; in one, she could just make out the darker shape of a man asleep, his face turned aside.

Seaweed, she identified the smell. Seaweed drying far beyond the tideline, turning the air briny. It was too much, this tangle of childhood memories and the man who could be Raoul in this dark foreign tent; she sobbed once, and saw him stirring.

"Raoul?" She breathed the sea, painfully. "Raoul, it's me…"

"Christine?"

Raoul's voice, and unmistakeable now, his form, as he propped himself up on one elbow with effort. Christine could not keep back her dismay: he looked terrible, his skin sallow and hair plastered to his head with perspiration, his forehead creased in pain.

"Are you here?" he murmured uncertainly, as though he was not sure he was awake.
Christine rushed forward, forgetting all caution, and wrapped him in her arms. He gasped, in surprise or pain, she could not tell, but she could not let go; she held him and buried her face against his cheek, and he embraced her as hard as ever, muttering something into her hair, words that did not matter to either of them but oh, it was good to hear him again.

"What happened?" she managed finally, holding his face in her hands, at arm's reach. She was wrong, he had not changed at all, he was just the same. Just the same.

"My, uhh… My leg, Christine, there."

Christine saw suddenly she had been leaning against his side; it must have hurt him. She jerked away and saw new beads of sweat on Raoul's forehead.

"Oh god, I hurt you, I'm sorry…"

He tried to smile up at her, almost succeeding. "It is only a small hole, ahh… It will… It will heal, they tell me. They say the fever has broken… Christine, come here. Come back."

He scooted aside awkwardly and Christine perched on the edge of his cot. The mattress crinkled under her weight, releasing a puff of the salty smell. She touched the sheet: "Seaweed?"

"The bed is stuffed with it." Raoul finally managed a real smile. "They say it keeps away infection. Only… it brings back memories - Little Lotte."

"It does." Christine looked away from at the blanket covering his wounded leg. "Raoul, how did this happen?"

"Just - just bad luck. It was chaos, you can't imagine it… A complete rout, just as my father believed. They are…" He paused for a long time, breathing. "Christine, they are stronger. The Germans. Much, much stronger, and not a bit fatigued by their victory. They will not stop."

Christine reached for his clammy hand, cold despite the comfortable warmth of the tent and the blankets. "Raoul," she begged, "It doesn't matter now."

He squeezed her hand, hard. "Please, Lotte. If you'd just let me… The house in Perros-"

Christine tensed and Raoul caught himself, realising how such an invitation must sound. "I do not mean to revive the past. I would just keep you safe."

She lifted his hand to her own lips and kissed his cold fingers. "I wish you were safe too. But you are in no shape to travel, not yet."

"Not until it is over," he said fiercely, "not until they are gone - or we are dead."

Shocked, Christine could only stare at him.

"I took an oath to do my duty… I'm an officer. Supposed to… to lead. Not to loll in bed, waiting for the next bowl of broth, the next poultice, the next thing to take the pain away. Waiting for someone to… To save me."

He fell back to the pillow, exhausted by this speech, and combed one unsteady hand through his hair.

Christine caught at the shawl, gripping the silk fringes. "He came back with you, didn't he. Erik."

"Brought me back," Raoul said, still with the same helpless anger. "And brought you to me. He
saved my life, I own it, but - Christine! It is not your debt. You owe him nothing. If he tries to hold it against you…"

"Shh." Christine pressed a finger to his dry lips, silencing him. "Someone is coming."

Indeed, there were heavy footfalls outside, a night guard on duty headed towards them. Christine watched the tent entrance in dread, knowing it was too late to hide. Abruptly the footsteps stopped.

"I'll be damned!" came a cry, "Another one!"

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"It was, frankly, the first time I have been thus greeted," Erik admitted, as he and Christine came at last to the conclusion of Madame Giry's interrogation. They were all seated around the dining table, with bread and wine, and for a while, it seemed as simple and quaint as any evening at the Egrots' house in Bazeilles. Between them, Madame Giry and Meg made a grateful audience. "The fool was about to enter the tent and your bandages, madame, made a convenient distraction. He ran off to get help, while their mysterious second patient," he flourished his arm, "made a most inelegant escape with Mademoiselle Daaé. Who, of course, was never there."

"Bravo," Madame Giry said, with a nod of wry appreciation. "Let us hope this escapade does not bring repercussions. Not least, for the Vicomte's recovery."

Erik saw Christine's fingers tighten on the stem of her glass, her wine untouched, and realised that for her, the fleeting excitement of their so-called escapade had long since cooled. She had that faraway look again, seeing a past beyond the stone walls of the chapel, a past where he could not follow.

"The Vicomte is a young man," he offered. "And most determined to live."

Christine nodded without raising her eyes from the glass, dark lashes shadowing her more perfectly than any mask.

"Yes," she said, and at last did look up at him, painfully honest. "Thank you."

Erik's throat constricted; he could not reply. Christine's gaze held him pinned in the golden light, exposed to the world, bare-faced. The pause stretched.

"It's past time we all had some rest." Madame Giry stood up. "Monsieur, this way if you please. Never mind those tonight," she said to Meg, who was about to collect the glasses, "morning will be soon enough."

Christine and Meg bid their polite goodnights and Erik found himself being ushered back into the little parlour, where a narrow bed had been made up on the divan. It took him a moment to understand this was intended for him.

"This is entirely unnecessary," he started, "I can certainly-"

"You certainly cannot. Here is the key for the door through to the dining room, take it; you will not be disturbed." Madame Giry placed a brass key in his hand, and Erik found himself accepting it, awkward with this unexpected trust. "Should you wish to air out this musty suit you have disinterred from God knows where, you are welcome to use the balcony. I trust you remember its location."

Erik could only nod, accepting the implied warning. The balcony she meant was the one he had
once found in his misguided plan that - he now recalled with humiliating clarity - had involved standing upon the railing with a rope in his hands, toying with death. Playing at war. He had not been certain, until this moment, that she knew of it. Or of what had followed, Christine's hands on his face and his mask torn apart.

"Sleep." Madame Giry's voice was gentler than he had expected. She added gravely, "I owe you an apology, monsieur. What you did for the young Vicomte… These are not the actions of a madman."

Erik reached for his pocket where Christine's ring was, safe. He was still thinking of ropes, tightening around the necks of men whose misfortune was only to have been on the wrong side of battle. And yet men, even the Vicomte with his obstinate pride, thought little of all those uniformed deaths.

"I doubt my sanity is much improved," he said at last. "Perhaps it is only the world that has lowered its standards."

The nights had become darker since they stopped turning on the street lamps, and of late Christine no longer bothered to draw the drapes in her room. She did draw them tonight. The heavy fabric slid through her hand unseen, and the blackness became absolute. She felt her way back to bed, kicked off her shoes, and sat on the covers. Then she got up again. Sleep was not possible, not with the memory of the evening's flight and Raoul's ashen face in that tent and the smell of the sea... Not with Erik still so near.

In the darkness she could hear the small unaccustomed sounds that had never belonged to this apartment before, the sounds that meant he stayed. The faint squeak of springs in the old divan, the movement of a chair. She had thought he would leave, flee again to the heights of Montmartre or deep down into the grave of the Opéra, vanish into the night like a ghost. Perhaps it was only the effect of seeing the Phantom's old clothes again. Perhaps all the years of make-believe were stronger than she was, and the habit of seeking mystery was not so easily broken.

She realised the sounds had ceased some time ago; he had gone to sleep. Or left. Christine wondered which it was, then gave up, shrugged back into her dressing-gown and padded out to get some water from the kitchen. Outside her pitch-black room, the apartment seemed to glow with a faint bluish phosphorescence, every corner and angle made soft, spectral by the moonlight trickling through the windows. She wondered how far off dawn was.

The dining room was before the kitchen; their glasses were still on the table. Christine picked up the wine she had not wanted earlier and wandered over to the window, taking a sip. It burned. In the morning she would go to see how Raoul was, talk to him if she could. His talk of debts and oaths worried her; she felt a vague guilt that his choices could have been different, that she had held that power and chosen his pain. She leaned back against the edge of the table and took another sip, feeling the wine burn her throat.

Something made her look up, and she saw the doors to the parlour open slowly.

Erik walked in.

Christine felt a sharp thrill in her chest, her heartbeat changing.

He was not looking at her, not expecting her there; Christine saw he was carrying his bundled suit and had wound a sheet about himself, over his shirt. She remained very still, watching. He went to
cross the room towards the window, heading for the balcony door.

"Hello," she said softly, when he was near enough.

He froze. Christine knew a moment of pleasure, darker than the wine. She thought she understood how he could have enjoyed this, being a ghost.

Erik turned slowly towards her, gripping the black bundle in one hand, the edge of the sheet in the other, and said only, "Christine."

That was enough: his voice caught her, held her still. He looked at the wine in her hand, at her pose, the way she rested against the table edge. Christine saw herself suddenly as she must appear to him, too knowing, and did not like it.

"I couldn't sleep," she said, straightening. "I didn't know you were up. I'm sorry."

He accepted this but still watched her. She leaned forward and touched the balcony door, letting it open. Erik's eyes went to the replaced latch, just as she had known they would, and Christine felt that disturbing thrill again when he stepped up to it and swung the door open wide. It was dangerous, to think she could command him. She watched him throw the Phantom's old suit upon the railing, and thought of this same man throwing Don Juan's cloak on the parapet behind him, leaving it, discarded.

"Why did you go back there?" she said when he was done. The hurt in her own voice surprised her. She set the wine aside. "That suit came from the Opéra. I had not thought to see it again."

Erik crossed his arms on his chest over the sheet, fingers digging into his own shoulders, the bandage stark white against skin coarsened by his months outside and stubbled with the beginnings of a beard.

"I needed a change of clothing. Something that was not stained with blood."

"And you chose this?" Christine gaped in disbelief.

"You misunderstand. It isn't a metaphor; I could not abide it. The stink of butchery, the filth." Erik's forehead creased against the bandage, the whites of his eyes showing. "It was not... clean and distant, not like you may imagine. The guns - the noise is deafening, and the bayonets, they finish what the bullets start, and men walk upon men..." He was holding himself still in his crossed arms, each finger a sharpened talon, but he was quaking. "Sometimes the bayonets did not finish it. But I did. They had cartridges, bullets, you understand - ammunition we needed. In the space of a day and a night, more men died at my hand than I could name. I wore their blood and soil, brown and crusted, and I could not escape the foulness. I could not. I cannot."

Christine raised a hand but did not dare touch him; he was burning with a frightening, cold fury, his eyes wild.

"Here," she said, trying to bring him back to her, afraid of what wound she had opened. "Erik, look at me, I'm here. Erik."

She waited until at last he focused on her again, with terrible effort. "You saved a life. Raoul, he told me..."

"The Vicomte!" Erik sobbed the word, perhaps intending to laugh. "Why is it different, Christine? He is just one, same as any of the others with a gun in his hand, same as me - he said it himself, they're soldiers. Who cares about their fates?"
"I do."

Christine did touch him finally, gingerly, her hand raised to cover his on his shoulder. She felt the strength of his grip, fingers like iron, and knew she could not unfold them.

"Come with me," she whispered. "I need to show you something."

It seemed an age before his clawed hands released their grip and the wildness in his eyes subsided. Christine felt clammy all over; she had not noticed her own effort until then.

"What is it?" This time Erik's voice was closer to normal, but Christine only motioned for him to be quiet and went ahead to the parlour he had left unlocked, soundless in her stocking feet. He hesitated, then followed.

The bedding on the divan was a tangled heap of blankets with the pillow lumped in the middle; he had taken the sheet. If he had tried to sleep there, he had not succeeded. There was an extinguished candle by the bed, still warm with the faint scent of wax, and though he had hung his cravat and waistcoat over the arm of a chair, the smell of the rotting Opéra had been evicted with the suit.

Christine went around to the piano and pulled down the notebook from the shelf above. Behind her, she heard Erik's breathing quicken as she brought it down to the piano bench and knelt beside it. He stood tall over her, uncertain, then knelt as well, the sheet he wore bundling under him on the rug.

Christine ran her fingertips over the cover. The book was hardbound, heavy, an old gift to her father from some forgotten acquaintance, with a gold-embossed "Daaé" on the front. It had been pristine. Now pages stuck out from the edge at odd angles where she had hastily filed the scraps and phrases of stray ideas.

She reached for the ribbon that tied it.

"No."

The tension in Erik's voice made the word an order. Christine ignored it.

"This is mine," she said, and pulled the ties.

The old sheet of letter paper with his scribbled fragment was right there, in a pocket inside the front cover, covered with her own scribbles in a darker ink. The rest of the music was hers.

"Not this," Erik said, his hand closing above his letter, making a fist. "My God, Christine, this thing... I should never have sent it."

Christine caught his hand, his shirt sleeve falling away from bare wrist. "But you did. And it helped. Listen!

She led him by touch along the stave, slowly, making his fingers trace each separate note, each bar. The hidden echo of the Moonlight Sonata intertwined and vanquished by phrases that were hers: starting dark and cold as the wintry sea, arpeggios crashing into salt and bitterness, receding finally to something calmer, simpler. A rest, expectant silence. Then stone walls and stained glass, the shadow of waves in many colours, a response. Only two notes, like teardrops: Chris-tine..."

"Angel of Music," Erik's mouth shaped the words, almost inaudible, "why do you cry?"

Christine let go of his hand and he continued alone; she watched the harmony unfold for him, saw
how he lingered over the same notes that had made her pause. It was a strange feeling, two mirrors reflecting each other, spiralling into infinity. Erik turned the page, then another. The tension left his body, he was alive beside her, absorbed.

He lingered on one bar, casting her a curious look, then returned to the previous page, tried again. Christine followed his progress. At the same spot, he broke away from the chord she had written and rose up through the stave instead, higher, and Christine felt herself being swept up with that sound, then down again, free. She put her own hand back on the stave and added the second vocal part to what he had started: only a deep burr at first, then rising to the challenge, crossing the first part, again and again.

"Repeat," he indented a line with the edge of a nail, but she shook her head impatiently and flipped a few pages forward, to the second movement.

"Here," she indicated the place, and felt him test it out, silently.

"Better," he agreed. "Much stronger."

She looked over at him, and felt herself smiling; the joy in his eyes was naked and vulnerable, mirroring her, and just then she could not remember how to be anything else.

She went over to get the ink and pens from the top of the piano, offered him one and sat down again. Erik reached over, dipped the pen, and waited while she turned to an unmarked page. Then they wrote.

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Chapter 38: Household Effects

A/N: A long chapter to reward your patience, with lots more Erik. If you want to return the favour, please do share a thought or two in your review - anything that caught your attention or made you think. That kind of feedback is invaluable, and it really does help me write.

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Chapter 38 — Household Effects

The sea was without form, and void, and from that formless darkness a forest of blades was rising. They were coming. They were coming for him, for Christine, for the Egrots. The city walls were smoke, the fortifications a vast chamber of mirrors, and he the only one who understood, the architect of their doom. The city was surrounded. The sea was lapping at its gates. He stood upon the highest place, the heights of Montmartre, with Christine at his side holding a loaded rifle, and behind them amassed a crowd of those who remained, all armed, all ready to die: Madame Giry and Meg, the Vicomte and Egrot and Louise Gandon, and the hundreds of others en garde. And they sang. The music kissed with blood, it thrilled and seduced and vowed victory was at hand. But he knew. He saw the faceless armies drawing nearer, felt the ground shuddering with the thunder of cannons, and he knew no music could keep it back. The city was surrounded but it was him, him they wanted.

"Shoot us," the voices shrieked into his mind. "You who are damned, what does it matter now? Kill again. Save them! Save yourself…"

"Take me!" he bellowed, and plunged weaponless into the sea, drowning as they closed over him, hearing only the screams of the dying above, all those he had left to die, Christine...
"...and expects every man to do his duty. The city will never be defended by fewer than three hundred thousand rifles; the fortifications are unassailable; the enemy will find no way in. Take heart therefore, and stand firm. Paris will not falter. Paris will stand."

I am alive, Erik thought, even as he was becoming aware of Madame Giry's distant, steady voice reading aloud from whatever this hideous proclamation was supposed to be. He sat up, dizzy at the unfamiliar, sunlit room. There was no sea; he had never even been to the seaside. The darkness receded. Why was he on the floor? It took a minute to place it: of course, the parlour. The piano stool with Christine's music book upon it, closed and tied again. The pillow had been placed under his head - Christine's doing? Her music, he had touched her music, her slender fingers guiding his hand. Her music. It returned to him now, light as the air he breathed.

He glanced down at himself: he still wore the sheet, wrapped tight like a shroud, and the shirt beneath it. His suit was presumably hanging still where he had left it - through the dining room, from where the voices of Madame Giry, Meg and Christine were now coming. It was a predicament he had not anticipated, thinking to be gone before daybreak… But the sleepless nights of his flight from Bazeilles had demanded payment. He tried to remember Christine leaving him, and could not.

A rap on the door made him grasp at his face by instinct; the bandage was in place.

"Erik?" Christine's voice. "Are you there?"

Erik managed to stumble to his feet; she must have heard this because the door handle was lowered and his suit was thrust through the part-opened door in a rustle of fabric.

"Thank you," he said, catching it. Christine did not let go but paused on the other side of the door; he could hear her breathing as they held the fabric between them. A mad part of him wanted to pull that door wide to catch her by the waist, to kiss her hard on the mouth, to stand at her side against the world and sing.

Christine's voice was pitched low, for his hearing: "I'm glad you slept. And that you are here."

She released her hold, letting him take the suit, and shut the door before he could think of how to reply. He heard her footsteps going back towards the kitchen.

He tried to order his thoughts as he dressed, marshalling the long list of things that needed attention if he was to keep hold of what little of this new life had been left to him. Clothing. Money. A home. His work, if any was to be had in this godforsaken city… The sheer depth of this newest fall threatened to drown him in despair if he was not vigilant, but Erik kept his thoughts moving. He would not succumb to it, he refused. Christine's voice still drifted in from the other room, and her music - a willowy, delicate, unbreakable thread - still pierced and held every shadowed corner of his mind. He had done all within his power to bring back her Vicomte and, damn it, he was permitted this much: one small triumph.

They were all in the dining room, reading the morning papers together when he came in, Madame Giry at the head of the table with Meg and Christine at either side. Christine looked up when he entered and her gaze flickered ever so slightly over him, taking in his appearance in the sunlight. Erik felt heat rise to his neck, but she did not look displeased, only perhaps a little flustered, and her smile was uncertain:

"Good morning. There is coffee in the kitchen-"

"Cold coffee," Meg added with a glance at the clock, as Christine went on:
"-and porridge." She held up her hands at Meg in surrender: "I tried!"

"And succeeded! It's congealed beautifully, you could sculpt with it."

Christine laughed, a sound so unexpected and free that Erik could only marvel at it. He wondered guiltily what it would feel like to draw that sound from her.

Madame Giry looked up from her paper. "These headlines may be of interest, monsieur."

She lowered the broadsheet so that Erik could read the bold type: "Mystery of the vanished patient: Americans insist they are not treating Prussians".

Erik blinked, looking from Madame Giry to Christine: "Prussians?"

Christine sighed. "They thought you did not want to give your name. They see Prussians everywhere now, it is a mania."

"Only the real ones have been hounded out," Meg said with feeling, standing up from her chair. Erik saw she had already dressed to go out, lacking only gloves and hat. "I promised Monsieur de Gas to go to the auction today," she said to Madame Giry, "they are clearing the apartments of those who left, even the art."

Her mother frowned as Meg came around to give her a kiss, but said only, "Do not stay long; I mislike these news of the roads from the city being closed. And whatever Monsieur Trochu may proclaim, his three hundred thousand rifles are not much comfort when they arm the angry men of Belleville."

"And Montmartre?" Erik asked.

"Montmartre too," Christine confirmed. "They have their own officers, I've seen them drilling near the cemetery. Wait, Meg, I'll see you out."

She gave Erik an apologetic look as she passed: "Please help yourself. I promise the porridge is very nearly edible."

Erik stared after her as she and Meg went to the door. He had the sensation that all this was a costumed rehearsal for a drama he did not recognise, and the part he had taken was not his own. Yet he had never imagined Christine this way, easy in her own home, surefooted and unafraid and lovely.

"What will you do?" Madame Giry's voice was very quiet, but still it made him jump. She was looking at him carefully, testing him as one might test a new course laid at a construction site, to see if it will hold.

He looked towards the kitchen. "I believe I have been instructed to eat."

"That is a start."

She waited, patient and implacable.

"Then I must discover what has become of my lodgings in Montmartre. And my employment."

"You do understand what it is you have returned to? We are made into an army, expecting a war. Even Monsieur Duchamp has been forced to decamp, and theatres are outlawed. There is only one employment this grim new Paris will allow: with the Garde Nationale, upon the ramparts. Will you
Erik found the answer was simple: "No."

Madame Giry's brows quirked as she considered this, then her gaze went to something behind Erik. He turned and saw Christine had returned.

"I heard what you said about Montmartre." She paused, looking from him to Madame Giry and back. In her hands was the dry poppyseed rattle, and she absently scraped a fingernail against it, back and forth. "I should like to go with you, if you do not object to waiting until I am back from the Ambulance. It has been some days since I was at the cemetery, and Madame Giry is right, it is no longer safe to go alone."

"Indeed?" Madame Giry closed the newspaper and set it down. "And which of you is to chaperone the other?"

Erik cleared his throat. "I regret I cannot; I must set my affairs in order, and soon." He bowed in turn to Madame Giry and Christine. "I thank you for your hospitality. Once again, I am in your debt."

Christine acknowledged this with a minute nod, as though she had expected no different. "All right. Stay a moment - I'll go, uh, carve you some porridge."

Erik stood back as she went past, wanting nothing more than to stay.

The auction was held in what had been a concert hall, now mute and sad under a veil of dust. The tall windows were open on both sides, lending the hall a bare, transient feel. The seats were all full; with so little entertainment to be found, even an auction drew crowds: women mostly, curious to see their former neighbours' possessions, but a few men, art dealers or salesmen, many in uniform even if they were not now on duty. Meg sat beside Monsieur de Gas, himself out of uniform today, though she knew this meant he would likely be back at the fortifications by the evening. Before them, furniture and paintings and rickety household pianos were paraded upon the dais at the front, each lot in turn unceremoniously dispatched by the fall of the hammer.

"And sold!"

She was not sure what it was they were waiting for; Monsieur de Gas bought nothing but merely sat with his eyes fixed on the dais, his hands folded over the carved handle of his cane.

"Another one," he said, drawing her attention to the painting brought out before them."What do you think, mademoiselle?"

It was a small oil in a heavy round frame, a mundane little still life destined from to decorate somebody's dining room. Meg regarded it carefully, then shook her head. She felt ashamed of herself for this, for dismissing as worthless this small thing from the life of a stranger now gone away. It must have meant something to them.

"And another," said Monsieur de Gas as a larger picture was brought forth in its turn.

Meg took one look, and felt a new wave of shame - this one she recognised. It came from Helena's drawing room, a family portrait painted in a stilted, fussy way, an unattractive picture but painful all the same to see it here. Monsieur de Gas noticed her agitation:
"What is it?"

"Nothing… It is nothing remarkable. As art." Meg knew she had to be honest but it hurt. "It was Helena's."

To her astonishment, Monsieur de Gas raised his hand. Nobody contested it; another minute and the hammer struck, making the terrible painting his. Meg stared at him in puzzlement.

"How many were there?" he asked, without looking away from the dais, where yet another heavy frame was already being lifted into place.

Meg understood now. "Just two, I think. They were not wealthy."

"All right. Do not distract me now, there may yet be something of interest here, with such perfect light… But if you see the others, you must say."

"You mean to return them to her family?"

Now Monsieur de Gas did look at her in surprise. "Naturally. These are of no imaginable use to anyone else." He returned to watching the auction, adding, "And I detest this business of trading art. Even this dismal sort of thing."

Meg thought about it. "It is different, I think, when it is not like this. When it is by choice."

"Dear girl, nobody sells their work by choice, not the work that matters. Least of all, to the highest bidder."

"What if the person buying it understood it? What if they needed it?"

"Needed it." Monsieur de Gas huffed, but after a moment leaned back in his chair, the way he did when he was pleased with a morning's progress. "You are an interesting case, Mademoiselle Giry, for one so young. I imagine you could be quite persuasive if you put your mind to it. Perhaps I ought to introduce you to some people, should we be fortunate enough to survive what is coming."

Meg decided not to ask what he meant, but returned her attention to the remainder of the auction. If they survived this… The roads out of the city were blockaded, bridges blown up; at the train stations she had seen dead lifeless engines sitting upon their tracks, eerily silent. The armies that surrounded them were somewhere out there, still invisible. It was enough to make her understand why even Monsieur de Gas had joined the National Guard. Surely anything was better than this interminable, nerve-wracking waiting.

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It was with immense relief that Erik discovered the bank functioned still, and his income had not vanished into the chaos that had swallowed so much else. Money was a basic necessity; he had been taught this lesson early and well, when he had been a penniless little freak hiding in the sewers beneath the gilded opulence of the Opéra. There was only so much he could do with the scraps of charity from the ballet girl who was not yet Madame Giry, herself close to destitute were it not for the meagre salary to which she had been entitled. That salary had given him an idea, one of which the ballet girl did not fully approve, but which even now was proving exceptionally useful. Twenty thousand francs a month was a respectable sum. His salary as an architect had been less generous, but that too had been useful while it lasted.

The question now was: how long could he live upon the interest alone, without touching the principal? A dreary calculation, but one that he knew he would need to make soon. The alternative
was a uniform and a rifle, and one franc fifty per day to stand upon the ramparts, and that, he would not do. Not today, not next week, not until the Prussians spilled over the formidable walls that surrounded this imprisoned city. He had had his fill of it, the filth and agony and the blood on his hands. Christine had held those hands, had led him, blind, through her soul's music. The thought of soiling them again was repugnant.

He was not giving up. There had to be a way to survive this, to become again the architect, a man worthy of forgiveness. A man who had the right to the ring he still carried.

But a man would fight, he thought. In this maddened world, mirror-flipped, where the sin of murder had become every man's duty, he would once again become an outcast. The grisly joke was on him.

Preoccupied with these thoughts, he discovered he had come much too far; he had meant to find his old room at the Gandons' store but had wandered instead all the way to the end of the street, where a little dance hall was wedged between two narrow apartment blocks. He recognised the building and the peeling red sign hanging above the entrance, promising music and a night of lively dancing, but something had obviously changed: the doors were open wide although it was barely noon, and the sounds that emerged from within were anything but musical.

Driven by curiosity, Erik walked inside, past the narrow grimy mirrors in the hallway and into what should have been the main hall. It was as gaudy as he expected, from the panelled walls to the zinc and glass chandeliers, but the orchestra pit was full of boxes, some opened to reveal piles of leaflets tied with thin cord, others sealed shut. A crowd had gathered in the hall, their attention directed to the stage, where men dressed variously in black suits or workers' blouses, and a handful of women in kerchiefs and aprons, were engaged in a series of orations. A few of them Erik recognised from the covert meetings he had witnessed at the house of Jean and Louise; these were the same speeches he had heard many a time, about the rights of workers and the fairness of pay, but never so loud or so openly. They had come out of hiding, he realised, all those proponents of revolutions. They had not had to overthrow the Empire in the end, it had crumbled under its own weight, but still they held their grievances close, only the targets had shifted:

"Every man receives his franc fifty for each day served," proclaimed one working-class man, "but that's only the Garde Nationale. What of those battalions of Bretons they brought in? Or the zouaves? How much is their pay, I would like to know?"

Erik did not stop to listen to the rest, but walked back out onto the narrow cobbled street, squinting against the sudden glare after the dimly lit hall. Neither Jean nor Louise has been in that meeting, so he held some hope that their store had remained open, and that his room might be unoccupied. This last seemed less likely now than he had supposed earlier that day: he had not counted on the hordes of peasant families who, fleeing the Prussians, had taken up residence within the capital. They were everywhere evident by their clothing and their rough patois, and Erik would not have put it past Jean to take pity on one such and install them in his house.

There was no sign of peasants or indeed anyone elsewhere he reached the store. The shutters were down and a rusted padlock held the side gate shut. That was new, and Erik wondered if thievery and disorder were indeed on the rise. He knocked on the shutters once, then stood to one side, to have a better view in case somebody did open them. Nothing, they were not in.

Erik lingered beside the store, thinking. He must try to find elsewhere to live, but was wandering the streets the way to do this? It would be best to ask around, perhaps, to have a recommendation - but how did one start? And where was he to go now for all the trivial but necessary things, from candles to writing paper?
A group of people were advancing uphill towards him, from the direction of rue de Clignancourt, deep in animated discussion. Another red club, Erik thought, breaking up their session. But in a few moments he saw a familiar shock of red hair among them, and sure enough, there was Jean carrying a book, and beside him, the broad-hipped figure of Louise Gandon. Erik had never imagined to be so pleased to see them.

They broke away from the group and stopped outside the side gate without noticing him, still talking animatedly. Jean squeezed Louise's hand and held it tight, while she beamed at him, ruddy-cheeked, for all the world as if they had just managed a coup between them. The Prussian encirclement, the advancing cannon, the burning towns and the twelve thousand men still imprisoned near Sedan and the rest of the fortresses, did not seem to perturb their marital harmony in the least. Erik felt a sharp pang of futile, irrational jealousy.

Jean went to embrace his wife, but stopped suddenly as Erik stepped out into view.

"Good day." He raised his hat to both of them. "I trust the Republic is faring well this morning."

"Andersson! Now this is a surprise." Jean lowered his arms from Louise's shoulders and she turned also, her forehead creasing in amazement when she recognised him.

"Well, well," Jean said. "We had thought you long gone."

He offered his hand and Erik shook it.

"I was. But I had reason to return. I confess I was hoping to find my former room-"

"Room's here all right," Louise interrupted, jerking her head up at the window, "but we've not got space for tenants, not anymore."

Erik saw Jean frown at this, and thought the rejection was not as certain as it sounded. "I require little enough, madame. And naturally I am more than happy to compensate you for the inconvenience."

Jean rubbed an ink-stained finger against his nose. "Listen… Things have changed around here, Andersson. We're working for the future now, and Louise is right enough, there is not the space. But come in if you will, and see what you think."

Intrigued, Erik followed them through the side gate and round the back, into the storeroom. Thus far, it looked exactly as he remembered, and to his relief, there were no chickens in the courtyard and no other sign of any peasant invasion. The back of the store was full of the usual boxes, once filled half with soap and half with propaganda, but Jean's folding trestle table that he had used for signwriting had disappeared.

"After you," Jean said, indicating the stairs. Erik went up ahead, ducking his head out of habit as he came to the low lintel, then waited as Jean leaned past to unlock the door to what had been his old room.

The missing trestle was at once explained. The work table that Erik had used for his sketches was piled high with papers, and signs and drawings in various stages of completion covered every surface including the bedstead, cascading gently down onto the floor. The small spaces between were taken up by tins full of brushes soaking near the washstand, bottles of ink, wads of cotton rags, and drawers overflowing with compasses, paper blades, perforating wheels and other paraphernalia of what had apparently become a thriving workshop. The curtains had been tied back from the window and the little room was flooded with daylight.
"All out in the open now," Jean said proudly. "No more skulking in the shadows, hiding from the gendarmes."

"About bloody time," Louise said from the doorway.

"Impressive," Erik agreed absently, completing his inspection. It was manifestly no longer a living space, but at least the furnishings were still there, and he decided it would do well enough. "It reminds me, in fact, of my previous quarters. The same miscellany of thought, though I believe something is missing."

Jean looked surprised. "What's that?"

"Me."

From the doorway, Louise voiced her opinion of his presumption with a string of quiet expletives, but Erik continued to address Jean, the idea now crystallised in his mind:

"It seems you have work enough for ten and no shortage of materials, but only one pair of hands: your own. Unless I am mistaken, you could make use of a skilled assistant. This is not architecture, I grant you, but there is regrettably little need for architecture at present. As Madame Gandon so perceptively pointed out," - he nodded in Louise's direction - "it is a bloody time."

The initial scepticism in Jean's expression was gradually replaced by a thoughtful look, first at his overflowing work table, and then, more speculatively, at Erik.

"Are you offering to assist me?"

"Just so. I believe you would find my draughtsmanship more than adequate to your needs. And I would be pleased to aid you in outfitting a more appropriate workshop downstairs, which you would certainly require should you desire to work on any placard too large to be moved here. With two, such a job would be trivial, would it not?"

"True enough." Jean half-turned to see what Louise made of this unexpected offer, but her gaze had remained unfriendly and her entire bearing made it clear that she had no interest in seeing Erik resume his tenancy:

"Look at him, would you! All bluster and fine words, but what's beneath all that, hmm?"

She came forward, letting the door slam behind her. Her finger pointed square at Erik's chest. "You don't give a shit about the likes of us, none of what Jean's worked for, so don't you think you can smarm him so easy now. What'd you come back for, really?"

Erik forced his body to relax, to ignore the finger jabbed at him like a weapon. This mattered, he could not get this wrong. He searched for the words.

"Well?" Louise demanded impatiently. "Lost your voice all of a sudden? Why don't you sing it, like that little nightingale you left behind?"

Erik felt his face grow stony beneath the suddenly ill-fitting mask. "Sing it," he repeated slowly.

"Louise, leave off," Jean protested, but Louise put her hands on her hips and stood her ground, the picture of working-class indignation. It would have been humorous, had her words not seeded a terrible suspicion in Erik's mind.

"How," he said, very carefully and clearly, "could you have heard Mademoiselle Daaé sing?"
"With my two ears," Louise retorted, "and damned if it didn't near break my heart to hear it. I won't go to church but that girl has the voice of an angel. I tell you, it made me tremble."

"She sang… for you? Here?!"

Louise shrugged. "For herself, I imagine, but I know little enough of these things. What I do know is, she's an odd one: I saw her nearby, thought I'd have a word with her - but she's not so simple, your young mistress. She knew you'd be back all right, and here you are. So again I ask, you with your tales of going to build in the midst of war: what is it brought you back here? Have you another plan like you did at the Opéra? Is the Daaé girl mixed up in it? I tell you, I don't know what you really are - but I will not have you use my house to hide out. If Jean says stay then well and good, but you'll be honest with us, and you'll keep your sordid business out of here. That fair?"

Erik looked from her to Jean's bemused, but intelligent eyes, then to the rest of the room turned workshop. He did not need it, he could find somewhere else - but all he could hear was the ghostly sound of Christine's music, weaving together what remained of his soul, an exquisitely painful surgery. This room held echoes of the night she had come for him, of her fingertips against his mangled face, her mouth shaping his name, the taste of her skin. The idea of her here, singing alone as she had not done since the Opéra, singing for this coarse woman who understood nothing… It was absurd. And yet it had to be true. A voice like an angel...

"I returned for one reason alone," he said at last. "It is neither sordid nor any of your business. My offer, as it stands, is more than fair: will you take it?"

"All right, all right," Jean said, "that is enough dramatics. You're welcome to stay and I will certainly not refuse your assistance. As to the girl," he made a placating gesture at Louise, "that is your affair and not ours. But my wife is right: if you are planning some mischief or you are the sort of man who thinks little of honour - then you'd best find someplace else."

Honour, Erik thought. They all loved it so, this strange abstraction that turned men into murderers or fodder for cannons, but which had nothing to say of the kind of man who drew a woman to him with song, bound her with music, begged forgiveness - and yet did not, could not, let go.

"Very well then," he said, wanting suddenly to be out of this room, anywhere but here. "I have business in the city but I shall return with the month's rent. You may have my word on that," he glared at Louise - "as a man of honour."

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**Chapter 39: Petit Pas**

**A/N:** Thanks again, guys, for letting me share your thoughts in the reviews for the previous chapter. I know it takes time to write a review and I promise, every one is read and valued.

An actual note on the content: there is mention of oakum dressings - this was used after the American Civil War and was effectively a non-absorbent form of lint with some antibacterial properties. It consisted of fibres picked (by hand!) from tarred rope. Picking oakum was an awful activity performed in prisons and poorhouses, but it was not as pointless as usually thought. There is also a mention of nuns; they performed the function of nurses, going from patient to patient, but unfortunately this resulted in the spread of infection in some quite dramatic ways. It was not known about at the time, and luckily for Raoul, the American Ambulance was well-staffed with their own volunteers and was less affected by this than other ambulances in Paris.
Chapter 39 - Petit Pas

Raoul was getting used to the low murmur of voices outside the tent, muted for his benefit, as though he was already dead and laid out in state. Whatever it was they made him drink had not exactly dulled the pain, but had lifted his mind from it, so that he seemed to be floating over his own body, looking down at the grey blanket pulled up to his chest, and the lopsided shape beneath it.

"Is he awake?" came an unfamiliar voice outside, a woman's voice, softer than the others and speaking clear, unaccented French. Raoul thought he should wonder at the new arrival but found he did not care. He needed to walk. He tried to move his swollen leg, but succeeded only in locking the knee in a spasm so strong it made him grit his teeth. Christine had been right when she had returned that morning, it was folly to try, but he chafed at this helplessness. He could not even manage the short trip to the latrine without aid. How long before he had enough strength to stand with the others on the wall - would Paris fall while he still lingered in safety?

Christine... Raoul shut his eyes against the floating numbness that was not pain, and allowed his mind to paint her as he had left her a lifetime ago at the Bois de Boulogne, in that distant summer before the war: the white-faced girl with grief in her eyes who could not accept comfort, who refused to choose peace above honesty. The same girl he had run with on the beach so long ago, the same girl who last night had embraced him with all her strength... He might have believed it a dream had she not returned to his bedside this morning, so graceful and poised and grown up beyond recognition, with her hair tamed into a modest chignon and her dress plain and bare of jewellery, but her smile still gentle and childlike, unchanged. She had stayed all morning by his side, travelling with him back to the days before her father's death, remembering together. It was mingled comfort and pain, but he welcomed it, wishing only that she would not have to see him like this, a half-dressed, bed-bound invalid. She had promised to return later and he would have dearly liked to greet her properly, standing up.

"Good afternoon, monsieur. How are you feeling?"

Raoul had not heard the nun enter. She stood at his bedside, her hands clasped, her head bowed, the picture of elderly dignified reverence. She made a quick cross over his chest, and put her fingers to her pale lips, then took up a bowl and some linen.

He sighed. "I am recovering, sister, thank you."

"Do not thank me, monsieur, it is the Lord who saves. I am only Sister Thérèse."

She sat beside him, moving the blanket to expose the dressing that covered thigh and hip. A sharp chemical smell assaulted Raoul's nose as she lifted away the old oakum dressing, phenol mingled with tar and the sickly sweet smell of pus. He gagged and looked away as she proceeded to wash the wound with the chemical concoction these surgeons insisted on, something to fight putrefaction. The pain was searing, too hot to think of anything else, and for that at least he was grateful.

When it was done, he leaned over the bed and retched bile into the pan, then fell back, spent and humiliated.

"You have great strength," the nun said, passing him a cup. He hesitated. "It is only water," she assured him. "Your physicians will tell you, you must drink. Water is life."

Raoul drank, but it was not water he wanted. He wanted a potion to give him back the use of his body, and perhaps another to make him forget.
"Shall I return tomorrow, monsieur? The Americans do not like us ministering to the wounded here, but we come to all who are in need; they will not deny you God's solace."

Raoul tried to find something gracious to say but it hurt too much. "Please," he muttered. "Do not trouble yourself. I am in good hands."

Sister Thérèse reached over and wiped a damp cloth over his forehead, a gesture at once so maternal and yet impersonal that Raoul had to close his eyes and look away lest she see him unmanned. She said something else, a blessing, but to his relief did not stay. When he heard the rustle of skirts against the canvas door, Raoul slammed his face into the pillow and tried in vain to stifle the useless convulsions that racked his body.

"Your salvation had precious little to do with the Lord, Chagny."

Raoul stilled at once; even the pain receded briefly to a safe distance as his blood thundered in his temples. He raised his head, half turning onto his good side. The former Phantom stood at ease near the tent door, contemplating him calmly from beneath his false bandage. He was, and he was not, the man in Bazeilles: the black suit might have belonged in the theatre.

"What is it you want?" Raoul managed. "I owe you a debt; there, I acknowledge it."

"Only to see if you plan on living."

"I am," Raoul said, with more certainty than he felt.

"Then why tell the sister to go?"

"I have not the strength for her solace. The nurses come, they can change the dressings..." Raoul propped himself up on an elbow, heavily, but it still left him at a disadvantage. "If you came to find Christine, she has gone. But... she did come."

"Surprised, Vicomte? I gave you my word."

The barbed tone sharpened Raoul's own temper. "It is not your word I doubt, but your reasons. Do you come here courting Christine's gratitude? Has she not suffered enough?"

The Phantom came forward, until he towered over Raoul. "You overestimate yourself. But I do want something, since you insist. An answer."

"To what question?"

"Your honour, Vicomte. What makes you believe you still keep it, with all those men left dead by your hand?"

Raoul set his jaw, returning his stare evenly. "What is it you accuse me of?"

He half expected the man to speak of murder as he had in Bazeilles, but he only shrugged irritably and thrust his hands in his pockets, turning away.

Raoul shut his eyes. Behind the blackness, he was holding a rifle, aiming at a column of brass buttons on a man's chest. He opened them again, and with a great effort sat up, feeling the stiff new dressing compress under his weight.

"You believe it murder still. You truly think it's the same as... what you did. What you put her through."
The Phantom did not bother to look back. "I have not the luxury of splitting hairs. Thou shalt not kill is written somewhere, is it not? Or is there a limiting clause on it, for uniforms? A pity you sent that nun away before we could ask."

He started for the doorway having tired of this jeering, and Raoul found he could not take another word.

"Why did you do it?" he demanded, his voice rising uncontrollably. "What in God's name did that stagehand do, or Signor Piangi, or any of them? The fire?"

The Phantom's black-suited shoulders hunched as from a whip, and yet Raoul thought it was a strike he had been expecting. He turned, and Raoul saw the raw grief that twisted his features, reminding him unnervingly of Christine.

"Have you ever hunted, Vicomte? The beast has no honour. The beast wants only to live."

Raoul watched him duck out of the tent, making his exit. It was not that simple, he thought, but the pain was returning and he did not have the strength to fight it. He closed his eyes again.

"Raoul?"

Christine blinked in the diffuse light in the ambulance tent. Someone was standing at the side of Raoul's bed, a thin grey-haired man she recognised as the physician who had administered the pain relief Raoul so disliked. He threw up his hands at her arrival:

"Is this an ambulance or a public thoroughfare? For goodness' sake, mademoiselle, let him sleep! A man in his condition can't spend all day entertaining visitors."

"I'm sorry," Christine said hastily, "I meant only to leave something for him. A book. May I?"

The physician acquiesced with a sigh. "Of course."

Christine took up the heavy book, a translation of some of the tales her father used to read, and set it carefully on the small stool at the head of Raoul's bed. He was fast asleep, his arm over his eyes, as exhausted as Christine had ever seen him. Shamefaced, she thanked the physician and retreated as quietly as she could.

Outside Raoul's tent the ambulance was busy; two more Garde Mobile soldiers and a handful of armyRegulars were standing around a smaller tent, having delivered a stretcher bearing a comrade, and Christine saw the surgeons gathering at the doorway of her another tent nearby, deep in discussion. Injuries, she wondered, or wounds? There was feverish construction work going on at the inner circle of fortifications, and accidents abounded, but thus far nothing from the besieging armies, no sounds of artillery, no news. The waiting stretched, gathering tension like a string being tuned, rising gradually in pitch.

At the kerbside, Christine paused, waiting for a gap in the crowded traffic, trying to see her way across between all the rattling supply wagons and gun carriages that replaced the once elegant landaus on their way to the Bois. Just when she thought she spotted a gap, something at the edge of her hearing caught her attention. Crossing forgotten, she turned to look back to the where the sound had come from.

And kept looking.
Erik stood a few paces behind her, framed by the slender trees of the roadside gardens, motionless as a statue beneath their rustling branches. The afternoon light cut sharp shadows across his face, hiding the bandage, and flared copper in the dark stubble on his cheek and jaw. His mouth was open a little, but whatever he had said was lost in the rumble of traffic — it did not matter, Christine thought. She had known that morning he would find her again. She just had not realised how much she wanted him to.

He was here, back in her life — and yet he never really left. He could become an architect in another city, disappear for weeks in the war, wear a new suit or an old one. It made no difference. He was in her life, and there was not a thing she could do about it.

It was a relief to see him.

She remained where she was, waiting. Erik hesitated, then came to her quickly, in two strides, like a man leaping a chasm.

"Your music. Let me hear it again."

His voice was fire, an angel's demand, but Christine refused to back away. Instead, she reached out and touched his gloved hand, wrapping his fingers with her own as they had done over her music book. Erik made a small noise, almost distress, and she dropped her fingers at once.

"I tried to be an architect," he said, confessing it.

"Your courthouse..." Christine thought of the afternoon he had left to return to it, of their voices in the Angels' Garden. "Was it damaged in the battle? Is that why you had to fight?"

"There was not enough of it to matter. It is gone now."

Christine gave a small nod. The loss was there, in the lines near his mouth, in his eyes. She knew this: some things were not replaceable.

"I saw your Vicomte," he said abruptly. "He is improving."

"You saw Raoul?" Christine felt sharp heat in her eyes, remembering Raoul's arm over his face, shutting out the world. He had warned her Erik would demand something in return for bringing him back to her... "Is that why you're here?"

The appalled expression on Erik's face told her all she needed to know.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I did not mean to be ungrateful."

"I do not want your gratitude."

Then the wariness slipped from his eyes, and behind it Christine saw the true need, a thirst as deep as her own. He reached forward and slowly, ever so slowly, picked up her hand in his.

"Let me hear your music again. Make it live."

"All right," she said simply, as if she had expected this twinning of her own obsession — and then knew that she had. Of course she had. The notes beneath their two hands had created something new in the whispering darkness, and now the sound begged to be born.

"Let's find a cab," she said. "I know where we can go."
The Boulevard Montmartre was unrecognisable under the trappings of war. Outside the Variétés, epaulettes and buckles had replaced evening suits and flowers in lapels, the purposeful scurrying of officials and the strides of the officers took the place of promenading couples, and a large tricolour flag overhung the colonnaded façade.

"Not here," Christine called to the driver when the cab slowed down behind a group of officers on horseback. "The artists' entrance please, around the back."

Her gamble paid off, there was nobody at the rear of the theatre but the doors were not locked; the municipal offices that had taken over the upper floor and the new ambulance that had taken over the foyer still needed the access. Inside, boxes marked with the Red Cross were stacked against the wall.

"This way," Christine said, keeping her voice low. Erik hung back a little, following half a step behind as she wended her familiar way upstairs. They were lucky; with the rehearsals suspended the rear stairwell was deserted. The first two doors she tried did not give, but she continued along until they came to the dance practice hall. To her joy, the tall doors swung inward easily at her touch.

"Why here?" Erik asked as they entered. His voice echoed against the polished floors.

The space was large and airy and bare, just the barre along the walls and, over by the windows, the accompanist's battered black piano. By way of answer, Christine went to the piano and pushed open the dusty lid.

"Nobody else is using it," she said, pulling out the wooden folding chair from its place behind the piano.

She glanced in the direction of the doors, where two similar chairs were kept for the comfort of visitors come to observe rehearsals. Following her lead, Erik brought one over and joined her at the piano, after a moment's hesitation taking the upper register. Christine was momentarily surprised, until she glanced up at him and realised he positioned himself so it was the open, unmasked side of his face that she saw. She tucked a stray curl behind her ear self-consciously, staring at the keys, black and ivory, ivory and black, alternating... Erik waited in silence, so disturbingly near that she thought her elbow would bump his arm when she raised her hands to the keyboard.

Before she could lose her nerve, Christine moved her hands to encompass the opening chords, and gently brought them down. The sound formed all at once, like a gust of salt air, then dissipated. Erik stilled, and Christine had a sudden vivid memory of that long-ago night in Montmartre, of his utter stillness when her lips found his scars. She stumbled, losing the beat, but only for a moment. With a shake of her head, she threw off all distractions and dived into the music, her own creation, imperfect but hers, and beloved. She let her right hand pick up the melody, and it became so easy, the easiest thing in all the world, as simple as breath.

Erik was there beside her, solid and real, not a ghost or the author of her dreams but the audience she had craved all this time, craved without knowing it, the only one who could hear it just as it was.

In a few bars she knew she would reach the point where last night they had altered the flow,
restoring the vocal part and adding another, and Christine thought she might stop - but the momentum carried her on and then, before she fully understood what was happening, he was singing. It was her music, not as written but exactly as she intended, completely, perfectly alive. Christine did not dare stop now, she could not. Erik sang her music, softly, more tentatively than she had ever heard him before, with no words on his lips but only sound, pure sound that transformed the air around them into something shimmering and bright.

It ended, but Christine felt its echo still drumming in her heart, in the rhythm of Erik's movement as he turned towards her, his eyes wild. He was breathing hard, and his hands fumbled at the edges of his own gloves, trying erratically to remove them. Christine reached over and pulled them off, one then the other, dropping them to the keyboard. His bare hands were cold; she took them between her own and felt the blood returning, but before it could warm him, Erik freed himself and raised his arms.

He was trying to take off the mask.

Christine could not speak, riveted and pained in equal measure by what he was struggling to do, and yet could not. She saw the muscles in his neck tense and tremble with the effort, and his eyes closed hard against it, but the bandage remained.

Christine found herself rising to her feet. He looked up at her, bewildered, caught still by the music they had created, the same song that played in her soul and would not let go. She took his hands away from the knot of linen, and brushed her thumb over his jaw, her nail catching at the shadow of a beard that lay flat to his skin, rough in one direction, silk in the other.

"Dance with me," she whispered.

"I… cannot."

She felt her mouth curl very slightly, a smile she had not expected. "Monsieur. May I have this dance?"

Erik stood up then, past her touch, until they were very close, too close to see one another at all. He was tense with a nervous energy that transferred itself to Christine in a thrill of anticipation — and then he exhaled and held her by the shoulders, as though he would turn her away. Instead he drew her closer still, and Christine put her arms awkwardly around him, her cheek pressed to his rougher one, breathing him in. She had missed him. Oh God, she had missed him...

If it was a dance, it was not one she had ever practiced or seen, but it flowed and ebbed with the music between them. She hummed and Erik made the harmony somewhere deep in his chest, thrumming against her heart, shivering down to the soles of her feet as she danced.

The sound gathered force, ascending in great winding spirals from a low hum to the height of her speaking voice, and beyond, to a hymn in a chapel, a cathedral, and higher still, a pure tone without vibrato, innocent of any embellishment.

Reluctantly, she brought it to its end.

Erik held on to her although they were no longer moving. His back was up against the open jaws of the piano, there was nowhere to go. Christine felt his grip tighten on her shoulders as he straightened his arms with difficulty, cleaving apart the creature they had briefly become back into their two separate bodies. At the back of her throat, Christine tasted salt.

"Bravo!" called someone from the doorway, shattering the air.
Christine and Erik whirled around: the doors stood wide open and a small crowd had gathered there, petty clerks and orderlies in uniform and ladies who must have volunteered in the ambulance downstairs.

They cheered as furiously as if it has been a grand spectacle, and Christine froze in this explosion, unsure of what all these people had witnessed. Erik stepped aside and, in a flourish that was all grace and theatre, deferred to her this ovation. Christine had no option but to sink down in a deep révérence, a bow straight from the stage of the Opéra.

Erik offered her his arm and she rose smoothly, having done this a thousand times in the ballet, and followed his cue, gesturing her thanks so that he in turn might take his bow. The cheering became applause, and they walked through the middle of it, people stepping back to clear a path. They too had understood this to be theatre.

That applause still rang in her ears when they were back in a cab, safely anonymous, jolting their way back home. Erik gave her address, then sat next to her on the bench, gripping the door handle, white-knuckled, staring out the window into the the fading dusk. In all the construction dust, trees and people stood out as violet shadows.

"Christine…"

"Yes." She tried not to look at him, afraid suddenly of what he had to say.

"It cannot be like that. Never again."

*The Phantom*, Christine thought. The music, the stage, the applause, the myriad accolades he had once sought with such terrifying need. Even thinking of it hurt.

"You told me… You said that man was dead."

"I was wrong. I am what I am."

He turned to her then, and took something from his pocket. Her ring. He studied it in the centre of his palm, and for a horrible second Christine thought he meant to give it back, but he only clenched his fist over it, hiding it from himself.

"You are what you are," she agreed. "Like all of us."

She turned his fist over, exposing the broken nails and the web of fine lines blackened by sticks of charcoal, or by gunpowder charges. He had lived through something these past weeks that had split him away from her, split him apart in some way she could not quite understand.

"I was proud." He was almost whispering, and Christine had to strain to catch the words over the rumble of the cab wheels and the clopping of hoofbeats outside. An artillery wagon rolled past, drowning all else for a while.

"I thought if I worked… If I could earn a soul — redemption by good works, isn't that the thing? It is a lie, Christine. I was proud, I thought I had changed enough, worked enough. I thought it was different if it was your music, not dark, not like before. But it is no different, it cannot be. The Phantom lives."

"No," Christine said sharply. She wanted to strike him, to rip away the mask, to cry. His fist was a stone in her grasp. "He never lived at all! He was a mask, a costume — a man. Don't you see? It is not what you are, Erik. It is what you choose. Today, tomorrow, a year from now, in Sedan or in Paris or anywhere else. You can bring back the Phantom. Or you can not."
He stared at her as though she had struck him, then subsided, slowly. "This is too hard, Christine. The music. The force of it, intoxicating… It is too much."

Christine felt her own anger dissolving at that, a wave returning to the sea. She thought she understood, a little, but what could she say? The music was deep within her, carried in her bones with the song of her father's violin. It could not be denied.

"Watch out!" came a rough shout outside, and the cab veered around another horse, juddering as the axles creaked. "Parbleu! Can't you see where you're going?"

Christine was thrown forward; Erik caught her arm and the ring clinked onto the bench between them. Erik lunged and snatched it back before it could roll away.

"Pardon, monsieur, mademoiselle! You all right back there?" the driver called back from the box.

"Yes," Christine called back. "We're all right! ...We are all right," she repeated, watching Erik hide the ring safely away, inside the Phantom's suit. "All right."

He caught her watching. She lifted her hand and slipped her fingertips beneath the edge of the bandage, over his cheek. There was no beard there, just the warped skin, warm from the mask.

"I've wanted to do that," she said, not apologising.

He covered her hand with his, then let go and reached behind her head. Christine felt him draw out the long pin that held her chignon, and her curls sprang free of it, tumbling past her shoulders.

"So did I," he told her.

The cab creaked and stopped.

Erik held out the hairpin for her, and Christine felt the tremor in his palm as she took it. "Since you are back in Paris," she said quietly, "you should come and have dinner with us again, sometime."

"Yes," he said. "Sometime."

The cab swayed as the driver jumped down and went to get the door. They were home.

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Chapter 40: Dreams of Heaven and Earth

A/N: And we're now well and truly under siege. Thank you so much for taking the time to review, and especially to share your musings about the way things are developing for all the characters - I'm not at all averse to Spark notes! Real life and real work are currently at fever pitch, so please accept my apologies for the slow pace. I hope the content makes up for it.

Chapter 40 - Dreams of Heaven and Earth

There was one thing to be said for manual labour: it certainly took one's mind off things. Erik bent his thoughts gratefully to the task of converting the ramshackle storage space behind the store to a useable workshop. He had meant at first to limit himself to plans and leave the carpentry to Jean, but it soon became apparent that Jean's skill with saw and hammer did not extend much past putting up placards. It remained up to Erik to reconstruct the outbuilding, replacing the side door with a large window to admit light onto the broad clear wall opposite, and to install a new system
of pulleys that permitted signs to be placed at different working heights and angles.

It was hardly a big project, but the unaccustomed exertion could at least send him into a nightly stupor of exhaustion, and Erik worked mercilessly to earn it. It was almost enough to dislodge from his mind the tidal pull of Christine's unfinished music, her voice - more mature, more resonant, stronger than before - almost enough to forget her searching eyes demanding a reckoning. It is not what you are, she had said. It is what you choose.

He did not want to think of choices. There were no choices, not anymore. They were trapped in a stone bubble, a locked theatre full of guns, waiting, waiting, waiting for the signal... Soon enough this intermission must give way to the final act. He had seen the inferno before. He had walked through it again in Bazées. He could not forget it, or pretend that his choices or Christine's could make the slightest difference now. He was the Phantom, who had forced Christine to make her choice when none was possible. And he was Erik Andersson the architect, whose only choice was between one window or two. But somewhere underneath he was just a ruined man who desperately wished for what he could never deserve. And he did wish for it. For her music. For her.

The devil take it all. If he was to be condemned without right of appeal, without time to earn his pardon, then so be it. He was not going to wait here meekly for the inferno.

Erik gathered his plastering trowels and dropped the lot in the water bucket, then wiped his hands on a rag and threw that in too. Jean glanced at him in surprise from where he was adjusting the new window frame, swinging the open pane back and forth. Outside the window was only the corner of the fence, but above that, the sky was a piercing autumnal blue that promised a clear evening ahead - as long as the war did not come.

Erik yanked the cloth that had kept the dust from his mouth down to his neck. "This wall needs to dry out before we continue. Enough for today."

Jean said something in assent but Erik did not stop to listen. There was no time to lose. He needed a bath, a shave, and something more presentable to wear than a workblouse coated from hem to collar in brown plaster dust.

The tub and water butt had been removed to the kitchen while they worked on the outbuilding, which meant he had no choice but carry the hot water upstairs and then empty the heavy tub, bucket by bucket, until it could be brought down again. The whole process was medieval, unbearably tedious, and Erik had ample leisure to curse his own stupidity in causing it. Somehow he had wound up with yet another construction project at a time when the only things being built were fortifications. Every park and square had been divested of living trees for defence, and the tents of the Garde Mobiles were pitched where children had played. The Bois de Boulogne and the Bois de Vincennes had disappeared into a landscape of mud dotted with tree stumps, and from the heights of Montmartre a searchlight cast a grim electric light over the no-man's-land of the razed suburbs. For a little while, he had been part of this city, this glittering bauble of light, and it was with some surprise that Erik discovered he pitied it. Poor pretty Paris, shorn of her greenery, deprived of her diamond streetlights, dark and plain and ugly in her bare military skin. But its suffering would not last long: Erik remembered well the sound of the Prussian cannons, the boom and shudder of the fireworks of death.

The thought made him hurry. The bath was barely over ankle deep but it would do. He scrubbed furiously and sluiced himself clean, again and again, gasping and half-drowning. He combed his dripping hair, then found a razor and scraped away every last speck of beard, using a tiny mirror he kept well hidden with his shaving things, until he was fit to be seen. Dressing too seemed to take forever. Buttons must have been invented by men with too much time on their hands, and even the
bandage on his scars was determined to resist his clumsy fingers.

Time was a thin, fragile, ghostly thread that could at any moment be torn apart, and he needed it to stay whole just a little longer. Deep in the city below was Christine, who needed him for her music, and he had been a fool to try to fight it. What could it matter now if he lost the shreds of a man he had so nearly become, dissolving in the madness? Soon enough it would all be over. Christine thought her choices were free, but she was shackled by the same music, the chains of his making. It had been his doing and he would burn for it, soon enough. But if he could not have forgiveness, he could at least have the sin.

He was halfway down the stairs when Jean called from the storeroom below:

"Wait a minute! I have the papers you asked for."

His bespectacled eyes shone with the thrill of finally having some news from the distant outside world. He met Erik at the foot of the stairs, holding up two well thumbed, yellowish sheets of newsprint like rolls of the most precious papyrus.

"Marèchal's youngest crossed the lines with them last night in a Red Cross wagon. Brave child. Her aunt lives in Rouen - these are only two days old. You may keep them, we read them at the meeting this morning."

Erik accepted the papers, grateful and irritated in equal measure. The solid black newsprint pulled him back, the words silencing the pulse of music in his mind. He skimmed the headlines, trying to avoid the rest: "My thanks. No big news then."

"Nothing. Metz is still holding out, but it can't be long now. The Prussians will get their reinforcements."

Erik nodded, unsurprised, and folded the papers into the inner pocket of his jacket. If - when - Marshal Bazaine surrendered the fortress of Metz, it would free the besieging Prussian forces to join the blockade of Paris. They would have more men and all the siege equipment they needed. The noose was tightening, the cannons were coming. It was only a matter of time.

"What are they like, the Prussians?" Jean asked.

Erik shrugged. "They're made of meat. Like all men."

He walked out, feeling Jean's uncertain gaze follow him as he went. Two days ago Metz was still standing; a quick mental calculation assured him that there could not be new cannons at the doorstep just yet. That was something at least, even if meant he must break away again from the music to deliver these thrice-damned papers.

The Vicomte was sitting up in his sickbed when Erik came in, reading a book. He did not look up at Erik's arrival; the tent was busy and medics fussed around the beds of all the groaning, delirious wounded, making Erik only one more figure in a crowd. He hesitated. The place smelled scarlet. There were too many fresh wounds for these to be a motley crop from the ramparts, too much blood. Another failed skirmish, Erik deduced, or what the official papers called an "aggressive reconnaissance". A pointless, ill-equipped punch in the armoured jaw of the Prussians, succeeding only in making work for the surgeons and the priests. A boy's shriek came from a bed to one side, piercingly high, and was silenced with rags.

For a moment Erik was tempted to leave the paper, but something, a new instinct, told him that would be poor form. He snorted, annoyed at himself. What did manners matter now?
Chagny must have heard him then, because he raised his gaze as soon as Erik approached. He did not look well; his eyes were bloodshot and there was a greyish cast to his skin. He watched Erik in wary confusion, the book forgotten in his lap.

"To what do I owe the honour?" he said finally, with a leaden irony Erik had not expected. He seemed to have aged a decade in the scant three weeks since his arrival at the ambulance. Erik wondered if it was the pain or the confinement that was making him haggard.

"Newspapers," Erik informed him curtly, dropping the two sheets onto the open book. "Do not get agitated, there is nobody riding to our rescue."

The Vicomte lifted the top paper to leaf through the one below. "Metz-"

"Is not going to hold out much longer, no."

Chagny gave a grim nod. He seemed to debate something for a moment, then said, "Thank you for these. It is impossible to get news here."

Erik cast a look around. "I should think you will have no shortage of news from these men, once they are fit to talk."

"Another defeat," Chagny said. "What else can they say? It is plain."

"I am certain they would be delighted to share all the gory details of their valor."

The Vicomte looked around appraisingly, as though seeing the suffering around him for the first time. Then he moved the papers to free the book in his lap, and picked it up again, turning it so that Erik could see the illustration. Against a blue-grey wash of seascape, a minute sailing ship had crested a wave, poised on the cusp of destruction. Beneath the churning waters circled the ghostly forms of sea maidens, hungry for the embrace of drowning men.

Erik touched one of the pale figures. "She is not one of these."

Chagny brushed this aside. "Of course not - she never was, not even as a child. I do not mean Christine. It is only that… The sea is empty, Andersson. There is nobody waiting below."

Erik examined the image again with some distaste, feeling the breath of something cold, like fear. He had not come here equipped with the answers to another man's loss of faith.

"Then let us hope the wind changes. We may yet live."

The Vicomte looked at him with a mixture of incredulity and almost hope. "You believe that?"

Erik shrugged. "I believe nothing. But I intend to find out how this ends."

Christine crumpled up another sheet of ruled paper and tossed the ball onto a growing pile atop the piano. Enough. She conceded defeat. She was tired, empty of songs, sick of the ugly masquerade of uniforms and horses and gun-carriages that had taken over the city. Her heart ached for the days when she could rest her mind from the cacophony of the Opéra simply by lighting a candle in the dark, kneeling alone with the voice that sang only for her, only with her.

Of late, her days had taken on a grinding monotony that was somehow far more exhausting than the most demanding of rehearsals. There was the ambulance, and Raoul's painfully slow recovery
and his growing frustration that made it so hard to leave him, and harder still to return. There was the cemetery, and the markets and the shops and the queues and the arguments about who had been waiting longest... Then the return home with some tiny hard-won piece of meat, about whose origins it was best not to enquire, and whatever sundry vegetables it had been possible to buy. It was fortunate that Meg was still doing her sittings, because without at least that small income, their situation might have been pitiable, but even so, it was difficult enough. The only entertainment to be had was Madame Giry’s unruffled acceptance of the day’s catch, as she called it, and the increasingly ridiculous dishes Meg dreamed up while they dined on this unexciting reality. But even the stories Madame Giry told, of her time as a ballerina and the old days at the Opéra, could not fill the void that deepened in Christine’s soul.

She had been so sure, when her voice had been restored to her, that it would all be well, that somehow her unlocked music must bring with it liberation for herself, for everyone around her - if not victory, then at least release. But in truth, nothing had changed in the intervening weeks except for the worse. The Prussians were still there. The means of communication with the world had thinned to a trickle and finally stopped. And, angry as it made her to think of it, the music she had shared with Erik had changed nothing at all. He was invisible somewhere, hiding or waiting. Or simply living a life of his own, just as Madame Giry had always told her he must. For a little while it had seemed like a simple, ordinary thing, that he might sleep in her home, eat at her table, sit beside her at the piano. She should have expected no more than this, but it hurt, more deeply than she wanted to admit.

She was Christine Daaé, the daughter of a gifted violinist, and the sole heir to his song. She owed it to her father and to herself to finish what she had started with such blind optimism, and what had now become more burden than liberty. Her music was lost in the noise of the soldiers encamped around the Tuileries, the official and terribly important telegrams relayed back and forth across the besieged city, the reading of strident proclamations, the daily search for food. She wished for the smallest share of Madame Giry’s equanimity, but she had not her grace.

Christine closed her music book, leaving it on the piano rest, and stood up, stretching cramped muscles. It had grown dark without her noticing; the clock on the mantelpiece warned that Madame Giry would be home soon, hopefully with bread, and Meg too would by now be on the omnibus back. Christine sighed and squared her shoulders. Time to get to work, or they would all be going to bed hungry.

She turned up the gas as far as it would go, but it made little difference to the twilight in the apartment. The whole city was down to half pressure to save fuel, and even the streetlights had been reduced to faint globes of red, barely lighting their own shades. The dining room was eerie in its shadowy half-light, and Christine hurried past the empty table towards the kitchen.

The table was not empty. At the corner, near her customary dining place, lay a single rose.

For a second, Christine could not breathe, and then the air came all in a rush, hitching in her throat, choking her with the scent of the past. She did not dare touch the flower, but even in the poor light she could see the black ribbon tied around its long stem, and the petals the colour of old blood.

"Erik!" she called loudly, hearing the shrill note of panic in her voice. She wished she could turn the lights to their full brightness.

"Erik!"

Her heart was hammering hard enough that her entire body shook with the beat. She ran to the balcony door; there was nobody behind the curtain, nobody in the kitchen, nobody in the parlour she had just come from.
No. She was wrong. There was somebody in the parlour. She stopped with her hand on the door.

Erik stepped away from where he had stood at the side of the piano, holding one of her crumpled music pages. He glanced down at it, then opened his hand and let the paper drop to the floor. A trickle of cold sweat ran like a teardrop between Christine's shoulderblades.

"Erik." She could not raise her voice now. "Have you lost your mind?"

He seemed to consider this. "Not yet."

Christine looked behind her to where the rose still lay on the table. Its fragrance was overpowering, confusing her thoughts.

"It is astonishingly difficult to find flowers in this city," Erik said conversationally, following the direction of her gaze. "I had to get this one from an undertaker."

The strangest thing was that he did not try to project his voice in the way the rose had made her anticipate. Nor was he dressed as anything more sinister than a gentleman come to call on a friend, although his stiff posture and gallows humour contrasted oddly with the casual ease of his tone. Christine found herself caught off guard, baffled. There was almost nothing in him of the Phantom, of the Opéra, yet he had brought her the rose…

Erik waited, less than a silhouette of himself.

"You were gone," she said. "Now this again?"

"This?" He discarded the casual tone. With one hand he tapped the edge of the piano: "This is what you wanted! You spoke of choices, Christine. And here is yours, is it not? The music, the theatre. You mean to escape from the world."

"No."

"Yes. But you can't run from what is coming, I have learned that much. It is a delusion, a lie for an orphaned child who dreams of heaven. Music will not save us. There is no heaven."

Christine came forward, deeper into the parlour.

"Step into the light," she told him, nodding at the lamp beside the armchair. "Over there. Where I can see you."

Against her expectations, Erik moved in the direction she asked. The lamp gave off sufficient light to sketch him clearly, chiaroscuro in black and orange, from his mask to his clothes. His face was clean-shaven again, his suit neat and even fashionable, all of it irrelevant.

He looked past her, uncomfortable under her stare.

Christine toed at her broken, crumpled music on the rug, then picked it up and pressed the paper in her hand, hard enough to bruise.

Without warning, she threw it aside.

"You think I wanted this, this - charade? You as the Phantom, me trembling at the mystery?" She advanced towards him. "You are wrong. Completely wrong."

She did not trust herself to say anything more. Her voice was threatening to break.
Erik retrieved the paper from the floor. He unfolded it carefully as he stood, smoothing it out, and read the fragment, his thumb tracing the edge of the sheet, back and forth. Christine followed it. At length he put it back on top of the piano, resting his fingers over it. Then he let go.

"You do not need me, Christine. This is... beautiful."

"You do not need me either. You have your life now. All that it takes."

He looked at her like she had said something shocking. Christine held his gaze.

Slowly, as though expecting retribution for every movement, Erik lowered himself to sit at the corner of the bench, facing the piano. The space next to him was wide and empty. Christine hesitated. Then gingerly, she sat down too, gathering her skirts out of the way. The lid was open; Erik touched a black key with one finger, too lightly to draw a sound. Then he half-turned towards her, cupped his hand to the side of her jaw, and kissed her.

Christine gasped and opened her mouth to breathe, instinctively seeking air - finding more than air, the sudden wave of him inside her, bitter hot on her tongue. Erik cried out in surprise, as though she had opened a trapdoor beneath him, but Christine could find nothing to hold onto for safety, no possible resistance, and they were falling together, without wings. She pushed against the barricade of his chest, elbows awkward and sharp, sliding against the piano keys with the clash of dissonant chords. Erik's heartbeat was too fast, juddering with every chord, but he did not let go.

"Wh... What is..."

Christine felt him trying to speak but they were melded together, and the sound could not dissect the air they breathed. Erik gave up and caught fistfuls of her curls, planted hard kisses over her cheeks, her forehead, before returning to her mouth, drinking her voice. Christine gave it freely - she was as mute as he, but it did not matter in the least; she had waited too long to be gentle. Her hands found his back, his neck, five nails drawing a stave down his spine, dotting notes upon it.

"What is it... you want?" Erik managed finally, breaking each word against her lips.

Christine pulled back to rest her forehead against his, against the line of his mask. She had forgotten it was there but it did not matter, not now. What did she want... "I don't know," she said. She sat back, little by little becoming herself. "But... I would like a chance to find out."

Erik's lips quirked in a way that was shy and somehow boyish. He moved back to kiss her but Christine stopped him reluctantly. "No, wait. Everyone will be back soon. Meg and Madame Giry. I must make dinner."

"Let me help."

Christine looked at him in surprise. "Can you cook?"

"I don't know," he shrugged, and echoed her own words, "Shall we find out?"

Christine laughed, and Erik seemed to drink in the sound with his whole body, as though it was water spilling onto parched soil. On a whim, Christine reached up and touched his bare cheekbone, drawing a line to his mouth. He stilled as she explored his lips and moved lower, over his chin, past his collar, to the hollow of his throat. There she paused, over the beating pulse.

"I may be an orphaned child," she said quietly, "and I do not know if there is a heaven. But I think..."
music can save. If you want it to."

Erik made no reply, but Christine saw it in his eyes, a wish so ancient it had grown hard and bitter with longing.

"You cannot eat music," he said, too lightly. "Tell me what to do."

Christine looked over her shoulder towards the dining room, where in the dark she knew the rose still rested on the table.

"You could start by finding a vase for that flower."

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**Chapter 41: Our Daily Bread**

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**A/N:** Fear not, I have not stopped! I'm just in the middle of some high-pressure stuff in RL that requires a lot of completely different research, and sadly I have only one brain. Thank you again for your insightful comments, they make for fascinating reading! Just a reminder: if you'd like an answer, I'm very happy to PM; you just need to be logged in.

Trivia for this chapter: the writer Anatole France, recalling his time in the Garde Nationale during the siege, described the behaviour of his fellow soldiers robbing a bakery something like this: "it was just as well the proprietor was not there — but we were not murderers". An interesting little insight.

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**Chapter 41 — Our Daily Bread**

"Christine, we're home! With bread! God, I'm starving, it smells good in here…"

Meg held the door open for her mother, standing against it while simultaneously peeling off her dusty gloves. Madame Giry nodded her thanks and Meg tossed gloves and hat on the dresser, already halfway down the hall, following the clanking sound she joyfully identified as soup being ladled into a tureen. She could see the steam from the dining room. It seemed like eons since they'd had something hot for supper.

"You know you're raising the standard," — she stopped mid-stride. "—Dangerously."

She heard her mother's footsteps halt.

Christine was carrying the steaming soup tureen, that much was true, but half a pace behind her stood the man Meg could still not think of as Erik Andersson. He was holding a pot stand.

Meg looked helplessly between her friend and her incongruous shadow, standing there in his shirtsleeves with a teatowel tucked into a trouser pocket, his bandage grey with steam and clinging damply to the contours of his face.

So much for a quiet evening at home.

"Madame Giry," he inclined his head with studied politeness, "Mademoiselle."

"Good evening, monsieur. Put the stand over here please, before there is an accident." Madame Giry took the tureen from Christine's unsteady hands, and set it safely on the pot stand Erik placed before her. "This is a surprise."
The cuffs of Christine's sleeves had been rolled up; she tugged them nervously into place. "I, uh, I asked Erik to join us."

"For good?" Meg said, and at once wished she had not. Christine flinched and looked at the table.

"For supper." The dark blush that covered Christine's cheeks spread down to her neck, and even Erik seemed flustered.

He went back to the kitchen, emerging a moment later without the ridiculous towel, but wielding a long silver bread knife, which he put down in the middle of the table. The handle shook when he let it go, striking the tabletop with a quick drunken beat. The Phantom cooking supper, setting the table… Farcical as it might have been, Meg felt her neck prickle with a shadow of the same tension that had dogged their lives at the Opéra, the old weight of unspoken buried secrets. She had not missed it one bit.

Madame Giry broke the silence. "Well. Let us eat while this is hot, since we are being treated to such admirable domesticity."

She put the fresh bread into the empty basket and they took their seats, with somewhat more than usual formality. Meg found herself opposite Christine and Erik, with her mother at the head of the table.

"Perhaps later," Madame Giry continued, as Christine finished serving the soup, "one of you can explain the contents of that vase."

Meg followed the direction of her mother's gaze to the sideboard. Balanced precariously within a thin-necked vase, with a length of black satin ribbon next to it, was an exact replica of one of the Phantom's roses.

Meg whipped her head around to look at Christine, but Christine returned only a tense half-smile that was not at all reassuring. Just then Erik passed her the bread basket, and Meg saw the quick flicker of touch as their hands met. Oh no, she thought. Not again.

Madame Giry saw it too. Meg discovered a keen interest in the porcelain rim of her soup bowl and tried her best to observe nothing beyond the movement of her spoon. If her mother knew of that night Christine was gone…

Nothing further was said about the rose. They ate.

"There was no meat again," said Christine after a while. "I should have gone earlier; there was a crowd waiting at the butcher's by the time I got there. But the doors were shut."

Erik dabbed the napkin against his chin, taking care to avoid the mask; it must have required some practice, Meg thought, to eat without wearing his dinner. "It is the same all around the city. But one may live without meat, for a time."

"How long?" Meg wondered, curious despite herself. "Longer than Lent?"

"I have never performed the experiment, mademoiselle. But we may soon find out."

Christine looked thoughtful. "Meg, remember Blanche, from the Variétés? She used to say she never ate meat at all, but she seemed healthy enough."

"Oh that. She also said she never let a man—" Meg coughed, catching her mother's expression, and searched desperately for a way to finish. "That is… Blanche liked to talk."
"Even so," Christine insisted, "I wonder if it is possible to live on nothing but greens and such. I've read about people in India who go for years without meat. Or bread."

Meg widened her eyes in mock horror and clutched at her remaining bread protectively, making Christine grin.

"This is very good," Madame Giry said neutrally, as she set down her spoon in her empty bowl. She looked down the table at Erik. "A hidden talent, monsieur?"

"Not at all," he said. "The recipe was Christine's; I merely followed directions."

"Oh? Now that is indeed a new talent."

To Meg's surprise, Erik looked distinctly pleased at this, as though Madame Giry had praised a true accomplishment. One corner of Christine's mouth lifted wryly:

"You are a very able student. Although there is some doubt about the teacher; this is about the pinnacle of my culinary skill."

Meg finished her bread and set her napkin aside, as the clock in the parlour chimed in warning. In another half hour the bells would be ringing curfew.

"The curfew," Madame Giry sighed wearily. "It is like being in the dormitories again."

"Except we did not actually go to bed then," Meg pointed out.

Erik stood up. "I should be going. No, there is no need to get up, I will see myself out. This was," — he made a slight bow at their small gathering, "— a pleasure. I do apologise for the intrusion."

"You know you are welcome here," Madame Giry said seriously. "But it would be best if you did not visit Christine alone."

He acknowledged the rebuke. Meg felt that familiar tension again, secrets. It struck her suddenly that for all she knew, he could have been here all afternoon.

"I will see you to the door," Christine said quickly, countering his refusal with a determined look. She got up and brought his jacket from the kitchen, then followed him out. Meg jumped up from her seat and went after her, Madame Giry following close behind.

At the door, Erik put on his hat and gloves and paused, waiting, but Christine did not open the door. She fidgeted with the edge of her sleeve.

Then she tossed her head, stepped closer and kissed his bare cheek. "Good night."

Meg tried not to stare.

For an instant Erik looked as startled as she. He touched his cheek where Christine's lips had been, near his mouth. Then he straightened up formidably, removed his hat, and looked directly at Madame Giry:

"Madame… I would ask your permission to court Mademoiselle Daaé."

Madame Giry was silent. In the limelight of her gaze, Christine glanced at her would-be suitor and back again at Madame Giry and Meg, steady and a little fierce, apparently undaunted. So this is it, Meg thought dismally. The rose in the other room made perfect sense.
Finally, Madame Giry said, "You ask for what is not mine to withhold. It appears you have Christine's permission."

Christine nodded, and now Meg saw that her confidence was not as deep as it seemed. She looked too brave to be happy.

"The curfew," Meg reminded them.

"Yes," Christine said, and Erik touched her shoulder briefly, put on his hat, and was gone. The door lock clicked into place.

Christine turned and stood with her back to the door, alone. She looked foreign, like that day long ago when Madame Giry first brought her to the Opéra, apprehensive and very young.

She was so much older and smarter, Meg thought in dismay, almost eighteen now - and yet this pain was still there in her eyes, and seemed to be there to stay.

"What on earth are you doing," she said, unable to hold back the tears of frustration, looking from Christine to her mother, both of them caught in this trap. "Maman, why didn't you say something!"

Madame Giry moved her head very slightly, "Meg…"

"Don't," Meg interrupted, "it is folly, you know it is! He brought you nothing but years of suffering and secrets and hiding, you and Christine both. All the times you helped him… He does something to Christine with his voice, you know it, you've seen it, but you say nothing, you just let her bear it! Maybe he's truly a genius, I do not know and it makes no difference at all, because it does not give him the right to destroy other people. It does not."

She turned to Christine. "You were free. For a while, you really were, Christine. Why can't we just let him go?"

"It is not so simple," Madame Giry said softly, her face taut with sorrow. "You cannot turn your back on the past."

"The past. Why is it always the past? What about now? Maybe we're all going to be eating rats by next month, if the Prussians don't turn the city to rubble."

"Maybe the month after, the rats will be eating us." Christine clasped her hands to the sides of her skirt in a hard grip. "It is not a spell, Meg. I swear it. There is no fairy tale, and I know you think I cannot judge it, but please, trust me. I know what he has done. It repels me. But what he has done and what he is doing, what he is… It is not the same thing. He is…" She sought the words helplessly. "He hears the music too, the same music. It was always that way, all the time that he… That we sang. I made him, Meg, as much as he made me. Or maybe it is all an illusion, but I cannot fight it, I do not want to fight it. You are right, we are surrounded and who knows what will be next month. Perhaps nothing at all. I don't want to go to my grave thinking of the things I should have said."

"Come here, both of you," Madame Giry said, and put an arm around each of them, as she used to do long ago when they were frightened. Meg did not want to be soothed like a child, but the embrace was her mother's, familiar and safe, and it was hard to hold on to her anger. Her mother stroked her hair back from her forehead, tenderly. "If the Prussians had wanted to turn us to rubble, they would have done it by now. This is a different sort of production, with a different rhythm. One way or another, it must eventually end, and we shall see what comes then. The world will still be here."
"Could we not do this just as well without all the roses?" Meg wanted to smile but could not quite bring herself to make light of it. "Maman, you told me yourself things might have been different had you been free to leave the Opéra..."

Meg felt her mother's shoulders rise and fall in acceptance. "You might never have met Christine then, and we would not be here. It is a dance, each step growing into the next, all as one. I have wished, more times than you might guess, that I had never seen that broken child, that I had not managed to keep his secrets... Or that I might have been wiser and had never tried. But it is as Christine said. I made him also. We all make each other. And we must live with our creations."

"That is what Monsieur de Gas says too," Meg sighed, "when he is forced to sell one of his works. He says he will buy them all back one day, even the failures."

Madame Giry glanced down at her. "You have great respect for him."

"Yes," Meg said. "He is able to see things, the way they are."

Christine freed herself gently from Madame Giry's embrace and smoothed her skirts. Her cheeks were glistening but she seemed happier somehow, more at ease with herself. "I am not signing away my soul, you know. It's only a rose."

"You're impossible," Meg said in defeat. "Your choice of suitors, Mademoiselle Daaé, is as dubious as your skills in the kitchen."

"Now wait a minute, that was perfectly good soup! And what are you implying about Raoul..."

"All right, mesdemoiselles, there are dishes to be done."

Madame Giry waved them away in fond exasperation, and Meg did not protest. Christine seemed glad to busy herself with the necessary evening chores, and Meg joined her. It was all simple enough, for the most part.

"Do you love him?" she blurted out, when they were done scrubbing the counter and putting away the pots. Christine started at her voice and Meg realised she had been lost in thought. "Do you love him," she repeated, louder.

Christine looked at her from under a tangle of messy curls, a dripping rag in one hand and a brush in the other. It was not exactly the look of a romantic heroine. "I don't know what that means," Christine said slowly. For a moment Meg thought she was clowning around, playing the foreigner, but Christine went on, "I loved my father. I love Raoul. Your mother. Even you, occasionally."

"Hey!"

Christine smiled, crookedly. "I think your mother loves him more than I ever could, like one of your Monsieur de Gas's failed paintings... Like a masterpiece she pulled from the fire, damaged beyond repair."

"But you?"

Christine dropped the rag in the sink and dried her reddened hands. "I don't know. It's like looking in the mirror, sometimes. Like closing my eyes. He is always there."

"You're trapped."

"Maybe. But sometimes I think... It's only a trap if you don't want to be there. And if you do, it
isn't a trap. It's a choice."

"Well, I don't want to leave this city," Meg objected reasonably. "I like it here, or I did, before the war. But I'm still trapped."

"That's different."

"Why?"

"For one thing," Christine said, "they have cannons."

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Erik felt he flew through the deserted nighttime city, barely skimming the paving stones, his heart full of Christine and trembling with wonder so immense that it had become a living thing trapped in his chest, beating its wings in time with his footsteps. To be loved! To be granted Christine's laugh and her touch, to be permitted to share her evening, guided by her quick delicate hands in the simple daily tasks that were life itself - the impossible thrill of the mundane, chopping onions and peeling carrots while standing side by side, thigh to thigh, both of them aware of the other as in a new dance. To kiss her and taste their cooking upon her tongue. To be treated as one of them, part of the pattern made by Madame Giry and her daughter and Christine. Above all, to have the right now to court her, to call himself hers. To be allowed to see her again tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow.

To kiss her again.

He slipped off one glove, put his hand in his pocket and slid his little finger into the circle of Christine's ring. It fit. He brought it out for one furtive moment, a tiny black star, and hid it away again.

The peal of the curfew bells rose in perfect counterpoint to his thoughts, echoed from buildings and paving stones in great overlapping waves of sound that were, finally, a sobering reminder of time. This was the deep, solemn voice of the besieged city itself, so unlike the songs of its silenced theatres and the bawdier tunes of the music halls. Erik paused to listen to the last bells die away, then resumed walking, the tread of his boots unnaturally loud in the empty streets.

He left behind the barely lit boulevards and began the ascent through the even darker lanes of Montmartre. The evening was chilly but not yet cold, and Erik relished the feel of air in his lungs. Despite the late hour nobody would be arrested here; the local National Guard battalions guarded their territory from the police more fiercely even than from the Prussians, and it would have taken a foolish policeman indeed to venture here at night. It was a kind of liberty, a promise of reprieve.

The houses pressed closer here, but far above the silhouetted rooftops, the sky was a violet infinity of stars.

"That's a pretty bit of sparkle you got," said a thick voice from the shadows.

For a mad instant Erik thought the speaker meant the stars.

He looked down. Half a dozen spectral figures separated from the denser blackness of the façade in front of him, abruptly becoming only human. Footsteps at his back assured him he had been followed at least since he had turned into this street.

He stopped, biting back a curse. Fool. To have allowed himself to be trapped with such ease! His fist clenched on the sharp edges of Christine's diamond. There could be no doubt of it, they had
seen the ring. The street was as narrow as a well, steep, and entirely dead; not a single lighted window above him. Only the stars.

The man who had spoken loafed closer, the others ranging behind him. They were young, Erik saw, all pimples and feathery moustaches, but their faces wore identical expressions of stony indifference, and the eyes of those he could see were cold.

"Ah," he said softly. "My mob."

The leader, a broad-shouldered young man in a guard's oilskin cloak, barred his way, standing with his feet planted apart, ready for the prey to run.

"The ring," the man jerked his head sharply at Erik's pocket. "And whatever else you got. Money."

Erik remained motionless.

One of the figures moved; a young woman dressed in a workman's smock and trousers. Erik shifted his weight slightly to the balls of his feet, listening for the snick of a knife being bared, but none came. She scowled and sniffed loudly, in what seemed a misguided effort to seem tougher:

"You took that ring off some girl, we take it off you. Fair's fair."

"Fair's fair," agreed the leader. "Let's get on with it, m'sieur, it's only money, all right? Don't be stupid. We all got to eat and you look like you've had yours. So go on, share nicely and we all go away. We're not murderers."

Erik raised his masked face, hating this, hating them, hating the cold diamond-hard truth, unbreakable. We're not murderers.

"No. But I am."

They stared in confusion, just long enough. Quick as a snake, Erik ripped aside his bandage, folded it back on itself as the white linen unravelled, and twisted it hard. The man's dirty neck was caught in a loop, a seemingly harmless thing; he blinked incomprehension a moment before Erik tugged at the noose.

That sound. The horrific sound of a throat begging for air took Erik at once to the final night in Bazeilles, in what used to be Bazeilles. The Bavarians in their plumed helmets. The snipers and the wounded men whose eyes had bulged just like this, and who died staring at the Ghost. There was no time for his victim to scream; the others scattered, with no loyalty in the face of this unmasked monster, leaving their former leader alone.

Erik's wrist was shaking; the boy in his grip ceased fighting as his cloak slid to the ground - and it was a boy, Erik realised, younger even than he had thought, now his shoulders were no longer broadened by the cloak.

He opened his fist. The boy fell back, hard on his spine, the back of his skull striking the paving stones with a dull crack. He was still breathing. For that, Erik was suddenly, immensely grateful.

"Get up!" Erik said hoarsely. The blood hummed in his temples and his vision threatened to blur. His bare face, exposed to the air, burned with an icy agony, as though he had been flayed. "Get up!"

The boy lay on the ground, breathing, his eyes white and wild and stupid. The bandage rope around his neck was slack, but he did not seem to notice.
Reaching into his pocket, Erik dragged out the contents: a handful of coins, two bills. The change from Christine's rose. He dropped the money onto the boy's heaving chest. A few of the coins rolled away, skittering brightly across the footpath, exactly like the coins tossed by the freakshow visitors in another life. The Devil's Child scowled up at him, all teeth and fear, a small and nasty animal brought to bay. Then he made a dive for the coins.

Erik snatched up the ruined bandage, rolling it up over his hand, and ran, with nothing more than the ring in his pocket to bind him to sanity, with his bare deformity branding him for what he knew he was, unchangeable and unchangeable.

When at last he was back in rue Fontenelle, he stood for a long time in the dark passageway at the side of the shuttered store, in the cold limbo between street and house, trying to tie the bandage. It was hopeless. The rope refused to reform into a mask, or be had forgotten the trick of it. His scars hurt badly, and he pressed the exposed side of his head to the cool brick wall and looked up at the stars. They blinked back, distant and impartial, a thousand times brighter in the absence of street lights.

_Forgive me_, he wanted to say, but there was nobody to ask.

Upstairs, under the locked door of his room, he found a folded letter. It was only a terse note, requesting the company of M. Andersson at his earliest convenience, if he was of a mind to learn some news. The nature of the news remained a mystery. The signature, in steady aristocratic hand, read "Chagny".

Christine's suitor… Oh God, Erik realised, _he _was now Christine's suitor. He, the Devil's Child, with his rope and his twisted rage, with hands schooled to the habit of blood; he, who only this afternoon had taken Christine in his arms and sat at her side and asked for her favour. Courtship was another man's role, and he had taken his place.

What could he give Christine, in this encircled city that was struggling for breath?

The note lay in the pool of yellow lamplight on the tabletop, next to his crumpled bandage, reminding him silently of all that he was not, and of all the obligations he had taken upon himself in assuming a role not his own. The Vicomte and his news… What this could be, Erik neither guessed nor cared, but he would have to go and find out. The certainty of it had the curious effect of giving shape to the following morning, and Erik felt his pulse slowing gradually, in acceptance.

He put Chagny's letter up on the shelf over the table, and pulled out Christine's ring. Fearfully, he pushed it again onto the little finger of his left hand, the gold circlet snug and surprisingly heavy under his knuckle, branding him with Christine's mark. He looked at it there, unbreakable, and thought of the stars. In his heart was music, a requiem for the Devil's Child.

He could do this. He was not the freakshow child, any more than he was a ghost or an angel. He was Erik.

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**Chapter 42: Take Flight**

_A/N:_ Apologies; I've had a rough few weeks, with a lot of hard work and a lot of disappointed hopes, and it hasn't been easy to write. However, here is a long chapter to make up for it. Huge thanks to all the lovely dedicated readers for your encouragement and, as ever, your thoughts. And welcome to the new readers who are just discovering the story – great to have you onboard!
Historical trivia: this chapter has rather a lot of it, due to the nature of events. The ambulance was run by the pioneering bone specialist Dr John Swinburne (who merits a short wiki page, if you're interested), and the cat and coffee cart are drawn from life, as are many of the other details. The incident described here (avoiding spoilers!) took place on 7 October, and if you're so inclined, you can find paintings of it online.

Chapter 42 — Take Flight

At the ambulance the following morning all was quiet. To Christine's relief, she saw no sign of new arrivals as she made her way along the tree-lined paths: no stretchers, no hurrying surgeons, only a well-fed, glossy tortoiseshell cat washing its whiskery face in the sunshine at the entrance to Raoul's tent, with every sign of feline contentment. Within, the curtains were drawn around several cots where the more seriously wounded were asleep; Raoul's bed was unmade, but he was not there, nor were the crutches he had started to use to move around. It was a good sign, Christine hoped.

A pair of middle-aged officers sat at a small table at the far wall, half-heartedly playing at cards: one with his arm in a sling, the other with no obvious injuries, but with the bored, restless look common to all wounded men Christine had encountered. Both had been there as long as Raoul, and were by now accustomed to her visits.

"Good morning, gentlemen. May I intrude?" She let the tent flap drop shut behind her.

The officer with the bandaged arm half-rose on his stool politely. "Ah, good morning, mademoiselle. Chagny will be back shortly, I expect. Do come and sit."

"There he is now," said the other, gesturing at the entrance with the fan of playing cards in his hand.

Christine turned; to her surprise, Raoul came in not with a medic, but with another officer about his own age, who held open the canvas while Raoul negotiated the entrance awkwardly on his crutches. It hurt to see the effort this simple action cost him, yet it was more than Christine had seen him attempt since his return.

"...He is determined he can rouse the provinces to action," the newcomer insisted, evidently in response to something Raoul had said. "And perhaps he-"

"Christine!" Raoul spotted her as soon as he raised his eyes from the crutches. Beneath his tied-back hair, his forehead was beaded with perspiration from the effort of the walk. He caught himself on the rail at the foot of the nearest bed before he could fall, breathing hard. Christine's heart went out to him.

"Good morning. I'm glad to see you up."

"Mademoiselle Daaé!"

Surprised, Christine looked over at Raoul's companion. She thought she might have seen him before; and after a moment's confusion, she was certain of it. He had been one of the young men of Raoul's circle; she vaguely remembered seeing him at parties they had attended before the war, always with a different woman on his arm, though she could not recall having ever been introduced. He was a well built man, with sharp, elegant features, who wore his lieutenant's uniform with the easy assurance of one used to a measure of authority. He bowed to her slightly, and cast Raoul a sidelong glance that bore the familiar mix of envy and amusement Christine
recalled only too well from that world of gossipping salons. He somehow managed to make her name sound like an echo of newspaper scandals. Christine sighed inwardly.

"I do not believe I have had the honour, Monsieur…?"

"Permit me," Raoul interceded, "I did not introduce you. Guyon, you remember Mademoiselle Daaé, my dearest friend. Christine, this is Henri Guyon; his uncle was in the Assembly with my father, for a time."

"A pleasure to see you again, mademoiselle, though under these regrettable circumstances." The man's urbane tone might have been better suited to a soirée, and it was evident from his trim appearance and cheerful demeanour that he was not at the ambulance as a patient. Christine arched her brows in pointed inquiry:

"You are not wounded, Monsieur Guyon?"

"Not in the least. I heard Chagny was cooling his heels here and thought he could do with seeing a friendly face. Of course I had no idea he was already so well attended – and a man could not wish for a more charming nurse."

"You are certainly charming, monsieur, but it may be a stretch to call yourself Raoul's nurse."
Christine gave him her best social smile, refusing to be baited by any hint of impropriety. She had a right to be there. And if she was a singer, a dancer, a musician, there was no shame in that. Henri Guyon laughed, and Raoul, who had been instantly on guard against the barbed humour, relaxed enough to lean back on the bedstead, sending the crutches clattering to the floor.

Christine went to his side to pick up the crutches, and put her own cheek against Raoul's damp one, in a belated greeting. "Ignore it," she whispered, as he had so often done to her when they had borne society's amusement together. Raoul squeezed her hand minutely in agreement.

"Guyon brings news from the defence," he told her.

"It is little enough, and half of it rumour," Henri Guyon said, and for the first time Christine detected a note of genuine concern and frustration behind his devil-may-care attitude. "My bastion is to the east, mademoiselle, where all the defence allowed us is to parade up and down the wall and check and re-check the gun emplacements. We haven't seen so much as the shadow of a Prussian except through a spy-glass." He glanced at Raoul's crutches, then sighed. "I suppose it is fortunate at least that the Third corps managed to fall back on Paris in time for us to avoid the … engagement at Sedan."

"That is one word for it," chuckled one of the card players, darkly. He threw down a card, drawing an irritated huff from his partner, and a flurry of folded cards. "But now you are shut up here together with the rest of us. Lord only knows when we'll see some action."

"There are worse fates," Guyon said, unruffled once more. "These poor devils," – he nodded vaguely at the cots of the seriously wounded – "had the dubious pleasure of testing the Prussian lines at L'Hay and Chevilly. Better to stay shut up and wait until we are ready to launch a full sortie, I say, than to waste good men and arms on such excursions. If we could only join up with an army from the provinces... I beg your pardon, Mademoiselle Daaé, this can hardly be an appropriate subject."

"On the contrary," Christine assured him, "it should be more objectionable by far were you to hold back on my account. I am shut up in this city too."
"Christine saw these men brought in, screaming." Raoul winced, and Christine knew he hated being the reason she must see such things, and yet he spoke with admiration: "She has more courage than half the blockheads in Vinoy's staff. Sending men against heavily fortified positions, without support, without cover! It is barbaric."

"Worse, pointless. If they're trying to stretch the perimeter of the encirclement, it's a waste of time, we cannot hold anything beyond the reach of the forts. Here, you better sit."

Henri Guyon offered his shoulder and Raoul braced himself against it as he hobbled to a folding chair beside the bed and sank onto it gratefully, with his bad leg stretched out. There was another chair, which Guyon offered her in turn, but Christine preferred to remain standing. She laid her hand on Raoul's shoulder, over muscle that trembled after he had been so long on his feet. She wished she could lend him strength. Raoul reached up to cover her hand gratefully for a moment.

Their card game finished, the others pulled out their tobacco and excused themselves, disappearing into the white triangle of sunshine as the door flaps opened and shut. Christine and Raoul watched them go.

"You may be right," Raoul said to Henri Guyon, returning to their previous conversation. "If the provinces could be made to raise another army, and march here to meet us as we break through... But is it possible?"

Guyon shrugged. "If anyone can talk them into it, it must be Gambetta. I'm inclined to believe the rumours, Chagny. He means to get out."

"How?" Christine wondered.

"I would give much to know the answer to that myself, mademoiselle. Surely he does not mean to sneak out dressed as a peasant like one of those newspaper couriers. He is much too recognisable. He would not get past the first outpost."

"What about the sewers?" Raoul suggested.

"It was tried, two weeks ago now. Two young boys attempted it."

The heavy silence that followed left no doubt in Christine's mind of the outcome of that escape attempt.

Raoul exhaled impatiently. "What then? Balloons? Flying machines? Underwater contraptions crawling along the bottom of the Seine, like in the absurd letter in yesterday's *Le Gaulois*? There cannot be any means that have not already been tried and failed."

"There are other tunnels," Christine said unexpectedly. "Those beneath the Opéra. The catacombs."

In the silence that fell, both men stared at her: Henri Guyon avidly curious, Raoul as appalled as if she had broken a taboo that grown between them. They had spoken of many things these past weeks, from the long summers of their childhood to the brief months of their engagement, but never dared approach the terrible night of Don Juan Triumphant, the dark lake in the Opéra cellars... Raoul looked up at her from the chair, deep creases between his brows, marks of pain that had nothing to do with his wound. Christine tightened her hand on his shoulder apologetically, and plunged on before she could lose her nerve:

"I do not know how far the tunnels extend, but there is a lake in the depths of the building, fed by an underground stream. The tunnels through which it flows..."
"Are of no use in quitting the city," came another voice from the doorway, unmistakable.

With a startled thrill, Christine looked up. Erik came in, snapping the door flap out of the way. His entrance was so sudden that she had the mad notion that she had called him somehow, by her thoughts. Erik's dark eyes found her unerringly, and Christine saw a reflection of that same betrayal, of secrets unburied. Her hand slipped off Raoul's shoulder. Erik looked away.

"Andersson." Raoul reached for a crutch and struggled to his feet again, supporting his other hand against the back of the chair. "You received my message then."

"As you see. Mademoiselle Daaé - good morning." Erik tipped his hat to her with a cool courtesy, as if her presence was of no more consequence than that of a socialite volunteering her time to nurse the wounded. He measured Henri Guyon's aristocratic profile with a sharp glance.

"This is a regular salon, Chagny."

"Henri Guyon," the man introduced himself, unfazed by the inspection. He studied Erik's bandaged face with interest. "Another from Sedan, I take it?"

"Erik Andersson – Henri Guyon," Raoul said. "Andersson and I were in Bazeilles together."

Guyon brightened. "So you are the man who brought Chagny back! Well done, monsieur, very well done. You know then, how it may be possible for a man to bypass the Prussian lines?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," Erik said flatly. He held a folded letter between two fingers, with the writing on the front clearly Raoul's. His tension, his fear of the past, was so painfully obvious to Christine that she wondered the others did not note it.

"Chagny, you brought me here with the promise of news. What is this talk of tunnels and leaving the city?"

Raoul took up the letter and opened it, as though he too was not certain what it contained. Christine watched uneasily, half expecting a quarrel to break out at any moment. Raoul had written to Erik? The mere fact of the two of them standing in the same tent, conversing, was fantastical enough without the addition of correspondence.

"It is as I said. There is news to be learned." Raoul returned the letter. "Do you know Léon Gambetta?"

"It has been some time since I lived under a rock, Vicomte. What does he have to do with this?"

"Guyon tells me Gambetta means to leave Paris to join the government delegation in Tours, to try to rouse the provinces from there. But the Prussians would never grant him passage, least of all to raise new armies."

"And you think I would know the way? You give me too much credit."

Henri Guyon gave a satisfied laugh. "There! You see, Chagny, it is just as they all say, impossible. And yet I believe he means to do it."

Raoul did not look as easily convinced, but he did not press the matter. "All right," he said, still looking at Erik. "Perhaps this is indeed beyond your talents."

Christine could not restrain a tiny smile at the predictable effect this piece of audacity had on Erik. He glared at Raoul, well aware of the challenge, but remained resolutely silent.
"I must be going," Henri Guyon declared, ignoring the standoff. "In any case, we shall know the truth of it in a day or two, one way or another. Take good care of him, mademoiselle." And with a round of handshakes and a faultlessly restrained bow to Christine, he left.

"Christine spoke of the Opéra tunnels," Erik said very quietly, when they were alone. "She told you of the stream that feeds the lake."

"I have taken a swim there myself," Raoul retorted acidly. "The lake is hardly a secret, nor the stream that feeds it."

Misliking the direction of the questions, Christine broke in. "Erik, where does that stream come from? Could the tunnels truly lead out of the city?"

She saw Erik resist delivering a sarcastic response, saw the hurt still there in his stiff, wary posture. The lake had been his home, his only home.

"No," he said at last, without the bitter humour she had feared. "The tunnels encase only a small part of it. The rest is merely an underground river that originates, I believe, around the heights of Montmartre. If is no use at all in trying to find a way through; the encirclement is a great deal too wide."

"The heights of Montmartre?.." Raoul looked thoughtful. "Have they not tried to launch balloons from there, these past weeks?"

"Tried and succeeded, in fact, although the devil only knows what kind of man would entrust his life to a basket lifted into the sky by a scrap of canvas, with an entire army beneath to shoot at it."

His vehemence surprised Christine; for her part, she thought she would have loved to see the balloons fly up, soaring into the sky. Even if they were shot down, or crashed… They would have flown first.

Raoul considered it. "Then you agree with Guyon. It appears impossible."

"It is not impossible," Erik said indifferently. "At least, it is not impossible to leave. Arrival is another matter. It would be unfortunate to end one's life as a pheasant for the Prussians' rifle practice."

"Do you seriously think Gambetta is intending to take a balloon?" Christine asked. "I thought only an aeronaut could do it, even in peacetime."

"There is one way to find out." Erik gave Raoul a nod, "There is a launch today from the Place Saint Pierre. I accept your challenge."

"Monsieur le Vicomte?" A medical orderly with a Red Cross armband looked into the tent, then turned back to address somebody behind him, "He's awake, doctor."

Christine watched as the white-coated surgeon, Doctor Swinburne, and his usual posse of attendants crowded into the tent with all their notebooks and toolbags, at once making it seem small and busy as a market stall before the siege. Raoul barely had time to apologise before he was directed back to bed and Christine and Erik found themselves peremptorily ushered outside.

"I should not have brought up the tunnels," Christine said when they stood in the glare of late morning. She shivered in the sudden chill after the warmth of the tent. Not far away, a horse-drawn cart had been set up with a curious array of copper jugs and boilers, and a cheerfully fat man was pouring measures of steaming black coffee from this contraption into mugs held out to him from
the queue of waiting medics and patients alike. The air teased her nostrils with the smell of hot coffee.

Erik's gaze was fixed on the cart, but Christine did not think he saw it. "You had every right to speak of them. And besides - the Vicomte is correct, the tunnels are no secret: the police spent a good week down there after…"

"Erik." Christine touched his elbow.

"Yes?"

Christine moved her head a little to indicate someone coming out of the tent behind them. Erik turned. It was Doctor Swinburne, discussing something in a mixture of Latin and English with one of his assistants who scribbled rapid notes with the stub of a pencil. He was a distinguished-looking man with a short, neatly trimmed beard and a military bearing; Christine heard he had treated the wounded in the war back in America, and had seen such butchery that nothing could now surprise him. She could well believe it, having seen him examine the wounded, moving from bed to bed in the same unhurried, competent way.

"Ah, you are still here," he remarked when he saw her. His French was excellent, with hardly a trace of accent. "Your friend is making a very satisfactory recovery, mademoiselle, but you must caution him most severely not to put too much strain upon his injuries so early, unless he enjoys the prospect of being confined to a wheelchair. I can issue what orders I may, but in this you must be my accomplice."

Christine assured him she would see the orders followed, thinking of Raoul's limping walk earlier and the new lease on life it seemed to give him, after weeks of being near immobile. It would not be easy to convince him to limit his freedom. And how was he to recover if the confinement drove him to despair?

"I will do what I can," she promised.

"And you, sir," Swinburne continued, to Erik's surprise addressing him, "have you a physician attending to that?" He gestured sharply at the bandaged side of Erik's head. The assistant waited behind him, pencil dutifully poised over his notes. Christine's heartbeat set to racing.

Erik looked between the two men, trapped and angry, off guard. Before he could venture a response, the surgeon frowned and took a step closer, observing the bandage with a trained eye.

"How long has the wound been covered?" he demanded. "The dressing ought not to be left in place this long, or the skin will slough - there, the lower margin is already inflamed. If you will take my advice, sir, you will remove it at once, and allow the healthful air to heal the skin."

"Your concern is touching," Erik said through his teeth. "But my skin is as healed as it will ever be. *This,*" he jabbed at the bandage, "is only a fashion statement."

"Suit yourself," Swinburne snorted, "but mind you do not end a victim of this peculiar fashion." To Christine he said, "Tell me, mademoiselle, are all your friends so obstinate? Even the best-trained physician is powerless in the face of sheer pigheadedness. Convince the one to respect his bandages and the other to relinquish them, and you will have made more difference to their recovery than any physician. Good day."

Christine dipped in a respectful curtsey, her own face burning, but the surgeon had already moved on towards the next tent. Erik nudged his mask lower, concealing the reddened edge of a scar, and
bared his teeth in what was not a grin.

Tentatively, Christine reached for his arm, half expecting him to jerk aside, but Erik permitted it, and a moment later they stood arm in arm like a promenading couple frozen mid-step. At last, Erik lowered his head, all the fight gone out of him.

"Let's buy some coffee," Christine suggested. "And then, I believe I was promised a balloon launch."

Erik raised her hand to his lips and kissed her wrist above the glove, sending tendrils of warmth through her. "My god, Christine," he said, looking up with a plea in his eyes. "I never wanted this. I will only bring you shame."

Christine touched his mouth, quickly. "I would prefer it if you brought me coffee."

They finally reached the Place Saint Pierre just after noon, having crossed half of Paris on foot. Cabs were in short supply, and Erik had not the least inclination to join the waiting crowds for the omnibus, or to subject Christine to the jostle of people squeezed onto the narrow benches with all the provisions they had managed to win in the endless queues. Christine walked beside him in the bright October sun, the light breeze lifting a few stray curls over her hat, and he hardly dared look at her or speak, for fear that it would break the illusion, that he would come to his senses and find himself alone. And yet there was the reassuring swish of her skirts and the rapid click of her steps in time with his heavier tread. The day grew warmer; the few remaining trees stood gold and umber, and upon their branches the soldiers' shirts and undergarments that had been hung to dry flapped like storm-tossed remnants of a ship's sails. Everywhere were uniforms and supply wagons and guardsmen drilling with their rifles in the denuded squares. Nobody so much as blinked at the sight of a bandaged man accompanying a young lady.

"Are you hungry?" Erik asked when they at last turned off the Rue Lafayette and began to climb the smaller streets, familiar enough that he could almost feel at home. A little grocery shop on the corner, which in better days had been stocked with fowl and eggs, cheese and smoked meat now had a display of nothing but mustard jars and cans of meat extract. Next to it was a café that appeared to be open; Erik wondered if he should not be taking Christine to have lunch… The idea was in equal measure thrilling and terrifying.

Christine squinted into the sun. "Not yet," she said. "I want to see these balloons."

The Place Saint Pierre had been turned into a barren rectangular plain, with a few military tents between the flat façades of ageing apartment buildings. There was already a substantial crowd gathered, snaking all the way up the hillside on the other side of the square: men and women of all ages, bourgeois parasols side by side with the kerchiefs of local women, and everywhere packs of children darting between the gawkers, eager for a better view. A detachment of national guards and regulars was there to keep order, but they were hardly needed; the atmosphere was of curious anticipation and the joy of spectacle, a happy break from the monotony of the siege. Erik hesitated, not at all keen on joining the throng.

Beyond and above the crowd, in the centre of the square, two enormous balloons strained against their lines.

"Let's go closer," Christine said, her eyes on the balloons and her face bright after the walk and burning with excitement. The sight of the giant gasbags made Erik queasy, but he dared not lose Christine in the crowd; he followed, wading in among the people, keeping his eyes on the back of
her head, the edge of her high collar. He wanted, desperately, to catch her shoulders and kiss her there, to leave this place and have her to himself.

"They're about to let go!" somebody near them called out, and for a frightening moment Erik lost sight of Christine - but then they were near the front, out in the open, and Christine was beside him. She glanced over at him, her smile so open and happy that Erik felt his heart must burst at any moment. Had she said then that she wished to get into a balloon and fly, he would have found one and soared into the sky with her, over the people, over the besieged city, out into the infinite sky.

"Look, who's that?" Christine pointed to two men rugged up in fur coats and hats, standing in the basket of the nearer balloon. Soldiers held onto the heavy lines that moored the baskets to the ground. Marines; Erik recognised the blue uniforms he had seen in Bazeilles. He did not want to think of that, not now. He moved closer to Christine, as near as he dared.

"Some Americans," a nearby National Guard supplied. "They were talking about buying in more rifles."

"Not Gambetta then!" Erik told Christine, raising his voice against the wind and the chatter of the other onlookers. "The Vicomte will be disappointed."

"Not them," Christine gestured impatiently, "There! In the other balloon."

Erik followed her arm to the basket of the second balloon, where a slim black-bearded man, also in a fur coat, was just climbing in. Another man was already inside, adjusting ropes and checking the grapples. The man in the fur coat raised his cap and waved at a gathering of people just below, and at once the crowd broke into spontaneous cheers. He turned his face towards them.

"That's him, isn't it?"

"Yes," Erik conceded, "undoubtedly. He must be mad."

"He is brave," Christine countered.

The marines released the lines, and the balloons, freed, rose slowly up, baskets swinging like the toys of a gargantuan child.

"Vive la Republique!" the crowd roared. "Vive Gambetta!"

From the basket, high above the square, the young minister unfurled a tricolour flag, and it sailed over the crowd, over the rooftops, until the balloons were no more than two ink blots in the bright sky. All around, the cheers continued long after the balloons had gone, kepis and hats of every colour flying in the air. The nearby wineshops were about to be overrun.

Erik looked over at Christine; she was still watching the sky, her hand held up against the glare but her eyes streaming despite it. There was such light in her face, in her entire body, surging towards the distant freedom.

"I hope they make it," she said. "I hope Raoul's friend is right, and Gambetta brings another army to lift the siege."

Erik did not reply; he could not. Christine was too lovely, clad in her shining hope, and he could not bear to have her see the fear he felt betrayed in his own distorted face, the fear that all this could not last. An army of relief was a hideous fantasy, painted in his mind with the black smoke of the ruins in Bazeilles. But even if no army came, this would end. One way or another, it would all end.
"Let us go," he finally pleaded, when the crowd had thinned a little. "There is a café I know nearby, we can get something to eat."

Christine nodded and they made their way out, back to the winding streets and the jumble of tightly pressed buildings. They did not make it to the café: at the top of Rue Fontenelle, Christine saw the closed doors of the abandoned dance hall where Erik had once seen a workers' meeting, empty today of political clubs and noisy demands. She paused under the unlit sign.

"Is that a theatre?"

"A dance hall. Would you like to see it?"

She looked over at him and her smile was mischievous and a little shy, carried still by the excitement of what they had witnessed. Her lips were dry from the wind, and Erik could not help picturing her open them now to sing, to let music soar from her with total abandon. He imagined Christine's music transforming the little old theatre, filling the space with cool air and clouds, with the wingbeat of birds, with sunlight. The dusty panelled doors stood unlocked and slightly ajar, waiting.

It was dangerous, too close to the edge of madness.

Perhaps it was brave.

Erik pulled at a handle, and the door swung easily outward, revealing the dark foyer. "Shall we?"

Chapter 43: Another Sky

A/N: The fictional opera referenced here is based on the instrumental fragment ALW composed for Christine's journey to the cemetery in the 2004 film, where she mourns in voice-over the deception of the Angel of Music ("her father promised her..."). The same music was later turned into a melodramatic duet for "Love Never Dies", called "Beneath a Moonless Sky". I really wanted to resurrect the original meaning of the music, and the disaster that is LND provided the perfect "opera". (I can post a complete version of the modified lyrics, if anyone wants them). Massive thanks to my wonderful beta, the multi-talented LadyKate, for her gorgeous French translation.

Chapter 43 — Another Sky

"What is all this?" Christine cautiously raised the lid on the nearest in a stack of boxes that had been piled in place of the orchestra. She and Erik had turned on only the wall lamps set over the mirrors, finding no way to light the chandeliers, but in the muted golden light the little theatre seemed warmer than Erik remembered it, less tawdry.

"It looks like newspapers…" Christine read the top sheet, "The Montmartre Vigilance Committee?"

"Leaflets, from the clubs that hold meetings here." Erik recognised the newsprint from the many publications littering the Gandons' storeroom. "Take one if you are curious, I assure you they would be only too happy to have them distributed. In fact, I believe they dropped a few hundred copies on the heads of the Prussians recently, from a balloon."

Christine looked horrified. "What for?"
"Oh, not as a form of bombardment, I imagine; they opened the boxes first."

Christine blinked, then gave a laugh of pure astonishment. "You're teasing me!"

"A little," he admitted, "forgive me."

But Christine only shook her head, the laughter still dancing in her eyes. "No, I like it." And after a moment, "Did they really drop the leaflets? What did they say?"

"That the French people have no further need of kings, and that if the Prussians were to follow our shining example and overthrow theirs, we would all—"

"Live happily ever after?"

"Something like that."

"It is a good dream." Christine let the lid fall shut, leaving the leaflet untouched, and the two of them headed on towards the stage. "And stranger things have happened."

"Like what?"

She stopped by the empty footlights and looked at him over her shoulder. "Like the almost civilised conversation with Raoul this morning. There was practically no gnashing of teeth."

"Now you are teasing me," he said, frowning.

Christine turned to face him, and Erik forgot his chagrin: she was here with him, in an echoey theatre filled with golden shadows and whispering gas-jets and the rhythm of their footsteps, and there was nothing, nothing the world could do to take this moment away from him.

"Christine..." He brushed his fingertips over the exposed sides of her neck above her collar, making her shiver, making her smile. She had swept up her hair beneath her hat, and Erik found it unendurable now, wanting her free of all bonds, released, soaring beautiful and wild. He unpinned her hat. Christine took it off and shook out her mass of dark curls gratefully.

"Could you give me a lift?" She nodded back towards the stage.

With his heart in his throat, Erik reached out to hold her by the waist. Under the barrier of her corset, he felt her muscles bunch in preparation, a dancer's leap, and then she was in his arms and he was lifting her onto the stage, between the footlights. He followed her up; Christine gave him her hand and he held it, and did not want to let go.

"Here we are..." Christine took in the darkened stage, from the wings to the unguarded crescent of the drop before them. She moved towards it slowly, as if recalling a dream.

They were on stage, together.

She tried a low note, with a depth that made Erik's own voice resonate to her, irresistible as breath.

The empty theatre echoed their chord strangely, and Erik felt Christine flinch from it also, breaking the sound.

She turned, half woman and half burning angel, dark hair and dress silhouetted against the lamps.

"The sound is wrong here."
"A moment," he held her, "let me try something."

He dropped back to the orchestra and selected a box. Working with a will, he moved it out to the periphery of the barren hall, to where he thought the reverberation could best be restrained.

"Sing," he asked her, looking back, and then heard himself and took a risk: "Sing for me!"

Christine laughed instead, with the walls laughing a chorus, and Erik thought he had grown addicted to that sound of joy, to her unbearable lightness.

"Give me an E."

Christine did, and guided by her voice, he rearranged the boxes and chairs and drapes, until the resonance was dampened and tamed, leaving only what they needed. It was not perfect, but it was good, much better than he had expected this place to be able to furnish.

When at last he paused to dust off his hands and Christine fell silent, he stood to breathe and watched her there on stage. Her face was upturned to look at where in a larger theatre the gallery should have been, but where were only the inverted trees of zinc chandeliers growing down from their stucco ceiling roses. She was human, neither angel nor saint, only a young woman in street clothing and gloves, but there was something sublime in her that filled him with the awe of a miracle. His miracle. Her every movement felt like an extension of his own body, of his heart.

"Erik?" She sat down, dropping her legs over the edge of the stage, quick and unconsciously graceful. A sharp longing pierced Erik from belly to thighs; he knew he should look away, but he did not.

"Could we find something to eat? It's getting late. I will have to go soon."

"Of course." Desire at once shrank to guilt, and the fear returned. What kind of suitor forgot his duty amid the rush of his own pleasure? And yet, and yet, he could barely tear his eyes from Christine sitting on that edge, legs swinging, unafraid. She returned his gaze directly, head tilted a little to one side, as though studying him in turn.

"I'll be back presently — wait, Christine. Wait here."

The moment he had her assent, he flew out towards the street, hoping the shop he had in mind still remained open, thinking only to be back before the clock could impose on her the duties of a woman towards her family and herself. Her time was not her own; with Meg's artist's fees their only income, Christine had taken upon herself the majority of the work of keeping house, and much as it pained Erik, there could be no way around such things. Not until this was over. He allowed himself to daydream of better days while gathering what food he was able to buy; dreams both ludicrous and seductive of lavishing upon Christine every imaginable luxury, but in those visions of happiness and plenty he could not see himself.

Summer preserves, chocolates, wine… A peculiar time this was, Erik reflected as he brought the basket back with him, when a man with sufficient means could buy any number of small luxuries, but not the basic foodstuffs from which one might hope to make a meal. No cheese, no meat, no butter. The bread he had managed at last to find was more bran than flour, and a dubious shade of brown, but at least it smelled fresh.

The theatre was even darker inside than he expected.

"Christine?" He crossed the murky foyer and opened the inner doors to the theatre.
And stopped.

The music that captured him was everywhere: in the walls, in the floor, in the empty air, in his mean little basket of victuals; in his hands, his chest, his mouth. It took all his strength not to let the food smash on the worn marble floor.

Christine was singing. And she had done something to this space… Erik looked around, and saw above and in front of the stage, upon the acanthus leaves of decorative pilasters, several frilled umbrellas that must have once been props, suspended upside down like the baskets of so many balloons. Behind Christine was a pile of leaflet boxes and a ladder. Erik felt nauseous at the thought of her climbing up there with the damned umbrellas, but even so he had to own the effect was spellbinding.

Christine broke off when she saw him, and Erik felt the cessation of sound like the loss of one of his senses.

"What do you think?"

He heard a harsh rasp from his own chest, mourning the end of that music. He barely recognised his own speech:

"I brought some food. Wine."

"Oh… Thank you."

Christine knelt at the front of the stage and accepted the basket from his hands as Erik lifted himself up to sit beside her. She had removed her coat but she was warm; the brush of her hand against his was life.

"It doesn't work?" she said, crestfallen.

In response, Erik could only gaze at her in wonder, struggling to find the words for what he had just heard. Christine's delicate brows quirked a little, uncertain of his verdict.

"How did you know?" he asked at last. "Those umbrellas…"

She shrugged. "I saw what you were doing before. But the ceiling here slopes up and the sound disappears too soon, it needed something to stop it. It works then?"

Without warning, he leapt off the stage and clamped his hands upon her waist to whirl her down into his arms. She gave a startled cry, "Erik!"

"You need to hear it yourself."

He held her close like a new bride brought to the threshold of his home, real and awake and warm in his hold, and carried her to where he had stood before. He set her down near the back of the hall. She brushed out her crumpled skirts, still looking at him doubtfully.

"This far back?"

"Yes. Right here. Listen, Christine, listen to what you have created."

"All right. Show me."

Erik returned to where the basket of provisions rested near the footlights, vaulted up and took a few steps upstage, judging the place. His boots struck the boards, setting the beat. Christine was a
slight lone figure in the back, but the entire room, the lamplight and shadows, radiated from her and returned towards her, filling Erik's vision completely.

He drew a powerful breath, and saw Christine's eyes widen in that split second before the sound was born: she caught an answering breath, waiting for him to sing — and then the tide of music descended upon him and, exultant and terrified, he yielded to become its instrument.

He sang opera, a Meyerbeer aria unabashedly magnificent in scope and style, grand opera in which he had once dreamed to hear Christine and which had been the daily accompaniment to their lives. The import of the words did not matter now; only that there, on the other side of the empty hall, stood Christine, and that he knew she caught every note within the magnificent sound she had uncovered in this place, with the very walls singing for her. Erik saw her listening, her arms opening to it unconsciously from her chest, surging towards it with all her heart. The last of his reservations fell away as the music swelled: Erik felt it commanding him out from the twisted shell of his body, demanding all his soul. He could not withstand it, he strode forward, closer, closer the edge of the abyss…

It was then Christine entered the music. She stepped into it tentatively at first, like a bather discovering cold water, but almost at once the music itself changed to meet her. Erik could not say what she did, or how, only that a moment earlier he was drowning and now they were singing together across the empty space, joined by something stronger than the music.

Christine led him in a new duet, walking towards him as she did so, and her words reached him clear and strong. He knew the duet; it came from another Opéra folly, a heartrendingly ridiculous story of love and betrayal — but Christine had changed the words to her part:

Il y avait une place sous un ciel en couleurs,
Où les anges viennent a prier, où la musique pleure
Là, seule, je murmurais mon espoir à la froide pierre,
Mais puis j'entendu une voix, comme la mienne solitaire

Once there was a place, beneath a painted sky,
where angels came to pray, where music came to cry
I whispered my hopes to cold, unfeeling stone,
But there I heard a voice as lonely as my own…

Et je t'ais appelée—
And I called you—

He sang his part faithfully, confessing deception, confessing sin:

—Et je t'ais entendu,
Et j'ais prétendu
—And I heard you,  
And pretended

She responded, but not with the platitudes written for her:
—And I let you…

He understood then, and joined her, kneeling before her upon the stage as she came to him at last:

Et avec chaque souffle et chaque soupir,
Je n'étais plus seule—
—Je n'avais plus peur—
Et nos voix s'entendaient sous le ciel en couleurs.

And with every breath and every sigh,
I felt no longer lost—
—I felt no longer shy—
At last our voices heard beneath the painted sky.

Christine gripped his hands, fingers in fingers, knuckles hard against knuckles, and the pain of that joining was the sweetest thing Erik had ever known.

"I prayed for an angel," she spoke and her words made music, "and you gave me an angel."

De la silence du deuil, j'ai entendue ton cri...
Et tu m'as retourné ma voix.

From the silence of my grief, I heard your cry...
And you gave me back my voice.

"Christine," he crushed her to his chest and buried his hideous aching face in the veil of her hair, weeping without tears, every nerve and sinew stripped bare.

"I don't regret it." She looked up, red-eyed, her hands still wound in his. "I need you to know it, I don't regret what we did, not a single note. I never will."

He released her long enough to permit her to climb up to kneel by his side, and they held on to each other with all their joint strength, rocking with the force of the past, the grief they still shared, and the new, searingly bright pain of release.

"Come here," she muttered and, obedient, Erik brought his face to her open palm, closing his eyes to her touch. He stiffened as her other hand pushed at the bandage. He tried his best to keep still against the sting of pressure on the angry sensitised skin of his deformity, but did not manage it; Christine felt him flinch and stopped at once. Erik reluctantly opened his eyes.

"It hurts you," she said in dismay, fingertips hovering at the edge of the linen. "But it did not hurt before, when I touched you there…"

Erik could not bear the anxiety in her voice, the way she watched him for fear that he had been concealing something from her.

"It is nothing." He felt acutely embarrassed by the sorry reality of his pathetic injury. "The flesh is
just chafed by dust and cloth. It hardly makes a difference."

"That surgeon was right then. You should not be bandaging it."

Erik looked at her incredulously, but Christine was apparently in earnest. "You have no need of a mask with me."

"No." He drew back a fraction.

"Why? Would you risk pain and infection rather than permitting the air to touch it?"

"Christine…" he said in warning. She made no move to take the bandage from him, but he did not mistake it for surrender. The silence stretched.

"Let's eat now," she said at last, "then I will need to go home. I should be glad of some company on the walk back."

"Of course." There was no question of her returning alone. Erik thought of the signwriting workshop he was still expected to be outfitting, but it would do the freshly plastered walls no harm to wait another day.

Christine opened the basket and unwrapped the bread. She broke it apart and passed him half.

"Erik, the clubs you spoke of, how often do they hold their meetings?"

"Daily, I imagine."

"Do you know the times?"

"It would not be difficult to find out." Erik tried a bit of the brown bread; it was not as abysmal as its appearance first suggested. "Why? Would you like to come back again?"

Christine ate the last of her bread and brushed the crumbs from her hands, then stood and looked around speculatively, adjusting her gaze to the space as if seeing it properly for the first time. She looked, Erik realised, like the displaced refugees he had seen haunting the city, sizing up their new home.

"Can the doors be locked?"

Erik glanced out towards the foyer. "Naturally."

"Good," she said. "Because I have an idea."

"Oh? You intend to haunt the meetings of the Montmartre Vigilance Committee?"

"To the contrary. They have little enough use for this theatre. I don't see why we could not share it peaceably." She gave a wistful sigh. "I miss the music, Erik. Don't you? And I'm out of practice. Madame Giry is certain they must open the theatres eventually… It does no harm to keep up the skill."

Erik's skin crawled with an old dread, the expectation of the mob. "It is outlawed, Christine. Theatres, music, dancing: all frivolous and unpatriotic."

"You don't believe that."

"But I do. It is exactly what theatre ought to be. Can you picture anything worse than serious and patriotic dancing? And you forget this is Montmartre; the people here would gladly tear down the
Opéra itself as a monument of the old Empire. This is no time for arias."

"They cannot arrest us for singing. And besides, nobody needs to know. We are not staging a spectacle."

"We will be heard. And whatever you believe, it will appear a rehearsal. They will not like it."

Christine picked up her jacket from where it had been thrown over a box and Erik placed it carefully around her shoulders. She lifted her hair clear of the collar and twisted it away under her hat, and Erik could not restrain himself; he reached over with shaking hands and did up the buttons on her jacket, letting his fingers graze the fabric of her dress beneath. Christine watched him do it.

"Erik?"

He could not look at her eyes. His fingers fumbled on the last button, over her collarbone.

"You are frightened," she said.

"Yes."

He could not release the button, his fingers were white to the knuckle. If he was caught — he, who had never been seen on the ramparts, who was already the peculiar fugitive returned from Sedan, what hope was there that Christine would not be tarred with the same brush of suspicion, when the spectre of spies lurked everywhere?

"Erik, we don't have to return here. Perhaps you are right, it is a foolish notion."

"It is."

He relinquished the cursed button at last. Then he leaned down and kissed her neck hard, just below the ear.

"Ahh…" Christine made a sound of shock and pleasure, tilting her head away. Erik caught the soft fold of her earlobe against his teeth, drunk on her skin and the taste of fear. He was certain Christine could hear his frantic hunted pulse.

"Tomorrow afternoon. The meeting should be done with by then."

"Yes," Christine said, holding very still, permitting him to nuzzle the curve of her neck, her ear, her cheekbone. Then she turned and caught his mouth, in a kiss so possessive it hurt. The flame of her tongue was music in his mouth, and Erik opened to it with sharp, desperate need.

"I want to sing," Christine told him when they could breathe. "With you."

Late in the evening, when he had at last left her to the comfort of her evening with Meg and Madame Giry, Erik took himself up to his tiny room at the top of the store. Though Jean had said nothing of his absence from the business of building the workshop, Erik saw the new placards waiting by the rear door and knew tomorrow he would have to make good on his promises and install easel and pulleys. But tonight… He turned the key in the lock, heard the click, and removed the key to the table. After a moment's thought, he wound a cravat over the door handle and tucked it over the keyhole. The ewer of water from the washstand was before him.

Erik closed his eyes, felt for the knot at the base of his neck, and pulled.

The mask came off all of a piece, the linen strips gummed together in places by the weeping of raw flesh on what passed for his face. He grit his teeth as he sponged and dried his scars, and applied a liniment that stung like the devil. He cut a fresh length of bandage and hesitated, holding the mask
in his hands a fraction longer than necessary. Then he put it on, and tightened the knot.

Chapter 44: Hunger

A/N: Thanks again for reading and reviewing! In response to a question, I'd say there's still quite a way to go before this story is done. But I hope you enjoy the journey. :-)

Chapter 44 — Hunger

Dear, stubborn friend! How welcome was your balloon letter, but oh, heartbreaking to think it left you so many days ago, and we know nothing since then. J-M and I are like a pair of old gulls here, watching the grey sea and talking endlessly of what you are facing, but to what end? What cowardly, dishonourable warfare M. Bismarck is waging, to starve the city to its knees! Have you food and fuel? Have the girls winter coats? All the talk here is of early frosts and a hard winter to come. Please, Agathe, do write soon.

Madame Giry set aside the anxious note from Monsieur Duchamp's sister, transcribed in some clerk's neatly impersonal hand, and closed her eyes against the urge to read it over again. She could envision the stately old house where it had been written, and hear the wind and waves and the brighter voices of children… Her daughter's laughter, and Christine singing to her father's violin: what a voice, they all said then, for such a wisp of a girl. She had been well taught by Gustave, but that voice had always been hers, silenced by grief for a time, but never broken. How happy it would have made him to see her grown into her gift, using it now to shape her own music! Less certain by far, Madame Giry sighed to herself, what he might have made of his daughter's choice of companionship, or the inadequacy of her guardian — but one could not seek forgiveness from the dead…

At least they had heard finally from the living: the first letter from beyond the walls since all post had been stopped. A pigeon had carried it along with hundreds of others, photographed to a minute size to be enlarged and transcribed again by those entrusted with this one remaining thread to the outside world. There was something frightening about a city reduced to this: pigeons replacing telegraph wires, smoky oil lamps burning instead of gas, obscene caricatures and proclamations plastered over noticeboards that were still crowned with the ornate heading, Spectacles, above the shreds of posters from the last performances.

And still, the theatres remained closed.

This would not do. The afternoons were getting shorter as winter neared and she could ill afford to spend these precious hours at her dressing table. Madame Giry pinned the letter to the side of her mirror to await time for an answer, draped her dressing-gown over the chair back, and went over to the small barre set against the wall. Like the rest of their worn furniture, it was a relic from the Opéra, but it still served its purpose: a quarter of an hour a day was just about sufficient to keep her body from losing all form and function. She gave herself a few silent counts to find her focus, then started on the pliés.

It was a pity they would not at least permit her to resume teaching class, she thought. Keeping the theatres closed with countless artists and stagehands out of a job was cruel enough, but to force dancers out with no means to hold on to what skill they had was simple stupidity. How were they to return to the stage when this madness ended? And how many of them would return at all? Her daughter still practiced at home, but absently and without heart, and Christine had long since returned to her music. It was not fair to expect them to carry on her art when they had their own
lives – but it was hard not to fear that, when the theatres opened at last, she would be left standing irrelevant and alone, in a practice hall empty of students, and the dance would end.

She finished her stretches, rinsed her face and dressed again in a hurry, all too aware of the gathering dusk. There was no sense mourning what had not yet come to pass, when there was work to be done. She went to the kitchen to fetch the basketful of freshly laundered linen. Even this was an expensive luxury now, for fuel was short and few laundries could afford to heat enough water to remain open. Another few weeks like this and they would be forced to wash their clothing in the public fountains, like the soldiers encamped along the boulevards. This, in Paris! Madame Giry shook her head as she separated out an armful of bedlinen to take to Meg's room.

She put her shoulder to the door of her daughter's room, and almost tripped at the threshold. Jules' posters from the Opéra still decorated every wall, but above Meg's dresser was something new. Madame Giry felt the linen fall from her arms to the floor, with a noise like the shocked whisper of a crowd.

Christine sank down onto the creaky piano bench, exhausted and utterly, childishly happy. It had taken several afternoons of painstaking work to tune the reluctant old piano in the dance hall to something approaching true pitch, but it was done, done, done.

"Close enough," Erik agreed, closing the top board. "Would you like to try again?"

"Tomorrow. I think I'm half deaf. And it must be after five, Meg will be finished soon." Christine reached up tiredly and took his hand, rubbing her thumb against the new calluses on his palm and fingers, small leathery bumps that she could not see in the semi-darkness of the theatre, but could hear when he had played the piano. Erik laced his fingers through hers. It was oddly pleasing to think of him working, building something with these hands.

"Does Monsieur Gandon mind that you are not at the workshop?"

Erik snorted derisively. "Jean has an unpaid assistant of greater calibre than his enterprise deserves. I daresay he can manage adequately for a few hours. Besides," his tone darkened with self-mockery, and he withdrew his hand, "he may be glad of some time without his tenant's disreputable company. Your coat, Christine."

"Thank you." Christine stood to shrug into it and began to do up the buttons, while Erik collected his own coat and hat from beside the piano. Something was bothering him, but she could not tell what it might be. Perhaps it was only the strain of enduring hour after hour of not-quite-tuned harmonics. Her own head was still humming like a bell.

"Your company is not so very disreputable, you know. Although now you've taken up with a dancing girl…"

Erik turned aside from her clumsy attempt at humour, putting on his hat with his face averted. When the brim caught on his bandage, Christine saw his shoulders hunch.

"You're still in pain," she said quietly. "Your face…"

He turned back to her too readily, his expression ugly with triumph, as though he had been waiting for this. "I'm handsome as ever, Christine. Your own Prince Charming."

Taken aback, Christine froze, coat half-buttoned. "Stop it. Please."
"Would you like to see it?"

"No."

"And why not! A woman has the right to admire the face of her suitor, does she not?"

"Stop it!" Christine snapped, stepping from the bench to come toward him, but it was too late. With a savage gesture, Erik snatched the bandage from his head, and Christine cried out in alarm.

She knew she looked appalled and that Erik saw it, that he had expected it, and there was nothing she could do. She stared, defiantly. His forehead and cheek bore patches of chafed, unhealed flesh, crusted and raw where the bandage had ripped away scabs. Christine felt ill, thinking he must have been wearing it day and night.

"Erik… How long has it been like this?"

Erik looked away, unwilling to meet her eyes. His hat dropped from his hand, loud against the boards of the stage, and rolled on the floor. The echo of the outburst slowly died away among the shadows.

At length he raised one hand to cover the scars, and muttered, "Forgive me. That was unfair."

"Yes. It is." Christine felt a helpless rage rising within her, at the prison to which he could not help returning even when the doors were thrown open. A scant few minutes ago he had been by her side, her harmony, the two of them guiding the piano to their music. She should have seen it coming.

The fingers of Erik's other hand worked convulsively at the bandage, bunching the soiled linen against his hip. Christine longed to take the thing from him and thrust it aside, far out of his reach.

Cautiously, she clasped his wrist and lowered his hand away from his face.

"Let me see."

Erik grimaced and Christine steeled herself, but he did not refuse. She put her hands lightly under his clenched jaw and coaxed him to turn to look at her. His pulse throbbed crazily under the blade of her hand, and hers matched it now, beat for beat, as she traced lines on his good cheek, mirroring the damage on the other side.

"It will heal. If you let it."

"You are unduly fond of freaks, Mademoiselle Daaé," he murmured, without moving away.

"And you are unduly fond of playing one." Christine brushed the very edge of his scars, as gently as she could. "It is only blisters, such as dancers have after weeks of rehearsal. But not even Blanche would be fool enough to go day and night en pointe just to keep the illusion of flight. Erik, this is madness. You have to stop."

"I meant only to spare you… Christine, no." He shuddered when she refused to move her hand, but she drew him closer and put her cheek against his unbroken one, skin to skin, wary of causing pain. It was an awkward closeness, but so much better than being made a spectator for his struggle. She moved past his temple, to his ear.

"You are mine now, and it is I who look at your face. I meant what I said that night, do you remember? I want to see you as you are. All of it, Erik, not just the part you choose to show the
world. All of it."

She felt him raise his arms to enfold her, uncertainly. Even now, she could feel the tension in his body and knew he could not believe her, but she tightened the embrace and let her eyes close, feeling his hair brush against her eyelids, nose, mouth, trying to think of nothing more than this.

"Christine..." Erik touched the back of her neck, the tiny island of exposed skin there, and Christine could only sob, in relief and the flood of dark, pulsing pleasure. She drew back enough to catch his mouth, and kissed him hard, heedless of scars and anger and pain. The sounds he made were chaotic and urgent, and in this as in music, Christine knew he could not hide. He was hers; she knew his taste now, the depth of him, the hidden tug of scars on the inside of his cheek that was as familiar as the timbre of his voice when he joined it to hers. She knew the things he had learned about her lips, the path within her mouth, the way her own breathing quickened and fluttered like wings.

Erik brought the kiss to a slow end, so gradual that Christine could not tell when they had stopped moving. He tugged at her lower lip lightly, one final note into the silence before they drew apart again.

"We have to go." His pupils were pools of fire in the lamplight, the blistered scars glistening shadows upon shadows, painful to see.

"In a moment," Christine agreed.

He glanced at the bundle of stained linen between their feet, then picked it up with distaste. "I have clean bandages back at the store. It is not far out of the way."

"Here," Christine pulled off her neckscarf, a pretty scrap of white silk that she was fond of. "You can't put that thing back on. This will do."

He fingered the fine fabric. "I can't. It will be ruined."

"All right then," she said seriously. "It is not far. Let us go, as you are."

"Do not mock me."

"I am not mocking you. Your room is not half a block away. Nobody will see; and if they do, they will notice only a woman and a man with an injured face. Do not tell me there is never a brawl in these streets, or an accident upon the ramparts, or another skirmish."

"And I thought I was mad."

Christine passed him the scarf wordlessly, and he draped it over one side of his head, and secured the hat over it. The old bandage he stuffed into his pocket.

They checked the theatre for any stray signs of their presence as they were now accustomed to doing, moved the boxes back to their places, and turned out the lights.

In the momentary darkness, the white line of daylight between the doors shone like a silver sword.

"Christine..." Erik's voice was little more than a sigh at her shoulder.

"Hmm?"

"Be very quiet now. We have been followed. There is somebody in the foyer."
A jolt of fear sparked in her chest; Christine listened. He was right; a man's heavy booted tread sounded just beyond the doors.

"The side exit," she suggested, and felt him concur. They hastened back towards the stage and a wedge of light split the darkness as Erik opened the side door.

They were fortunate: a moment behind them, Christine heard the clatter of the foyer doors swinging open, but by then they were safely outside.

Christine blinked; impossibly, it was still daylight, although dusk was already gathering in the doorways and under awnings. Erik looked along the shabby, nearly deserted street, but there was nobody in sight.

"We had best not linger, whoever it is will be back here in a minute. This way."

They walked steadily towards the Gandons' store, downhill. A minute passed, and then another, but they were not followed. Beside her, Erik had become again the elegant gentleman, the illusion so complete that Christine herself could almost believe they had never been in the dark theatre, alone.

Outside the store, she breathed in relief. "We're here."

Louise Gandon sat behind the front counter, frowning over a lurid copy of something titled Le Combat. The headline demanded closure of all private butchers, universal rations… Behind her, the store was a dark cavern in which Christine could just about see the stacked outlines of empty crates. Louise put aside the paper, directing her frown at the two of them:

"Ah, the man who will not fight. And you again, mam'zelle."

Christine bowed her head a little, hoping her embarrassment was not too obvious. "Good afternoon, madame."

Erik pulled out his key, with a wary glance at Louise. "Go inside, Christine. I will be right back."

Louise admitted them into the store, with less than a willing welcome, and Erik disappeared upstairs. In the dim interior, Christine could smell plaster dust and fresh paint from the workshop at the back, and the faint lingering scent of brewed coffee. It was curiously comforting. She gave Louise a tentative smile, in thanks for the refuge, and Louise sighed and gestured at an upturned crate beside her. Christine sat cautiously, moving her skirts aside.

"Well, my songbird? What do they say in the city then?"

"What about, madame?"

Louise shifted in her chair uncomfortably. "Enough of that 'madame' nonsense, you're not in your Opéra here. Name's Louise, and that's what you may call me."

"Louise," Christine corrected herself. "I know very little, I'm afraid. There was some fighting last week, but you must know that already."

"Indeed I do. Trifling nonsense that, a sop to keep us quiet."

"There were wounded," Christine objected, recalling too vividly the screaming men carried into Raoul's tent, and the surgeon with arms red to the elbow.
"Ruddy waste, that. We're sitting here chewing our black bread, bunch of pigs in a pen ready for the butchering, when we could burst right through those gates in a blow like one of them locomotives at full steam. Half a million rifles, girl, that's what we have! But they won't let us out, not us."

Christine frowned. "The Prussians?"

"Prussians! Screw the Prussians, Trochu and his army lot. Have you a brain behind those dreaming eyes? It's not the Prussians keep us back. It's our own generals, the whole damn lot of them. All they do is turn their officers to keeping us in line, and tell our men they want more drilling."

"But what of the relief armies that Monsieur Gambetta is raising? Would it not be best to wait?"

"Wait?" Louise's already ruddy complexion turned almost puce, and Christine feared she might at any moment blow off steam like the trains she had mentioned.

"Empire!" she spat, "You and the likes of you, coddled little puppets swallowing shit like it was chocolate in gold paper, waiting for a saviour from God. Well, you keep praying then, but I tell you, there's people in this city tired of bending the knee. You tell that to your city friends."

Christine lowered her eyes, thinking of Raoul and the other officers in their sparse military tent, waiting, waiting, locked in their own too-comfortable frustration, not so different after all… She was saved from having to reply by Erik's return.

He descended the stairs two at a time, his face neatly bandaged again, and Christine felt a warmth spread through her at his approach, as if an answering flame inside her flared stronger. She rose from her seat.

"Shall we go?"

Erik held out her scarf, undamaged, and Christine let him put it around her neck and fold it under her coat collar. His fingertips lingered warm on her skin, long enough that she felt her cheeks burn, aware of Louise watching them.

"My thanks," Erik said to Louise, touching his hat-brim in her direction as she huffed in response, and in another moment they were outside.

He descended the stairs two at a time, his face neatly bandaged again, and Christine let him put it around her neck and fold it under her coat collar. His fingertips lingered warm on her skin, long enough that she felt her cheeks burn, aware of Louise watching them.

"My thanks," Erik said to Louise, touching his hat-brim in her direction as she huffed in response, and in another moment they were outside.

Christine glanced at the sky anxiously, deep blue striped with gold and scarlet. It was later than she had thought. "We must hurry; Meg will have finished by now. Monsieur De Gas is on night duty, he'll be due on the ramparts after sundown."

They walked as fast as could be managed without drawing undue attention, mercifully still heading downhill. Even so, it was full dark by the time they reached the studio. The gas streetlights were dead; instead, only a few sputtering oil lamps brightened the street corners.

"Meg!" Christine cried, turning the last corner at a run. Meg turned and smiled; she was standing by the side door of Monsieur De Gas's house, talking to a middle-aged woman who must have been a servant come outside to keep her company. The woman held a lantern in one hand and the folds of her shawl in the other, huddling without a coat in the growing chill. At the sight of them approaching, she said something to Meg and ducked gratefully back into the house, taking the lantern with her.

"I'm so sorry we're late." Christine tried to catch her breath as Erik came up behind her. She was deeply grateful Meg had not been left to stand here alone in the gloomy street.
"What on earth have you been doing? It's after six." Meg glanced up at Erik and amended hastily, "Never mind. Let's go home, maman will be beside herself."

Just then the door opened again, and a dark-haired man in a National Guard's greatcoat and kepi came out, a rifle slung over his shoulder.

"Monsieur De Gas," Meg said, stepping out of his way.

He turned towards her and only then seemed to identify her; Christine realised one of his eyes was weak. "Good grief! Are you still here?"

Christine felt Erik tense, as if he thought to retreat into the shadows. It took her a moment to grasp it; of course, Monsieur De Gas had been a regular at the Opéra.

"We are just heading home," Meg assured him.

"Hm." He cast an artist's disconcerting look over Christine and Erik, lingering on his bandage, before returning to Meg.

"Don't go catching a chill now, I have three pieces to finish. Here," he reached into his knapsack and took out a wrapped parcel; bread and a few slivers of smoked meat, Christine saw on the open side. "Victorine packed enough to feed a battalion, I don't need to carry all that."

Meg hesitated, but he simply placed the parcel into her hands and released it. Meg caught it before it could fall.

"Monsieur, wait!" The servant, Victorine, opened the door again. "You left your sketchbook and pens behind."

She passed him a thin dog-eared notebook and a leather pen case, and shut the door.

Meg made an odd noise, almost pain, and Christine looked at her in surprise. Her face had gone white.

Monsieur De Gas opened the book, and turned a page, then another, looking bemused. "This is not mine."

"No," Meg said, her lips barely moving. "It's mine."

He did not raise his eyes from the page, or show any sign that he heard. For what seemed like minutes, they stood there, waiting.

At length, he closed the book and put it together with the pen case into Meg's nerveless arms, on top of the food parcel.

Then he simply walked away.

Meg clasped the bundle to her chest, looking after him like a dancer told she was not needed in this ballet after all.

"Meg?" Christine asked after a moment. "What is it?"

"I think… I just lost my job."

Without another word, Erik stepped away from Christine, and followed after him.
Chapter 45: Shapes and Shadows

A/N: Thank you, lovely readers, for being here! It was a pleasure to read all the speculations after the last chapter and I look forward to hearing what you think of this one.

Trivia for this chapter: Bastion 12 really was where Degas served during the siege. Altogether there were 94 bastions around the perimeter of the city wall, which were manned by the Garde Nationale volunteers. For this purpose the city was divided into sectors, like giant pie slices, and men from each sector were appointed to the corresponding section of the wall.

Chapter 45 — Shapes and Shadows

Meg spent the evening drawing. She did it out in the open, with pens and ink and paper spread out over the cleared dining table, cross-hatching with stubborn single-minded concentration. Her mother stood motionless at her shoulder and watched the rapid, jerky movements of the pen, never making a single comment. Christine felt an intruder between them. She would have liked to escape to the parlour, to scoot her legs up into the corner of the divan and do her mending in solitude, but there was already a lamp lit here and good oil was too precious to waste on a whim. She might need it herself another night, to work on her music. So she remained at the table, sewing buttons onto her winter coat, with only the ceaseless swish-swish of Meg's pen and her own needle marking the time. The coat was good thick wool, dyed a beautiful deep blue, but even with the buttons moved to their limit there was no disguising that it had been made to fit a child's shape: too narrow in the hip and bust, too short at the waist. A new coat had been less than a wish that morning; now, without even Meg's job, this one would simply have to serve.

She had seen Meg draw before, of course she had. But the odd sketch doodled in the margins of a newspaper or on the obverse of a receipt had in no way prepared her for what Meg did now. This was more like her dancing, the seemingly effortless performance that could come only with tremendous hidden work. She must have been been doing this for a long time, Christine thought, longer than even Madame Giry seemed to have suspected. All those evenings when they had run out of ink… Christine stabbed the needle into the edge of a buttonhole, more forcefully than she had intended. Caught up in her music, she had once again lost track of her friend's life.

After a while she got up and went to put the kettle on for tea, then resumed her sewing. Neither Meg nor Madame Giry looked up at her passage; only the curtains moved lightly, revealing the black mirror of early nightfall. Was it as dark upon the ramparts now as in the middle of the city, Christine wondered uneasily — dark enough to hide a man's shadow and leave only his voice? Outside the studio, after the artist's brusque dismissal, she had seen indignation flare in Erik's eyes, and then worse, a kind of joy of the chase... Then he was gone. Christine could not imagine by what means he intended to persuade Monsieur de Gas, if indeed that was his aim. She tried to turn her thoughts from the dreadful guesswork.

Meg's pen stopped, but she had only reached out to refill the inkwell. Madame Giry caught a falling lock of her hair before it could mar the drawing, and Meg looked up at her briefly. Madame Giry gave a tiny nod towards the paper, and Meg returned to it with a new will, as though something in that minute gesture had given her wings.

"She is pleased with you," Christine whispered, too low for them to hear. She went to pour the tea. It was unjust, that she could never see her own father's eyes at the sound of her music, and could not even recall her mother's. The only one who might have remembered was Raoul, but Raoul would applaud her no matter the music, he could not know… And even her childish hope that her
song might be heard from heaven lay buried with the bloodstained dream of the Angel of Music. But that was hardly the fault of Meg or Madame Giry. Christine picked up the tray and went back to the table.

"There." Meg dropped the pen she had been holding onto a piece of blotting paper, and held up the sheet.

Christine did not know how she kept hold of the tray.

The crisp inked lines looked nothing like the flowing colours of her father's Opéra posters, and yet the echo was unmistakably there: Giselle, the same Giselle he had once drawn, only watched from behind in a dizzying reversal of perspective. Christine glanced at Madame Giry: she was looking at herself. The central figure was hardly more than a black silhouette backlit by blinding footlights: a lone dancer downstage, no longer young, demonstrating to a gaggle of hastily sketched girls the ghostly, pleading mime of protection: let me save him, her arms say, let me keep him safe. And behind her, unseen, the girls mimicking it each in their own way: some bored, some mocking, a handful chatting, one or two honestly trying… A whole rehearsal and a whole lifetime in that one sketched scene.

"Tea," Christine said, too loud and too clear. The cups and spoons jangled on the tray as she set it down, but nobody seemed to mind.

She took up her sewing kit and her mended coat, and slipped away to her room.

She had foolishly left the window open and the room was bitterly cold. She went to close it, but instead only stood, alone and shivering, trying not to think of what Erik might be doing, might have already done, in the tangle of dark streets or on the ramparts… She should have stopped him, should have called out.

Erik. Monsieur Erik Andersson. Had she forgotten so soon the Opera Ghost's threats and demands and "accidents"? Had she reshaped him once again into what she needed, discarding the parts of the truth that she could not bear to see? It was not so long ago that the Phantom had thought to advance her career with the spiteful, vicious pranks that would now forever cling to her own name and her father's, tainting even Raoul with the blood that had come at the end… Oh, but she did not want to think of it. She had to think of it.

Was she creating Erik the way she had once created the Angel?

Christine prodded her soul with the question, merciless because she suspected the answer. She had taken him into her life now, opening to him the long-guarded corners of her soul, sharing her own music. She liked his touch; her skin tightened at the thought of a kiss, and more than a kiss… Deep in her heart was the memory of him wrapping his shirt over her bare skin, a fantasy of making love.

Once, she'd had the strength to hold up to him the mirror of his hatred and show him the distortion in his soul. Once, when he had wept at the destruction of his own making, she had been strong enough to walk away.

Was she still? If this new dream came apart, would she be able to let go?

Christine slammed the windowpane shut. From her dresser drawer, she pulled out the picture of her father and studied it for a long time, turning the frame to the pale moonlight from the window. The dead paper of the portrait could not change the line of his mouth, the shape of his brows. If he knew of his daughter's fear, it was in a place beyond her reach.
Square-shouldered silhouettes of men in Garde Nationale greatcoats appeared more and more regularly the closer Erik came to the periphery of the city: at first only the occasional glint of a rifle stock here and there, then clumps of men of all ages meeting outside bars and at doorways or walking along together, their breath fogging the air. As his eyes began to pick them out more readily, Erik realised they were all following the same routes, heading for the eastern bastions to relieve the previous watch. There was something unsettling in this living river draining the city of men, rivulets joining into a single stream. More unsettling still was the feeling that he was walking with them, becoming one of the multitude.

He had hoped to intercept Meg's ill-mannered artist before the man could go too far, but keeping him in view among the dozens identically attired guards, in the dark, proved an exercise in frustration. Twice he thought he had him, only to discover at the next crossroads that it was the wrong man. Erik grit his teeth. The whole thing was degenerating into a comedy chase that had not even the excuse of humour to temper its lunacy, when he had left Christine unaccompanied to make her own way home with Meg through the grim cold streets. But he would find the man now, even if he had to track him to the damned ramparts.

The streets became wider and there, in the distance, loomed the wall: massive and endless against the deep indigo sky. The houses here looked abandoned, windows boarded up, doors missing. Only a few determined filles in dresses far too daring and flimsy for this weather were standing about, blowing on half-frozen fingers in between calling out to the passing men. A few called back; one or two swerved from their path and vanished into a doorway. Erik caught sight of de Gas again, before he vanished in the midst of another group. He cursed his luck; the further he went, the greater the confluence of men and the more difficult to have a private word.

At last he saw their immediate destination: several tents had been pitched in an empty square, and officers milled about them, attempting to marshal the arriving National Guard volunteers into something resembling an army unit. From the surrounding streets, more guards emerged: tall men and short, fat and red-nosed or thin and bespectacled, boys scarcely old enough to hold a rifle and old white-bearded grandsires, as unmilitary a gathering as any Erik could have imagined. De Gas took a place among them, hefting his rifle.

"Bastion 12!" an officer was calling out, riding up and down the ragged line on an ostentatious white charger. "We are marching for bastion 12 now! Anyone seen Gérard? Where the hell are your officers? You gentlemen, here. Present arms!"

Rifles went up at every angle. One was dropped noisily, much to the mounted officer's disgust, and collected again amid snorts of stifled laughter from the ranked men. The officer rounded of them:

"You think this is a joke? You are here to do your sacred duty before yourselves and your country, and you find it funny that one of your own number doesn't know how to hold his weapon, let alone fire it? Let me tell you, when we launch a sortie, you will need to know that you can rely on the man next to you, whoever he may be. It will be serious then, deadly serious."

Erik kept to the cover of a wagon while a headcount was taken, his eyes on the artist's back. He did not like where this was leading; this battalion was evidently foregathering to march for the ramparts and approaching de Gas in the middle of the march was not a comfortable prospect. The officer rode on in his search for the unit's still-absent commander, and Erik made a decision.

He walked brazenly out of the shadows and went straight for his mark.

"A word with you, monsieur!"
De Gas turned at this declaration, as did half a dozen others from the sorry line-up. Conversations broke off; faces turned towards him. Erik ignored them.

"Erik Andersson," he introduced himself curtly. The artist raised an elegant hand to his kepi and started to reply in kind, but Erik silenced him with an impatient hand. "I know who you are. I would have a word with you, about the Giry girl you so summarily dismissed earlier this evening."

De Gas looked at him with interest, without the least sign of remorse. "And you are?..."

"A friend of her family. And a fellow artist." Erik could feel the other men staring, but he had only enough patience to deal with this one. Any moment now the officer would be back, they would be ordered to move out, and the moment would be gone.

"I say, haven't we met before?" De Gas looked puzzled, just long enough for Erik to wonder in a wave of cold sweat whether this former Opéra patron might have attended its scandalous final performance — but de Gas went on: "I thought I recognised you! Café du Suède with Choury, wasn't it, the night they ran the Ems dispatch in Le Soir."

"That may be so," Erik dismissed this. "But I need an answer about Mademoiselle Giry, if you please."

The artist looked genuinely baffled. "Forgive me, but what is your question?"

"You must know she is a dancer out of work, and reliant on your art for employment. Are you a man of honour? Would you have her starve, for the temerity to have made a few scribbles of her own?"

At this, de Gas' prominent eyes bulged: "Scribbles? Scribbles, you call it, and you claim to be an artist! The child has been scribbling since the cradle, I believe, but if what I saw today is any indication, she may yet put a few of us other scribblers to—"

"Fall in! Let's move it, gentlemen, quick march! Move out!"

Erik started at the command; the other onlookers returned to their positions. De Gas thrust out a hand earnestly and clasped Erik's as if to extract a promise.

"Tell Mademoiselle Giry she is expected after lunch tomorrow, as usual. And she is not to be late!"

The uneven lines of half-trained soldiers straggled out in the direction of the ramparts, a few throwing curious looks over their shoulders. Erik began to retreat towards the safety of the nearest street, but stopped when he felt the gaze of a nearby officer upon him.

"Interesting," Henri Guyon said, in the same infuriatingly amused tone Erik recalled from the chance meeting in Chagny's ambulance tent. He moved the packet of documents he was holding and offered Erik his hand. "It is not often we get a white knight here, fighting for his lady's honour. It was charming to see, monsieur, you fairly brightened my evening. This Mademoiselle Giry must be an extraordinary creature."

"And you must be an extraordinary simpleton," Erik snapped, barely managing to restrain himself from simply pushing past. "Mademoiselle Giry has nothing to do with it. Excuse me."

Madame Giry sat on the edge of Meg's bed and stroked her hair as she had not done since her daughter was a tiny girl, waiting for her to sleep. Meg's shoulders still shuddered every now and
then, racked at last with the bitter tears of loss, and the impossibility of return. The disappointment would pass, Madame Giry thought, and other chances would come for her art to grow — God only knew, there were artists enough in Paris. If only this accursed imprisonment of two million souls would come to an end, and life and art were permitted to resume their course.

She found her eyes returning again to the portrait above Meg’s dresser. Its edges were frayed, as though it had been kept too long between the pages of a book, but the drawing was clear and frighteningly simple: a rough likeness of Helena Weiss making ready for the stage, halfway through applying greasepaint to conceal a scratched cheek and swollen eye, and scrawled before her, reversed as on the surface of a mirror, the ugly word "spy". Looking at the drawing was like finding herself behind that dressing-room mirror, privy suddenly to the girl's fear and responsible for the betrayal in her too-heavily painted eyes. There was a searing intimacy to the moment that caught the viewer unprepared, and thrust before them the face of this so-called spy.

Jules had never dared draw anything like this; this was another's school entirely. And if this Monsieur de Gas truly saw nothing more than a mockery of his own work in the fragments that filled the sketchbook Meg had shown her, then, Madame Giry thought, he was as blind as she herself had been.

This was no mere pastime for a girl happy to earn a few sous by donning her gauze skirt and staring soulfully into nothing, selling one art into slavery to another. She should have known her daughter better than that. Meg had been learning, for months now, and however unintended the lesson, the teacher had been Monsieur de Gas.

Madame Giry looked down at her child, a child no longer. She was asleep at last, still puffy-eyed and blotchy, and her mouth still set in the same determination. Well. Perhaps Monsieur Duchamp was right; if the mother was stubborn, the daughter must surely learn. But never in all her life, not even at the last curtain call of her *Giselle*, had she felt more proud.

The breath of air from the hallway disturbed her; she turned around and saw the door move. Christine, up at this hour?

Madame Giry tucked the blanket closer around Meg's shoulders and went out into the dark corridor towards the dining room, flinging on a shawl as she went.

"Ah," she said, when she saw the black shape of a man by the balcony door.

Her hands found the polished edge of the sideboard, keeping her mercifully upright, and she stood between the slashes of cold moonlight upon the floor, waiting for him to close the latch. Why, Madame Giry asked herself wearily. Why now, of all nights?

He looked at her with his half-bandaged face drawn in grey shadows, at once nervous and smug, as though he had done something that pleased him and had come into her house in the middle of the night to seek approbation. She had seen that look many times in another life, when she was still barely older than Meg and he was only—

"Erik." Madame Giry sighed, and farewelled all hope of sleep that night. "What has happened?"

The sound of his own name made him raise his eyes warily, like a stray dog unexpectedly petted, and Madame Giry felt a piercing guilt. She pitied him, yes, but no good had ever come of her pity. He had to be treated as a man; Christine had taught her the truth of that. Even when he stole inside through a balcony door. *Especially* then.

"Monsieur," she amended. "I trust there is good reason for this. My daughter and Christine returned
some hours ago, unaccompanied. They did not seem to know where you might be found."

Chastised, Christine's strange suitor tugged at the edge of his bandage, in a new and anxious habit Madame Giry did not recognise.

"I thought it my duty to have a word with the artist for whom your daughter has been posing. It was too late to return the usual way, but I thought... " He blew out a breath uncomfortably. "I was anxious to know that Christine was safely returned. My apologies for disturbing you."

"We are sufficiently disturbed these days that a little more can hardly matter," Madame Giry said ruefully. "Christine is well, and asleep, as we should all be. Dare I ask the outcome of this word of yours?"

He glanced at the lamp on the table. "May I?"

"Of course." Madame Giry passed him the matches from the sideboard, and Erik lit the lamp again and replaced the chimney. Golden light flickered over the scattered sketches and paper on table, making them seem older than they truly were, like pages from a scrapbook. Erik looked at them with more interest than Madame Giry had expected. He lifted the Giselle drawing carefully, then looked from it to her, as if to compare.

"Meg's work," she confirmed, noticing with amusement the defiance in her own voice, like that of a new mother proud of her infant's ten perfect toes, though she could scarcely claim them as her own accomplishment.

Erik replaced the drawing on the tabletop. "Meg's work. Did your daughter tell you of the loss of her work posing for Monsieur de Gas?"

"She went to sleep weeping for it. She speaks of money, but it is a painful thing, to find yourself exposed to one you admire and lose his regard. She will need time. The money can be found."

"There will be no need for it, madame. Monsieur de Gas is expecting her for her sitting tomorrow at the usual time."

Madame Giry frowned, "I do not understand your humour. Or his. Meg may be young, but her emotions are nothing to trifle with."

"I do not believe that to be his aim. He had no intention of dismissing her; the book he saw appeared to impress him deeply, that is all."

"...That is all. I see."

Madame Giry felt a weight lifted from her heart, a weight she had not realised was there. There were painful lessons one must learn in life and she could not hope to shield Meg from all of them — any of them — but just this once, the knife had been flung away without biting, and she was glad, deeply glad, that her child had been spared. The bitterness of rejection could poison talent; she had seen it happen before.

The drawings, the lamp, the shadows on the walls swam and blurred before her.

"Thank you," she said, smiling through it, and Erik stood before her like the little boy he might have been long before she had met him, absurdly gratified.

Madame Giry went to the dining room doors, removed the brass key from the lock and held it out to him. "There is bedding in the linen cupboard... Get some rest, Erik."
He made no reply and she expected none, but she put the key on the table, a little piece of trust, and left him with the sound of his name like memories in the night, and his shadow upon the squares of lamplight, the shape of a man.

Chapter 46: Rations

"Chocolates for breakfast!" Meg said in amazement, then darted a cautious glance at her mother, who was busy pouring out steaming black coffee, her favourite silk shawl draped like wings from her arms, looking for all the world like she had nothing to do with this extraordinary luxury. The heady aroma of cocoa from the open gilt-paper box wafted with the smell of fresh coffee, and it was the Opéra all over again — Carlotta and her retinue of admirers with their boxes of chocolates left forgotten, the ballet dormitories where those stolen chocolates were consumed in conspiratorial haste, and her mother's little room, where together with Christine they would sit drinking scalding coffee and refuse to admit any knowledge of chocolates.

Meg accepted a coffee cup gratefully and slipped into a chair, shuffling her sketches aside. Behind the table, the balcony door was uncurtained and the pale morning light turned steam into white clouds. The edges of last night's sorrows had softened in the light of day, and it was impossible to sulk at Monsieur de Gas' dismissal when her mother had at last seen her art. She would simply have to find another job, that's all there was to it. There had to be ways to survive, at least until the armies from the provinces could reach Paris and free them from this unending limbo.

She took a sip, returning her mother's smile, then nodded at the chocolate box:

"What are we celebrating?"

"Art. And the lack of common sense." Madame Giry set down the coffee-pot and took her own seat, reaching up to adjust the coiled braid at the back of her head. "I made the grave error of asking our guest to go out for bread this morning. He returned with these."

"Madame, if you had seen the queue for the manure-like substance the bakery labelled bread, you would understand. Good morning, mademoiselle."

Meg gulped her coffee in surprise. "Uh. Good morning."

The former Phantom — Monsieur Andersson — came from the parlour to the table and Madame Giry passed a coffee cup to him. The porcelain handle looked flimsy in his long fingers, but he held it lightly and carefully as he set it down. He put his hands in his pockets, took them out again, pulled out a chair, but did not sit.

"Christine?..."

"Is still asleep," Madame Giry confirmed.

"It is rather early," Meg pointed out, trying not to sound like she was complaining. He was her friend's suitor, and perhaps that gave him the right to enter their lives now, but it had been pleasant to have a few moments alone with her mother before Christine woke up. She took a chocolate and bit into it... On the other hand, she reflected, this was a better breakfast than they had had in weeks, and most welcome after a supper of nothing but black tea. She took another. It had marzipan inside. Her empty stomach growled embarrassingly in appreciation.

"I have instructions to convey to you, mademoiselle," Monsieur Andersson looked down at her across the table. "Your artist was most anxious that you are on time for today's sitting."
Meg wished she had not tried to eat that chocolate whole.

"I don't understand," she said in a sticky cocoa-flavoured mumble, and finished the last mouthful in unseemly haste. "He saw my sketchbook…"

"Take it with you. And these." He swept an arm at the previous night's drawings.

Meg's eyes widened. "Monsieur de Gas asked to see my work?"

"Not yet. But he will." He stared at his coffee as if he had forgotten what to do with it. "Art must not be permitted to remain unshared, as useless as a conversation with your own echo. Your Monsieur de Gas will know that, if he is truly an artist."

"He is. But the things in that sketchbook..." Meg sighed, fingering the corner of a drawing. "He must think it a mockery but I didn't intend it, not at all. I just thought it's funny, he sees us dancing at the Opéra, but he doesn't know how it is, not really. So I copied a few of his sketches, but from inside, the way things look backstage. The way things used to look that is, before — before the fire."

Meg bit her tongue and looked to her mother for support, but Madame Giry only stirred her cup, sending new tendrils of steam swirling above the surface and over her hands:

"In this, Monsieur Andersson is right. Art is no different from dance, or music: it needs to be seen, and heard, and questioned. And understood."

"He will not like it." Meg pictured with dread displaying her drawings to Monsieur de Gas' critical gaze, inviting the lashing criticism of which he was more than capable.

"He does not need to like it, my dear. It is your art, not his. You cannot please everyone, but that does not mean you should confine your audience to the mirror. You will go, today?"

Meg nodded mutely, and saw the hidden pride in the corners of her mother's mouth.

"I'll go," she said, stronger.

"Good." Madame Giry studied the former Phantom over the coffee cup in her hands, as if she was measuring him against a role in some new choreography.

"There are no news from the defense?"

"I saw the ramparts only briefly," he admitted. "I regret there was no time to ask questions. But the battalion was heading for their regular patrol, nothing more. They are expecting Gambetta's armies."

"Very well." Madame Giry nudged the chocolate box towards him. "Let us eat cake and live in hope. At least while the chocolates last."

He hesitated and for a moment looked like he might finally sit down, but just then a small sound made him pause. Meg heard it too. He looked over his shoulder, then turned and froze like that, coffee cup still in one hand, the coffee threatening to spill on the parquet.

Christine stood in the doorway, bleary and sleep-rumpled, with a hairbrush in one hand and her hair undone, as though she had been surprised at her dressing-table.

"I heard you," she said softly, to her suitor.
He replaced the cup and saucer on the table, with a noise like chattering teeth.

"Good morning. You… slept well?"

Christine gave him a lopsided smile as she came closer, and noticed the chocolates. "You are courting our favour."

"Not exactly."

Madame Giry reached for the coffee pot, expecting Christine to take a cup, but Christine shook her head.

"I just need some water, Madame Giry, my head is aching." She returned her bruised gaze to her suitor. "You disappeared last night."

He inclined his bandaged head. "I thought it best to speak with your friend's artist. He is not as big a fool as he might have been."

"To speak with him…"

Meg said, "Monsieur de Gas wants me back today." She was beginning to believe it.

"Oh." Christine fidgeted with the hairbrush, then seemed to draw herself together. "Excuse me, please."

She disappeared in the direction of her room, and it struck Meg suddenly that there were any number of things the Phantom might have done in the name of "art unshared"... She glanced at him warily, but could not reconcile this man, with his untouched coffee and the bandage he kept adjusting, with the monster of their old nightmares.

Madame Giry set down her empty cup, and took out a few small blue papers from her pocket. She fanned them out to show the official stamps. *One hundred grams of meat, or two meals at the cantine municipale*, Meg read. It had taken her mother three hours of waiting in the line at the municipal offices to receive them.

"Chocolates are very well, monsieur, but you know as well as I do one cannot live this way. These are ration cards, but we cannot eat them either. They must be filled. You might accompany Christine on her errands this morning, if you have no prior engagement."

He accepted the cards, and Meg saw the flicker of gratitude in his eyes. "It would be my pleasure, madame."

Madame Giry looked back at him for a long time, seeing Meg knew not what, before Christine came back, now calm and properly dressed.

"Chocolate?" Meg offered, and Christine nodded:

"If I may."

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With her belly full of chocolate, Christine thought she ought not feel as empty as she did, yet she would have gladly exchanged all the delicacies in the world for some bread and cheese. Erik was clearly determined to make up for the previous night's flight by not straying a pace from her all morning, remaining by her side as they walked from store to store in search of vegetables then
waited outside the butcher's for the miserable ration of meat they were permitted. The grey and shadowless day was getting on her nerves. She could feel Erik glancing over at her uncertainly, and once making a move to offer her his arm, but she could not take it, not yet. It shamed her that she had suspected him of something unworthy last night, when all he had done was try to straighten out a misunderstanding: not so different, surely, from what any other man might have attempted…

Yet no other man would have chased a stranger through the darkness. And it would be more shameful still to forget it.

She wanted to forget it. If her mind accused him when he had done no wrong, if her trust was so fragile, what was the use of this courtship? Were they to shackle each other to the past, each pulling the other down, again and again? *You need no mask with me,* she had told him, believing it, wanting him to believe it. But this grey morning, she wanted only to be left in peace, to suture the old wounds that refused to stay closed.

"Christine," Erik warned, taking a step back from a squabble breaking out.

"Just a moment!" A corpulent woman in front of them waved her umbrella at a young girl who had run up to take the place of an elderly lady, presumably her grandmother. "The rest of us have been on our feet for hours, mademoiselle. There's a queue!"

The national guardsman policing the line was immediately there to quash the disturbance. After some argument the replacement was permitted, but it took a long time for the grumbling to die away. The queue slowly shuffled forward. Christine tried to focus on the hidden stream of music that flowed deep in her thoughts, the way she usually did during these tedious hours spent queuing, but it was difficult to concentrate with Erik so near. He glanced at her again, but said nothing.

"Your cards, please, mademoiselle."

The meat they finally received was pink and sinewy and flecked with white fibres, nothing at all like beef, but Christine did not argue. Even horseflesh was better than a diet of rice and tea. She surrendered the precious blue cards and took the wrapped parcel.

"All gone!" called the butcher's boy from the doors, and at once the guard shut the heavy metal grille, amid cries of outrage from the remaining queue.

Christine walked the gauntlet of the disappointed, with Erik a step behind her. Around them, servant girls who had arrived too late to fill their cards glared unhappily at Erik's civilian clothing, muttering comments behind their hands about cowards who took meat from the families of the enlisted defenders, and the women who profited by it. Christine could scarcely wait to be gone, before all that simmering bitterness could spill into something more dangerous.

"Where to?" Erik asked her when they were clear, his voice tight with the effort of pretending he could not hear the whispers.

"This way."

A few produce stalls had been run up directly on the footpath, backing up against an empty advertising booth that no longer carried theatre posters. The vegetables sold here came from the foragers who stole out of the city to dig in the soil right under the noses of the Prussians, risking their lives for parsnips and potatoes. Perhaps some traded with the Prussians as well. Christine had tried to avoid them at first, but she had long since grown used to their presence.

"I've got no parsnips," the woman at the stall declared. She poked a few shrivelled little things on
her trestle table, "Turnips, nice and fresh, or carrots. Ten sous for the turnips, carrots are twelve."

"Turnips then."

"Carrots too. Permit me."

Reluctantly, Christine allowed Erik to leave the last of his coins at the stall; her own purse was virtually empty, and with prices like this she could ill afford to insist on propriety. How long could she and Meg and Madame Giry hope to keep this up, when they could scarcely pay for a bunch of turnips? Perhaps Meg truly would keep her job, but that did not make Christine feel any less indebted. All she had was her music, and that could not serve to put bread on the table.

Still, at least the music was hers. Its rhythm in her mind was the sea, pure and vast, and she could share it as she chose. Perhaps that could be enough.

They started to make their way back. Low cloud turned to drizzle and Christine kept her face down, pathetically grateful for the excuse not to make conversation. The last thing she wanted right now was to imitate a strolling young Parisienne of the old days, gazing up in trusting infatuation at her suitor. Women, ordinary busy middle-class women, were coming in and out of a nearby café-concert that had been converted to a hospital, marked with a large Red Cross on a white flag drooping over the stonework of the porch. At the next corner, their way was briefly barred by the bulk of a military bier bearing a coffin, crowned with an officer's epaulettes. The sad gaunt-looking horse waited for a succession of carriages going the other way, before plodding patiently onward. Another dead man. The sight was as commonplace as a milk cart would have once been, and in truth, a milk cart these days would have drawn far more attention, but Christine hated it all the same.

When the apartment building was in sight, Erik raised a hand to stop her. Christine looked up in surprise. His bandage, damp from the drizzle, was wrinkled as in a frown, though the open side of his face remained impassive. There were bags under his eyes; he had not slept well either. Christine fought the impulse to touch his wet cheek, to remind herself of the feel of his skin.

"Let us go back to the theatre," Erik said.

She had expected anything but that. It took a moment to recollect her thoughts. "We were followed, yesterday."

He shrugged. "It may have been nothing to do with us. Someone coming to collect a box of pamphlets. Or simply a thief."

"Perhaps," Christine allowed. "But if not… it is a risk, you said so yourself. There are spy stories in every paper. A poor man was shot for nothing more sinister than popping his head out of a sewer at the wrong moment, and being taken for a Prussian. He was only a sewer worker."

"And I am only a curiosity. A deformed man in an architect's suit who goes shopping instead of standing guard. If they wanted to brand me a spy, they could do it as easily at the butcher's shop. Am I to spend my days cowering in a corner and cringing in shadows?"

"That is not what I meant. Erik, I don't want to risk you being arrested. Last night…"

Erik winced and dropped his gaze, and for a moment Christine felt a sick swoop of fear in her stomach: surely, surely he had not lied; he had done nothing wrong.

"Chagny would not have left you."
Christine thought she had misheard. "Raoul?"

Misery was so plain in his eyes that Christine felt anew the dreadful guilt of having suspected him for even a moment and, equally dreadful, the knowledge that it could be no other way.

"Chagny would have had a carriage for you, or a servant to send along, or whatever it is these people do! I cannot tell. But it was wrong of me to leave you to go home alone. Unchivalrous."

Christine burst out laughing, hysterically, until her eyes were brimming and a passing gentleman shied from her as if she were a lunatic. Unchivalrous!

"I am not a child, or a duchess, to go everywhere escorted. But perhaps next time you might give me warning."

He looked thoroughly baffled. Perhaps he had honestly thought her black mood due to nothing more than his departure. She took the groceries from him.

"Wait for me here," she told him. "I'm going to fetch my music book."

Again." Christine flipped through the pages back to the start of the second movement. "It doesn't sound right, there. Too messy, the parts should not blur like that. Let's try it with a pause."

Erik sat back from the instrument and tried not to scratch at the cursed blisters under his bandage.

"Enough," he said. "You cannot do this to your voice, you will push it too far."

Christine came over to perch on the edge of the piano bench, and Erik saw her study their warped reflection in the polished lid. Her hip was warm against his.

"Perhaps. But it is so close to how it should be. How it sounds in my head."

"In that case, we must certainly stop. There is only room for one mad musician between us, and I'm afraid that part has been cast."

He reached out and stroked the image of her cheek, lightly. Christine glanced away, as distant again as she had been that morning, though she did not move her hip.

Tentatively, Erik touched her hand where it lay in her lap. His shameful conduct of the night before weighed on him, entwining with the mutterings of the resentful crowd outside the butcher's. A coward. Less than a man.

Well then, was it not true? He was playing at courtship and music in a city where death was ranged at the walls, where the men wore guns and the women the black of mourning, and where the only music permitted was mass. Men of every class and station joined the battalions on the wall, ready to protect their home. But Erik Andersson had stood instead under the roof of another man's home, and wasted his right to fight as a man there, in that nightmare, as another might waste his ration cards upon a chunk of rotten meat. And now he had nothing left but the stink of his own sin.

He brushed his fingertips over the back of Christine's hand, following the undulations of her knuckles, the skin gone dry from household soap and too many chores. Her Vicomte would have known how to protect her.

Christine clutched his hand abruptly. "Oh! I almost forgot. Here, this is for you, I had a bit left
She leaned down to lift her music satchel from under the bench and rummaged within it, bringing out a brown glass medicine jar half-filled with something white. She put it into his unresisting palm.

"It's a salve for blisters. Take it, I have no need of it — I am not dancing now."

Erik stared at the jar suspiciously. "Neither am I."

Christine smiled then, for the first time all day, and Erik understood suddenly how badly he had missed it, craved it. His entire being followed the light of that smile.

Christine's gaze moved to his bandage and her smile faded slowly away.

"It is no better, is it."

"If you are expecting me to grow a new face, I fear it may take some time." He regretted the words before they were out, but he could not call them back. The jar of salve was a small weight in his palm; he shut his hand on it resolutely.

"Forget it, Christine. It is hardly worth your concern."

"All right then." Christine took something else from her bag. It took a moment for Erik to recognise it as a roll of linen.

"I have sufficient—" he began, but she cut him off.

"No. I want you to put it on me."

Erik stared at her, unable to comprehend what madness possessed her. Christine unrolled the linen, flowing it through unsteady fingers. Then she held it up to her own perfect face, marking a sharp white diagonal from forehead to jaw. A cold wave of horror washed over him. He did not want to see this. It was strange and repellent and wrong, wrong, wrong.

"Put it on as you do yours." She tilted her chin up, daring him to object.

"In God's name, what for?"

"For you. I want you to see this thing as I do."

"I have a little more need of it, don't you think?"

"Tell me how to tie it myself then. Perhaps then I can wear it daily, and adopt it as a fashion statement of our times, just as you said to the surgeon."

Erik watched her fumble with the cloth. It was incomprehensible, unbearable.

With a hard angry noise, he grasped the thing and wound it around her head, wrapping it over her curls and her hairpins and her lovely unblemished skin. He pulled the knot tight at the base of her skull, not kindly.

"Christine…"

She looked back at him, half-hidden, one eye shaded by the roughly formed slit of the eyehole. He wanted to weep, because he did know what she had meant by it, and it hurt so badly he could
barely breathe. Christine was gone, concealed behind the mask, right here and yet separated from him.

He all but ripped it off her, sending hairpins flying, indecent in his haste to get rid of the horror. Christine helped him, pulling at the linen too, until finally the thing was just a mess of cloth on the keyboard, powerless.

Christine gathered him tight against her, her slender arms around his hunched shoulders and her hands on the back of his head, letting him bury his shame in the hinge of her shoulder and neck, inhaling the sweet warmth of her living skin.

"Five minutes," Christine said softly, her breath touching his ear. Her hands were in his hair, weaving unconscious patterns. "Five minutes a day when you are with me, that is all. The rest of the time you can keep all the bandages you want."

"Not yet. There are sores — Christine, it is foul…"

"They will never heal if you go on this way. Erik, you have taken this to the edge of sanity."

She untangled herself from their embrace and moved back a little on the bench. She raised her hands to his face, palms to his cheeks. It took all the courage Erik could muster not to pull away, but Christine only held her hands there, one on his still-damp bandage, the other on bare skin. Then she guided his head around, until he saw the mirror to one side of the stage. A strip of reflection showed only her hand upon the mask.

"I want to see your face when you sing," she told him. "The way you see mine."

He looked past her, upstage and into the wings, to the swarms of dust motes sparkling in the halo of a gas-jet. "You used to ask for that very thing. Do you remember? As though angels have human faces."

"People have human faces."

"But you did not know what I was…"

"I had some hope." Christine gave him a tiny secretive smile, and something about it shot Erik's body with a surge of desire. "You see, it is not easy to picture yourself kissing a voice from heaven."

Erik felt as though he had just downed a glass of wine in a single gulp. The heat spread over his neck, to his chest. "You… pictured us kissing?"

"And you did not?" She put one hand on his chest and looked at her splayed fingers over his heart, lost in a past before betrayals. "Neither of us knew what you were, back then. But I thought I should like to kiss the music from your mouth."

Erik was struck dumb, staring at her in what he knew must be an utterly undignified manner, but all he could see was that tiny glorious smile that filled him at once with hope and the basest of human longing. The only consolation was that Christine's cheeks were burning too. He knew what night she now remembered, their white-hot confusion of limbs and faces, the end and the beginning of things. Human, both of them. Only human.

Before he could form a response, Christine stood up from the bench, and held out a hand.

"Erik, come, I want to sing. Just once more and we stop; this passage is driving me to distraction."
The temptation was too great. A decent suitor should have brought her home hours ago — would never have brought her here at all… Erik raised his hands to the keyboard, brushing the clump of bandage out of the way, and turned the music back a page.

Christine sketched a phrase to show him the place she wanted. "From here."

They sang again, and this time their two parts came together well enough that Erik felt Christine relax into it, at peace with the music and with him. He closed his eyes and allowed his hands to find the shimmering chords that merged and grew to a crescendo, supporting her voice and his own — and just for a little while he thought he glimpsed a future beyond the walls and the war.

They were free to see the world in that vision, and their faces were bathed in sunlight.

When the music came to its end, Christine collected her bag and the two of them circled the little hall to turn out the lights and restore boxes and chairs to they way they had found them, stepping through the now familiar ritual in companionable silence. It was good, frighteningly good, to share this space with Christine, to breathe the same air and hear the same song and move as she moved, in unison. The last flame vanished with a sigh, and the velvet darkness enveloped them together.

Erik opened the side door and felt Christine take his hand in hers. Cold evening rain slapped his face.

"No," Christine said suddenly, in the voice of a child.

A detachment of men in national guard kepis and coats surrounded the exit. Others were running here from the main doors, all armed with breech-loaders. The orange light of a single streetlamp glinted on black-oiled steel.

One stepped forward, and Erik at once recognised those glasses and that slope of the shoulders.

"Erik Andersson?" Jean sounded almost apologetic. "In the name of the Republic, we are here to arrest you."

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Chapter 47: The Lonely Room

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A/N: A bit of a historical point: the National Guard was given a number of privileges at the start of the siege, one of which was the right to stop and search anyone acting suspiciously, as well as to search premises without a warrant. Understandably, given the spy-mania that raged during this time, many such "investigations" took place on the slimmest of pretexts. For instance, a woman was accused of signalling to the Prussians from her window with red/green semaphore signs. It turned out to be... a parrot. Eventually people complained and Trochu, the governor of Paris, issued a proclamation forbidding this sort of thing. Nonetheless, there were some genuine cases of spying, particularly documents being copied and conveyed to the Prussians, so the hysteria was not entirely unfounded.

Chapter 47 — The Lonely Room

It all happened in a blur that Christine could later recall only as a mad whirl of wet greatcoats and rifle barrels, and in the centre of it, Erik's feral, stricken roar as he dropped her hand and lunged at Jean Gandon.

"Don't shoot!" bellowed Jean to the others, throwing his arms out wide against the encircling men. "Keep back!"
"Erik!"

Christine grabbed at his overcoat, trying to hold him back in turn, but strong hands gripped her arm from behind. Erik's gaze darted this way and that, from rifle to face to rifle to face, making a few National Guards take a hasty step back.

"Andersson," Jean said. "I'm sorry. But you must know this looks bad. You were seen at the ramparts last night. We need to ask some questions."

"Questions." Erik hissed the word.

"Questions which you will have no trouble answering, if you are what you say you are. This has gone far enough."

Christine struggled against the arms holding her, but it was hopeless. She twisted around, and instantly recognised the face.

"Louise, take the girl home to her family. Tell them we may need her back in the morning."

Louise Gandon's kerchief was soaked through and rain coursed down her forehead, but she did not slacken her grip on Christine's arm to wipe her face. She shook her head with grim pity:

"Come along, mam'zelle, this is no place for you."

"Get your hands off me!" Christine tried fruitlessly to free her arm. "We've done nothing wrong. You have no right!"

"We have every right, as well you know!" Louise glared at her as if she were an obstinate child. "You go snooping round the clubs after dark and carry your notebooks around," she jerked her chin at the music bag, "and think the rest of us are blind? Your man here comes back from the front and says he'll work for Jean, but all he does is check out our defenses and write his goddamn notes — who's he writing to, hmm? Von Moltke and his pals?"

"It's only music!" Christine flared. "We're singers, musicians, that is all. That's all!"

"That's all, is it?" Louise shifted her dark stare from Christine to Erik, and her mouth twisted in a grimace of revulsion, "You've got some nerve, my girl, that I give you."

"Leave her!" Erik lurched towards her but two of the men thrust the butts of their rifles into his ribs:

"Don't move!"

"Peace," Jean said, "There will be no violence here. This man—"

"Spy," one of the others corrected, to general approval.

"This man," Jean repeated louder, "has a right to hear the questions we have and give his answers unmolested. Citizens, get a hold of yourselves; it will do our cause no good to start a riot. Let's not give the police an excuse to revisit old grudges. We'll take him inside for now and sort it out in the morning."

"Throw him in the Mazas and be done with it," someone suggested, "better safe than sorry, eh?"

"The Mazas?" Jean rounded on the speaker, a weedy little man with an oversized kepi on his ears, who shrank back from the sudden attention. "Better men than he have spent years rotting in its
cells under the Empire, without trial, without so much as a hearing. Are we no better?"

A few of the rifles were lowered slowly, in acknowledgment. Even Louise seemed to subside a little. Jean rubbed the bridge of his nose under the rain-spattered glasses.

"Louise, the keys to the side door."

"Aye."

With her free hand, Louise withdrew a bundle of keys from her coat pocket and passed it to the man nearest the door. He jangled it at the lock and shoved the wooden panels with his rifle, revealing the darkness within.

"We'll need your bag, please, mademoiselle." Jean pointed to the satchel.

Christine had no choice but to surrender it into the clutching wet hands of the National Guardsmen who eagerly reached for it. Her father's beautiful book was unceremoniously extracted and held out under the rain.

Christine could not keep back an anguished cry. "No, please! You will destroy it."

"Put that back," snapped Louise unexpectedly, cuffing the man lightly over the ear. "It's evidence."

She stuffed the book back into the satchel that was passed to her, momentarily releasing Christine, but before Christine could move, Louise had grabbed her other elbow. Christine's coat sleeve gave way with a rip, and a rush of freezing water soaked into her shoulder.

"I'm taking this one home, for now." Louise gave her elbow a tug to get her moving. "Come along."

"She goes free!" Erik jerked towards Louise but she moved back, pulling Christine with her.

Jean only said mildly, "Come, Andersson, let's go in from the rain. No harm will come to Mademoiselle Daaé."

Erik's lip curled back in a hideous growl and Christine thought in horror that he would hurl himself bodily at Jean and it would all be over; someone would fire. Her world shrank to a view of Erik's enraged face. He did not move. No shots came.

Jean stepped in past the rifles and Christine saw his own gun slung unheeded over his shoulder. Still looking carefully at Erik, he addressed Louise:

"Take Clément with you, in case you are stopped. Clément?"

"Right here."

A big, serious-looking man with the bearing of an old campaigner gave a crisp nod as he shouldered his rifle and moved behind Louise. Christine glanced at him; he did not look dangerous but her heart sank at this additional guard. Even if she managed by some miracle to evade Louise, she would not get far. And what then? She had to let someone know what was happening, get help, get Madame Giry, anyone — but she could not leave Erik here, not like this.

Erik turned to her and Christine saw despair in his eyes. She strained against Louise's grip on her elbow; it was all she could do not to make another futile attempt to go to him. Erik's wet bandage had slipped, exposing a slick patch of scarring on his forehead.
"Go home," he said. It was almost a plea.

"It was my idea to use the theatre." Christine heard the desperation in her voice, "All we did was sing!"

"It is getting late," Jean said in warning. Someone passed him the satchel and he showed it to Christine, then to Erik. "Your music, if that is all it is, will be safe with us. I give you my word."

They led him away. Christine watched as long as she could, until Louise directed her down the street, and she was forced to walk onward.

She thought she would remember for the rest of her life the way Erik turned his gaze downward and followed his captors into the depths of the theatre, unrestrained, unbound, and yet walking with them. The door was slammed shut.

"You silly little chit." Louise half-led, half-dragged her through the puddles, indifferent to the carriages that sprayed them with mud at every turn. The soldier Clément followed a step behind, his boots splashing noisily.

"I told you to stay away from the likes of him, didn't I. He's bad news, your singing friend."

Christine could not open her mouth; cold and anger had locked her jaws tight and she concentrated furiously on not losing her footing. Her skirts dragged through the piles of dirt and leaves that lay uncollected in the streets since the sweepers, most of them Germans, had been expelled from the city. She thought of calling, crying out, but the few passersby they met took one look at the disgraceful sight of a young woman taken home by the National Guard, and prudently raised their umbrellas and averted their eyes.

"It's here," she finally managed, when they reached her building.

She had hoped Louise would let her go in alone, but even that was denied her. Louise barged into the lobby, only to be instantly observed by the concierge, who leapt at the whiff of a fresh scandal. Not two minutes later, Christine was forced to endure the humiliation of being escorted to her front door by both women, dragged in between them, dripping and muddy, like a stupid ballet girl being returned half-drunk and half-dressed to the dormitories. She stared ahead and refused to give them the satisfaction of seeing her stumble. Her feet were lumps of lead in her wet shoes, she could not feel her toes.

"Good evening," Madame Giry said from the doorstep. Her face was so calm and her voice so absolutely expressionless that Christine saw even Louise taken aback. Her gaze flicked over Christine, an assessment as quick and impersonal as a dance exam.

The concierge sniffed at the savoury aroma of stewing meat and vegetables coming from within the apartment, and craned her neck to look inside. "All right for some, isn't it."

"Thank you," Madame Giry said to her pointedly, and the nosy woman was left with no option but to take her leave of them, reluctantly. Madame Giry looked past Christine, to Louise.

"And you are?.."

"Louise Gandon. Yours, is she?" Louise thrust Christine forward.

Madame Giry stood aside to let Christine enter, then barred the doorway again. Christine turned to see Louise stare at Madame Giry, frowning under her wet kerchief, before she finally gave a shrug of grudging approval.
"You don't look like the hysterical sort, so I tell you plain: your girl here is mixed up in some nasty business. You'd not know it to look at her but were she my daughter, she'd not be roaming round Montmartre at all hours with the Devil knows what for company, poking her pretty nose into things she doesn't understand. Some honest work is what she's wanting, to keep her out of trouble, and away from them theatres."

"That is certainly good advice," Madame Giry said without irony. Christine knew this entire shameful tirade must have carried up and down the stairs, and could doubtless be heard by every neighbour and the concierge besides.

"Ah, you lot." Louise looked around, her gaze condemning the entire bourgeois interior of the building, from the wood panelling to the sooty lamps. She sighed and turned to go. Then, thinking of something, she turned back and looked squarely at Christine:

"I'll come fetch you first thing, and see you come and talk politely. But if you want my advice, mam'zelle, you'll do well not to swear your little life away. You let him answer for himself, you hear, and don't go trying to paint him innocent."

Christine clutched at the doorframe, digging her fingers into it as though she could pull a trigger. "You have no pity," she said, low and fierce. "You will see him dead for what he did not do."

Louise's eyebrows shot up. She lowered her voice almost to a growl, for Christine alone: "Pity you want, is it? I know about the Opéra, and so does Jean, how about that? Knew it when I let him under my roof, and when he came back too, though I had my doubts how he got away so clean from the Prussians, you bet I did. And then Jean tells me about that theatre. Under my roof! Think about that for a minute in your pretty head, before you talk of pity. But we never said a word, and we won't either — Jean'll not tell gendarmes things as don't concern them, not unless it's a matter for the Republic. He's a good man, my Jean, and doing a man's duty. Would that you could say as much about your lover."

She turned and tramped down the stairs, taking them two at a time as though she could not wait to be quit of this place.

"Come through at once," Madame Giry said, closing the door soundlessly behind them. She peeled Christine's wet coat from her, inspecting the torn seam, and folded it onto the chest of drawers by the door. Christine crossed her arms over her chest, painfully aware of the muddy water running onto the floor from her ruined skirts.

"Christine, what happened?" Meg was standing at the end of the entrance hall, a wooden spoon still in her hand from the dinner she had been cooking. The worry in her face was deep, and it was more kindness than Christine could bear. Her throat tightened.

"It was my fault," she said, barely audible. "I wanted to sing…"

Madame Giry stopped her. "You will explain everything, and in order, but only after you have had a bath and something to eat. Give me a minute to heat the water."

She went to the kitchen and Christine could only look at Meg, unable to explain anything at all over the lump in her throat. Meg looked mistrustfully at the door, as though she expected it to be thrown open again without warning.

"Who was that woman?"

"Meg," Christine could not quite make her voice work. "They took Erik."
The interior of the little dance hall rang with a cacophony of heavy footsteps and men's voices, all talking at once. Erik thought his head would split. He could see nothing except a square of the floor and the movements of Jean's booted feet; he pressed the rain-soaked linen of the mask to his face to keep it in place and did not try to look up. They had taken Christine away. What more was there to see?

His fault. His and his alone. He had known it was forbidden to him, yet he had followed the music like a dog slavering after its master's heel, and now it demanded its blood-price. How many must die tonight? He would have to wait until one of them got closer, grab his gun, go for the foyer… It would not be easy and he would need to move fast: a few of them moved like trained soldiers and their guns were loaded, but even so, he would have a chance.

He took no chances, but followed Jean in silence. Christine was alive and taken home and he refused to give in. Not now. Not while she lived. She would not return to find her Erik an escaped murderer again, and he would not give them the satisfaction of knowing they had been right to pursue him. Christine's voice was hidden in every corner of this theatre, in its very stones; it pulsed in his veins and kept him breathing, slowly, steadily. Inhale. Exhale. He would not see this place befouled. He would not.

"Shall I tie his hands then?"

One of the men had found a length of cord and Erik was jolted suddenly to a stop as he and another guard tried to wring his arms behind him.

With a shudder, Erik threw them off and whirled around, grasping the rope in his own hand. The movement was as instinctive as it was almost disastrous, but he struggled at the last moment against it, dropping the lasso as his fist caught the man's jaw and sent him sprawling. The guard, skinny and black-bearded, lay on the floor, too stunned by the suddenness of the punch to do more than blink. His kepi skidded to a wall.

"Merde," someone cursed behind him. "What the hell was that?"

Erik breathed heavily, ready for the next attempt. The ghost of the rope was still burning his palm. Christine's music throbbed crazily in his head, like a caged child rattling the bars. He clenched his fists.

"I will not be bound."

"Enough!" Jean held out his arm to help the man to his feet. "There's no need for ropes. Citizens, keep calm. Andersson, we will not restrain you if we may have your word you will make no effort to escape."

Erik smirked bitterly. "My word."

"Well?" Jean demanded, glasses flashing in the gaslight. Erik surveyed the determined faces of the surrounding guards, neighbours most of them, transformed by their identical kepis. A few he knew by name, most were only vaguely familiar faces. They thought him a traitor. He opened his empty hands.

"You have my word."

Jean acknowledged this soberly, before turning back to his neighbour-soldiers. "We will lock him in the room with the placards until a clerk can be found to take down evidence. Nobody is to touch
him, do I make myself clear? This is a matter for Montmartre. We do not need gendarmes on the doorstep."

The others muttered agreement. The bearded man swore, rubbing his injured jaw, but even he did not contradict them. There had been a minor riot in the city only two days previous, by men who did not think the Government of National Defence answered to their idea of a Republic, and Erik judged none here were eager for a reprise.

"Andersson," Jean said, "carry on, towards the back rooms."

Erik went on. They meant the dressing-rooms backstage, where he and Christine had not bothered looking before. The corridor was dark and narrow; they had to go single file behind him. It was a lethally stupid arrangement; one sudden turn and he could reach Jean's rifle belt.

Inhale. Exhale.

He walked on.

A dressing-room door to one side stood open; inside were stacks of wooden placards that reeked of paint and, by one wall, a dusty mirror and an even dustier couch upholstered in faded and balding red velvet. No windows.

Erik stepped into the dressing-room and Jean put the key to the lock. The rusted hinges of the door swung through an agonising high B, and that sound of a cage being locked for the night was almost obscenely welcome, as a respite from fighting.

"I'll have them bring you something to eat." Jean held the door a moment. "Maréchal will be outside if you need anything else."

A rope, Erik thought, bring me a rope. But the thought was only a ghost's echo.

"Do not bother with food," he said aloud. "Paper and ink; I require nothing else." When Jean hesitated, Erik gestured at the windowless room: "What do you imagine I might do with them here? Post letters to the Prussians through the chimney? Or plaster the walls with complaints about the Montmartre Committee?"

"Paper and ink. Fine. You'll have them." Jean adjusted the kepi on his unruly red hair, and went on more quietly. "They are good men, Andersson. They have families, and friends, and girls in this city, but they know our Republic is still young and under threat. It would hit them hard to think of a traitor living among them, reporting to the Prussians, working to subvert all that they sacrifice for. Truth to tell, it would hit us all hard. There will be a hearing tomorrow, and for my own sake and Louise's, I hope we were not wrong about you."

Erik turned away from him before he could do something he would come to regret. A hearing. That almost sounded like they intended to listen.

After a moment he heard the door being shut and locked. Jean's voice sounded beyond it, giving instructions. Erik looked up. An ugly man stared back at him from the full-height mirror, with bloodshot eyes in his badly bandaged face, and mud splattering his black suit and coat.

He raised his hand. The spectre in the mirror did the same.

A hearing. An audience, for him.

Christine's music touched the edges of his thoughts, riffling through the torn pages of his mind. If
he sang now, he wondered idly, would they think he was calling to the Prussians?

He pulled off his sodden bandage and stared at the image of what he was confined with.

It was going to be a long night.

Three o'clock.

Christine paced the little parlour from window to the divan and back, the same five steps each way, like a clockwork dancer in neverending recital. Her dressing-gown whirled at each turn. Madame Giry closed her eyes against what she could not change, and tried to think, but even unseen, the rhythm of Christine's steps tugged at her heart.

"Stop, please." Meg's voice was strained; she could not abide this either. "Christine, you're scaring me."

Christine halted by the piano, her hands at her mouth. Her lips were bitten bright red.

"I'm sorry… Madame Giry, please, I must go back. I should never have left."

"Christine Daaé, you will stop this instant. Pull yourself together." Madame Giry rose from the chair and went to her, quickly enough that Christine had no time to do anything but remain where she was. Madame Giry cupped her face firmly, ignoring the tremor in her own fingers. Christine's eyes were dark and wild, as if she was looking at a ghost before her.

"Christine!" Madame Giry pressed her hands hard to the girl's cold cheeks. "Look at me, please. Look at me."

When she did, Madame Giry released her and stepped back. Christine watched her uncertainly, and the spark of hope in her eyes was a familiar, heavy burden. How was she to fix this, Madame Giry asked herself fearfully, when the mess was of his own making? Again! She did not want this. She had shielded him long enough, had drained this cup to its bitter dregs; she could not allow Christine to make the same mistake. Sooner or later, Erik Andersson must settle his own debts. And yet to think of him here, bringing those accursed chocolates with a child's eagerness for praise…

"Please, Madame Giry. What do I do?"

"What is it he is accused of? No — stop — no more panicking now. What precisely did they say?"

Christine gripped the piano lid behind her. "They said he's a traitor. That he's been passing information to the Prussians."

Madame Giry counted the heartbeats before she could trust herself to speak. Ten, twelve, fourteen… At last, she said, "And you are certain he is innocent."

"Yes!" Christine struggled to bring her voice back under control. "I'm certain."

"He returned from the front. He came back ahead of the Prussian lines, and brought back the young Vicomte when the rest of our army was held prisoner." Madame Giry fought back the choking pity that threatened to silence her, but she had to speak now, because there were stains that could not be erased from the soul. She knew what the boy she had once called Erik was capable of, and she had no right to cast away the knowledge. It had to be voiced.

"What are you saying?" Christine stared her in incomprehension, unwilling to believe the betrayal of trust. "He came back. He saved Raoul."
"Christine, listen to me." Madame Giry forced the treachery out, sickening as bile. "You must understand this. There are things none of us can know. He returned, yes. He brought back Raoul, for you, because that is what he understood. But you cannot know the means. If he made sacrifices along the way, if he dealt with the Prussians — do you believe he would choose one uniform over another?"

"But he didn't!"

"You were not there. You cannot know what price he paid for the Vicomte's life! And whether he may still be paying it now. The talking-shops that have infested our theatres take their business seriously. They will not stand for their plans, no matter how ludicrous, being relayed to the enemy."

"No." Christine's voice cracked into a whisper. "You are wrong. It was only music. It is I who wanted to sing; it was for me that we went to that theatre. I made him yield to the music, when he would keep it away. He did nothing, nothing more. I know what he did before, do you think I could forget it? But not this. Not this."

Madame Giry shook her head, slowly. "Last night, when you learned he was at the ramparts, you feared. What did you fear?"

"I don't know. Ghosts." Christine hung her head, and Madame Giry hated herself for what she knew she had to say:

"A traitor is one who betrays the things he believes in. The things Erik believes… They are his, child. His alone. And that is not something the world will take to kindly."

"You think he is a spy then." Christine raised her face slowly, and her mouth was rigid with anger. She looked over at Meg, who was huddling into the divan, then back at Madame Giry. She stood very straight, as if bracing herself for a blow. "You believe it."

"No," Madame Giry said, very softly. "I do not think he is a spy."

Christine looked wrong-footed, like a dancer who suddenly finds herself flourishing the opposite arm to the others. Madame Giry almost smiled, through tears, but in truth, there was nothing comical about any of this. He might be no spy, but that did not make him innocent. He stood accused, and the people who held him had only to call the gendarmes before the rest of his terrible career would unravel. And from that, there could be no escape.

"What I think, or hope, does not matter. I want you to see these things because they are only the truth, Christine. Neither you nor I have the power to scrutinise your suitor's comings and goings, and neither of us can know what he may or may not have done. Your assurances, however well-meant, are not proof."

"What about Raoul?" Meg said from her spot on the divan.

Madame Giry and Christine turned to her. Meg stood up, shaking out her skirts, and brushed her tangled hair back for her face. She looked exhausted; Madame Giry glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece and saw it was well past midnight.

"Raoul was there, wasn't he — Christine?"

"Yes," Christine whispered.

"Well then..." Meg rubbed her eyes. "Why don't you ask him?"
Chapter 48: The Hearing

The ambulance had every comfort, as these things went. Nestled amid pomegranate trees rustling with the last of their golden-brown autumn foliage, nursed by charitable ladies of the highest society, given freedom to drink coffee, play at cards and listen to earnest poetry recitals, it was easy to forget the storm. And if one struggled still, if the seagull shrieks of the wounded brought in the breath of winter, then there were always doctors ready with their soft foreign accents and their inexhaustible doses of opium. After all, why fight the inevitable? Then another blanket would be pulled over another glazed face, the parcel wrapped and swiftly borne away, never disturbing the peace. A paradise of warriors straight from the pages of Christine's storybook.

Raoul hid the book away under his pillow, dressed and combed his hair. The simple tasks of pulling on trousers and buckling boots took an interminably long time these days but they had learned by now to leave him to it, all those charitable angels of mercy, and let him struggle as he would. The others in his tent had no such qualms; the more lightly wounded of the officers made no secret of enjoying the ministrations of the American ladies, and Raoul could only watch in morbid fascination the way they thrilled and preened when the troupe of the day's nurses would enter the tent.

For his part, he had resigned himself to readmitting the nuns. They demanded no social graces from him, asked few questions, and had never read his name or Christine's on the gleeful pages of the newspapers.

"Will you take a walk this morning, monsieur?"

Raoul turned on his heel, startled. Sister Thérèse has entered quietly and stood by the doorway, her soft white hands folded dutifully over her robes.

"No," Raoul said too abruptly, then softened his tone. "No, thank you, Sister. I am expecting Mademoiselle Daaé any minute."

"This early? It is scarcely gone eight."

She followed Raoul's glance to the envelope by the bed that had a runner had brought with the morning's post, and smiled slightly in benevolent understanding.

"The Lord keep you both," she said, touching her rosary, and retreated.

Raoul knew what she thought, what they all thought: a young woman who visited daily, yet not a sister — even Guyon, who knew all about the broken engagement, seemed to assume it was only a matter of time. Raoul had half a mind to call back the sister and show her the letter, just to see the expression on her face when she'd read what Christine wanted of him.

Please, Raoul, I need to know what happened in Bazeilles. Erik's life may depend on it.

Andersson. Somehow or other, everything always revolved around him, his life, his needs. Murder, extortion, arson, kidnapping — none of it mattered. The laws of God and man did not apply to him; he could escape the cage and the theatre and create a new life for himself in Bazeilles or in Paris or wherever he pleased, over and over again. And they would help him still, the likes of Madame Giry and his unfortunate Egrots, and even Christine, because men such as he did not pay for their crimes… But now he was finally cornered. What difference did it make whether he was innocent
of the treason of which he was suspected, when the man was a murderer thrice over?

And yet Raoul could not summon even the shadow of triumph. Too much time had passed, and the Phantom who had torn Christine's childish fairytales from her eyes to replace them with terror had vanished, leaving behind nothing but the pitiful raw form of a human being.

Raoul turned Christine's frantic letter over in his hands, then folded it and stuffed it into the inner pocket of his officer's jacket.

What happened in Bazeilles…

Noise, fire, the recoil of a gun against his shoulder. The throbbing agony in his leg. The Phantom dragging his prey through the buzzing swarm of bullets. Blackness. Later, the same man standing at his side and firing into the dusty yard of the little house in Bazeilles, into living men intent on destruction. He had wept afterwards the way Raoul could not, for the honour a killer did not have.

Well, Vicomte? How does it feel to be a murderer?

It was not murder, but it stank just as foully. It was war, and there was no honour in it. Christine's book was full of wondrously detailed images of battle, of heroes slaying monsters. That was not murder either, but Raoul wondered how many of them woke nightly afterwards, their nightmares pierced by the monster's dying scream.

He was no hero. Christine had saved him from the monster, sacrificing herself to win life for them both. Had it been one of her stories, there might have been some dreadful magic in it, to rip a piece each from the hearts of monster and man and exchange them, binding them to kinship.

The reality was more prosaic but just as binding. He owed his life to Christine and to the man who was guilty, but not of the crime of which he was accused. And Raoul de Chagny was not a murderer.

"Christine?.."

The doorflap parted, but it was not Christine on the threshold.

Raoul bowed slightly to Madame Giry, trying to conceal his surprise. It had been several months since he had last seen her, but she was unchanged, calm and straight-backed as ever, and carrying herself with the same graceful step. She returned his greeting, ignoring the grotesque swelling of bandaged thigh that strained the seams of his uniform, and instead levelled her gaze at his face.

"It is good to see you again, monsieur. My apologies for the early visit." She cast a quick look around the empty tent. "You are recovering?"

"As well as can be expected."

Raoul took up his crutches that had been propped against the foot of the bed, and hobbled over towards her. Behind her, the canvas doorway flapped in the breeze, empty.

"Christine sent me a letter this morning, madame."

"Yes. She would have liked to come and speak with you herself, but it seems justice must not be kept waiting. The audience is not patient." Madame Giry's mouth twitched in a smile but there was no humour in it. "You know something of what has happened, I believe. The charges against… our mutual acquaintance are serious."
"Aiding the enemy." Raoul frowned, touching the pocket where he had concealed Christine's letter. He could not bring himself to take it out. "Christine says there is to be a trial, and quickly."

"A hearing of sorts, by the people."

Raoul's frown deepened. "The Reds?"

Madame Giry gave a resigned shrug. "People come in all colours, monsieur. They are poor, and hungry, and growing leaner by the day on this diet of half-truths and inaction we are fed by our new government. You must read the papers here. We need a reason for our suffering, and traitors are all the fashion."

Raoul felt an unpleasant twist of fear in his gut. The spectre rouge had been a refrain of the newspapers for years, a convenient diversion from the faults of the Empire, but now the ghost seemed to be taking form. That very morning, an announcement with a black mourning border in a Red paper had claimed Metz was betrayed, with Marshal Bazaine treasonously negotiating surrender. It was a dreadful rumour to peddle. And a dreadful time to be suspected of treachery by the mob.

"Traitors may be in fashion," he pointed out, "but the people cannot hold a hearing. They must hand all such enquiries to the gendarmerie, that is the law."

Madame Giry gave a slow nod. "Doubtless the gendarmes will be informed, soon enough."

Raoul thought of Andersson in the cellar in Bazeilles, his filthy shirt and hands black from gunpowder, reeling backwards from a punch. They are headed for Paris. And he had returned, gendarmes and Prussians be damned.

Raoul nodded and took an awkward step back, balancing on his crutches.

"If my testimony can help then I am at your disposal, madame, as soon as we can find a conveyance. I take it you have the address."

Madame Giry sighed and adjusted the shawl about her shoulders. "Monsieur le Vicomte. If Christine is to be believed, you owe him a debt. That is so?"

Raoul acknowledged this in silence.

Madame Giry closed her eyes for a moment, and Raoul saw what it cost her to speak:

"You must not repay it like this."

Raoul knew his astonishment must look foolish, but he could not disguise it. "You would have me refuse?"

"You may owe him your life, but — you cannot owe him your honour. For years I gave mine to buy his safety, and won nothing but suffering for us all. Do not damn yourself as I have done. If it is true he dealt with the Prussians, then you must not let your debt force you to speak on his behalf, and make yourself a liar."

"A liar?"

At last Raoul found the anger he had not felt before, and it rose in a fiery choking tide. "It is not a question of debt. Madame, I stood side by side with that man in a house surrounded by the enemy, and my hand squeezed the trigger of a rifle exactly like his. If he dealt with the enemy, then so did
I. Were I to remain silent, tell me, what would I do but damn myself?"

Madame Giry's silence made Raoul aware he had raised his voice inexcusably.

"Monsieur le Vicomte, is something the matter?" The sister was back, peering into the tent in her solicitous way, pretending she had not overheard.

"Not at all," Raoul told her, finding a bland smile to counter her unvoiced questions. Madame Giry raised her brows slightly, but said nothing. "But I think I will be taking a walk this morning after all. A long walk."

Sister Thérèse bowed her head. "I shall get the chair. I do hope all will be well with your friend."

"My friend. Of course."

Raoul looked straight at Madame Giry, and it was suddenly so easy to take out Christine's letter from his jacket that he could not understand why it had ever seemed a struggle. He flapped the paper open before her, not caring if the nun read it too.

If he is guilty and you know of it, then I beg you, tell me anyway, and the truth will set me free. I cannot live another illusion, the fear of it will drive me mad. I need to know.

"She is in love with him," Raoul said to Madame Giry, and heard the nun clatter her rosary beads, over and over again.

He had expected the words to hurt, and they did, but only as the rebound of a shot, fired from a knowledge he had held too long and too heavily. And now there was a vast, empty freedom.

Madame Giry moved her shoulders a little, spreading the burden. "Yes," she said, simply. "I believe you are right."

Raoul took back the letter and hid it away.

"Let us go." He turned to the nun. "It is time for my walk, Sister."

o o o

"And the nighttime excursion to the ramparts. What was its purpose?"

Christine did not look at Jean Gandon or at the clerk seated at a trestle table and dutifully transcribing every word, but only at the gathered crowd that spread from below the stage all the way to the back of the dance-hall: children, rowdy and bright-eyed, squeezed cunningly to the very front; kerchiefed women and men in National Guard uniform, some flint-eyed and angry, most merely curious for the spectacle. There were no chairs; the audience — she could think of it as nothing else — stood shoulder to shoulder in rapt attention, gazing up at the proceedings. She could just make out Louise's imposing form near the side door, watching with her arms crossed, but of Madame Giry there was no sign. The gaslight blazed brighter than Christine had ever seen it, exposing every crack in the plaster and paintwork, every mousehole and broken floorboard. Exposing her as well. The theatres and dance-halls were shut, and this was all the entertainment the people might have.

Christine sensed their growing impatience and knew her performance was woefully inadequate to convince them, but it was all she could do to repeat the same refrain over and over in different guises.
"Monsieur Andersson was at the ramparts to speak on behalf of an artist friend. It had nothing to do with the defenses."

Jean sighed at this now expected answer. "You must admit it is a peculiar time and place to be visiting acquaintances."

Christine felt a stirring of anger. "Peculiar is not yet criminal, Monsieur Gandon. There are thousands on duty at the ramparts every night, not least yourself and half the people here. Should we suspect them all?"

This was a mistake; she had provoked instead of entertaining. An incensed rumble ran through the audience and a few shouts rose above it — "Enough of this! Bring out the spy!"

Jean raised his hands, asking for silence. When at last he had it, he stared heavily at Christine. "You are right, citoyenne. Duty. We serve as best we are able. Andersson shows nothing but contempt for what is the duty of every decent Frenchman to defend the Republic. Why has he refused the call to arms?"

Christine bit her lip. "He fought at Sedan."

"Did he!" Jean rose in his seat, angry now. The clerk scribbled furiously beside him. "He fought there, you say. Is he a soldier as well? He spun us a story about a courthouse he was to construct, there, in the midst of the fighting. Did you know he claimed to be an architect?"

"He is an architect."

"An architect who fights at Sedan, but goes to the Paris ramparts only to pay his friends a visit, and spends the remainder of his time singing with you, in an empty theatre that just so happens to be our Club. Is there no limit to how far you expect to stretch our credulity?"

Christine felt the wave of dismissal from the audience, and knew she was floundering, drifting further and further out of their interest. People were starting to fidget and whisper. They wanted more than her stubborn clinging to the same improbable story. They wanted her to faint perhaps, to throw herself at Jean's feet and plead, to sob and rend her clothing and tear her hair. Or, equally entertaining, to disavow Erik Andersson completely and trot out some fresh evidence of his treachery, of strategic building plans sold to the Prussians or some similar nonsense. She could offer them nothing. Her body felt frozen numb with the expectation of the next act, the inevitable moment when Erik would be led out here, and forced to endure the same questions. And then the third, and final, act. Finale, with apotheosis. Another traitor dead. Long live the Republic.

Christine held Jean's challenging gaze, and managed at least to keep her voice under control, even if she could feel her hands trembling badly. "Why do you ask me these things, when you know I have no way to prove them? You are determined to condemn him no matter the evidence."

"If you had evidence that he fought at Sedan, and fought bravely, would that satisfy you?"

Christine's head whipped up, she searched the audience frantically for the source of the voice — there! The side door had been opened, thrusting Louise aside, and now people were shuffling out of the way, parting to clear a path for a procession so improbable in this place that they merely stared: a wheelchair bearing a young officer in full uniform, manoeuvred by a nun. The wheels squeaked as they advanced. Behind them, Madame Giry came in and Meg closed the door.

"Raoul!" Christine mouthed, and could not help beaming at him, at the warmth of the smile he gave her and at the familiar, beloved spark of humour and reassurance in his eyes. When he
reached the edge of the stage, he nodded to Christine gravely, but she read the movement of his lips, the same incantation they had always shared before facing the scorn of society. *Ignore them.* She would have hugged him, if she could have safely left the stage. He was here.

A clearing had formed around Raoul and the nun. The audience grew silent, waiting.

Jean removed his glasses and cleaned them on a handkerchief before putting them back on, then mopped his forehead with the handkerchief. "Are we to understand that you have information about this case, sir?"

"I do." Raoul sat back in the chair, upright and undeniably impressive in his officer's stripes. Christine suddenly recalled his father, the Comte, presiding just like this over the dinners she had seen as Raoul's guest. She supposed he must have looked like this at the Assembly as well. She glanced over the audience; the people were fascinated — thus far at least, this evidence of aristocratic bearing brought forth no outcry, but that could so easily change…

"Your name then," Jean said, nodding to the clerk to record this.

"Raoul de Chagny."

Christine breathed lightly at the dropped title, and saw Madame Giry do the same where she stood. Raoul knew where he had come.

"Chagny?" Jean's eyebrows rose past the frame of his glasses. "Related to the Comte de Chagny, Ollivier's man? Not exactly a friend of the Republic—"

"Nor its enemy," Raoul countered, with such perfect, fiery conviction that Christine could only watch him in wonder. He walked this knife-edge between impudence and respect without the least hesitation, as if he had done it his entire life. Christine saw people leaning forward, craning their necks, and found herself taking an involuntary step nearer.

"My birth is not at issue here. I believe you are holding prisoner a comrade of mine, by the name of Erik Andersson."

"Your comrade." Jean gestured at Raoul's uniform, "You are an officer with the regulars."

"**Sous-lieutenant**, 12th corps."

This caused a stir; even the clerk looked up from his meticulous scribbling for a moment, his pen dripping ink.

Jean looked uncomfortable. "The 12th is imprisoned at Sedan."

"Most of those who remain, yes. We are regrettably few. I was fortunate to have escaped," Raoul motioned at his leg, "relatively unscathed."

"And is it your claim then that Andersson fought with the 12th? With you?"

Raoul sat straighter in his chair, and put his hands upon the armrests. "It is my testimony, which I hope you will be good enough to record, that Erik Andersson was an architect on a civic project in the area, and was well known to the local people. It is further my testimony that he was in no way engaged with the regular army."

Amid mutters of incomprehension, Jean was forced to raise his voice again. "And yet you say he fought?"
Raoul caught Christine's eyes and she saw a flicker of dread behind the façade as he gathered himself, filling his lungs with air, readying for a dive into the cold sea. Then he spoke, and his voice was steady:

"Sedan is but one city in the valley of Givonne, but it is — was — surrounded by many pretty villages. Balan, Bazeilles, others. Some of the people managed to take shelter behind Sedan's walls before the Prussians came. Many more could not. Andersson's friends were among those who stayed."

There was absolute silence from the crowd. Christine had never before heard Raoul speak of this, and she saw now what it was she had asked of him: he unwound the memories in sharp bursts, like layers of bloodied bandages, his eyes never leaving hers.

"My division was to take up position in Bazeilles and hold it, and this we tried to do. We barricaded the streets. The people — those good loyal Frenchmen — stayed shut up their houses and barred the doors, afraid to give us bread, afraid they would be mobbed by their own army for a morsel of food. We had been marching for days on rations of hard biscuit and potatoes. We had not slept. The men did all they could but our condition was desperate, and the Bavarians who came upon us took advantage of it."

A child's high voice began chattering and was instantly hushed by its mother.

"I was shot. I should have bled to death in that street of locked houses, had Erik Andersson not seen me. The man you accuse of treason made his friends open their door and brought me inside. Then, from the attic of that house, Andersson and I tried to hold back the Bavarians."

Raoul looked around slowly, from face to face. "It is my testimony that he was not in the army. He did not need to do it. He could have waited in the cellar below, or gone to his construction site in Sedan. He could have returned to Paris or fled across the border to Belgium. But he stood at that attic window, hour after hour, and he fired at the enemy. His aim was exceptional; he never faltered. All through that day and the evening, the Bavarians came. And they died."

Christine's heart thudded dully in her chest. Against her will, she saw the image Raoul's words had conjured: Erik in a stranger's house, Erik holding a rifle aimed at the men far below. She could picture it, could almost smell the smoke. Had he seen in that army a new mob come to tear apart his shelter? Had it held a thrill of power, the lure of dealing legitimate death?

It was only when Jean spoke that she realised the effect Raoul's story had had on the rest of the audience.

"Then he is a hero," Jean said, in perfect earnestness, and stood up. A slow tremor of noise began somewhere at the back of the hall, gathering force, growing louder and more certain with each passing second. Christine glimpsed tears in their eyes, and even Louise, who had regarded with such suspicion the Imperial braids of the officer's uniform, now shone with a powerful, furious joy. Raoul had given them the very thing so sorely needed in the grim tedium of the siege, better even than a spy's downfall. He had given them glory.

The same people who minutes earlier had been clamouring for the traitor now stood and cheered in a spontaneous and heartfelt ovation.

Christine felt heat sting her eyes, her nose, threatening to dissolve the composure she had fought so hard to maintain. It had to be true, and she could only admire what Raoul had accomplished here, an oration his father might have been proud to hear… And yet, and yet. Raoul was saying something else, gesturing to her, but his voice was drowned out by the hubbub, and she could no
longer stand this. She stared at her clasped hands, at the fingernails she had bitten last night in trying to write the letter to Raoul. She told him she wanted to know the truth, and she did. She did. But it hurt so very much, this portrait of the Phantom raised far above the battle, raining death onto the enemy below.

A hero.

She remembered the way Erik had stood in her apartment the night he had returned to her from the war, his clawed hands gripping his shoulders and the wildness in his eyes. He had spoken of battle as something immediate and terrible. She had not wanted to know any more, then.

"Mademoiselle!"

Someone was calling her insistently from below the stage: the elderly nun who had wheeled Raoul's chair. In the general confusion, Christine knew herself forgotten by her interrogators, at least for the moment, and she could no longer see Raoul's face for the milling people.

She hurried over to her, unnerved by the woman's anxious gesticulating. "Sister?"

"Mademoiselle, the Vic— your young friend would speak with you."

Christine slid down to join her and squeezed through the crowd, and in that moment Raoul somehow succeeded in turning his chair away from them and toward her. His face was chalk white, startling her from her own fears. God only knew what he had seen between the lines of his memory, within the hell she had forced him to recount.

"Raoul!" She rushed over to him and then stopped, suddenly uncertain. There were too many people here, and too many things to say… The words caught in her chest.

"Lotte. You're trembling." He looked up at her, no longer the splendid officer but again her friend, the young boy who stumbled dripping from the sea, and the man who had swum the Phantom's lake to find her. She had asked him to speak for the man who had almost destroyed them both. For the man he had just made a hero. For Erik, her Erik, who could not turn away from the blood.

"Christine, the last thing I wanted was to cause you pain…"

"No, you didn't, I — it is only this place. Thank you. For coming here, despite," she frowned at the wheelchair, "despite everything. I saw how much it hurt you to speak."

Raoul did not deny it, but the colour was gradually returning to his face. "It was only the truth," he said. "Even if my honour were not at stake, it had to be done: the people do not have the right to hunt as they will. But I did not think they would do this…" He winced at the jubilant chaos that continued around them. "I envy them."

"Envy them! Why?"

"They are so sure there must be heroes somewhere."

"There is one before me now." Christine met Raoul's surprised gaze, with complete honesty. She tried to shape her mouth into a smile for him, but could not, and the fear would not go away.

"Don't," Raoul said. "Heroes and monsters belong in your book. It has taken me a very long time to see it."

She reached out and took his hand lightly, trying in vain to draw comfort. "I did not think it had
been like that. The battle.”

"Like what?" he said in bemusement.

Christine squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. When she opened them again, blood-red circles swam over her vision. "Raoul… Did he enjoy it? Standing above them all. Shooting."

The understanding unfolded in Raoul's face leaf by leaf, a whole book of pity. He shook his head, slowly. "No. He did not."

"He has asked to court me." Christine could not hear herself speak over the noise of the crowd, but Raoul heard.

He nodded. His hand curled into hers slightly, then let go. Christine wished she could hold it, catch it, try to explain, but she had no right to this, to any of this — not his friendship, not his understanding. Everything he had given her, she had given away.

"Raoul…"

"You should know all of it then." He looked squarely at her. "There was more, after the attic. Will you hear it?"

Christine stood riveted to the floor, unable to move. What more could there be? "Yes."

"It was after nightfall. We were almost out of ammunition, but the battle was not yet done, only paused until morning. The Bavarians had reinforcements. And there were Prussian batteries already moving to the high plateaux. It was not a matter of whether we died there — only how. He… Your very brave suitor wanted to us to go into the cellar, to hide out. His friend wanted to fight."

"...And you?"

Raoul gave her a lopsided smile. "I was too busy bleeding to care. But Andersson wanted to live. He wanted to live very much, Christine, but in that place there was only death. I do not think I have ever seen such revulsion in another man's face as when he knew he must kill, and he picked up that gun again and went to collect cartridges. Except perhaps when he returned, covered in blood and filth, half-crazed, without the gun… He had spent that whole morning outside, among the shells, the mitrailleuses, the dead and the dying. I do not know what he saw. I pray I never will. But I know of no other man who could have seen what the Prussians did afterwards to that unfortunate village, and not vowed revenge."

Raoul looked past her to the stage, where Jean and a few of the other men were now caught up in an increasingly heated discussion. A kepi was flung to the table, a stack of paper pounded by a fist.

"They have called him a traitor for it, Christine, and a coward." Raoul nodded at the stage. "It isn't cowardice, though I do not pretend to understand it. But I am beginning to think you might."

Christine could not speak. She felt a presence behind her and turned, grateful, into Madame Giry's arms, too much a child just then to care what the commotion up on stage was all about, and why the audience was once again growing quiet.

Another hand touched her elbow.

"Christine." Meg's voice. "It's him."
Chapter 49: The Solemn Hour

A/N: Thank you for your reviews of the last chapter, and especially to those of you who shared such thoughtful analyses of the characters and the situation! It makes posting this story so rewarding for me, and justifies the many, many hours of work that go into it. In response to Jessica's question about whether this is the storyline I intended all along: actually yes, I'm finding that despite the hiatus, it is unfolding almost exactly as in my original outline. Some things happened in a different way to what I expected, or at different points, but this is still very much the story I've always wanted to tell. The historical setting keeps things on track, but really it's about the characters and their development. I've had these people in my head for over a decade and I still love them all in their different ways!

A note on the music. The song here will of course be instantly recognisable, but it has a very different tone in Adolphe Adam's original (try listening to it in French, eg by Mireille Mathieu, to hear the difference from the much gentler English). It was written in 1855 and was extremely popular, but became regarded with suspicion by the church because of its martial and revolutionary tone, and its secularisation. The first verse was later changed by the lyricist, Capeau, to remove references to original sin, and this modified version is the one quoted here (although it never attained popularity in French, the commonly performed English translation is closer to this modified version). I couldn't find an adequate rendering of the "revolutionary" second verse, so the translation of that is mine.

Phew. Enough of that! On with the story...

Chapter 49 — The Solemn Hour

A full house, Erik thought numbly as he went to take the stage. And he with no costume to shield him, without a single prepared line, rumpled, unshaven, ugly as sin, with nothing but the flimsy bandage and the few sheets of paper rustling in his hands with each heavy step. It was not enough. He should have been facing a hall of hatred, but the Vicomte's mad courage had robbed him even of that. Hatred was expected, he could have used it, but this... The noise of the crowd dwindled to silence and his guards fell behind, leaving him to make the ascent on his own — and then he stood before them in the hot blinding light.

Their hero. Their damned murdering hero.

Cheers burst out and spurted afresh through the ranked audience. What did they see? They were all looking at him: Jean and the others at a table by the piano and Louise below the stage, and beyond, dead centre in the audience, Madame Giry and her daughter, and the Vicomte in a wheelchair... Christine, where was Christine? Erik skimmed his gaze past Chagny's tailored uniform and pale face, unwilling to be drawn into gratitude for what must surely be the most absurd farce these walls had ever witnessed. The Vicomte had named him murderer and bade them love him for it, and they did. They did. The cause was just, the blood must flow. So months ago Louise Gandon had cheered him for the destruction of the Empire's Opéra, untroubled by the misery and flames. The faces blurred into a sickening mêlée peppered with grins and shouts and kepis of the National Guard. The theatre tilted and swayed.

"Erik Andersson," Jean called.
It was then he finally saw Christine. She had been leaning into Madame Giry's shoulder and now she turned towards the stage, lowering her arms, and looked up at him. Her eyes were rimmed with red, but her face was frank and open and waiting, and Erik knew that here, truly, was his judgement. Christine straightened up, and shaped his name: *Erik*.

He came forward.

The rest of the hall receded; there was only Christine. She watched him approach the edge of the stage. The glamour Chagny cast had not deceived her; Erik saw the war reflected in the depth of her horror, and he held onto that lifeline, steadying himself against the cheers.

He pressed his fingers into the pages he held.

"We've heard Lieutenant de Chagny's testimony," Jean continued, "and I for one would gladly offer you my heartfelt thanks for what you did at Sedan. *Franc-tireurs* are a rare breed, and you risked a terrible price for your courage; we have only last week learned of the appalling events in Châteaudun when the free shooters of that town stood against the Prussians..." He paused and the audience sobered; the dream of glory was wearing off, exposing the nightmare beneath. "But as my friends rightly remind me," Jean indicated the others of the National Guard behind the table, "there remains the question of what you do in Paris. Andersson, bear with us — we must get to the bottom of this misunderstanding."

"Indeed," Erik said carefully, his eyes never leaving Christine.

She caught the deep resonance in his voice almost before he was aware of it himself, and her brows furrowed uncertainly: she recognised that particular tone. Madame Giry and Meg had recognised it too; Erik saw them draw back, and glimpsed the Vicomte's equally appalled expression. The Phantom's voice issued again from his mouth:

"Let us have no more misunderstandings, messieurs."

Oh God, but it felt *good*. To command their attention like this, to turn their elation to fear at will, to drink that heady draught and turn it to a sorcery of his own, stronger by far than the Vicomte's earnest oratory...

Christine held his gaze, and slowly, painfully, Erik felt the vice loosen its grip. The back of his shirt under his coat grew damp with cold sweat. It took all his self-possession to rein himself in, to release no more than this faintest echo of the role that still lived within him. He concentrated on each heartbeat, wrenching his body away from old familiar habits. Locked in his mirrored room, he had tried to prepare himself, but that had been as nothing compared with standing here in his own skin.

Jean motioned to the guards and Christine's music book was brought out, gleaming with its embossed writing on the front: Daaé. Erik felt Christine flinch at the abrupt way the book was placed on the table before Jean and the clerk.

"Mademoiselle Daaé assures us this is her own notebook intended for composition and nothing more. Is that so?"

"It is."

"And you are Mademoiselle Daaé's — tutor?"

A laugh from the audience suggested an alternative that made Christine's eyes flash; but Erik tramped his own anger down. Carefully now. Oh, so carefully.
He said, "We sing together. I would offer a small demonstration, if Mademoiselle Daaé permits it." The words resonated over the audience, and a fresh wave of perspiration dampened his shirt. Christ, he wanted a mask.

Christine tensed, but her eyes were still on him, questioning, trying to understand. Erik silently asked her forbearance, and tried to commit to memory the way she looked back at him: the line between her brows, a loose curl she brushed impatiently from her eyes — and that fragile, fearful trust. She had heard the dangerous echo. She knew he could slip now and fall willingly into the inferno; the rage he had fed for so long needed only a few puffs of air to be rekindled, a few miserable breaths. But Christine held him, and did not let go.

"Let them sing then!" someone cried from the audience, and Erik recognised Louise's voice, brighter than he had ever heard it. Others joined to support her in ragged counterpoint: "Go on! Let them sing!"

Jean nodded to Louise, and then addressed Christine: "Will you oblige us? There is no need if—"

"I will."

Christine had already slipped to the front, where the children and the terminally curious pressed around her. The rest pulled back a few paces, but these only crowded nearer, not bothering to hide their curiosity. She tugged surreptitiously at something near her hips, and with a shock Erik realised what she was doing: loosening the sides of her corset to permit singing. A new heat spread through him, and it was only with the greatest effort that he kept hold of the Phantom's voice as he bowed to her:

"Mademoiselle Daaé."

"My book, monsieur." Christine looked up towards the table, hands ready to receive it, but with a gesture Erik stopped Jean from passing it down.

"No. That music is… unfinished. Here; something more appropriate to the occasion."

He fanned out the pages he held to reveal the ruled staves and scattering of notes. The men at the table peered at it and the crowd began to whisper, but Jean recognised it at once:

"Of course; the paper you requested." To the clerk he said, "This is Andersson's work; it has not been out of his hands since last night."

"Not mine in the least — but it will do." Jean was taken aback, but Erik swept on, "We shall need an accompanist." He peered into the sea of assembled faces, certain there must be at least one mediocre pianist among them. This was a dance-hall; someone must have played the abused instrument that had been gathering dust on the stage, before he and Christine had restored it to life.

"Yeah, all right," said a child of about thirteen, a lanky girl with sharp elbows and thin wrists protruding from too-short sleeves. She shoved to the front and pushed untidy dark hair back under a cap. "Let's see the music then." Then as an afterthought, she glanced at the table where Jean and the others presided, and added, "If it's all right with you, papa."

Maréchal, one of Jean's confederates, gave a shrug of his burly shoulders, feigning indifference, but glanced askance at the rest of the gathering, daring them to object. The proud father, Erik thought, and the girl grinned, charming but cocky as a street-wise gamin. Erik recalled Jean's tales of this same child smuggling newspapers into the city, and looking at her, he was not at all surprised she had succeeded.
"Our young Marie," Jean greeted her, and the audience murmured its approval; evidently the girl was well liked. "Thank you."

She climbed easily to the stage, dusted off her skirts, and looked from Erik down to Christine and back again to Erik, staring him insolently up and down.

"Well?" she demanded.

Erik measured her against the sort of accompanist he might have expected, but in truth, there were no other volunteers; she would have to do. Provided she could at least distinguish the white keys from the black, he could not possibly make the arrangement any more simple.

"Mademoiselle." He held out the loose sheets of paper to her. "Can you play it?"

Marie looked at both sides of the first page, then gave a derisory snort. "A monkey could play it. But a bit early in the year for this sort of thing, isn't it?"

Erik ignored this, and the girl went to take a seat at the piano. The floorboards squeaked as she pushed the bench closer. Below, Christine followed this in puzzlement, but Erik had nothing for her; there was no time to explain, he had to trust she would understand his intention. The audience waited.

The music began.

Christine's caution dissolved with the tentative opening chords, turning first to incredulity and then, slowly, blossoming into joy. The tension left her shoulders, her eyes shone, and Erik thought he could not care less what they chose to do to him after this.

He raised his bandaged face and started the first verse.

**Minuit, chrétiens, c'est l'heure solennelle…**

O holy night, the stars are brightly shining...

The people gasped and stirred. They could hardly have failed to recognise the song; its very popularity had seen it escape its Opéra roots so completely that Erik had little doubt none of them would know in its author the creator of *Giselle*. The melody brought back a past he had almost forgotten: an ancient Christmas Eve in the Opéra, a parcel of almond rolls waiting in Box 5, oranges and the smell of spiced wine, Christine's young voice soaring into the darkness of their chapel, and backstage, everyone from costumiers to drunken stagehands humming the same song. It poured from the stage to the wings, into the offices, into the streets. It no longer mattered what it had been, it had become a Marseillaise of a sort, a hymn, but not of blood. He caught sight of Madame Giry for a moment; she had recognised it too, and she shook her head in wonder.

**Où dans l'heureux Bethléem, vint au jour…**

It is the night of our dear Saviour's birth…

People were starting to laugh: a Christmas song, in October! Men elbowed their neighbours, pointing, their awe of the hero forgotten in this new spectacle; women jeered at all this unwelcome religiosity. Fools; the Phantom could draw them deep into complacency and then turn on them, snarling, until they trembled in their places. He could hide his face.

Christine watched him.
To Hell with the Phantom.

Doggedly, Erik sang on.

_Le messager de la bonne nouvelle—_

Of He who brought to us the word from Heaven—

He had rendered Adam's score faithfully, only lowering the key enough to permit Christine to weave in her part, but the words were a later version seldom performed: the poet had tried in vain to remove sin from his first verse; the song had been taken up by too many voices by then. But Erik sang it now and saw Christine recognise it, and treasure it:

_Qui fit, des lois de sang, la loi d'amour._

—Where once was blood, there would be only love.

She joined him on the next verse, making her own voice angel-clear and urgent, irresistible, completing the effect he asked of her and creating something greater still, entwining with him to take their song beyond anything one voice could have created. Between them, the music grew.

The laughter faded away. People were listening: men in their National Guard uniforms, errand boys in imitation kepis, students, schoolteachers, careworn women clutching ration cards and young laundry-girls with sleeves rolled up to the elbow. It was a motley crowd, but they were all shouldering unwittingly forward, drawn by no magic other than song.

They reached the darkest of the verses, the one the Angel of Music had always avoided, but Christine did not hesitate for an instant, and buoyed by her assurance, Erik threw himself into the fire of the words:

_Le Roi des rois naît dans une humble crèche:_
_Puissants du jour, fiers de votre grandeur,_
_A votre orgueil, c'est de là que Dieu prêche._
_Courbez vos fronts devant le Rédempteur._

The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger:

O mighty ones, so certain of your world,

It is your pride that He has come to vanquish,

So bow your heads to sing before the Lord.

The people joined in on the chorus, more and more of them with each turn of the spiralling sound, hundreds of untutored haphazard voices merging into a single perfect whole and setting the theatre to humming like an enormous bell. It was beautiful, and it made each one of them seem beautiful:

_Peuple à genoux, attends ta délivrance..._

Fall to your knees, await your liberation...

Erik could no longer hope to direct this music. It frightened him; it ruled him; his soul knelt at its bidding, making vague, shuddering promises, like a freak-child whipped to bleeding and then all of a sudden released, forgotten, free…

He groped for a way to break it. He needed a mask and a cloak and the safety of his anger, he
wanted a world that made sense and a part he knew through and through. He wanted nothing of that terrible pronoun, "we". He was not one of them.

And yet he sang. Christine's voice wrapped over his own, soothing the roughness from it, chasing away the remnants of the Phantom's echo, lifting away his mask — until what remained was a sound Erik knew was his. Truly his.

*Peuple debout! Chante ta délivrance,*  
*Noël, Noël, chantons le Rédempteur!*  

People, arise! And sing your liberation,

Raise up your voice to praise the One who saves!

It was done. The people were on their feet, holding their hats, faces streaming. Their regard was a blast of heat in his face, as if he stood before a furnace, and at the centre of it all was Christine. She stood unsteadily, her face tipped up, her cheeks wet, but the trust in her eyes was the most precious thing Erik had ever held.

Erik stepped off the edge of the stage, dropping like a stone into the mass of humanity, and felt his knees give way as his legs folded uselessly beneath him.

He struck the floor and knelt, and Christine knelt with him. No; she must not do it — he kept trying to tell her to stand, only perhaps he did not speak this but merely thought it, because Christine stayed on the floor and caught the front of his coat, crushing the fabric with bruising force.

"Erik," she kept repeating, "Erik," and he thought he could stay on this cold filthy flagging for eternity if she would only keep saying his name. He waited for the world to stop spinning.

"Andersson," came the Vicomte's voice behind her, in a kind of fascinated horror, "What happened?" and right behind his wheelchair, Madame Giry was sweeping the crowd aside: "Move back! Move back, I said!"

For a wonder, they obeyed, and a circle of blessed air opened out around him and Christine. The Vicomte looked down at them over the rim of a wheel, and Erik could do nothing but remain where he was. Then, incomprehensibly, Chagny held out his arm.

Erik clasped it and climbed to his feet, as Christine did the same behind him, with far more grace. "Thank you," she said to Chagny. The words chimed inside Erik's skull, a beautiful pain.

Chagny nodded to her, then turned his chair and permitted the nun to wheel him away. People stood aside to let them pass.

"Chagny!" Erik called. When the Vicomte half-turned, Erik bowed slowly to him, then raised his head:

"I am honoured. Monsieur."

Chagny's mouth hitched up in a bitter smile, despite himself. "The honour is mine." Then he looked down at Christine's fist still closed hard on Erik's lapel, refusing to let go. He said nothing more, but only touched the nun's hand lightly, and they moved away.

"Water!" A calloused hand held out a flask, and Erik looked up to see Louise. She bustled in through the crowd, with the water flask and a half-loaf of dense brown bread, and maneuvered her way past Madame Giry and Meg. "Have a drink, man, here." She unstoppered it for him and Erik realised he
was parched. He grabbed at the flask and drank greedily, inelegantly, each gulp knifing its way down his throat.

"You poor man," Louise clucked, pushing the bread into his hands, then snarled at a group of men approaching the top of the stage. "Get back, you lot! Jean, what's going on up there?"

"Listen!" Christine tugged at him urgently, "Erik, what is that?"

The doors to the foyer stood wide open after the Vicomte's departure, and through that bright square of daylight now came the unmistakeable sound of bugles.

Again the call sounded, and again. And far, far in the distance rumbled the dull thunder of a cannonade.

Erik looked around him; the whirlwind of the last few hours now seemed a mad, wine-fuelled dream. The people who had sung of liberty listened, and stood taller with each call of the bugle.

"They're taking Le Bourget!" A young man in spectacles burst through the doors, sending a shockwave with his arrival. "It's a sortie, a real sortie! They've broken through the lines!"

"To arms!" came the answering call. "To arms!"

The hall dissolved into a new furore the likes of which Erik had never imagined here. The theatre, never large, became positively claustrophobic with the rush of people seeking to get out; the side doors were thrown open and the hearing and its dubious hero were left forgotten. A man was handing out rifles; the National Guard were already forming clumps that would soon swell to battalions streaming towards the ramparts.

"Christine!" called a girl's voice, and Erik saw Meg thrust the music book into Christine's hands. She had somehow managed to climb to the stage in the chaos, and her dress was hanging limp on one side where a panel of underskirt had been torn. Madame Giry put one hand over her daughter's shoulder to steady her, and reached the other to Christine, as though she could hold them all.

"Come at once," she said. "And you, monsieur. There is no telling where this is going to end."

Christine tucked the book under her arm safely, but did not move. "It is only more fighting…"

Madame Giry gave an impatient headshake, but Erik had to agree. He saw the pain in Christine's eyes and knew she had seen too many wounded men in the Vicomte's sickroom to believe in anything anymore. Christine smiled, sending a piercing sadness through his chest.

"Monsieur Andersson!" the clerk cried from the stage in agitation, waving a sheath of papers. "Over here, please! I need a signature. If you please, sir."

"Go ahead," Erik assured Madame Giry. He tested his legs and found he could walk almost steadily. "I will join you before the day is out; as soon as these people," he gestured at the stage, "have their satisfaction in writing. Le Bourget lies well north of here. If there is indeed a battle, it will be hours yet before we know the outcome."

"Then I will stay with you," Christine said firmly. Erik drew breath to protest, but he saw the iron certainty in Christine's face, and exhaled slowly, saying nothing at all.

Madame Giry watched this unfold, and at last her exasperation softened into something older, and far darker.
"Very well," she said. "But do not be long."

She turned and led Meg away to the doors, following the crowd. Erik saw Meg twist around anxiously to catch Christine's eye, and then the daylight swallowed them both. The last of the stragglers were following behind.

"The papers, please!" The clerk had managed to scramble down from the stage and now stood red-faced and puffing at Erik's side, rubbing his elbow. "This is the transcript, here," he explained, "And here, your testimony. I need a signature on every page, if you please." He gestured at the trestle table, where nothing and nobody remained except yet more papers and a pot of ink.

"Go on," Christine said softly, and Erik followed the clerk, meek as a reprimanded student, and signed every accursed page of his accursed transcript, and probably half a dozen other papers besides. He barely glanced at what was being thrust under his pen, his heart was beating frantically to the rhythm he felt from Christine below the stage. He knew she was watching him.

When the last page was signed, and he had slammed the doors behind the relieved clerk, Christine reached out and took his hand in hers, fingers closing on his wrist. Her cuff fell open; she must have lost the button in following him down from the stage. Erik shuddered, half-wanting to break away before he did something foolish. Christine brushed her thumb over the pulse in his skin, the fine network of veins there that was the same as his own. Against the door's dark panel she seemed a living masterpiece, sombre in her dark dress, and so lovely it hurt. It was he who had put her through all this, he alone.

He searched for the words he needed, but Christine released his wrist.

"I don't want your signature. But I want your word. If this siege ends at last, if we survive… Promise me — promise me! — there will be no more shame. No deaths." She paused. "Erik, I will never, ever be the Phantom's lover."

The Phantom's… He blinked at her, almost certain his brain was still addled. "Repeat that."

"Your word—"

"Not that." The bread Louise had given him was still in his hand, and it slid from his grasp and thumped to the floor. They both watched it. Erik picked it up and put it in his coat pocket. "The last part," he managed.

Christine said nothing, waiting. Above her, a gas-jet flared and hissed on the thinning fuel, swaying red-gold shadows over her shoulders and face.

"I am done with the Phantom," Erik said. He wanted to kneel, but he could not tear himself from her gaze, from the clarity and the demand in her eyes. "No more shame. No deaths. No blood. Never, never again. It is done, Christine."

"Swear it."

Erik finally, slowly, understood her meaning, and a roaring noise filled his hearing as the blood rushed to his head. Shaking, he leaned over and sealed the promise to her mouth:

"I swear it."

"Again." Christine's lips felt hot against his own, and her kiss was a burning brand.

"I swear it."
"Again." She raised her hand and Erik felt her fingers work under the back of his bandage, above the knot; a small movement, and it was loosened. She combed her fingers through his hair, then around to the back of his scars, the gentlest of intrusions. A frisson of tension rippled over Erik's skin, but he fought it, and moved his cheek closer to hers, his lips almost touching her ear:

"I swear it. No ghosts. Only life, I swear it. I swear it. I swear it."

"That's enough," Christine told him, pulling back, drawing behind her an agony of longing. She stopped his mouth with a finger. "I believe you."

"Christine..." He kissed her finger.

Her chest rose and fell quickly, just once. She glanced past him, into the black unlit doorway leading to corridor where the dressing-rooms were. "Did they... Were you here last night, in the theatre?"

He flushed at the unwelcome reminder. "Yes. A room at the back."

"I want to see it." Christine saw his confusion, and her smile flickered like a candle, hardly touching her lips, and yet sending new tendrils of hope through him. "I would... Change the memories of it."

Erik felt a vertiginous thrill at what she was suggesting. His throat was dry. He took a step towards the corridor, then another. "It is — this way."

She pushed away from the door, and followed him unhesitatingly, as sure-footed in the dark as she had been in the light. In the dressing-room, a jet burnt low, bathing in its dim light the old upholstered couch and the huge, unforgiving mirror. Erik glanced into it despite himself, and there, behind him, was Christine, holding something in her hand: the key.

He looked back in time to see her put it in the keyhole. Then she turned it, locking the door from inside.

Chapter 50: Liberation

A/N: I'm so sorry about the wait, life is complicated at the moment, and time to research and write is very difficult to come by. Please take a minute to review if you're still reading, it really does mean a great deal to me, particularly at pivotal moments like this.

Chapter 50 — Liberation

Click.

The lock tumbled into place, trapping them in the small half-dark room. Christine pulled out the key, and the tarnished brass cover swung down over the keyhole. Safe. Nobody could touch them here: not the war, not the people, not their own ghosts. Erik's promise sounded in her ears and despite herself, she thought of their old chapel, and all the golden-edged memories their duet had woken. There had been beauty in the darkness too, long before the fear.

She put down her music book on a chair but kept hold of the key, rolling it back and forth between nervous fingers, and turned her back on the door. Outside, the world went on, oblivious.
"Erik…"

He stood in the middle of the floor, between piles of wooden placards and an ageing divan, in this dimly lit, cluttered room — his bare cheek coarse with beard, his eyes tired, dried mud streaking his coat and shoes — and he was sublime, brighter than any dazzling angel could have ever been. The mirror behind him reflected the top of the door, like the start of another passageway.

"Let me look at you," Christine whispered, voiceless now the danger was past. She had come too near to losing him, and all that lay between them. "Please, just let me look at you for a minute. I want to remember."

Erik bore her inspection with difficulty, growing more uncertain with each passing second, expecting a verdict. At last his gaze skittered aside from her and he grimaced at what he imagined she saw.

"Hardly an improvement on the usual."

Christine discovered a smile at that, and it melted in her voice. "You're wrong, Monsieur Andersson. I find I like you like this."

"Filthy and reeking of a night in a cell?"

"Beautiful."

At this his head shot up and he looked bewildered, and it made her want to hold him so much that her chest ached. She came closer, the key clenched in her fist, something to hold on to. Behind him, their twin shapes swung in the heavy-framed mirror. Christine did not want to look into it, not now, but it was too late and there they were — two dark figures blending to a single indistinguishable form: Erik's coat and her courtroom dress, blue-black and buttoned high to the collar. It was wrong here, this dress. She did not want mourning.

Erik glanced over his shoulder, catching her gaze in the glass.

"Oh," Christine said softly, as her mind echoed, Angel...

No, she pleaded with it, digging her heels in, refusing to follow, but the mirror threw back their twin faces at her and there was nothing she could do: the duet they had sung in the hall seeped again through layers of memory, washing over her with loss such as only children know; loss and betrayal.

Angel of Music, I would see your face.

"Christine," Erik said, and the mirror made it a sigh, "Christine…"

She shut her eyes but the mirror did not let go. There again was the chapel, teasing her with images of angels made flesh, with faces ablaze with glory, and beautiful, long-fingered hands, hands she dreamed she could hold… And always the voice in her dreams, dark with such longing that she could not help but wonder about the mouth that could shape those notes, and the face of the voice.

Come to me, Angel of Music.

The key slid from her grasp and clanked to the floor.

Christine's eyes flew open and she met her own face again, and Erik's masked one behind it.
"Come away from it," he pleaded, coaxing her towards him. "Come back."

His touch under her chin bade her look at him, and she followed gratefully, sliding free of the past, retreating until her legs backed against the scrolled armrest of the couch. Erik released her, leaving her skin warmer, both of them out of breath though they had scarcely moved.

"How did you stand it? A whole night in this room?"

Erik shrugged with careful indifference, his back to the frame. "It is only a glass. I checked."

Christine choked on a small laugh, and then knew he was right after all: it was only a glass, with no power but to reflect what it saw; and what it saw was up to her and Erik to decree.

"I used to miss it," she admitted. "The Angel's voice… Remember?" She hummed a few bars of one of their old songs, from the chapel.

Erik did not pick it up, but only took her hand and stroked her palm with his thumb, refusing to meet her eyes. "It's your voice I remember. You calling to me night after night from the candlelight, that song pulling me out of my shadows. It was beautiful, at first. Then it hurt."

"Hurt? Erik, no…"

"Others could hug you, stroke your cheek, hold your hand. I hated it; I was jealous of the entire world." Erik released her hand abruptly. "I wanted to touch you."

"So did I."

He caught his breath as Christine scraped her fingertips over his rough cheek and jaw, down to his mouth. One finger slid between his lips, parting them slightly. Erik admitted it just long enough, then clasped her wrist and pressed quick kisses to that finger and every other in turn, then the palm of her hand, until she was trembling.

"Erik?"

"Yes…" He cradled her hand against his bare cheek and Christine touched his temple, gently.

"It was worth losing the Angel, to see the Phantom gone. That duet was the most beautiful sound we ever made. Every person in that hall heard the truth of it, and they believed you, as I do."

He could not disagree, but his eyes were troubled, and he moved back from her touch. It must have taken him all night to wrestle the demons to submission, to learn to harness the Phantom's voice without losing himself to the role. Christine wondered if she would have been strong enough to spend a night in this chamber of mirrors and emerge as he did, alive and unchanged.

"You miss it still." Erik made it half a question, and Christine realised what had disturbed him so: his betrayal, the fairytale he had shattered in opening that fateful mirror. She shook her head impatiently.

"Not anymore. It was a dream, and sooner or later all dreams end. This is real."

For a long moment, Erik held her gaze. Then he grabbed hold of her shoulders, pulled her close and kissed her.

Real, this was real. Not like the cellars in the Opéra, the rats and the damp, or like the misery of the siege, but real like water and air, the sweetest harmony of Erik's voice and hers making the
same small sounds of human need. Life, only life. Erik reached around to unpin her chignon, and Christine felt it give way as a tide of long curls unraveled to flow past her shoulders. It felt extraordinary, like freedom.

"Let me look at you." Erik did not quite break the kiss but drove her own words back into her mouth, between breaths, his hands buried in her hair. "I need to see you now. Please."

He asked for so little, and Christine longed to grant it, but that please was too sweet on her tongue to let him go. She tugged his coat open and slid her palms under his cravat, clumsy with her own need to touch him — there, at last, the velvet warmth of his skin. A button popped to the floor, from his shirt.

"Christine, please..."

She mumbled a broken apology, kissing him still, not truly sorry at all because the breach let her press both hands to his chest, flat against his heartbeat. It was familiar, this rhythm; she remembered it from their one mad night in his room, and her own pulse answered in turn. His skin dampened under her palms, unseen; she wanted more, pushed her hands deeper...

"I need to see you." Erik captured her hands and moved his kiss to her neck, to the spot just under her ear where he knew it would shoot new bolts of heat to her belly. The prickle of his beard scratched her skin but his tongue healed it at once, and Christine welcomed it all, flesh and blood.

He broke away, caught her face cupped between his hands and held her at arm's length, heaving short breaths, his eyes wide behind the scrap of stained bandage. He held her not as something fragile but as a wild thing, that might any moment take flight.

"Let me see you like this, just for a moment."

Christine’s body thrummed with protest at the separation, but she fought it to be able to give him this proof he so craved, the sight of her here with him, in this room where she had brought them, open and holding nothing back. She wished he could see himself through her gaze right now, and believe her, truly believe what she saw: his soul shone naked in his eyes, and it was intoxicating.

"Look," she told him, and he did, watching as she started to unbutton the front of her own dress, her fingers fumbling on what was the simplest of daily tasks. It was terrifying, and it was exactly what she wanted. The dark silk cocoon of the dress slipped down, taking the world with it, and she stepped from it gladly, wearing only the white things underneath. Stockings, shift, corset, that was all.

Erik was utterly silent, all his life force intent upon her. Christine took his unresisting hands and set them warm on her hips, to where the adjusting laces were already loosened for her singing breath.

"There. Like that." She showed him what was needed and he removed the corset with barely a stumble of his fingers, reverent in this new learning. It felt good to be free of it, light and alive. They had done this only once and too hastily to find the knots and buttons that held each garment in its place, but now Erik took each one like a rosary bead, recalling and memorising the pattern.

"This?" He fingered the thin linen of her chemise, and willingly Christine drew it up, shuddering as the air raised goosebumps on her skin. It took a burst of courage to be rid of the fabric altogether, and it fell with barely a sound. Under Erik's gaze her neck grew hot, then her exposed breasts, her belly; but it was the sweetest magic, this new memory they were creating. Erik touched her waist and together they pushed down the last shreds of fabric. She relished his awed, unguarded look and the desperate tremor in his touch as he sank to his knees, trailing his hands down her thighs to roll...
down her stockings. She fought to keep still, but it was difficult when everything in her demanded
to move, when the very lightness of his touch made her thirst for more. He unlaced her shoes.

A step, then another, and there was nothing left. Christine raised her arms across her chest, then
thought better of it and let go. She wore nothing but her skin and it made her feel weightless, as
though she was rising into the air, singing with him.

"Christine," Erik whispered, kneeling, looking up at her with gold firelight in his eyes.

"Sing," she begged him, needing it suddenly even more than his hands on her skin, "Let me see it
in your mouth."

She brought him up to his feet and Erik shed his own coat and waistcoat, cravat, shirt, mask;
Christine urging him on, kissing skin newly freed, trailing her lips from his neck to his shoulders,
tasting salt and smoke, exploring all the curves and valleys of his body that she had scarcely
glimpsed before. The blisters on his scars were still healing, violet on red; she did not dare touch
but only brushed her lips over his eyelid there, in promise.

Erik tried to kiss her but she shied away to remind him: "Sing with me…"

"No." He met her eyes, unmasked and very human. "No music, not now."

Christine drew breath to speak, but exhaled instead; Erik nudged her legs apart with one hand and
pressed her back against the armrest, and there was no longer any music in the world to describe
what she wanted. She forgot words and speech, forgot herself and Erik; there was no longer a
barrier of skin between them because the same blood flowed in their veins, the same heat and
release. She dug her hands into his shoulders as they fell back, laughing breathlessly at the creaking
springs and their own awkward angles, knees and elbows, until, frustrated, Erik swept her hands
out of the way and they were joined again.

It was as strange as she remembered, feeling him become a part of her, watching the intensity of it
flash in his face above her.

"I wanted this..." he said, or she did, or perhaps they only breathed it together.

Erik slid to the edge of the couch afterwards, keeping her close, stroking her shoulder, her back,
kissing her cheek and hair. Christine rolled a little to arch her back, and he took the invitation,
trailing the whisper of a touch around her breast, between her ribs and lower, learning, pleased by
the murmurs he managed to elicit. It was a small peace, but all the more precious for it, and
Christine moved gladly to help his unhurried exploration. The thought of getting dressed, resuming
her life, seemed madness, and the world was very far away.

She did not know how long they lay like that, hidden from the mirror, languid and wordless and
safe, sometimes barely touching, then all at once greedy again, afraid that if they let go it would all
end. Erik seemed intent on making her shudder all over again, finding new ways to discomfit her,
then putting them together like phrases of music, until she felt wanton enough to simply press him
beneath her and take her own pleasure from his hands. It was nothing she had ever imagined and
yet it was natural as breathing, simple and beautiful and good.

She stayed atop him, watching his eyes for signs of the shadows returning. The fears and bitterness
were a part of him, and Christine knew even this was not enough to melt them away for good —
but there was only joy in his eyes. No angel, no ghost: a man in her bed. It frightened her how
easily she could get used to it.
Erik shifted to sit up under her, letting her down. Christine moved reluctantly, and her stomach emitted a noisy growl.

"You're hungry," Erik said, with a definite glint of smugness in his eyes. Evidently he considered it a personal triumph to have made her ravenous.

"I haven't eaten since breakfast," Christine protested, but could not help returning the smile. "It must be dinnertime by now."

She wriggled out of the mound of crumpled fabric beneath her and pulled out something at random: her petticoat. Erik made a harsh sound when he saw its scrunched and damp state, but Christine only caught his mouth in a hard kiss. "I liked it."

"Mmm," Erik murmured apologetically and drew her waist closer, "I'll buy you another…"

Christine laughed, startling him. "I don't mean this thing! I mean," her ears were burning; ridiculous, in the circumstances, "I mean I liked… what we did." Her fingers floated down from his throat to his chest and belly, exploring the soft hair there. The muscles beneath his skin gathered to her touch.

Erik grabbed her wrist, and all at once his eyes darkened; Christine saw the flood of fear burst its banks, flushing the marred half of his face an angry blistered scarlet.

"No, Christine. Not like that."

She frowned and tried to pull her hand back. "Like what? Erik, let me go!"

He crushed her wrist harder, hurting her in his panic. "It's all happening again, don't you see? Don't you see? I thought to court you honourably this time, without illusions, without mirror tricks! I wanted to come to you as a man. But the siege, I feared we had no time — and the music, the music — they would never have caught us but for that! A decent man would not have done this, any of it…" His free hand went to his scars, fingers splayed and digging into flesh, trying to hide. "I had no right."

Christine hit him. It was clumsy, but it was enough; her hand left a red imprint on his good cheek, glowing under the stubble. Erik gasped for air like a man pulled from a river, and let her go. Tears blurred the edges of Christine's vision, unbearable and beyond her power to stop; she snatched her hand back and clasped her fingers to hold herself together.

"It is not your right," she managed, "it's mine. Mine! Don't imagine I'm some kind of prize, that will sit in its box and wait to be awarded. I have a right to this."

Erik stared at her, rubbing his cheek absently, and Christine felt the anger relinquish its hold on her heart. Painfully, she scooted closer to wrap her bare arms around him, and kissed his shoulder, turning his skin slick with tears. At last he let go of his own face and brought his arms around her in turn, burying his head in her shoulder, clutching her to him. He smelled salty and musky and warm; a familiar closeness that made her ache for herself as much as for him.

"I'm not strong enough," Erik said helplessly, stroking her hair. "I wanted to do things right, to treat you as you deserve, to let you be free." He nuzzled into her, unwilling to let go now despite all he said, his scars hot and slick against her cheek. "I wish I could be your suitor, an architect… Someone with a life to offer you."

She pulled back. "Then be my suitor. Take me to dinner."
"Dinner."

"Yes. There must still be a restaurant open somewhere in Paris." She picked up her undergarments and began to pull them on, haphazardly. "This is what I want, Erik. To sing with you and go to dinner and kiss you and not spend my life waiting for a miracle or keep planning for some future that may never come. And to stop crying like this, God damn it!"

She tossed an armful of clothing at him; at least some of it had to be his. "Come, let's get dressed."

Erik sat naked on the divan and did not move when the bundle landed in his lap. She could not read his expression, but he picked up a garment and held it out to her. "All right. But I shall need your assistance with the laces."

Christine snatched the corset from his hand, more amused than mortified. "You haven't the figure for it, monsieur. Here, these are yours. Let's go outside."

o o o

"Mademoiselle Giry! Meg! Wait, wait a moment, over here!"

Meg turned and found Victorine, Monsieur de Gas' servant, rushing headlong in her direction, her shawl streaming around her and her coat open, as though she did not feel the cold. The crowd was almost as thick on the boulevard as it had been in the streets of Montmartre, and she and her mother had a dozen times lost each other in the confusion.

"Maman, wait!" Meg called over her shoulder, and just managed to hold on to Madame Giry's coat sleeve before they could again be separated. "I know that woman, she works for Monsieur de Gas."

"What woman?" Madame Giry squinted against the sun into the mass of people as the two of them were jostled here and there.

Victorine had disappeared in a cluster of what were probably students or artists, by the look of their artfully dishevelled clothing and fever-bright eyes. They were holding rolled-up newspapers and shouting to one another wildly over the others' heads.

"She was just there," Meg said, and then spotted the shawl again, "There she is. One moment, maman, please."

Victorine elbowed her way towards them, and wiped her forehead on a sleeve. "Oh, thank goodness. I hardly thought I'd catch up with you."

"What's happened?" Meg planted her feet wide and tried to remain where she was without falling into her mother or Victorine as the crowd flowed around them. "Is it Monsieur de Gas, is he going to the ramparts?"

"Oh no, not that I know; it's the regulars fighting up in Le Bourget as I hear it. But listen, you must know Monsieur de Gas has been beside himself on your account."

"On my account? What do you mean?"

Victorine took out a letter from an inside pocket and pushed it into Meg's hands. "He gets these notions you see, sometimes, and now nothing will please him but that I find you and tell you he has some newspaper man waiting, and he's bent on seeing you at once. The newspaper man, that is. Well, both of them, I suppose."
"A newspaper man? Why?"

"I really couldn't say, but do come, please!"

"But I can't!" Meg clung to her mother, anxious lest she lose sight of her in this stampede. "My mother, Victorine — look at this place, we need to go home."

Victorine seemed only then to notice Madame Giry; she made some apologetic noises but Madame Giry brushed this away.

"Go," she said to Meg. "Go and see what it is. I will meet you at home."

Meg raised her arms helplessly. "All right, but come with me then…"

Madame Giry smiled slightly and gave her a quick peck on the temple. "Don't worry about me, my dear, I have seen worse. Paris is what it is; that was always so. I will be fine. We will hear some news of the battle soon enough, and then this will calm down."

Victorine had already hooked her arm through Meg's to direct her and a moment later they were gone from Madame Giry's sight, vanished in the mayhem. Meg's pale hair flashed white among all the hats and scarves, and was gone.

Madame Giry sighed and turned her own steps back, finding the riptide in the crowd that jostled her along in vaguely the right direction. It was harder than she wanted to admit, to let them all go: Christine and her suitor, acquitted and heartbreakingly eager to rebuild, and now even Meg swept up in her own young life and carried away — but the day had been long coming. Paris was what it had always been, a whirlwind: one breath of news and the entire populace took to the streets just as they had done two decades earlier, in the days of her own hectic youth. She had danced through it all back then, the shootings and politicking and the death of the last Republic, the crowning of yet another Napoleon, the blood and gold and drama. She might have tried to keep Meg away from it, and Christine also — but it was theatre, then and now. They were all born to it.

The crowd thinned marginally by the time she reached the cemetery, when her eye was drawn to the sight of a gathering outside a grocery store, a tighter group of people that was more crowd than queue. She crossed the street and peered into their midst: and sure enough, there was the stack of cans, baskets of produce and even eggs that had certainly not been there that morning, with price labels a good third below what she herself had paid only the previous day.

The grumbling did not cease but some semblance of a queue did start forming. Madame Giry joined it; hoarders or not, if they had food to sell, she as the others around were not mad enough to turn it down. Madame Giry saw the satisfied way the shopkeeper twirled his moustaches and knew he would make his profit tonight. And if the siege ended tomorrow, well, at least there would be
dinner on the table.

A group of youths pushed through the queue, singing a cacophony of the Marseillaise, and laughing uproariously; the queue doggedly reassembled behind them. Madame Giry watched them disappear down rue Rachel, towards the cemetery. One turned and called, "They're holding Le Bourget! Haven't you heard? Kicked the Prussian Guard right out! Forget your onions and potatoes, come and drink!"

There was something to be said for being young enough to live off hope and wine, Madame Giry reflected. She bought a few eggs, once so common and now a delicacy, and a little of this and that, as much as her aching back would permit her to carry. Time was short and she thought it best to get home, but the stream of people heading for rue Rachel seemed to be growing out of all proportion. They could not all be heading to the cemetery and there was nothing else to be found there, except a couple of little restaurants and a drinking dive.

She turned into the street and paused, startled. The crowd had indeed surrounded one of the restaurants, where it seemed yet more hoarding had exploded in an array of dishes one hardly expected to find in the midst of queues and rations. The steamed-up windows were lit up like Christmas baubles in the gathering blue dusk, and within were tables with every seat taken, and food heaped upon every plate.

Yet it was not the food they were all looking at. Two of the diners, seen clearly through the plate glass, were a gentleman with a bandage across his head, and a young woman who sipped her wine with a tiny secretive smile, both of them as intent on each other as though they were alone. Madame Giry held her breath for a moment, then let it out in a rush. An old instinct made her step back into the cover of the crowd. She felt an intruder somehow, as if she had seen a thing not meant for her eyes, though reason told her it was all public, street and restaurant both.

"It's them," people were muttering, "the *franc-tireur* from Sedan and that girl, the singers! Look, look, there they are!"

Madame Giry glanced around in amazement: it was certainly so, these people were gathering to see them. News travelled fast around these parts, and it seemed Erik's hearing had somehow become entwined with the news of the sortie at Le Bourget.

A youngish man in a faded velvet suit exclaimed something unintelligible, stubbed out a cigarette dramatically against the step of the restaurant and flung open the front door.

**Chapter 51: Sur un pont**

**A/N:** A couple of trivia points for this marathon chapter. The exodus of British and US nationals on 27 October was the last opportunity for all those lucky enough to carry these passports (plus other necessary documents) to leave the city. At this point provisions were becoming so scarce that even the more determined foreigners mostly packed their bags and took advantage of it. Meanwhile the retaking of Le Bourget was welcomed as a reversal of fortunes, and revived the hope among the populace that the siege was nearly over. Consequently, those who had hoarded food or bred animals began to sell faster, trying to make money while food was still generally unavailable, resulting in falling prices and a very brief reappearance of better fare.

The title of this chapter, "On a Bridge", comes from one of Erik Satie's famously atonal piano compositions, which you can find on YouTube. It also echoes a quote from an 18th century Hasidic scholar, Rebbe Nachman, which became a popular folk song: "Kol ha'olam kulo gesher
He was either exhausted beyond reason or simply gone mad. Likely both, because surely no man in command of his faculties, having begun the day as an accused traitor, would end it by sauntering into a heaving restaurant on the eve of an all-out battle, to inform the waiter over the distant boom of artillery that he was being accorded the honour of serving the loveliest woman in France, and that a table had to be found at once. It was fortunate that Christine had greater tact. Her smile and gentle words had gone some way to reassure the unfortunate young man that beneath her suitor's bandaged and bedraggled appearance, he was a respectable gentleman with a deeply respectable wallet, capable of sane conduct and of paying the bill.

"We are celebrating freedom, monsieur," she had explained, and the waiter had readily concurred: the news from Le Bourget was better than anyone could have hoped. They had emerged to find the village taken and held, awaiting only daybreak and reinforcements. The liberation of Paris was at hand.

And he was here to have dinner with Christine Daaé. His Christine; irrevocably, incomprehensibly entwined with him; her arm laid firmly upon his, there for all the world to see.

The waiter’s gaze followed Christine's form with perhaps too much admiration, but this was not the moment to quibble: a table was theirs, and Erik saw the tremor in Christine's hands as she took up her menu. Beneath her poise, she was intolerably hungry, and all he'd had to offer was the measly hunk of bread that Louise had shoved into his hands. When the first course arrived, Christine reached for it like a ballet girl stealing chocolates, quick and ruthlessly determined. Her broken cuff and imperfectly pinned curls somehow made her all the more glorious to look at; Erik could not tear his eyes away.

Christine speared a tidbit of meat and hesitated. "Won't you eat something?"

"Not yet."

Truth to tell, he was not at all certain that his conduct could be described as sane. His thoughts careened wildly between ecstasy and doubt, one moment overflowing with gratitude, the next mocking his own hopes. Had this been music, it would have been tuneless and purposeless, nothing but waves of sound clashing against the noise of the other diners. How could Christine be so calm? He had exposed her to the winks and titters of the gossips, had put her in the compromising situation of having to speak for him, even sing for him… And yet, she spoke of what they had done afterwards as her own due. How could she want this? He was too exhausted to make sense of it beyond the simple fact that he was alive, and that for some unfathomable reason, Christine wanted to share this life with him.

The main course arrived, as convincing a roast rabbit as any before the siege, betrayed only by the whiff of horse fat that ought to have been butter. Christine did not seem to mind, and her delight was wonderful to behold. So much food here, so much wine and celebration. The waiter had muttered something discreetly about hoarders in Les Halles, but Erik did not bother listening. The jubilant tumult of the restaurant seemed an orchestra around them; the clinking of glass and arrhythmic percussion of cutlery and sporadic cheers framed their silence: Christine eating, and he watching her every move, only moving now and again to refill her glass with water or wine.
She stopped his latest effort before he could lift the carafe, and noticed his full plate. "That's enough; it'll go to my head — you haven't even touched your food!"

"I can't, Christine. My heart is too full."

"You must tell it to make some room for your stomach," she said lightly, and her cheek dimpled a little. He could kiss her there, later.

He ought to be thinking of the future, whispered some remnant of his sanity. Who could tell; this news from Le Bourget might indeed be the foothold the city needed. They might yet live. He must think of his small income and the ways to support Christine properly, and of jewellery and dresses. A woman, he vaguely knew, had requirements beyond those he might be aware of, and must have her own rooms and certainly a servant, and a carriage... Or was a carriage not required? And in any case, where was one to find any of these things in a city on the brink of explosion?

No. No, he was mad. A man would do all this first: a stroll along the Seine, a chaste kiss placed lightly upon her crown of neatly-rolled hair, a dance, a night at the theatre, and then a visit to his banker and at last, a ring. That was what suitors did, he was certain of it. But he...

Christine raised another forkful to her lips, and Erik was forced to clamp his teeth on the inside of his own cheeks, trying not to imagine the astringent taste of wine still in her mouth, or the way those lips would open to sing. All he could think of was the extraordinary sensation of melding his body to hers and feeling her soul accept his mangled one. It was monstrous to think this way. He could not help himself. Christine must have guessed something of his struggle, for her foot under the table slid along his, from toe to ankle, and he did not think it an accident.

"This is more and better food than I've seen in weeks." Christine's voice was soft as water lapping at his skin; a man could drown in it. "Thank you."

"My pleasure. It is our luck to have come here now. Yesterday there might have been nothing here but bread and turnips. And tomorrow—"

"Tomorrow will come soon enough."

"Yes. It must." Erik took a napkin and dabbed a corner carefully against Christine's mouth, where a stray crumb could have lingered; only there was none. She smiled a little, and permitted him to do it. He let his little finger graze her lip behind the napkin, a magician's trick that no suitor should dare, but Christine looked squarely back at him, even as he felt the tip of her tongue. Was it his imagination, or did she seem to enjoy it?

Hastily, he dropped the napkin and busied himself with the pointless task of folding it.

"A million apologies, mademoiselle, monsieur, but I simply must speak!"

Erik raised his eyes sharply and found himself confronted with the glowing face of a musician.

The napkin fell to the table.

A musician, there could be no doubt of it, an accompanist from the Opéra. He had played occasionally, and not too abysmally, for rehearsals of the ballet. The months since had not been kind to him, he looked thinner than ever, and his reddened nose suggested too great a fondness for wine.

"Saints above!" The man's jaw slackened. "Christine Daaé."

"Ah. Good evening, mademoiselle." The hapless man yanked at the velvet lapels of his coat in an effort to impart to it an elegance it did not possess. Erik was deeply glad he had not eaten, because his belly roiled, threatening him with the taste of bile. What in the Devil's name was this?

Ballard's eyes flickered wildly between him and Christine. There could be no mistake; he knew exactly whom he had so boldly addressed. Erik found his own voice rasped unpleasantly when he spoke.

"Sir, you are disturbing my fiancée and myself. Kindly go away."

Christine glanced at him sharply, and Erik had the sudden clear sensation that he had missed a hidden beat. Her brows jutted together and she looked away from him most deliberately.

Ballard's narrow face crinkled in worry, "No, please, I beg you! You mustn't think me forward, but I had the misfortune of missing your performance earlier today while I was on duty, and to hear it, all Montmartre has been transformed. And now…"

"And now," Erik seethed, "Monsieur Ballard, you will leave us in peace."

"Monsieur, er, forgive me, I don't know the name you go by—"

"Andersson," supplied their waiter, returning to the table with a look of hungry curiosity on his beaky face.

Oh God, Erik thought. They were watching, they were all watching him…

"Andersson!" the accompanist continued, with a grateful nod to the waiter, "I am the chief pianist at the Folies, the very dance hall where you sang!"

"Delighted." Erik felt anything but.

"And, and, and — it would give me the greatest pleasure if you were to help us celebrate the news that reaches us from Le Bourget!"

"Celebrate how?" asked Christine, quietly enough to force the noise around them to subside a little.

"Why, with a concert!" Ballard declared, as if it was patently obvious. "What better way to celebrate our deliverance?"

"What you are suggesting is illegal." Erik kept his voice as low and bland as he could. Go away, he willed mentally, to no effect whatsoever. Not only was Ballard still standing over their table, but his flamboyant behaviour had drawn the attention of a bigger audience than Erik had realised; the front door was opened to the freezing evening, and too many faces were peering in.

"Christine." He tried not to panic, not to breathe shallowly, not to stand too quickly. "We are leaving, now."

She understood; by some hidden genius of her own she knew to ask nothing but allowed him to help her into her coat, and pulled on her gloves. The waiter was conveniently hovering nearby, presenting no difficulty in settling the bill, and then, thankfully, they were free to depart.

"Leave me your card, Monsieur Ballard," Christine asked the man in parting, to Erik's surprise and irritation. He wanted to be gone; what sort of time was this for social pleasantries?
However, the address was duly produced; Christine slipped it into her coat pocket and preceded him out of the godforsaken restaurant and out into the cold street. The crowd parted before her; it was fortunate for them that nobody jostled or otherwise offended her, because Erik did not feel capable of restraining himself just then.

Outside, he needed to be outside and away from all this noise. He shoved himself and Christine through the crowd and half-ran into the depths of the unlit street, Christine keeping up with quick steps. The gates to the cemetery were padlocked at this hour, of course; he turned and headed instead for the stairs up, taking two at a time, until they were finally out in the open, on the causeway of rue Caulaincourt. There was not a soul in sight; it might have been a deserted bridge over some river, but for the smell of the gutter and the barely visible roofs of the tombs in the great black expanse of the cemetery below. The evening air felt icy after the warmth of the restaurant, biting at the exposed half of his face.

Erik clutched the parapet and tried to halt the impulse to keep running. The iron was freezing cold against his ungloved hands. There was nobody in pursuit, the stairs remained clear, and the street empty.

"It is too much." Arrest, liberation, music, desire… He had to hold on to himself now, he could not leave Christine to deal with a mad creature running from the light. "You should not have taken that fool's card."

Christine removed a glove and laid her hand over his. Her breath fogged in the air. "He meant us no harm. The theatre was packed earlier today; they all heard us sing. There is nothing to be done about it now."

"He knew me. He looked at my face, and yours, and he knew."

"What of it? All he knows is the same nonsense the papers trumpeted all those months ago, the same thing the girls at the Variétés believed. Christine Daaé had a strange admirer who wanted her on the stage, and superstitious theatre folk believed in a ghost. It is old news." Her profile was soft in the cloud of her breath, and there was no rancour in her voice. "It is history now. Like everything before the war."

Erik stared down through the bars into the cemetery, and tightened his fists on the grate. "What of the deaths? And the fire." Speaking it was hard; his mouth resisted the words.

Christine sighed, but did not remove her hand from his. She was quiet for a long time, mourning. "You can't undo what is done. But you know the police were only too glad to believe it when Raoul and I said we knew nothing. The Comte came to speak with them too; it would hardly have served to drag his own name through the mud. Perhaps there was money involved, I don't know, only they left us alone after that."

Erik took off his hat, despite the cold, and held it between both hands. It was neither costume nor disguise. "I owe you my life, Christine. You and the Vicomte."

"Yes," she said simply. "We must go to the ambulance in the morning. Raoul came a long way to speak for you. For us."

Erik replaced his hat and turned to face her. His heart was pounding fit to burst, but he felt very calm now, and entirely himself. "Come with me to the mairie before that, first thing tomorrow."

Christine frowned. "What for?"
"What for?" Erik repeated in bewilderment. "To sign what is already done! Let us be wed properly, Christine."

To his astonishment, Christine only shook her head. "It is Friday tomorrow, they will be dispensing ration cards all morning. And besides… Erik, let us not speak of it now. It is very late, and we have a long walk ahead of us."

Her teeth were chattering, Erik realised, and a flood of shame and tenderness overwhelmed his own fears. He should never have kept her here in the cold; it was as dangerous as it was thoughtless. There was no excuse, he must learn to look out for her better than this. Hastily, he shrugged out of his coat and draped it over Christine's shoulders, embracing her over her protests.

"Don't, you'll freeze!"

"Forgive me," he whispered, "please, Christine. I will try to make you happy."

She held his coat closed tight, its bulk of fabric vast as a cloak around her. On an impulse, Erik leaned down and kissed both her hands through the gloves, one then the other. She put her cheek against his as he rose, with the bandage between them.

"Erik, take me home. It's been a very long day."

Without another word, Erik picked her up and held her. Even in his coat, she was feather-light, and when she laughed, he only held her closer to his chest. He carried her thus, all the way home.

The next days flowed by in a haze so strange and peaceful that Erik might have almost feared it the product of his own delirium, locked still in the mirrored torture of his cell — and yet he knew every moment was real, to be cherished and inscribed on his heart against whatever else the future might hold. Madame Giry and Meg met their safe return with immense relief, and evinced no surprise at their tightly linked hands, or at the brazen goodnight kiss he dared to plant on Christine's forehead. Perhaps after the duet that had ended his ordeal, they had expected no less; Erik was too tired to question it. The late hour, past curfew, made conversation impossible, but Madame Giry's arm placed on his for a moment spoke all that was needed. He was alive, and he was welcome.

He slept like the dead that first night, rolled in his blanket on the rug before the divan that was too short and narrow for his frame. The door was kept shut and it was late morning when he at last came to, groggy still with the vanishing memory of some extraordinary dream.

"I brought you coffee," the girl in the dream said. He sat up, and saw it was no dream: Christine sat perched lightly on the edge of the divan, looking down at him, gorgeous and uncorseted in the silk folds of her morning dress. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee rose from a cup she had set on the side table.

Too late he remembered his unmasked face and the unwashed state of his shirt. He raised a corner of the blanket to hide the worst of his scars; it was all he could do.

Christine studied him with undisguised curiosity, and something more; a warmth in which he recognised the memory of the previous day. "This is nice."

"What is?"

"This. Seeing you wake up."
Perhaps he was still not entirely himself. "What of the others?" The apartment seemed entirely quiet and uninhabited; the only the low mutter of rain against the windowpanes offset the silence.

"They are collecting ration cards. And Meg is to meet again with some newspaper man with whom Monsieur de Gas is acquainted; she left this morning with a whole binder of sketches under her arm." Christine passed him the coffee cup and saucer, and Erik had no option but to let go of the blanket to accept them. The coffee was very black, almost sweet, and hot enough to wake him fully. Christine watched him sip it.

"There is no news of a sortie," she said in answer to a question he had not yet formed. "Nothing at all. So we can do some work when you're ready." She nodded at the piano, where her music book had been restored to its place on the shelf above.

Erik set his empty cup back on the side table and glanced down at his shirt. "I need a wash. Christine, you should not be seeing me like this."

She dismissed this with a small grin that pierced him right through, and served only to increase his self-consciousness. "I'll heat some water. You can rinse that shirt out if you like; we have an iron to press it, now that the laundries have all closed. I'll find something you can wear."

"My mask… I'll need some linen."

Her grin faded. "Five minutes," she reminded him. "Five minutes when you are with me."

"It has been twice that long already."

Christine jiggled the empty cup on its saucer, an unhappy music, then stood up in defeat. "There must be some in the sewing things. I'll look."

He heated water and scrubbed the worst of the grime from himself and his sweat-stained shirt, then dumped the remaining hot water in the bath, filled it, and climbed in. It was very warm and deep; he had not permitted himself such a luxury in a long time. He sat back as far as the small tub permitted. It felt strange but not unwelcome to be so immersed, to sit motionless and without thought. At the other end of the apartment, Christine was picking out something new on the piano, in a strangely pleasing repetition that rose, fell, stumbled and rose again, never resolving into any key. With his eyes shut against the daylight and the water lapping at his chest, the music transported him back to the lake, where droplets were falling endlessly, soothingly, upon the dark green surface.

"...Erik! Erik, open the door, please, please open the door! Erik!"

He flew awake so violently that the back of his head struck the edge of the tub.

The frantic hammering on the door broke off; Christine's playing had ceased and she was right outside. "What was that noise? Erik!"

"One moment!" He surged from the tub in a crash of zinc and water, drying himself with a wad of towel in one hand while he searched desperately for his clothing. "What is it, what's wrong?" Vague images of barricades and shellfire tore through his mind.

Silence; then a softer, embarrassed tone. "It has been two hours. I feared... Never mind. Your linen and robe are here. We must be at the ambulance soon, or they will not permit the visit."

His pulse slowed a little. Had Christine thought he might drown in that water, or come to some other harm? The thought of her being concerned for him was so peculiar that Erik did not know
what he felt.

By the time he had unlatched the door, Christine was gone. She had left behind a loose dressingrobe she had found, gold and green, printed in a facsimile of the Japanese style, and a roll of clean linen to bind his deformity. Erik did what he could with both.

"Oh," Christine said when he emerged, and her gaze trailed the edge of the robe, open at the neck and ludicrously inadequate as anything approaching clothing, but sufficient at least until his own shirt could be dried. Christine wore a proper day dress now, and Erik regretted the loss of all that softness behind its strict lines.

"I am going to kiss you," he warned her.

Her eyes sparkled. "No buttons. It suits you very well." She meant the robe.

Erik felt the heat rise to his bare neck and seep to his scars under the linen. "I feel like one of those pashas in Dupré's ridiculous paintings."

"Well. You could take it off if you prefer." She made this suggestion with a perfectly straight face, betrayed only by the bloom in her own cheeks. "I left the iron heating in the kitchen, for your shirt."

He understood the implied invitation to hurry, and took it up with a will, trying in vain to make up for the cursedly long time he had wasted lounging about. Christine was delightfully obliging, tilting her neck to grant him access to her skin, and but she took no liberties of her own, and when he moved to her mouth, she did not permit his kiss to deepen past her lips. "$\textit{Shirt,}$" she said breathlessly, with so sweet a sound of regret that he could not deny it. "$\textit{Go, or we'll burn the building down.}\$"

He honestly could not have cared less if the building and everything in it was reduced to ashes, he thought as he struggled with the heavy iron and steaming shirt; it would give him all the better reason to carry her off at once and never lose her again. But there were Madame Giry and her daughter with their own worldly possessions; and in any event, he had no desire at all to be the cause of any destruction. He had Christine, he had some semblance of an income and the hope that when at last the siege ended, he could resume his role as an architect and look after her with all the tenderness and comforts of which he was capable.

That was all he wanted, all he had ever needed. Perhaps he truly was a traitor, because he cared not a whit for the machinations of the diplomats and the grotesque incompetence of the government, nor for the increasingly desperate hunger among the poor or the processions of men bearing rifles and placards and calling for new elections. As long as Christine was by his side, all the world could go to Hell and remain there.

Christine stayed by his side all through the damp walk to the ambulance. When at last they arrived, the scene was wilder than either he or Christine had anticipated; the victory at Le Bourget was not without cost. Wounded men, covered in dust and with their faces grey in exhaustion, were borne in on every manner of waggon and donkey-pulled cart, and received like some dilapidated baggage train of a lost army. Everywhere were orderlies and nurses with their Red Cross armbands blazing through the cold misty afternoon, ladies hurrying with packets of rolled bandages, and the rapid fire of surgeons' instructions relayed across tents in a mixture of Latin, English and French. A fine drizzle hung in the air, and beaded on Christine's dark eyelashes in minute diamond droplets that looked too much like tears.

In all this well-oiled chaos of a great human machine, the officers' large tent was an oasis of quiet.
Fully half the beds stood stripped bare and obviously vacated. The Vicomte's bed was one of those.

"He's gone," Christine said in disbelief, looking around as though she might have found him behind any of the other faces of the remaining men. "How can he be gone?"

An officer Erik had not seen before, laid on his cot with one leg in what seemed to be a weighted splint, looked up from the day-old newspaper he was perusing. "Who is it you're after, mademoiselle?"

Christine looked his way hopefully. "Lieutenant de Chagny. Do you know something of him, monsieur?"

The man glanced at the direction of Raoul's empty bed. "I imagine he went with the others. Had he English papers perchance, or American?"

"No," Christine said, mystified. "Whatever for?"

"Perhaps you have not heard? The Americans negotiated safe passage from the city for them and theirs, and the English as well. They all left today, by way of the Porte de Sèvres."

"But he is an officer!" Christine protested. "And I am certain he could not have had any foreign papers."

The officer shrugged, "A few of the others were officers too, from this very tent. It's extraordinary what a little pain and privation can do to help some men uncover their true loyalties. Then again, perhaps they have the right of it. You know what they say about rats leaving the ship."

Christine could say nothing to this barely-veiled bitterness, and Erik took the opportunity to steer her outside. He hated these tents, with their sickening odour of chloroform and seaweed, and the ever-present shadow of agony.

"I must find him, Erik, I need to know where he is gone, and why. He did not look well at the hearing." Even as she spoke, Christine's eyes searched the medics for someone less occupied, whom she could importune for information.

Erik touched her elbow to indicate a nearby small tent, where the back of Doctor Swinburne's white coat was could be seen between the raised flaps of canvas. "He ought to know."

At that moment a group of medics emerged from the tent, with Swinburne in the centre of it. He looked trim and unperturbed as usual, from which Erik gathered that he saw nothing here out of the ordinary, except perhaps a busy day.

"Ah!" Swinburne exclaimed, recognising Christine at once before she could venture anything. Erik stepped closer, lest the man permit himself any unnecessary familiarity. "Mademoiselle Daaé. Just the lady I had been hoping to see today. And," he glanced at Erik, "your even more obstinate friend. I see you have not followed my advice regarding your dressings, sir. A pity; a great pity."

"Monsieur le docteur," Christine returned his attention to her question, "What has become of Raoul de Chagny?"

"He left us this morning."

"Left you? I don't understand."

Swinburne raised a placating hand to a nurse who had come to ask him a question. "A foolish idea,
after his escapade yesterday, but there is no accounting for men of his type. To tell you the truth, mademoiselle, I had been expecting something of the sort. It is a burden to the young men to feel themselves confined, they none of them can endure it gracefully. Chagny did better than many."

"Then you know where he is to be found?"

"He was discharged into the care of one Henri Guyon, evidently a friend, and by his own claim, a doctor's son. You know him?"

"Only a little. May I have the address?"

"I don't see why not. Mention my name to Mrs. Edmonds at the nurses' station and she will be glad to oblige you. But tell me," he frowned again at Erik's bandaged face, "have you any knowledge of what prompted his mad departure with the nuns yesterday? He was gone so long that we had begun to fear he had taken it into his head to be healed by prayer. And when he returned, I thought a good deal of our work undone."

"He wanted to help me," Christine said softly. "And he did."

There was nothing for it, Erik could not allow her to accept the blame. "It was a matter of honour. Mademoiselle Daaé had nought to do with it."

Swinburne sighed deeply, and began to turn away. "Do get rid of the dressings, sir. There are sufficient men with burned faces and purulent wounds that it is not at all necessary to add to their number. I would be perfectly willing to examine you should you fear to act on this advice unseen."

Christine wisely caught hold of his arm before Erik could express all he thought on the subject. He restrained himself long enough for the man to be gone from his sight. "Examine me," he said, in a low, ugly voice that even he found distasteful. "He would examine me, and every freak who wanders into his clutches, and parade them before his students like a sideshow of curiosities."

Christine moved his arm so that their elbows were linked lightly, and Erik surrendered his anger and shame before this gentle caress.

"Let's go find this Mrs. Edmonds now. I want that address."

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**Chapter 52: Le Bourget**

You know that feeling you get when you see a chapter alert in your email? I get it with review alerts. :-) For those who check regularly for updates: if you have an account, you can add Solo to your story alerts, and receive an email as soon as a chapter is posted.

Trivia for this chapter: the *London Illustrated News* was an actual publication that printed reports with accompanying illustrations. However, their Paris correspondent left the city with the exodus of British citizens.

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**Chapter 52 — Le Bourget**

"*Maman*, I wish you could be happy for me. It is a chance I may not have again, and the *Illustrated News* will pay well for every drawing that makes it to London."

Madame Giry took the freshly scrubbed stockpot from Meg's reddened hands, and dried it furiously
on a dishtowel. If their dinners were plainer than ever, at least the kitchen was spotless, thanks in no small part to having so little with which to sully it. "I have already said you may do as you choose. But you must forgive me if I gain no joy from the prospect of you seeking out every unsavoury and dangerous happening in Paris, for no better reason than to sketch the wretched state of our city. If the papers pay well for such drawings, it is because there are few artists in this city foolish enough to risk themselves."

"But they are all risking themselves! Look, even Monsieur de Gas is in the National Guard, and so is Monsieur Hadol, and so many others."

"How many of them are girls not yet seventeen? No," Madame Giry stopped herself, "that is not the reason. Open that cupboard for me, please." She pushed the pot back into its place in the cupboard Meg held open, and let the door fall shut. "Were you twice your age and not a daughter but a son, I would still counsel against it." She saw the familiar obstinate set of Meg's jaw, and conceded ruefully, "And I know you would do it all the same."

"Thank you." Meg's face softened in relief. "It will not be very long, just until the siege ends. And it's thirty francs a drawing, maman. We need it. You know we can't go on as we are."

"We may not have to endure this much longer. You saw the guns being moved this morning; there must be a sortie planned, and soon." Madame Giry tried to infuse this with an optimism she could not feel. The taking of Le Bourget that for two days had driven all Paris wild with anticipation had still not produced anything more than a round of arguments about reinforcements. No news of a plan to break out in that direction, and no news of armies from the provinces reaching them in time to support such a sortie. Nothing, in fact, except more assurances that all good citizens were to stand fast and remain calm, and that the world was looking to Paris for its magnificent courage. It all had the air of panic about it, akin to the old placating calls for the audience to keep to their seats.

"Whatever happens," Meg said, "at least there will be no shortage of subjects. You know it is not just the unsavoury and dangerous that the News is after; it's our daily life they want. Queues and such."

Madame Giry huffed, "What they want is to see Paris brought to her knees. There is a brand of ugliness in the human soul that rejoices to see the mighty fallen. The English will look at your sketches and read the reports, and know they were right to condemn us as arrogant and frivolous, and deserving of our destruction. They use us well enough for our fashions and theatres, but now we are helpless, nothing keeps them from enjoying the spectacle of our misery."

Meg looked mortified, and too late Madame Giry thought she should have kept her bitter thoughts to herself. What was the use of burdening her young soul with such weariness? Poor Paris was like a diva fallen from favour, gleefully watched in her humiliation by all those who would never have dared speak a word against her at the height of her power.

"They can't be as bad as that... All those other countries. Wasn't there a government minister gone to negotiate with them?"

"Yes, Monsieur Thiers. He has returned, this morning I believe, empty-handed and talking only of surrender. Not a single court in Europe will come to our aid. And why should they help? We started this lunacy. To think of them in July, dancing on the boulevards," Madame Giry flourished a mocking arm, "À Berlin! Such foolishness. À Paris, now."

"Doesn't matter. We'll just have to save ourselves. Everyone is enlisting now, everyone who can." Meg wrung out her cloth, dried her hands and let her sleeves down again. Madame Giry felt her
daughter's conviction as a warmth in her own heart. Would that conviction alone could be enough to change things… Meg held out her hands and Madame Giry helped to fasten her cuffs, more from habit than in answer to a genuine need: Meg did not really require her assistance in anything much these days, and she supposed they both knew it — but it was pleasant all the same to have their few small rituals.

Madame Giry pressed her knuckles into the small of her own back, rubbing muscles stiffened with disuse. "When do you start?"

"The next London despatch is two days from now, if they can get the balloon ready in time. I'll need two or three sketches by then, to send with the press reports. The balloonist can't take any more, because of the weight."

"You have plans then, for what you will draw?"

Meg looked uncomfortable. "I thought I would take a look at what's left of the Opéra. There is a vegetable market out the front now. It would make a good contrast." She got that determined look again, expecting an argument.

"Very well then." Madame Giry met Meg's surprise at such an easy victory with her own implacable stare, and waited until she was sure that Meg understood this was the point where negotiation ended. "You will go, but you will not go alone."

"All right. You are welcome to join me; only what about the shopping…"

"Christine and Monsieur Andersson will accompany you."

Meg's eyes widened, "What? No! Maman, no. What would be the use of the two of them standing around watching me work?"

"You may not need watching, but I am beginning to think it best if Christine and her suitor were not left too much to themselves. And it is no bad thing to take an architect with you if it is your intention to draw the ruin; it will give you better cause should your efforts be questioned."

Meg looked unhappy, but voiced no more objections. They collected the clean dishes and headed for the dining room, where the sideboard was. Meg crouched down to put the plates away and spoke without turning, seeming to address the shelves: "Do you think Christine is in some danger with him?"

Madame Giry sat down at the table, taking a moment to arrange her skirts. It was not a question she knew how to answer. "We are all in danger," she said finally, "There is a war."

"That isn't the same. You know what I mean." Meg sat on the floor like a child and hugged her knees, looking up to her. "You saw them at the hearing — he didn't even need to ask, she just sang for him. And he watches Christine's every move, have you noticed? It's unnerving."

"They are…" Madame Giry groped for words for what no words existed. What name could one give to the deep chasm of longing that had lurked in Christine's eyes ever since her father's passing, or the identical chasm, the same hunger, in the voice of another orphan? "Theirs is a long and strange history," was all she could bear to say on it, "and full of grief. Time will tell what comes of it."

"He frightened me at the hearing, with that voice — like the Phantom all over again. But Christine wasn't afraid, was she?" Meg rested her chin on her knees, thinking. "She is changing. She doesn't look quite so… haunted anymore. But he still looks a little mad. More than a little."
Madame Giry thought of the lit-up restaurant window, of the defiant intimacy she had inadvertently witnessed, and of the unfortunate pianist whose intrusion had led to their flight. Ballard had seen the madness between them, and not understood at all. But it was simple enough, when one did not imagine more than there truly was: they were not the first or the last to be young and in love. Perhaps they thought their casual touches and more-than-casual looks less obvious than they were, or perhaps they wanted the world to see them. Either way, the remarks in the Montmartre crowd had been ribald enough that they made the Opéra gossip about Christine and their patron seem the model of propriety.

"He is sane enough," she sighed, "and ought to know more discretion. I have perhaps allowed Christine too much liberty in this."

Meg stared so intently at a spot on the parquet that Madame Giry was at once convinced her daughter was privy to some confidences Christine had not shared with her. She decided to leave it for a better time, and only said mildly, "Try to get some rest, my dear. Read a book. I'm sure Christine will be home soon."

When hours later Christine did return, it was once again on the arm of her suitor, and this time their goodnight kiss, when they thought themselves alone, was full on the lips. Madame Giry retreated to her room as quietly as she could, saying nothing, and lay awake hour after hour, replaying in her mind's eye that worryingly confident kiss, and all the little moments that had come before. They had spent every daylight hour since the hearing in each other's company, whether at chores or at their music... Yes; it was undoubtedly best if they were not left unchaperoned. Perhaps her anxiety was as unfounded as the time he had first taken Christine to his cellar, or the time he had come to her room in this same apartment — but even so, it would do no harm to be cautious.

Sometime in the night, more artillery was moved through the nearby streets, with a deep rumble of wheels punctuated by calls between soldiers. There was something strangely comforting in worrying about a girl's courtship when tomorrow or the next day the siege of Paris might come to an end.

The address of Henri Guyon's apartment had proved a relatively simple matter to obtain, even if it did require a further two morning visits to corner the formidable lady in charge of the patients' whereabouts, and a most uncomfortable interview regarding the nature of their acquaintance with the Vicomte. Christine, angelic and imperturbable, with hands folded in her lap, was so much his childhood friend, almost sister, that even Erik's dubious presence did not form the obstacle he had expected: of course the address had to be provided to so loyal a friend, and the rash young officer was duly wished a full and speedy recovery. Mrs. Edmonds gave Christine's bandaged companion a last speculative look, wondering perhaps if he was not himself an escaped patient, but Erik only tipped his hat at her and steered Christine outside as quickly as he dared.

It took all the persuasive powers he could muster to keep Christine from rushing straight to the Vicomte's side without so much as a card to forewarn of their visit. The drizzle that had accompanied them these previous days at last grew to heavy rain, and by the time they were out of the ambulance Erik could only dread the prospect of spending the afternoon dripping over the polished parquet floors of some salon-turned-sickroom while being scrutinised by the Guyon fellow and all his kin. The ambulance had been bearable in its own way, and visiting the Vicomte there had been easy enough, but a fashionable apartment near the rue de Rivoli?

"We do not need to stay long," Christine insisted, huddling under her umbrella, "but I must see Raoul is all right, and his leg is not injured further. You heard what Doctor Swinburne said before."
"What he said was that the Vicomte is in the care of his friend, whose own father is a doctor. There is no danger, Christine! Had he wanted to be followed directly, he would have left a note."

"I need to talk with him. And so do you."

"Not now." With his arm through Christine's elbow, Erik drew her nearer, sending a cascade of rainwater to fall back from her umbrella, and tucked a lock of wet hair behind her ear. "Send a note first; it is only polite."

"Polite!" She laughed, and made not the least attempt to remove herself from his decidedly impolite proximity, but instead put her other hand over his for a moment. "Perhaps you're right. He might not want to see me."

The sudden uncertainty in her tone broke Erik's will. "Christine…"

"I told him about our courtship. At the hearing."

There was nothing else she could have said that would have had such an effect on him: Erik felt his heart beat double time, and his limbs seemed to turn to rags. Christine was looking at him, a worry line between her eyebrows, quite unaware of having struck him mute.

"What is it?" she asked after another moment's silence.

Erik forced some approximation of speech from his mouth. "You told your — your Vicomte that we are engaged?"

A second worry line joined the first between Christine's brows, briefly; then as suddenly as it had come, the frown was gone, and she was as carefree as he had ever seen her.

"Let's go back to the theatre," she suggested, "I've had a few ideas that I would like to try out with you… Musical ideas," she added hastily.

"They'll spot us there and we'll have no peace. No," Erik hid her from the street with his umbrella and put his thumb to her lips, tracing the line between them, corner to corner. "But if you would like to visit the Angels' Garden again…"

She brightened, "Yes! Yes, Erik. I haven't been there in too long."

It was settled; they made their way on foot to the cemetery, past endless soldiers' tents and groups of *mobiles* at rifle drill, which seemed to drift through the downpour like so much scenery from a discarded production. The boulevards teemed with military life, but at the cemetery, all was still and mercifully unpeopled. Christine released his arm once they were inside and hurried onward, only turning once or twice to check that he followed.

Her father's tomb stood lonely and dark with rain under the bare leafless trees. The paths Erik still recalled as packed earth had dissolved into mud squelching beneath the relentless rainfall, and the steps up to the tomb churned with puddles. Christine dropped her umbrella and ran up those steps the moment she sighed them, heedless of her sodden shoes and skirts, and clung to the wrought iron gate of the crypt as though it was not a tomb but a prison cell that held her father. Erik watched her from the bottom of the steps, thinking only that he understood nothing of death.

There were other graves here that he recognised, Piangi's grey tomb among them. Carlotta was very much alive somewhere, and nothing and nobody could ever return her lover to her. Erik toed
at a few pebbles, then giving up all pretense, bent down, scooped up a handful, and dropped them in a pile atop the wet stone: a futile, laughable gesture. The rain ran between the stones and over them, washing nothing away.

It was sometime later that Christine returned to him, frozen and so wet that he could not tell whether it was water or tears that coursed down her face. She smiled at him through it, and he could taste no salt when he kissed her cheeks. Her poor feet were mud to the ankle. He passed back her umbrella.

"You will catch cold." He felt a sudden stab of fear at the idea of her ill, an irrational echo of the accusing stones around them. "Come back to rue Fontenelle with me; you can get dry and warm. There is coal for the stove."

Christine gave him a long, searching look. Something in her eyes demanded honesty, more than he could speak, and he had to drop his hands and step back to a distance that was only fractionally more decorous. "There will be bread and a sort of soup Madame Gandon makes, of beets and barley and I know not what. It is edible; I have not died of it yet."

Christine touched her wet cheek, where he had kissed her. "I would like that," she said. "And more."

That more kept him flying through street after street, barely conscious of the rain and cold, seeing only Christine's form and feeling her steps fall in time with his own. In his room, a furious determination made him cover the keyhole and window and even slide a shirt across the slim space under the door, needing to know without shadow of doubt that they were alone, that Christine was his, and that nothing she did here could ever be whispered about by the crowd.

He wanted to take his time, to be mindful of her responses to what little he had learned of how to please her, but the dictates of his consciousness did not seem to have much force with the rest of his being. Christine peeled off his mask the moment they were inside, with impatience that demanded the same in return, and he could not stop anything. She was here again, in his own room, in his bed, naked and wide open and not the least bit interested in his shame or his ignorance. She led his hands to where they were needed and all that was left to him was the twin confusion and thrill of her body, and barely enough presence of mind not to prolong the torment into the abyss of release beyond which these stolen moments could endanger them both.

He raised himself above her on his elbows, floating upon her light. "Marry me, Christine."

"Not now," she said, and kissed him, soft and irresistible as rain.

He took her home much too late in the evening, and spent a dreamless night back in Montmartre, drifting through fragments of memories and peaceful, wordless hopes. Tomorrow he would see Christine again. His heart refused to be silent, and wrong though it was to indulge it, Erik let it sing. The music that came to him was sweet and dark and rich with promise, and he explored it until at length he found himself out of bed and scribbling a staff on a stray sheet of paper. He crumpled the page away at once and reached instead for the velvet pouch that held the ring Christine had given him. Returning to bed with it, he slipped the ring onto his little finger, and spent a long time watching the moonlight through the prism of its diamond.

He slept. When he awoke, there were heavy guns firing to the north, somewhere in the direction of Le Bourget.

o o o
"Chagny, what the devil are you reading!"

Henri Guyon burst into the sitting room in a state of extreme agitation and clapped Christine's storybook shut in Raoul's hands, then threw himself into a chair by the fire and flung at him a copy of *Le Soir*:

"Seen this?"

*Metz surrender confirmed*, Raoul read upside down. He made a grab for the paper before it could slide from his lap, turned it over and read the headline again, his heart sinking. There it was, black on white, exactly as the execrable Red paper had claimed not two days ago. The besieged city of Metz had been surrendered to the Prussians with provisions still remaining, and an entire army penned up within, 150,000 men. The type was still fresh; all Paris must be reading this right now.

Raoul wheeled his chair around to face Guyon. "How can this be? Jules Favre swore yesterday was nothing but a Red slander, designed to whip up unrest. There was even a warrant out for Pyat's arrest, for printing treason!" He thumbed the paper open and glanced at the article. "But it is all true. They have Metz."

Guyon shrugged elaborately, angrily, and Raoul saw he carried a paper file with stamps too official to be in his possession. A sheet that slipped to the floor bore the letterhead of Governor Trochu's own office.

Raoul frowned. "What are you doing with those?"

"Seeing the truth for myself. Uncle won't miss them for an hour to two while he's at the billiards." Guyon upended the file and a snowfall of documents flurried out over the rug, a few narrowly missing the fireplace grate. "And it *is* true, every word of it. Even that swine Rochefort denied it yesterday, as though we wouldn't find out." He tossed the empty file on top of the papers, and gave it a kick with the toe of one polished boot, half-heartedly aiming it at the fire.

Raoul moved his wheelchair back a little, unwilling to peruse classified documents. "They will have to admit that they knew all along. And the Reds—"

Guyon snorted, "The Reds will have a field day. The entire government knew of it, days ago, and they simply lied. Not even elegant lies. Just think what they will do tonight in Belleville. And not only there."

A discreet rap on the door interrupted them. Maurice, Guyon's man, leaned his balding head around the door. "Another paper, monsieur."

"Let's have it," Guyon motioned for him to come in, tiredly. "What a complete cock-up…"

His expression froze when he saw the front page. Raoul saw from the corner of his eye as Maurice made a hasty retreat, and quietly shut the door behind him.

"Well?" he prompted, when Guyon still had not moved.

Guyon reversed the paper to permit Raoul to read it. *Prussian assault on Le Bourget. Tactical retreat made in good order.*

A wave of nausea swept over Raoul, but he could not seem to stop reading. Morbid fascination made him appreciate the cautious phrases and political optimism of the piece, even as he recognised in all that trite phraseology the news of a spectacular, terrible reversal. The last line made him curse aloud: "*The Le Bourget position, taken by General de Bellemare on his own*
initiative, was of no tactical value and forms no part of General Trochu's plan."

Raoul looked up. Guyon was sitting bolt upright in the armchair, staring at the paper in a kind of elegant stupor. "No tactical value," he echoed the report, "but 1200 of our men dead or captured, with cannon, and the village lost. They never sent the reinforcements Bellemare asked for. No tactical value!"

"It's over," Raoul said, "they're finished. Trochu and his 'plan', Jules Favre, all of them."

Guyon bolted from the chair and threw the paper into the fire, where it whooshed at once into flames. Then he turned and, thrusting his hands into his pockets, proclaimed solemnly, "Screw Trochu and his plan. Chagny, we need wine. A lot of wine. There's going to be a revolution."

Chapter 53: Paris Governs Herself

I can't begin to tell you how happy it makes me to see all the discussion in the reviews, and responses to other readers' thoughts as well as the story. Thank you for being here and please keep it up, it's fascinating!

Apologies for the unavoidable delays with this chapter, I'm in the midst of a stressful time and writing is a precious gift to myself that I can't always afford. I've started a Twitter account (tangofiction) which you are welcome to follow; I'll try to use it to warn of any future delays.

Trivia: This episode in the history of the siege took place on 31 October 1870.

Chapter 53 — Paris Governs Herself

The street was eerily silent. Christine and Meg advanced slowly along, their footfalls echoing along the façades to the heavy grey sky. On a Monday morning there ought to have been people around: women returning from the butchers' queues, schoolchildren with their boxes, nuns, beggars, the odd National Guard or mobile stationed at one of the apartments opposite. Today there was not a soul in sight, and half the windows were shuttered closed. It was as though a great plague had swept through in the night.

"Something has happened." Christine felt a peculiar need to keep her voice hushed. "There were all the guns yesterday. I don't like this; perhaps we should go back."

Meg clutched her sketchbook tighter. "Let's at least go as far as the boulevard and see what's going on. I would like a sketch of the Opéra if it can be managed."

"Erik ought to have come. He said he would meet me this morning; it is not like him to not even send a note."

Meg glanced over at her with a spark of mischief dancing in her eyes. "That does seem unlike him. He used to be so fond of sending notes."

"I wish you wouldn't joke about that." Christine heard the strain in her own voice and knew Meg must have heard it too, because she at once grew serious again. Was it so surprising, really, that Erik did not come today, when they were to visit the house where Raoul now stayed? He had made no secret of his reluctance to make what he deemed a social call; only, she had hoped he might do it for her sake... She had been looking forward to doing this walk with his arm in hers. And they might have returned to the theatre afterward. The piece she was working on kept going awry; she
wanted very much to test it out with Erik. He had a way of making her see the inner workings of her own creation, the hidden skeleton upon which it was built.

"Christine, maman is getting worried about you."

"About me? Why?"

Meg arched her eyebrows, "Because you are acting suspiciously newlywed these days, Madame Andersson."

"Newlywed?" Christine stopped in astonishment.

Madame Andersson.

That sounded like… someone else. Like someone who knew what she was about, a woman with a husband and family and all that went with them — not a foolish girl infatuated with her music, who let her soul and her body become so tangled with another's that she grew restless at a single morning alone. I don't know what you mean, she wanted to say, but that would have been a lie. She did know, felt it happening. With each day spent in Erik's company, with each shared word and touch, she admitted him a little deeper within her. In every chord she played, she heard not the music itself but Erik hearing it. And day by day, chord by chord, Christine Daaé was becoming a little more Madame Andersson.

"Really, you are not supposed to make all your engagements secret." Meg's gentle teasing should not have bothered her, but Christine found she had no heart for it now. She struggled to keep her tone low:

"We are not engaged."

"Oh? You're just making music together?"

Christine resumed walking. "He did ask to marry me," she admitted, cringing inwardly at the anxious echo of it in the deserted street. "But he has wanted to marry me for a year now. That is not yet an engagement." A new unsettling thought struck her. "Meg, did your mother say anything… Could Erik have asked for her consent?" Surely he would have talked to her first, Christine hoped, and yet it was not impossible.

"I have no idea," Meg said, and Christine was shocked by the hurt in her words. "You should talk to her yourself. And to me, occasionally. I worry too."

"I know. Meg, I know." Christine felt a terrible friend, and yet she wanted nothing more than to drop the matter. "Please, just be patient with me."

Meg bunched her skirts to step over a puddle, then released them with a sigh. "It's none of my business, really. I just wish you would be careful. Courtship is one thing but… Just be careful."

Christine gave her a tense nod, more acknowledgment than assent.

They reached the corner where the street opened out onto the boulevard and saw living people at last: a gathering of twenty or more women and men knotted around the first of the news kiosks, conversing in tones of the deepest disbelief. The occasional shrill note of anger rose above the buzz. Something had clearly happened, and Christine felt the now-familiar apprehension gathering in the pit of her stomach, the dread of bad news.

"Not a sortie then," Meg surmised quietly. "It looks serious. Let's go closer, I think I can see a
Christine managed a weak grin. "Weren't you the one a moment ago telling me to be careful?"

"Come on." Meg tugged at the sleeve of her coat, and they shouldered their way to the front of the group.

"It isn't possible," mumbled an elderly woman in a thick woollen scarf. Her bony hand rose to the poster glued to the kiosk wall as if to wave aside a printer's mistake, "it's treason. Treason! Mademoiselle, you, young lady..." She grasped Meg's shoulder to catch her attention. "What does that say? My eyes are not what they used to be."

"Armistice," Meg read obediently, and then did a double take, "Monsieur Thiers has been negotiating with Bismarck for our surrender? But he can't!" She looked to Christine for support. "He hasn't even been in Paris since all this started!"

"He's in their pay," the old lady said darkly, "must have made some deal with them to sell us out. You mind my word. My grandson was on the ramparts, such a good boy, big lovely eyes, never mind he was a bit jug-eared. Cannon explosion did for him, they wouldn't even open the coffin for us. For what, tell me? For what! Surrender. Treasonous old goat, we ought to tie him to a gun and fire him back to that Prussian devil!" The woman was shaking with rage, tears leaking from her wrinkled eyes. Christine shrank back, trying not to picture that unopened coffin.

"This can't be real," a nervous-looking fellow nearby cried, hefting a cane for emphasis, and a host of voices immediately latched onto this idea. "It's fake. The notice is fake!"

Having raised the suggestion, the man seemed to altogether convince himself, and within minutes Christine and Meg found themselves part of the stream of people heading onward, determined to reach the Hôtel de Ville and learn the truth.

"Meg, what about your sketches?" Christine reminded her. "And Raoul; you said you'd come with me."

Meg only hugged her sketchbook to her chest. "I need to see this."

All along the boulevards and even the Saint-Lazare station, similar notices plastered the walls: Metz had fallen, Le Bourget was no more, and Paris had no choice, it was time to lay down arms and beg terms from the Prussians. Christine felt more numb than indignant. It seemed impossible that the war could end so suddenly and without them having seen anything more than the misery of the siege. True, she had grown tired of the drudgery and the ever-present feeling of hunger, and things were worse still in the poorer districts; but a surrender of the whole city, of all France?

From every side street and alley, more people were emerging, until Christine had to grasp Meg's elbow to keep together in the crowd. Even if they wanted to return home now, there could be no question of attempting it: there were hundreds of agitated people around, with many men of the National Guard among them, and pushing through such a crowd would be a quick means of being trampled in the surge.

"Christine!" Meg cried as they passed rue Peletier, and Christine caught the briefest glimpse of what remained of the ruined Opéra: a windowless burnt hulk, with its boarded-up façade wallpapered by copies of the same official notices, about Metz and their imminent surrender.

Christine craned her neck uselessly, trying to see it again, but they had already moved on. She was surprised by the upsurge of pity she felt, by the lump in her throat. Was it truly necessary to deface
the ruin with these official pronouncements? Her childhood lay buried beneath those stones.

By the time they neared the vast square before the Hôtel de Ville, the mass of people around them had swelled to what seemed like thousands. Christine found herself clutching Meg's elbow in a fierce grip, terrified of losing sight of her in this sea of angry, confused, frightened faces, and misliking the profusion of National Guard rifles all around. The crowd was stopped by the guards outside the perimeter of the Hôtel de Ville but more and more newcomers were joining in and Christine began to fear in earnest that they might be crushed in the jostling. Meg's eyes reflected the same panicky thought but it was much too late to escape; they were wedged tight between a woman with a bundle of books over her arm, and an elderly man with a young boy riding triumphantly on his shoulders. Christine envied the child the freedom to breathe. Meg held her book out flat before her, creating at least something of a space.

"Citizens!" came a sudden call, and Christine whipped her head up to look for where the cry originated. She could see nothing of that, but the windows in the upper storeys of the great building ahead were opening one by one, and in each, she saw the heads of men in the kepis of the National Guard. A young man, almost a boy, climbed out from one of the windows on the second floor, and sat on the stone windowsill, legs dangling in the air. Soon others were imitating him.

People below must have tried to ask the insurgents for information, because the boy stood upon the windowsill, clinging with one arm to the stonework, and sang out, "Commune! We are become a Commune! Down with traitors, Paris governs herself!" His words whipped through the crowd. There was more, but the wind snatched the rest away.

"Not another revolution," groaned the woman with the books, straining to see over the people in front. Her elbow caught Christine in the chest. "They're all mad!" The boy on the man's shoulders tooted a horn, thrilled by the spectacle.

"The Hôtel de Ville is taken," came a shout, and others joined in with names of men Christine understood must be within the building: Tibaldi, Flourens… She did not recognise them but at least some of those around her did. Nobody seemed to know what to make of the sudden change, and some women next to her were fearfully describing the battalions of freeshooters and National Guard they had seen enter earlier. Opinions were divided on whether they were revolutionaries, brigands, or only citizens angered by the government's appalling betrayal, and the tension in the air grew with each passing minute, threatening to turn ugly. A single shot, Christine thought with trepidation, or even the rumour of one, and there would be a riot.

"Meg!" She raised her voice, struggling to make herself heard above the rumble around them, "We need to go. Please, we must get out of here!"

"How?" Meg shouted back, looking around. The nearest façades overlooking the square seemed as distant as the gallery at the Opéra.

Christine felt ill with the crush of bodies around them, and fought the fear that in a moment or two she may be unable to catch her breath. The broad backs of men much larger than she were closing in, confining her view to black coats and a patch of grey sky. She had the absurd thought that it was just as well Erik left her alone this morning, for he would certainly have hated this even more than she did — but then, had he come, he might have been able to find a way to get them out of here.

Something large and solid pressed against her back; Christine looked over her shoulder and saw it was the steel tree-trunk of a streetlight. Compelled by panic more than thought, she grabbed hold of it, stepped up on the base and managed to lever herself up a little on the ironwork, pulling Meg closer by the arm, nearly tearing her own mended coat-sleeve clean off in the effort. Her face was now level with the rifles in the crowd, just above the surface, and Christine instinctively gasped in
a breath, and then another and another. Cold air filled her like gulps of unwatered wine, making her head spin.

Meg's sleeve slipped out of her grasp as Christine raised her free arm, clinging to the streetlight as the boy at the window had clung to the stones of the Hôtel de Ville.

"What are you doing?" Meg called.

Christine cried out, and the cry was music.

She could not have said what prompted it, only that the notes exploded from her with a violence she had not expected, wordless and rapid and staggeringly high, as though it was not her own voice at all but some arcane awesome power using her to trumpet its displeasure. The song, if song it was, cut through the angry hum and burst into a myriad fragments, a fireworks of music that ricocheted from every stone.

Movement rippled out around her as people turned her way: a growing mosaic of white faces, shocked and incomprehending, their eyes widening at the inhuman sound.

Meg was gesturing frantically for her to get down. Christine felt more than heard the music pause, and at last managed to scramble ungracefully back to Meg's side. They pushed through the unresisting, stunned crowd, Christine in front and barely aware of the people that a moment ago had threatened to overwhelm her, Meg following close.

They were in the rue Jean-Lantier before Christine began to recover her own self again. Her throat felt like it had been shredded with a blade from within. She did not dare try speaking. Meg next to her was breathing hard, her hand at her ribs and her hair come loose from its pins. The street was narrow, neat and mercifully quiet. This was the address she had been given for Raoul, but it had been a mistake to come here now, Christine thought; she needed time to regroup, to compose herself.

"You...are...certifiable!" Meg gasped, making it at once a rebuke and a compliment. "What in God's name was that song? I've never heard even Carlotta let loose like that."

"I don't know..." Christine was relieved her voice still worked, even if it sounded hoarse and uncertain. It was her own music, she recognised with a jolt, a fragment from the second movement. She had not known it could be sung. "Meg, I want to find Erik."

"Erik? Where would you start looking? I'm not going back through there!"

"Mademoiselle Daaé!" cried a young man in a nearby doorway. Christine whipped around and recognised the speaker as Henri Guyon, Raoul's friend. He was immaculately dressed as ever, in a sharply tailored black coat and hat instead of his uniform. He cast an amused look over Meg's hair and Christine's coat and Christine realised with some chagrin that her own state of disarray was at least as dire as Meg's. Her sleeve was torn, one of her gloves was missing, and she could feel her hat beginning to slide down the side of her head.

"We came through the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville," she said with ill-concealed annoyance. "Do you know what is going on today, Monsieur Guyon? There is a crowd of thousands!"

"They're saying it's a revolution," Meg added. "Again."

Guyon's smile faded and he looked in the direction of the square, his face turning grim and more than a little anxious. "I am on my way out, mesdemoiselles, but I shall be back shortly. Chagny is expecting you, I believe. Do come through."
Upstairs they found an apartment the likes of which Christine had not seen since the Opéra. It was all stucco scrollwork and tall windows, crystal and velvet, the rooms not overlarge but more than spacious enough for the needs of a wealthy young man. Christine could see at once that Henri Guyon had not put himself to any great trouble in taking in Raoul; indeed, he probably appreciated the company. The servant who had led them to the sitting room took their coats and melted away unobtrusively, and it was only then Christine saw Raoul.

He was standing at a window, leaning on his wrists, with his crutches resting nearby beside the heavy drape. Beyond the windowpane was a view of the street, and above, the bleached-bone sky. Raoul turned when he heard Christine and Meg enter, and Christine saw he had held his face pressed to the glass; there was the shadow of a reddish patch on his forehead. It had been a long time since she had seen him out of uniform; the civilian dress made him seem healthier somehow, less vulnerable. Or perhaps it was this room, these surroundings, that made him appear at once closer to his former self. Christine felt suddenly self-conscious in her untidy clothing, and was not sure what to say. She had meant to thank Raoul for what he did at the hearing, but standing here now she could not retrieve the right words: the room was too much a reminder of their past, of salons and soirées and society. In that moment of awkward silence she suddenly understood Erik's reluctance to come here, and yet a small, abandoned part of her resented his absence all the more.

Then Raoul beamed at her, warm and just the same as ever, and all the awkwardness vanished. "Christine!" he grabbed a crutch and half-strode, half-stumbled towards her, "and Mademoiselle Giry. I didn't think to see you today with all this going on," he nodded at a newspaper lying on a lamp-table by the window. "Please, sit down. Tell me you didn't go near the crowds."

"We went through them," Meg said behind her. "Christine was unstoppable." Raoul looked so startled that Christine had to laugh, despite herself.

"Meg is exaggerating. But we were outside the Hôtel de Ville just now." She sobered. "There was a commotion right in the building, with armed men upstairs and windows open. They were saying Paris governs itself."

Raoul accepted this with a grim nod, as though he had expected as much. "Please, do sit. I'm sorry I left the ambulance so abruptly, Christine. I should have warned you."

Christine lowered herself to sit on the edge of one upholstered armchair, and Meg took the other, setting her book safely by her side. Raoul remained standing, leaning heavily against the mantelpiece. Christine suspected he was in pain again and did not like to have them see him struggle to sit. She dragged her gaze away from his bad hip and looked up at him.

"I'm sorry about… Erik. I keep wishing there had been some other way out at the hearing, without endangering you. Is Guyon's father really a doctor?"

"Possibly. I have only seen him from a distance. He lives downstairs, I believe, in the first apartment."

"I thought he was looking after you!" Christine said, aghast.

"I am well enough." Raoul turned to the door, and for a moment Christine thought in confusion that he meant to walk out, but it was only the serving man returned with a tray of tea. There were strange little cakes on the side, white and brittle, and a pot of jam.

"Rice flour," the man sighed mournfully when he noticed Christine looking at the cakes. "Terrible stuff, mademoiselle."
Christine thanked him sincerely; the sight of the cakes made her aware of the urgency of her hunger, and for several minutes all conversation was forgotten in favour of food. The terrible stuff proved far more than palatable, and the jam was clear as rubies and delicious.

"You don't wear his ring," Raoul said, startling her. Christine set her cup down with a soft porcelain chime, her pulse racing. Raoul was looking at her bare fingers.

"No," she admitted. "Not yet."

Meg gave a small cough and excused herself, murmuring something transparent about Rembrandt, and headed to the other end of the room where several small, dark paintings decorated the wall. Christine saw Raoul wince, and knew he had not meant to raise such a topic in company. She understood, but it had had to be said; they both knew it.

"He had best not be toying with you." The banked anger in Raoul's words seared her. "If he thinks he need not marry you after all this, everything he's put you through, I swear to God, Christine—"

"It's me."

Raoul broke off. "You?"

"Me. I'm… My father's name is enough, Raoul. I cannot wear another. Not yet."

He looked back at her, and his eyes were very young, a boy's eyes full of hurt on her behalf.

Christine rose and went over to join him at the fireplace. Raoul let her move in beside him, and for a long time they stood there, side by side, silent and thoughtful, closer than they had been since childhood. On the other side of the room, Meg had opened her book and was sketching something, looking back and forth to the painting.

There was a rhythmic noise outside, under the window. Raoul made to move that way, his leg momentarily forgotten, and Christine only just managed to catch at him before he could fall. He leaned on her shoulder, embarrassed, and Christine tactfully moved back as soon as he had his crutch again safely.

A command was shouted, and the noise grew louder. Meg dropped her book and ran to the window, and Christine and Raoul came up a moment later. Raoul shoved the pane open and they looked down. An entire battalion of mobiles was marching through, in the direction of the Hôtel de Ville. They had their bayonets fixed, and daylight glinted white along the blades.

"We should go home," Meg said, chewing her lip anxiously as another row came past. "Maman is expecting us back. I hope they haven't closed off the streets."

"Of course," Raoul said at once, "I'll have Guyon's man get the carriage." Christine felt him squeeze her fingers gently, exacting a promise. "Be safe." More properly, he added, "My regards to your mother, Mademoiselle Giry. It would be a pleasure to see all of you again."

The bayonets below disappeared, leaving the street clear. Raoul called for the servant, and Meg went to retrieve her sketchbook and pencils. Christine was just about to follow her when a movement in the corner of her eye made her linger at the window. There, she saw it again: a shadow where there could have been nothing to cast it. She leaned a little further out of the window, and saw she was right.

Erik looked up at her from the stone alcove of a doorway on the other side of the street. He was unmasked.
Chapter 54: Revolutions

A/N: I'm loving all the discussion in the reviews! A few bits of trivia to put things in perspective. Marriage in 1870 France was a permanent civic contract (any religious ceremony was only an optional extra): divorce was illegal, even judicial separation was difficult. Understandably, few married young; the average marriage age for women was 27. Women under 21, and men under 25, had to have parental consent, as it was a financial as well as personal transaction. Because it was financial, a huge fraction of the working class never married at all, and under the Commune, common-law partners of members of the National Guard were for the first time given the same allowance as wives (75c per day, half of the day's pay for the men serving). This is not to say that marriage was not romantic, of course it was, but it was also extremely serious.

Chapter 54 — Revolutions

"Christine…"

She vanished into the black maw of the open window, but she had seen him; he felt the glancing blow of recognition strike between them. He never did know how to hide from her. Erik hunched deeper into the alcove until his back met the heavy locked door. Something ghosted over the raw half of his head. A spiderweb. He slapped it away, flesh crawling, and pushed his hat lower, seeking the shadow of its brim. The mobiles had passed through, leaving in their wake only belched wine; no sound save the distant burr of the crowd at the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville and over it, the uneven rattle of his own breathing. Minutes crawled by, but Christine did not emerge again.

He was nauseous with the thought of seeing her and of being seen; of approaching her like this, like a beggar. The cobbled street seemed by turns to stretch and swell, throbbing in waves of pain at the front of his skull. What was she doing so long, holed up in that ugly aristocratic edifice with its two-hundred year old façade dripping wealth from every stone gargoyle? Surely she could not still be inquiring after the Vicomte's health!

At last the gate opened and out drove a carriage, so irksomely tasteful that Erik could not find a thing to fault among its oiled springs and light-spoked wheels that rolled smoothly into the road. The dappled grey horse pulling it was not perhaps in its prime, good horses having been requisitioned some time ago, but it was a fine enough specimen, and Erik could only wonder how it had evaded the butcher. No doubt the family money helped. The crest on the door winked in the light as the carriage passed him.

Ah but he was bitter, and he cared not a whit. He had checked his accounts with all possible care that morning and found only too clear a proof that he was an imbecile, a delusional freak who squandered his income on chocolates when he ought to have been buying a ring and arranging a house. What was it Louise had thundered at him, the time after she had thrust herself into their privacy? A fine dress, a wedding… But it was worse than that, he could scarcely believe how quickly money could disappear on nothing more than the basics: a barrowful of coal, lamp-oil, soap, a single restaurant meal that was not worthy of Christine but better at least than Louise's slops. He could break into the principal to buy a ring, but what was the use of that when it would only diminish further the paltry income that remained?

It was not enough for two. It simply was not enough.

He had flung a pot of ink to spill over the damned calculations, soaking book and work-table both, and even as the stain ate away the evidence, knew the rising horror of despair. An entire pot of
good ink wasted, when he had accomplished nothing of what he had set out to do. Letters, he needed to write letters and obtain proof of his standing if he had any hope at all of swaying Madame Giry to his purpose. He had to have her consent before Christine would be released to him. How was he to obtain it when without his architect's salary he could not hope to offer Christine even the mean sort of life she was already living?

God was having a spiteful little joke at him, like a sideshow spectator dangling a piece of bread out of reach. Beg for it, Erik, here it is! Take this girl's soul and her body, make her yours, show the world how a beast copulates. No ring, no veil, no wedding for the likes of you.

It was unendurable. The thought of it had made him shake as with palsy until he clung to the open window of his room, ink stains from his fingers smudging the windowsill, the icy black air of the last October morning squeezing all breath from his lungs. He slammed the pane shut and drew the curtain. He would marry Christine. He would marry her and keep her in a life in which she would know no need, even if he must sink to hell to buy that life.

There were sounds downstairs, squealing door-hinges and the scrape of crates being moved.

"Where do you want these?" came a booming shout from further away, and Erik recognised Maréchal's voice. There were people in the storeroom.

What was this? A dawn meeting? The guns he had heard in the night had long since fallen silent, but evidently the spell of blessed silence was over.

"Bring those here. And the cartridges too."

Cartridges. For rifles, he realised; they were talking about ammunition.

"Tibaldi is taking the Belleville contingent to the Hôtel de Ville," — that was Jean, Erik could almost see him gesticulating as he spoke, "Montmartre must follow! He has at least five thousand with him, perhaps more."

This raised a furore among the others. "Five thousand!"

"Or more; they are foregathering now. We must join them before Trochu's men can cut in between them and us."

The house shuddered and creaked alarmingly as booted feet took the stairs two at a time: unmistakably Louise. Erik heard her panting outside his door and saw the swathe of yellow light from her lantern sweep his floorboards, before the door itself was rattled near out of its frame. The lock groaned but held.

"Andersson!" Louise thundered, all but kicking down the door. The searchlight of the lantern danced crazily around his bare feet. "It's time! We're betrayed, get up, man, get up! Get your sharpshooter arse downstairs, do you hear me? They're surrendering Paris!"

The last finally brought Erik to the door, but Louise had lost patience and left, after thrusting some paper underneath it.

Erik picked it up. There were two sheets: the torn page of an official proclamation, topped with government insignia, and a thin crumpled leaflet blazing with headlines: Metz surrender admitted; Le Bourget recaptured with 1200 men and cannon for the taking. Prussians triumphant. Surrender imminent. A cartoon depicted a grinning, demonic Bismarck wringing the arms of a grieving woman in a crenellated crown, whom Erik supposed to be Paris herself, while in a smaller caricature Bismarck was being obscenely pleasured by a likeness of Marshal Bazaine.
On the margin was a note in Jean's clean signwriter's hand, absurd beside Bismarck's bare rump:

*This is the solemn hour, Andersson. Hurry. We need men like you.*

Erik eased the handle open and slid soundlessly onto the landing.

The house was erupting. Jean and Louise's confederates scuttled through the pre-dawn darkness like bugs under an overturned rock, passing out rifles, collecting extra cartridge belts. They were in their full National Guard uniform and armed: an entire battalion passing through the storeroom on their way to the city, old men and young, all equally grim and prepared to fight. Paris was dishonoured but not yet broken; they would die before they accepted surrender. Erik watched them from the landing, then returned to his room and locked the door.

This was more than just another riot. This was a revolution.

His gaze returned to the ink-soaked pages on his desk, and next to it, Jean's call to arms. *We need men like you.*

There were no men like him.

All over the street other men were waking up, throwing on their greatcoats and running outside with their guns. Erik heard them shouting, calling to each other, stamping their feet and cursing lustily at the freezing dawn. They were ready to fight, ready to demand the justice Jean had so often talked of: a fair split of all remaining stockpiles of food and fuel, rifles for every man still standing, and the immediate election of a new government with the courage to defend its own people and the mandate to speak for them.

Honourable goals, and modest enough when considered against the magnitude of the government's betrayal. And why should he not join their uprising? Jean's extended hand promised a share of the power this world was built upon: political power, the right to command. All Montmartre knew him as a war hero. Was he not entitled to some respect to go with the title?

And if their uprising succeeded, would it not make his income irrelevant when it came to being able to offer Christine his life and his protection?

But then there was an opposing choice, another way out of the labyrinth. It was not yet too late to reach the Hôtel de Ville ahead of them to warn the government, and collect the reward due a concerned citizen who so loyally reported treachery. Then Paris would indeed be surrendered, and life would resume. He could have his position again, and an income, and Christine. Surely this was no less honourable a path, to support a government these same people had freely elected not two months ago.

Which was the better choice? Erik stared at the scraps of paper on the floor, and he did not know. He did not know.

A new sound outside distracted him: the clip-clop of donkey hooves plodding down the street.

He parted the curtains a crack and looked down. Two bony donkeys were struggling under their loads, slipping on the frost-slick cobbles. Swaying on their backs were soldiers, or what used to be soldiers: heavily bandaged lumps swathed in grey blankets, with limbs protruding at odd angles, and heads bowed so low that under the pale light they seemed faceless. The young woman leading them wore a man's greatcoat with an armband sewn with the Red Cross.

One of the wounded raised his head, and Erik recoiled from the window: the face was bandaged, and from under the linen zigzagged a black trickle of blood.
Bazeilles. The inferno — it was coming again.

No, it had already begun.

Erik snatched his hand away from the curtains as from a fire, and backed to the chair, the worktable, and the blank inky pages of accounts he could not fill.

What had he been thinking? What infernal cue was he waiting for?

Christine; she was all that mattered. He had been wrong, grievously wrong, to hesitate even a moment, to think of life as other men thought of it, in small shuffling steps, all shackled to one another. This world was no theatre, there were no rehearsals to perfect the show, no opening night for which to work. Jean's uprising, the war, the siege, the cogs in the wheels that moved the scenery, the money he needed for the privilege of leading an ordinary life, none of it mattered. There was nobody up in the flies and even if there was, the lines were too tangled to be of any use.

Here on the shelf was the velvet pouch and within it Christine's ring. There! It tumbled into his palm, and slid reassuringly heavy onto his little finger. Enough gold to fashion a new band, and a diamond to secure the start of their new life, together. The Vicomte ought to be grateful; his money could not be put to a better purpose than Christine's happiness.

Erik pulled on his boots and reached for his bandage, but could not tie it; his fingers were shaking with urgency and the ring got in the way.

What did it matter if he went uncovered? So be it! He flung the linen aside. There was no time for this. He was only a man, an invisible mote of dust in the storm. It did not matter how he looked or what he did, there would be no punishment and no reward. From now on there would be only him and Christine, together against the world.

He clapped his hat directly onto his uncovered flesh, grabbed his coat, and ran through the open storefront and outside.

"Wait!" he heard Jean shout behind him, and then Louise's perplexed, strident voice completing their duet: "Andersson! Where the devil are you going?"

Erik stopped in his tracks and whirled around, unable to resist the music of surrender that had him in its grip. The storefront and the people behind it gaped at him through the morning fog.

He threw his arms wide, letting the coat soar like a cloak, feeling the world spin around his bared deformity. The diamond glittered on his finger.

"It's my wedding day!" His feet wanted to dance. "I'm to be a married man!"

He left them staring comically behind him, goggle-eyed little people caught in the whirlwind of their lives, their deaths and their politics.

He had a wedding to plan.

The morning fell away from him, hour by hour, in the business of organising everything. He had to push past an endless stream of people who insisted on heading the opposite way, intent on their revolution, but they could not detain him, least of all when they saw his face. He made a wonderful, unspeakably joyous discovery: Christine had been right after all; in the influx of wounded men from Le Bourget, another butchered skull seemed only part of the scenery, and people around him hastened to avert their eyes. The thrill of it was intoxicating. He was getting married.
At the mairie there was a dreadfully tedious collection of papers to sign, with exotic questions about his family and the bride's, their parents and even grandparents. He had a wonderful time composing a past for himself, borne aloft on the wings of his epiphany: nobody would ever know or care what he wrote. Nobody at the mairie had the slightest interest in his compositions; they were far more preoccupied with huddling around the doorways to hear the latest news from the street.

"Your nationality?" the pimply young clerk at the desk asked, trying not to sweat too profusely with the effort of pretending the man before him had a face.

"Half-Swedish," Erik dictated, giggling like a schoolboy, "half-Persian." It sounded like a cat, he decided. He liked it.

"Mother's maiden name?"

"Mor," Erik told him. He hoped it was Swedish for 'mother', but perhaps it actually meant death. Who would know? Not this boy or the other petty clerks with his noses in the morning paper, nor the National Guard men poking their heads in and out, nor the half-blind shrivelled mushroom of a man at the next desk. The mushroom verified the existence of Erik's identity papers, falsified so long ago that by now they looked respectably real, and continued in a tone of the utmost indifference, without looking at him:

"Congratulations. Return with the signature of the lady's father."

When Erik disabused him of any hope in that direction, he continued unperturbed, "The mother then; failing that, the grandparents or the guardian. You have thirty days to register the marriage or the papers will be made null and void. Good day!"

And as simple as that, he was in possession of documents that named him the son of some poor Swedish woman by the unlikely name of Mother, and a Persian fakir who no doubt loved her most fervently, but had met his untimely end by swallowing one flaming sword too many, leaving her to find herself a sensible carpenter whose name her son could appropriate. The clerk did not ask for the whole story, being satisfied with only the names, which was his own loss: he was missing a terrific libretto. And now he, Erik Andersson, architect, was free to seek consent from the guardian of Mademoiselle Christine Daaé, singer, former artist of the Opéra.

All that was needed was the ring.

There were jewellers closer to Montmartre, but Erik did not trust them to value Christine's diamond fairly; he chose instead a little shop further west, off the Boulevard de Courcelles, which he knew from the days when it had supplied old Monsieur Lefevre with tasteful pieces of please-don't-leave jewellery to appease Carlotta. It was a quiet and tidy affair, and to his great delight open despite the chaos of the streets. The diamond was produced, checked, weighed, and signed for. The jeweller, a tired little man with a magnifying loupe that seemed welded to his eye socket, looked directly into Erik's face and sighed, his other eye watering inexplicably.

"Cannon?" he asked. Erik said nothing, but the jeweller nodded just as though he had all the answer he needed, and reached for his ink. The total he wrote far, far exceeded Erik's expectations.

"Take my advice, monsieur, and do not melt the ring. It is a fine piece. If it is a wedding-band you require, I would gladly sell you another. You may have it today, if you like. Shall I size it to match this one?"

Erik clutched at the valuation paper, and looked at Christine's ring laid before him on a scrap of
velvet. Even with prices climbing as they did, Christine and he could live half a year at least on that money. No siege could last that long; he would become an architect again, and they would live as man and wife, out in the burning sunlight.

Erik gave a sharp nod, and the ring was taken away.

A quarter of an hour later, he walked out into the white daylight with a box that held a slender circuit of rose gold, simple and perfectly beautiful. Inside was a monogram composed of two letters, C and E, entwined.

He was perhaps halfway to Christine's apartment when the full weight of what he had done began to catch up with him. His footsteps slowed, and he was forced to duck under the porch roof of an abandoned building before his thundering heart could burst through his chest. Raising his hand to his face, Erik groped for what he hoped might confirm this to be only a very vivid dream — but his fingertips connected with his own slick warped flesh, and pressed into the ridge of malformed cheekbone beneath. He raked a nail over it. The pain was sudden, hot and undeniably real.

He was maskless.

The street before him was full of people, women for the most part, talking in small worried groups. Nobody was paying him any attention.

Christine's diamond was gone. In its place was a stamped and sealed document intended for the bank, with the weight and value of its component metal and stone, nothing else. Under it, folded into a rectangle the size of his hand, were the marriage documents he had acquired. And resting on top was a small box containing the plain gold band.

He was trembling all over, even his teeth chattering. What was the use of a paper? What madman sells his soul for a valuation stamp? If he lost the paper, if he were robbed — if today's uprising blossomed into some new and different reality where money no longer mattered…

Oh God. Christine had been waiting for him, he suddenly recalled; he had promised to accompany her to Chagny's new quarters. How long would she wait before she knew herself abandoned? Would she go on alone, braving the crowds?

He looked again at the things he was holding, and felt anew the strangeness of wind upon the entirety of his face. No; he could not lose everything now. He would not.

Later, he thought it had been the most agonising hour of his life, or near enough; worse than everything except the terrible last moments of his opera.

He was a sideshow freak walking the streets of Paris, carrying in his pockets another man's wealth and another man's right to call Christine his wife. He could find nothing to cover his face except a handkerchief, whose whiteness only made the scars around it so apparent that he was forced to abandon it and continue as he was. The insane sense of freedom that had possessed him before had drained away completely; he felt naked, hideous, exposed.

The banks were shut; the city was in chaos. Near the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville, he saw the frayed edge of a growing crowd and could have sworn that just for a minute, Christine's music had sounded there, sung in her own voice. Clear, forceful, undeniable; it pulled him towards itself, closer and closer to the perilous whirlpool of people. Then the illusion fled and he was left bereft, his whole soul craving more.

He floundered too long at the outskirts of the crowd, embracing to his body the precious contents
of his pockets and hoping against all reason that he might indeed encounter Christine, but the music must have been nothing but a trick of the ear.

Erik diverted his course at last, picking his way with difficulty between the latecomers on their way to the Hôtel de Ville as he searched among the street-signs for the address where Chagny's friend had his apartment. If Christine was not there, if she waited for him still…

But she was there. She had been at the window, and as the carriage passed, Erik was certain he glimpsed a flash of dark curls within, next to a lighter head that must have been Meg's. Christine did not need to wait for him; she had her own life, and her own plans.

He cowered in his shadowed alcove, wondering how to leave it.

Another carriage approached, and as it rolled past, Erik saw with a disturbing sense of déjà vu that it was identical to the first one, down to the dappled horse. A moment, and his mind cleared: it was simply the same carriage; it must have driven around the corner and returned.

The door flew open and Christine leaped out onto the cobbles, bare-headed and flushed, with her coat-sleeve ripped at the shoulder, rushing headlong towards him.

"Erik!"

The world slowed its spinning. He took a step out of the shadow and there was Christine, coming back to him over the dark waters of the lake, and every hiding place she touched was thrown open to the air and to the light. Her eyes were on his and the symphony in his heart was love.

He opened his mouth to explain, to warn her of his unmasked face, but did not get the chance.

Christine did not slow down at all but cannoned straight into him and took his head between her hands. It hurt. It felt wonderful.

"You're here!" Her forehead pressed to his was warm and sinfully sweet. "I knew I'd seen you there, but we drove past and… Do you have any idea — any idea at all — how much I needed you today? Tell me what happened!"

She was touching his face. Christ! They were out of the alcove and standing right in the street. Were they being watched from the carriage? Or the house? He clapped his hand to his scars, but Christine pulled his arm aside in exasperation.

"Erik! What are you doing here, like this?"

"Ah." This was it, this was the moment. Christine was waiting, but he seemed to have forgotten how to breathe.

"Here. For you."

Erik thrust the ring into her hand, box and all. Oh bravo, he mocked himself, well done, monsieur, truly an eloquent performance.

Christine held the box as though it was about to burst into flames. Erik reached over to flip open the lid. Then he took the folded documents from his pocket and showed her those as well, hoping that she would think the tremor in the paper was only the breeze.

"We will need Madame Giry's consent, of course, but you see, it is all arranged, the papers, everything. Christine? Christine…"
She had opened the document and laid one finger over her name written there.

"Daaé." Her voice was very soft; Erik had to strain to hear it. "Do you know that people like Henri Guyon," she tipped her chin at the building behind her, "they used to hear my father's name and say, oh, of course, the great violinist. But now they say, that Daaé girl, there was a scandal, wasn't there… And they laugh. They laugh at his name."

She raised her face again and Erik saw her eyes were brimming. "I needed you today, because I sang, out there in the crowd — I didn't meant to do it, but it happened and it was… Erik, I sang my own music. And I want to do it again, properly. Do you remember Monsieur Ballard, from the Folies? The one who asked us to perform. I'm going to call on him, and I need you there with me. Please."

Erik feared he would drop the jewellery box, or the precious documents would flutter down into the dirt. "The ring, Christine. We must marry within the month, or all this has been for nothing…"

She nodded, took the ring and blithely put it on her finger. "It is a lovely ring, Erik. Thank you."

He gaped, felt his head spin and barely kept his balance. "It is a wedding band!" he said stupidly. "You wear it… after… When you are married."

Christine touched the back of her hand to the corner of his mouth; a familiar gesture made new by the ring.

"We are as married as we need to be. Do the papers matter?"

Erik stumbled back from her touch, horrified, repulsed by his body's betrayal of everything he felt: Christine's ringed finger teasing his lips, her waist close enough to grasp, her mouth speaking awful, incomprehensible words.

"They matter! The papers matter to me!"

She bit her lip until it was white, and said, "Why?"

"Why? Why?!" He was screaming, he felt the force of it in his throat but heard only his blood rushing with the roar of a crowd. "Because I am a man, Christine! Did you ask the Vicomte 'why', too? No? Let me be, get out of my way!"

He shook her off, more violently than he had intended, and heard her gasp behind him, but he did not care. He had to be gone, now, before he lost consciousness, before he forgot how to do anything but howl at the walls. The carriage door was open; he just caught a glimpse of Meg's appalled face within. The driver was climbing down off his box, but he was much too slow to matter.

"Erik!" Christine cried behind him, and her voice was pure as the Angel's, and just as perfect a lie. "Erik, I love you!"

He may have laughed, he could not tell. All he knew was that he ran.

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**Chapter 55: Valour**

*A/N:* The insightful, articulate analysis in reviews for the last chapter blew me away. Feeling indescribably fortunate!
A bit of trivia to clarify the timing here: this is 31 October, still several months earlier than the Commune, but the political situation was already volatile. The government was pessimistic, ineffectual and politically tactless, and it was not only the poorer districts who were fed up. And bonus trivia on the nature of the social order: there was no such thing as a single standard of behaviour for all social classes, and Paris of 1870 was a melting pot of everything imaginable, both socially and politically. The bohemian, intellectual and artistic circles flourished, and a huge fraction of the population (not only the poor) was politically liberal, anti-monarchist, atheist, and in some sense radical. This was most definitely not the "Victorian era", in the sense in which people seem to use the term.

Chapter 55 — Valour

Raoul cursed his leg, and the stairs, and the twisting, muscle-wringing pain that dragged its iron weight behind him. He was forced to slow his descent to an awkward stumble down Guyon's neverending marble stairs, hearing all the while the entreaties outside that had to be Meg's, and the gaps of silence where Christine's voice ought to have been. He could picture her standing there, in this silence that was her last refuge against injury, her eyes turned to dark bottomless wells and her slight arms hugging her own shoulders.

"Please, Monsieur le Vicomte, you mustn't do this!" Guyon's serving man staggered under the weight of Raoul's shoulder, his ageing voice cracking. "What will your surgeon say?"

"I'm going to kill him," Raoul rasped.

"Kill him! God in Heaven, whatever for?"

"Not the surgeon! That… man." Raoul gritted his teeth and managed the last two stairs at almost a normal pace, but it was a close thing: as soon as they were outside, he saw the driver had already shut the carriage door and was returning to his seat.

"Christine!" He had not wanted to raise his voice, loath to heap still more humiliation upon her, but he could not bear the thought of her being taken away like this. "Hold," he called to the driver, "a moment of the lady's time."

The driver bowed, but Raoul saw him frown in the direction of the crowds in the streets beyond as he twisted the reins in one anxious hand. "Looks nasty back there, monsieur. If you don't mind me saying, I'd just as soon be off before they barricade the way." He cleared his throat. "You know the, uh, the gentleman what was hollering?"

"I do."

"Oh." The man scratched his ear uncomfortably. "Oh, right then."

"Wait, I will not detain you long."

Bracing his side against the frame of the carriage, Raoul pulled open the door on Christine's side. She sat huddled into the plush upholstery, staring down at her hands knotted in her lap. Beside her, Meg was murmuring something; she looked up when the door opened and gave Raoul a pleading look, plainly fearing he would only make this worse. Christine did not seem to notice him. She looked battered and pale, with no gloves or hat, dark curls tangled around her shoulders, her old coat torn. Raoul had never wanted another man's blood as badly as he did just then.

"Piece of work," he breathed, and that was far too kind a verdict. He could not bring himself to ask
if she was all right; he could see she was far from it. "What does he want from you?"

Christine's head jerked up at the sound of his voice and her eyes widened. "Raoul! How did you get down here? Your leg!"

"Never mind that now; what of you, are you hurt?"

Christine shook her head adamantly, like a child. "I'm fine. Erik meant no harm."

"No harm!" Raoul glanced at Meg, who looked as helpless as he felt. "If this is how he treats you when he means no harm, I do not like to recall what he may do if he means it." He buried his hand in his hair. "And I defended him! Christine, he is determined to ruin you; the entire street heard these histrionics, the way he was shouting your name and mine. Does he think this is the theatre? What was it he demanded?"

Wordlessly, Christine unclasped her hands and lifted one to show him what Raoul now realised, with a stroke of absolute certainty, had to be a ring.

It was.

A narrow gold band encircled Christine's finger, where no ring had ever been, not even during their engagement. It gleamed with a tinge of rose, as though a drop of blood had been mixed into the metal itself.

Raoul let out a slow breath. "That was his idea of a proposal."

"Not exactly. That was his idea of informing me we are to be wed." Christine's mouth twitched in smile. "At least he did not buy a dress and veil."

"This time."

"This time," Christine agreed. She sighed and squared her shoulders, but did not remove the ring. "Let it be, Raoul. Erik is—"

"He is insatiable, like the dragons in your father's tales that only grow greedier with each sacrifice." Raoul tried to ease the bitterness from his voice, but all he could see was this girl he could never manage to protect, no matter how he tried. "Your father would never have wanted this for you. You deserve better! You deserve a normal life."

"Father wanted me brought up at the Opéra. That is hardly a normal life, but… It has its beauty." Christine looked much more herself now, as though she had found a new source of strength. She took his hand in her ringed one and squeezed his fingers. "Raoul… Would you do me a favour?"

o o o

Madame Giry lingered at the barre much too long, until the apartment sank into shadow and she could not see past the end of her own arabesque arm. Any moment now the door would open and there would be her daughter and Christine, unharmed and full of the excitement of these crazy times. There would be no loud official knock or uniformed men fresh from another riot, checking her name and looking regretful to inform her of things she dared not name even to herself. No, she dared not think it. They had to be safe.

Sounds of door-hinges, crying infants and anxious conversations drifted in from the stairwell, but no worried neighbours knocked on her door to share the uncertainty. That was only to be expected: the building was middle-class, and all knew she and the girls were theatre women. Still, the
absence of news was becoming an ache in her chest.

She held the extension until her muscles complained, then turned and began anew on the left. The clock struck six; the window had become a black mirror with nothing beyond. Beads of perspiration ran around her eyes.

Six-fifteen. Still no Meg or Christine. She should not have sent them out alone; chaperoned or not, it would have been better if Christine's suitor was with them. Six-twenty.

She threw on a robe, turned up the gas as far as she could, and went to the kitchen. A pot of soaked beans still stood uncooked and would have to remain thus another day: once again there was no coal and only green wood for the stove, no use for keeping the heat going long enough to make stew. She ransacked the shelves for anything else to be done with tins of preserved vegetables, but had not the energy to focus on it now. Sardines it would be, and bread. Tomorrow if there was fuel, she would cook enough for the coming days. Never in her adult life had she expected to find herself grateful for the drudgery to which she was born, the five siblings wedged into a tiny room, and her mother wracking her head for a means to feed them all. Beans could go a long way when there was no meat; vegetables could be dried, fruit preserved. It seemed she had forgotten none of those early lessons, and it was well, for the lack of foodstuffs had gone beyond the uncomfortable to the dangerous. The girls were young and must not be permitted to go hungry; she saw enough of the misery in the streets now to know that illness lay only a small step past hunger, and this must not be.

They would live. No matter how long this went on, they would live.

A key turned in the door, and Meg's bright voice filled the apartment.

"We're back, maman!"

Madame Giry released a breath and winged a prayer of gratitude to any power that might hear.

They were both in the parlour before her, pulling off scarves, shaking out their hair and looking like the scraggily, scruffy and lovely girls they were. They brought in a breath of frosty air with them; late autumn.

"It's chaos out there," Meg said in a rush, flinging her scarf over the back of a chair. "The Hôtel de Ville is besieged, but we didn't see anything else, no fighting. Nobody even knows who the leaders are. There wasn't time to draw it but I'll make some sketches tonight; we saw enough and the News will certainly expect it."

Madame Giry nodded, but her eyes were on Christine. The girl sat down in the corner of the divan, her stocking feet crossed at the ankle, her back pressed to the armrest, and something in this cautious attitude sounded a new note of worry in Madame Giry's mind.

"Christine Daaé," she said very quietly, "what has happened?"

Christine looked up but it was Meg who answered.

"Erik found her."

It was then Madame Giry saw the glint of gold on Christine's ring finger. She felt the bulk of the piano behind her and held on to its lid, hard.

She said, "I see."
Christine smoothed her curls back from her face, looking bone-tired. She closed her eyes for a moment, and in this shadowy room her face became suddenly the image of her father, in the days when illness had only just begun to steal the youth from his face. Gustave used to close his eyes just like that when he played, Madame Giry recalled, seeing it.

"We had… an argument," Christine said. "That's all."

"He made a scene," Meg corrected, "right there in the street. It was awful."

Madame Giry watched Christine, but she only kept turning the ring on her finger around and around, as though probing a sore tooth.

Madame Giry braced herself. "That is an engagement ring?"

Christine smiled without humour. "A wedding band."

Madame Giry raised her eyebrows and looked between Christine and her daughter for an explanation. When none came, she sank down onto the piano bench. "What is this new madness? A secret marriage?"

"No. It is a ring, nothing more." Christine drew the ring off and closed her first over it. "I didn't want to lose it." She stared past Madame Giry to the piano, and behind that yearning gaze was the old, impenetrable world of loss that Madame Giry had ever been powerless to reach. Two orphans helping each other. What a fool she had been to allow it.

"May I have half an hour to practice, Madame Giry? If you don't need my help with dinner."

There was nothing for it but to acquiesce, and Madame Giry took Meg's shoulder and led her away through the dining room and into the kitchen. In truth, there was not much to be done other than brew coffee and set out the bread and wine, but they took their time over it and left Christine to her music. Not for the first time, Madame Giry caught herself wondering what she might have told Gustave about his daughter's future. The music that sounded from the parlour now was wild and strange, dense, with no discernible melody or space for a vocal line. It would blaze white, then abruptly fall silent mid-phrase, with an effect like the door to some dazzling room being slammed shut.

"Erik means to marry her." Meg set the last plate down but kept hold of it, looking into its porcelain mirror.

"Yes; so I gathered." Madame Giry shook herself from the spell of the music. "She is too young. You are both much too young for any of this." She answered the unspoken fear in Meg's voice: "You may be sure I have no intention of giving my consent until I am certain it is what Christine wants, and until he can prove himself capable of taking such a step."

"And if he refuses to wait? He had papers from the mairie. Documents. Christine said they were filled out with false family names."

Madame Giry looked at her curiously. "How can she be certain they are false?"

"He gave his mother's name as Mother."

"Ah."

"He shouted at Christine, and then when he ran away…" Meg shook her head in disbelief. "I could not be sure, it happened too fast, but I thought he was unmasked. In broad daylight. Maman, could
he truly be insane?"

Madame Giry sighed. "Who can tell? Living in a prison makes calmer men than he impatient —
look at what is going on out there tonight. We are all of us growing a trifle mad in this siege, each
in our own way."

"Please, maman!" Meg released the plate with a clank. "How can you be so calm about it?
Christine defends him even now, when he thinks so little of disgracing her. He can spend days here
and seem like anyone else, almost — he went to talk to Monsieur De Gas for me! But then
something happens and all at once he's this snarling… lunatic. What if he does take her? If she
marries him, she will have nothing but what he allows her! There is no family to restrain him, and
even the law and the government are a mess. And you know his opinion of the world."

"She has not accepted him," Madame Giry pointed out, gently.

Meg halted. "Well, no. Not yet."

Madame Giry touched her cheek. "You are right to worry, my dear. But give Christine her due, she
is not ignorant of his nature. As for Erik, he listens to the world much more than you might
imagine. He has only proven it again with those documents."

"What do you mean?"

"A man who scorns society's approval would hardly have gone to the trouble of obtaining all the
papers for a marriage licence. Living in the world is not an inconsiderable task, my dear, even for a
man accustomed to the demands of law. He is learning, and some lessons come harder than others.
Pass me the bread knife please."

Meg handed her the knife and paused uneasily, wrestling with the need to speak of something else.
Madame Giry held up a hand, forestalling her.

"Let me talk to Christine first. Whatever it is, it will keep until after dinner."

They took their meagre meal in silence. Meg kept glancing at Christine as though she feared
Christine would any moment announce that she had decided to wed, while for her part Christine
did not seem to notice anything past her own plate and ate as in a dream. She excused herself the
moment her coffee cup was empty, and moments later that strange music began again. If it had any
sense or structure, Madame Giry could not hear it — but the bright theme threaded between the
lingering chords reminded her, all too forcefully, of the looks she had seen pass between Christine
and her suitor. It was hope too fragile to be named, ghosts yearning for a touch.

Meg collected the dishes and, with an imploring glance at her mother, went to the kitchen.

Madame Giry sighed. Then she rose, carefully re-pinned her hair, and followed those disturbing
chords to their source.

She wondered if somewhere, Erik was playing the harmony.

Christine jolted in her seat when she looked up and realised she had an audience. Madame Giry
stood to one side of the piano, saying nothing, only waiting until Christine saw her and stopped.
She felt she was waking a sleepwalker, afraid of making too sudden a move.

"I know what you are going to say," Christine told her, quiet and fierce.

"Then you know more than I do, my dear."
Christine put one hand to the instrument and picked out the staccato start of a folk tune. Madame Giry saw the ring was back on her finger. "You would tell me I must remember Erik is only a man, and he must be expected to act as one."

"That is not always easy," Madame Giry agreed mildly.

"But he did act as one!" Christine swivelled on the bench to face her, eyes burning. "That is exactly what he is doing. The 'honourable thing'. Isn't that what the world used to say of Raoul, after the scandal? 'The poor Vicomte, he is doing the right thing, marrying that Daaé girl.' But they laughed behind his back all the same."

Madame Giry tried to assimilate this, and could not. "The honourable thing."

"Erik insists we must make our, uh, our understanding binding." Christine pulled off the ring and dropped it to the keyboard with a clack of metal on ivory. "That is just what a man ought to do, and I know it as well as he. Only, I can't do it. I can't."

Madame Giry thought she was beginning to see, though some stubborn part of her mind refused to acknowledge it. Our understanding. No, she thought. No.

"It's all fake, that document. Names, dates, places. All he wants is to put a ring on my finger and give me a false name in place of my father's, and make of me a respectable wife to take out on Sundays. It is the honourable thing. But I can't wear a mask, I don't want to. I won't. I never dreamed Erik would ask it of me. I thought it was not a wife but me, me he wanted!" She struck the keyboard sharply, making the ring bounce up. "I am only Christine Daaé. If my father's name is mocked, it is my doing, and it is I who must put it right. I will not simply shed it and hide behind another."

Madame Giry felt the knot of suspicion in her belly unravel all at once into certainty. It left a sweetish, sickening taste in her throat, like guilt.

Those goodnight kisses. All those mornings, afternoons, evenings spent alone.

And like a fool she had done nothing save try to rein in their courtship a little, much too late. A painful refrain floated on the edges of her mind: she ought to have taken the girls away from the Opéra many years ago, ought to have abandoned its ghost.

It was no use dwelling on the past. The present was trouble enough.

"Christine, I have asked you this before — and have been wrong before. You must not be angry with me for asking again. What if something were to come of this… understanding, as you call it?"

Christine shrugged, but kept her face averted. "I'm not a child, Madame Giry."

"No. Far from it."

"We have been very careful. Erik has not… let himself go with me." She was whispering. "And my flux came."

"I see."

Christine stared down at the piano pedals. Madame Giry ached with her whole soul for this not-daughter of hers, whom she could not seem to shield from anything at all.

"Christine Daaé," she said gravely, "we will talk about it, later. But for now you must promise me
that you will not do anything rash. It would be prudent to bolt your window tonight, and the doors also. Your lover," she pronounced the word carefully, "is capable of many things, not all of them admirable. And he will have been sorely disappointed."

Christine picked up the ring again, carefully, almost apologetically. "He has never taken disappointment well."

Madame Giry could not help a small snort. "That is something of an understatement."

Even Christine cracked a smile at that, but it vanished almost before it appeared. She looked thoughtful.

"Madame Giry…” She spoke slowly, forming the words into a single thought. "If Meg's father had wanted marriage, truly wanted it… Would you have accepted?"

"If Jules had wanted marriage, my dear, he would have been a different man. And if I had accepted, I would have been a very different woman. It was best we parted when we did."

Christine touched the piano keys very lightly, as though stroking a timid animal. "He could have stayed with you," she said softly. "He could have stayed, even so."

Madame Giry shook her head. "No, my dear. Men of his class cannot live that way. He loved the theatre but he was not of it, not at all. And I certainly would have made an even worse mistress than wife."

"Erik is of the theatre."

"Is he?" Madame Giry guided Christine's hand gently down from the keyboard. "That's enough for the evening, Christine. Give it time."

Christine nodded. Then she rose briskly, and faced Madame Giry, looking at once determined and terrified. The light reflected in her pupils was rose gold, the same shade as the ring.

"I made up my mind today. I am going to perform. Only this time, it will be my own music."

Chapter 56: In the Wilderness

A/N: Posting this as soon as I can, partly because I'm getting on a flight tomorrow and partly because we all need a bit of escapism after tonight's US election result. Deep breath, get comfy, and it's back to Erik...

Chapter 56 — In the Wilderness

Everything felt false: the rattle of his boots on the pavement as he ran, the lump in his throat, the heaviness in his ribs. Boulevards, crowds and buildings slid apart like scenery flats on a colossal stage, lighted unevenly by the setting sun. Lies, all of it! Every beautiful thing... Half-blind behind his own hands, Erik could not bear the air on his deformity that was smeared with a slick of salt tears and snot. People shied from him, vague shapes stumbling over each other in their haste to get away from the madman. He ducked into alleys and covered passages, pursued by the echo of his own ugly sobs, and by the dregs of humanity that lingered here.

"Five sous for you!" shrilled a girl from a doorway, brazen in her desperation. "You'll forget all
about her, eh?" She made a grab at him as he passed, almost catching his coat. Erik booted her aside, shuddering in revulsion, and heard her hit the wall with a thud. She launched into a stream of obscenity behind him, but he only glanced back and prised his hands away from his face for a moment, and had the perverse satisfaction of hearing her shriek nonstop as he fled the alley.

This was his right, his birthright, his due. Better by far to be feared than pitied, better to be a spectre from a nightmare than whatever it was Christine had made of him.

She did not love him. She did not love him!

He was not a man she could marry, only a freak with the voice of an angel. It was the music she loved. And he had known it all along. He was not stupid, he had known, and still he had permitted himself the lie of their happiness, craved it, crafted it, seeking the fantasy the way Christine had once sought her Angel of Music. Damn her.

Damn it all, but he loved her still. Still, still. Always.

Oh, Christine...

The dilapidated rooftops of rue Fontenelle rose into view at last as he crested the hill, their edges tinted pink by the dying evening — and it was a little like returning home. The vice in his chest eased slightly, until he could breathe.

He stopped at the corner where the alley joined the street. The façades beneath the roofs were already in shadow, but it was not yet dark and the red coats of the soldiers were clearly visible.

Erik stilled.

Two of them in front of the store. Perhaps more within.

Apart from the soldiers, the street was ominously empty. There was no sign even of the usual children and beggars. What windows were not boarded up were curtained and shut; only the Gandons' storefront gaped dark, open but unattended. Stacks of newspapers occupied the counter, the sort of papers Jean would never dream of leaving out in full view when there was a chance of a police raid. Dozens of papers, hundreds.

The soldiers were chatting idly, with the air of men finishing a day's work. Another stranger in a clean National Guard uniform came out from the store and joined them: one of Trochu's men. He loitered near the counter, cigarette in hand, then picked up a paper from the nearest pile and began idly leafing through it. Erik could just make out the cover; it was a recent copy of *Le Combat*.

So. Their revolution was over.

Silently, Erik retraced his steps into the alley. He did not dare move too fast, but adopted the purposeful stride of a man out on urgent business, intent on some destination in the gathering darkness. Jean would no doubt be arrested, and Louise with him. What of it? The two of them had been through all this before in the Empire days, always together. He was alone.

Two streets on, Erik could stand the farce no longer. He ran.

It was not until he found himself clinging to the ironwork of the parapet on the rue Caulaincourt, blood pounding in his ears, that he saw where his feet had brought him. Beneath the causeway lay the jagged landscape of the cemetery, vast and black and dead.

He was alone. So be it.
He leapt up on the railing, lifted his arms clear, and dropped.

The granite edge of a tombstone slammed his feet with such force that Erik felt its jolt all the way along his spine to the base of his neck. Too high; the jump ought to have been lighter, but he had forgotten how to be a ghost. He was fortunate not to have cracked his backbone, or he might have remained there on the gravel path to freeze until morning. The irony of dying in the cemetery only annoyed him further.

A ferocious meowing met his ears, and the hissing of a dozen disturbed cats. The creatures were everywhere, darting between tombs and leaping sinuously from roof to roof, mangy black demons with eyes that glinted evilly in the moonlight. None came near; they must have learned to avoid hunters' slingshots and ropes by now and only glared at him from a distance.

Mercifully, the Angels' Garden seemed devoid of cats. Erik vaulted the low padlocked fence and scrambled through the leafless bushes by the side of the path, heading for the familiar tomb. The lichen-stained faces of the statues followed his progress with their sightless eyes, hideous in the near-darkness, as he mounted the stairs.

The grate over the tomb was unlocked but rusted, and gave reluctantly to his touch. Erik dragged it shut behind him. Within, out of the biting wind, the air was a little warmer, and the stonework smelled of damp earth and crumbling mortar: an old smell that woke memories of cellars. It was a place to be alone.

Erik crushed his hat under his head for a pillow, stretched out along one of the narrow stone ledges that lined the walls, and rolled into his coat as he had seen men do in the streets. The corner of something flat in his pocket dug into his ribs. He cursed, and yanked it out. Of course: the marriage documents and the valuation of Christine's ring.

He stuffed the papers under his head, turned to the wall, and at length descended into a heavy, unsettled sleep. Several times he thought he heard Christine call out to him, but it was only some night bird calling, or the wind among the monuments. Once, he clearly saw two yellow eyes watching him from beyond the grate. Just a cat, come to reclaim its dry corner. Erik groped for a stray pebble on the floor, and flung it at the eyes. There was a squeal, and a scrabble of claws, and then all went quiet. The eyes vanished.

He wondered if Christine was playing her music tonight. His soul and his body stirred at the thought; there was nothing to be done for it. In the darkness beyond the walls of the tomb, the night sang with her voice. He pressed his jaws together and refused to sing with her.

The light was grey when he opened his eyes, and broken by the bars on the door.

Erik sprang to his feet, struck his bare head on the low roof, and flew back against the rear wall. A cage!

For a moment all was confusion. Why was he bare-faced? Where was the sack to hide the head of the Devil's Child, and how did he get here?

No.

He groped for the rough stone behind him with fingers gone numb with cold. There was a layer of frost on his coat. Puffs of his breath clouded the air. Not a cage, a tomb. There was his ruined hat, and the papers…

And he was no longer alone.
"Do not be long, darling," a young baritone pleaded with somebody outside, past the bottom of the stairs. "You'll catch a chill! Think of your voice."

"Si, si, my voice. Go wait for me outside, Federico. Dio caro! Look at all those rocks, does nobody sweep around here? Just look at this, my poor Ubald…"

Erik sank back onto the ledge and fought the hysterical urge to laugh. A pink hat of spectacular proportions was just visible through the bars, far below. Carlotta! Here to mourn her beloved Pia…

He stole to the bars and looked out again, keeping himself out of view. Sure enough, there was the pink hat and the cloud of silk flowers at Pia…

He could not look away from the cursed woman. What did she care for poor Ubald…

Carlotta finished fluffing up the bouquet and stood a moment in a fair imitation of pious Catholic contemplation. Erik almost expected her to sing a requiem, but she only sighed deeply and, pulling off an immaculate white glove, kissed her fingers and touched them to the granite where Pia…

Erik watched her go.

Outside, early visitors were already milling about several of the graves, all clad in black and carrying handkerchiefs and wreaths. Others were only just arriving. Why were there so many?

In the next breath, it hit him: this was the start of November, All Saints’ Day. The day of the dead.

Perfect. Just perfect. Erik swept his useless papers and crushed hat onto the floor and resisted the temptation to kick the lot into a corner. How fitting that he should seek refuge in the one peaceful place in Paris — only to wake to find he had managed to come here on the busiest day of the year. He might have done better to sleep at the horseflesh market. In an hour, the cemetery would be overrun with mourners, and he would not have the slightest chance of leaving it unseen.

He grabbed his hat, knocked it back into a semblance of its former shape, and contemplated simply walking out bare-faced as he was, a walking cadaver in a graveyard to put the fear of ghosts into all their hearts. But the idea neither amused nor repelled him. He felt nothing. His chest seemed to have been hollowed out in the place where his heart ought to be. He was nobody. Just another hungry and filthy beggar hiding from the world, with nothing to call his own, no music, no architecture, no future, no home to go to… no Christine.

"Christine!" came a cry below.

O O O

"Wait, Christine, wait. Permit me, please." Raoul took hold of her arm, and somehow contrived to help her out of Guyon’s carriage without dropping his crutches into the mud. This gesture of basic courtesy, once effortless, was so clumsily executed that Christine had to support his weight rather than lean on him, but at last it was accomplished and they stood by the side of the path. Unsteady from the effort, Raoul was relieved to see that Guyon’s man had already helped Madame Giry and Meg to alight from the other door, before retreating to his box. Christine gave him a worried look
from under the black netting of her mourner's veil, noting his creased forehead, but did not embarrass him with questions.

Madame Giry had no such consideration for his sensibilities.

"Out of the question." She extended an arm to stop him when he turned himself toward the steps. "Monsieur, that climb is not for you."

"I would pay my respects," Raoul objected, "Monsieur Daaé—"

"Will still be here next year." She relented a little, "It does you credit to remember him. But it would be a poor memorial to Gustave to have his daughter's friend lose a leg on these icy stairs. Monsieur, please. Wait for us here, we shall not be long."

Christine was already extricating herself gently to move away to where Meg was waiting, so Raoul could do nothing but bow to the three of them, defeated. "As you say. I shall wait here."

Christine smiled at him, promising to say a few words on his behalf, and Raoul sighed and resolved to await their return with as much patience as he could muster. Not much, he feared. If convalescing in the ambulance had been akin to living at the zoo, then staggering around Guyon's apartment was, if anything, even worse a confinement. Guyon was a generous if absent-minded host, prone to long disappearances and vague explanations that did little to keep Raoul abreast of the news. Take last night's revolution, for one: how did the government, collection of gasbags that it was, succeed in negotiating its way out of the mess at the Hôtel de Ville? Or was the feared spectre rouge just as incompetent a rabble as the caricatures painted it? This morning all was talk of a "peaceful settlement" and flowery protestations of love for Liberty, but what did that mean? The people at Andersson's hearing may have been coarse but their frustration was real enough, and he could not imagine that they would be easily placated.

Raoul sighed and readjusted his crutches, awkward on the uneven, partially frozen ground. At the top of the steps, the three slight black figures of Christine and the Girys were busy clearing leaves around the tomb and arranging the wreath of evergreens that he and Christine had bought at the cemetery gates. He would have liked to lay a flower of his own there — less in Gustave Daaé's name than in memory of the childhood summers he once shared with Christine, and the love that could have grown so easily but for her father's early death. He vaguely remembered Daaé as a gentle, soft-spoken man, a thoughtful presence at the edges of their playing. More vividly, he remembered Daaé's violin and young Christine's love for it, the way her face shone with pride and joy when he played. How brightly she shone! He had been a good father, Raoul supposed, and not to blame for Christine's pain. Too good a father, for in leaving her, he took his daughter's whole world to the grave with him. Nobody should become that to another person. That kind of love was too cruel a burden, and left too terrible a shadow.

"Ugh!" Raoul gave a startled cry as a crutch was suddenly kicked from under him by someone behind. He overbalanced in trying to turn on the other, lost the crutch, and landed square on his crippled hip. The pain snatched his breath away. He could scarcely gasp.

"Vicomte," said a black figure towering over him.

"Christ…"

"Hardly," Erik Andersson said dryly. "Though I did just rise from the tomb. A damnably uncomfortable resting place." He was unmasked, red-eyed, filthy beyond anything Raoul had seen since Bazeilles, and stank so foully of cat urine that for a moment Raoul gagged. He did not stand steadily but seemed to sway a little from side to side.
"And what brings the heroic Lieutenant de Chagny here, hmm? Enjoying the view?" Andersson made a broad gesture in the direction of the tomb, where Christine stood with her back to them, her hands on the grate.

"Christ almighty," Raoul repeated, struggling to grab hold of a crutch. "Are you drunk? Stand back!"

"Why? Worried someone might see you conversing with a tramp? A certain lady perhaps, who has been freed from all obligations?"

"You maggot!" At last Raoul succeeded in regaining his feet and balanced as best he could on one crutch. He was numb, shaking with outrage. "You really are scum, aren't you. You have the nerve to follow her — to stand here and show your face after what you did to her — after all she did for you — and speak of obligations? Obligations to you! I heard your little show yesterday. Christine was in tears in the street. Because of you! You, you! Always it was you, but that is not enough, you will not rest easy until you have destroyed her utterly, her and everyone around her. Haven't you caused her enough pain?"

Raoul advanced, swinging the crutch forward, but Andersson merely stepped back with a hideous, deformed grin that exposed all his teeth on one side.

"What the devil do you know about pain, Vicomte?"

Raoul had a vivid, vicious impulse to drive the crutch straight into that sneering monstrosity. How could this be the same man who had dragged him bleeding through the bullets in Bazeilles, who had stood on the edge of that stage in Montmartre? He kept his voice low with the greatest effort.

"What do I know of pain? Nothing. I have lost my country, my fiancée, my family's respect, my future, everything — do you understand? — and gained this for a reminder." Raoul jabbed at his throbbing hip. "But it's nothing compared to her. Why don't you ask Christine about pain?"

He wrestled his rising voice back down to little more than a whisper. Andersson had gone still as death, listening.

"You think the world owes you something… everything. You think it's only fair I should plead with all Montmartre for your worthless hide, and Christine should be your wife because that is how it goes. Your suffering must be rewarded. The world owes you nothing, Andersson. No more than it owes me, or Christine or anyone else. We get the cards we get, and do what we can with the hand we're dealt. You think Christine deserves to have you for a husband? Her protector, her lover, the father of her children! Look at yourself. Better yet, smell yourself!" He lurched forward.

Andersson gave a low bark of laughter and retreated easily out of reach. "You mean to fight me? You can barely walk."

"For you, I'll learn."

"What's it to be then? Pistols at dawn? Come, Chagny, I'll give you a handicap. Ten paces, twenty? Come along, let us have a rematch!"

"Be silent." Raoul remained where he was, refusing to be goaded another step. He could not lose his head, not here, not now. It had gone much too far already.

Andersson reached the edge of the path and stood now in the white frosty leaves, crunching them underfoot, breathing heavily. He had risen onto the balls of his feet, Raoul realised, poised to run at any moment.
"You're not a man." Raoul bent to retrieve the crutch Andersson had kicked from his hand, and stood up straight between the crutches. "You're a mask. No, an... onion. Skin after skin, mask after mask, and nothing underneath but more masks. I will not demean Christine by humouring you. I almost mistook you for a man of honour a while ago, but I see now the resemblance was passing." He shrugged. "My mistake."

Unexpectedly, this seemed to puncture Andersson's composure. In the instant before he did run, Raoul caught a glimpse of real fear in that malformed face, and something cringing, like shame. It was hideous and yet so raw that Raoul could not help an answering stab of pity.

He glanced behind him, and to his dismay found Guyon's man watching with an expression of utter bemusement. Raoul cursed himself inwardly and hobbled over to the carriage, choosing to say nothing.

He was still wound up and buzzing with nervous energy when Christine returned with Madame Giry and Meg. They were all contemplative and quiet; even Meg opposite him was subdued and barely spoke, leaning against her mother's arm. Madame Giry seemed content just to sit in silence, and Raoul was grateful to have been spared the need for polite conversation. He knew Christine assumed that he too was remembering her father.

When at last they cleared the queue of waiting mourners and left the cemetery behind, Christine drew her gloves off slowly, and laid her hands in her lap. Raoul saw the gleam of the gold band on her ring finger, and knew she had intended for him to see it.

"He was at the cemetery," Raoul admitted under his breath.

Christine nodded. "I thought I saw him leave."

Another block of half-abandoned buildings floated past, ghostly in the misted-up window. Maurice was a cautious driver and guided the horse through the uncertain morning fog at barely a walking pace. The white and red flags that marked ambulances seemed to hang from every other building.

"I must start rehearsing tomorrow," Christine murmured, drawing absently on the glass with her finger. A stave, Raoul saw, a handful of notes. Christine wiped her palm over it. "I have never done anything like this. A concert, and in that theatre… Perhaps it is a mistake."

Raoul glanced over at her, struck by an unwelcome memory of the eve of another performance, but Christine did not seem to be thinking of that. She was gazing out through the patch of glass she had cleared, and there was no dread in her voice, only wonder and a touch of sadness. Raoul knew that expression. She was listening to something, a music only she could hear.

"What of the ban on spectacles?" he asked. "You will need a permit of some sort. Are you confident this Ballard knows the right people?"

"Concerts are allowed now," Meg put in, overhearing, "As long as the program is 'suitable', that is. Serious."

"God help us all," Madame Giry sighed. "Serious music. They will yet turn Paris into a province of Prussia without any help from Bismarck."

Christine smiled a little. "Don't worry. I will not be playing Beethoven."

They reached the apartment building without incident, but as Maurice brought the horse to a halt, Raoul knew a moment of the deepest anxiety. An officer was waiting by the front door, in full uniform and pacing the pavement. Raoul swiped the window clear with his glove and to his
immense relief recognised none other than Henri Guyon.

"Chagny! There you are," Guyon was upon them almost before the carriage stopped. He flung the door wide, helping the ladies dismount with almost unseemly haste, his gaze all the while fixed on Raoul. "What are you doing promenading after what happened last night? Have you heard nothing?"

"About what?"

"The Reds of course, what else! Did you not just go to Montmartre? Get your head out if the sand. There's arrests from here to La Villette."

"What arrests?"

"The doddering fools in the Hôtel de Ville swore there'd be no reprisals but here we are. No, don't bother getting out. Maurice!" Guyon shouted to the driver. "Let's go, man, let's go. Forgive us," he added to Madame Giry, "call of duty."

"Of course," she said graciously, guiding Meg and Christine ahead of her to the doors of the building. Christine raised her hand in a wave and Raoul watched helplessly as she vanished behind the door.

Guyon landed with a thump on the seat opposite as the carriage took off with all possible speed, axles creaking.

"They have no idea," Guyon was saying. "None at all." He sounded frightened.

Chapter 57: Tethered

Hallelujah, the delayed chapter! Sincere apologies for the long wait, and thank you so much for being here and sticking with the story. Your reviews keep me going.

Chapter 57 — Tethered

Christine hooked her finger under the window-latch and held it, wondering as she did every evening since Erik's flight whether she might follow Madame Giry's advice and lock it.

Perhaps tonight she would do it. It would be so good to sleep in peace instead of being woken by every noise and shadow that never, ever became a man. A night of rest was badly needed after all the rehearsals and hectic preparations, or her voice would be no use at all tomorrow. She could not let them down. They had worked so hard for the past three weeks: little Marie on the piano, in her poor fingerless gloves to keep off the chill of the unheated theatre, and Pierre Ballard and Madame Giry knocking on every municipal door to secure the permits from officials who had larger concerns. Even Meg, who was already up half the night sketching for her newspaper, somehow found the time to draw and ink the posters that had been pasted outside the theatre:

_Mademoiselle Christine Daaé in performance!_

_One night only, by special arrangement._

_Come and hear the most beautiful voice in Paris!_
All proceeds to the 18th arrondissement Widows' and Orphans' Fund.

The words were Pierre Ballard's, and Christine still winced when she thought of them. One night only. It sounded like an advert for a travelling fair, with her as the prize exhibit. But Ballard knew how the Folies drew its crowds, understood Montmartre and its moods, and Christine did not argue. She wondered only if they would think her music too strange, too unpatriotic, just as Erik had cautioned her...

"Can you not see," Ballard told her in agitation after she had first let him hear a few fragments, "you are Paris! And better than that: Montmartre. You are proof we need no church choirs to hear such pure beauty, and when you sing… My dear Christine, if the Prussians could hear you, they would lay down their arms."

Yet in the wake of the near-revolution at the Hôtel de Ville, it seemed unlikely that anybody would hear her. This was no time to be asking for permits to perform. The city was still in turmoil; Montmartre doubly so. The government had placated the insurgent leaders with promises of support for their grievances — only to break their word the very next morning, on the Day of the Dead, and have them arrested: as dishonourable a lie as any since the war began. Raoul and Henri Guyon spent days raging about it, and even the Prefect of Police resigned in protest. Several days later most were released, but, walking through Montmartre, Christine could see the damage was done. The last remnants of faith were gone. If people spoke of the government at all it was in the deepest, ugliest tone of disillusionment. The just Republic they had believed in turned out to be nothing more than a mundane collection of cowardly, self-interested, ordinary men with neither the skill nor the courage to resist the Prussians, no respect for their own people, and no concern for the fate of anyone besides themselves. Anger of the kind Christine had only ever heard from Louise Gandon now sounded from the lips of every woman in the ration queue, and even the men of the National Guard.

Christine understood it, their betrayal, and it made her feel more at home in Montmartre than in the city proper. In the city the siege dragged on, with every day a bleaker facsimile of the last. In Montmartre, people gathered to talk at every street corner; hungry and ill and enraged at being abandoned, but not afraid. Never afraid. Christine admired that. Sometimes they would notice her and tip their hats or nod to her in recognition, and she would smile in return. Sometimes they asked after her man, the franc-tireur, and she would keep smiling, using every ounce of her stage training to hold the muscles taut and never let go.

"Cold day to be out on the ramparts," the women would commiserate, assuming he had been drafted along with the others. All young men had to serve now; it was finally law.

"Yes," Christine would agree, despising herself for her cowardice. "A very cold day."

"At least he's got you wrapped up nice and warm then, eh? Lovely new coat that."

"Yes. Lovely and warm."

She passed Erik's house every day on her way to and from the theatre, alone or walking with Meg or Madame Giry; or occasionally riding in a carriage with Raoul, but the window beneath the roof remained dead and dark.

The very first time she came by, she discovered that Jean Gandon and Louise had been among those arrested. Perhaps it ought not to have surprised her as it did, but when she saw the police notice pasted to the locked storefront, Christine felt nothing but shock. She thought of Louise, with her rough manners and clomping boots and eyes full of pity, and Jean with his papers, facing Erik without a gun — the anguish they had caused... She might have hated them for that arrest, but how
could she nurse a grudge, knowing they had every reason for mistrust? She could not resent it. She had forgiven them the instant her voice joined Erik's at the hearing and everything else ceased to matter. His voice… He had embraced it then, their music and all that they were, stripping off all the masks, and it was enough. It was perfect.

She came by the locked store again that evening, and the day after. Sometimes a movement at the fence caught the edge of her gaze, or the sound of a breath, and she would stop and wait, ignoring the neighbours' curious looks, but she remained alone.

A week passed before Louise and Jean finally returned home, looking sombre but animated with a renewed sense of purpose; a long, painful week during which Christine had found herself lingering longer and longer outside the store, or finding increasingly slender pretexts to ask Raoul to take the carriage past. When at last the counter was re-opened, Louise brushed off Christine's greeting and her relief, as though there had never been a doubt in her mind that return they must.

"Still singing then?" she asked and, following the line of Christine's gaze to the window above, added more quietly, "Ah. The missing hero. Gone again, is he?"

Christine averted her eyes, afraid of revealing the anger and hope in them, but Louise only shook her head, and set about rearranging the counter to her liking:

"You needn't worry, he's not been to the clink with our lot." And more gently, "Go on home, pet. I'll send you word if I hear anything. Jean's been posted to the mayor's office now; who knows, he might learn something."

It was not to be. Day followed day, life around the store resumed something like its normal course, but still Erik's window was unlit. And, as though his absence had the power to silence her own music, it was looking more and more likely that the permit for her performance would never be granted.

Just when Christine had begun to think she must sing regardless, unaccompanied if she could so as to spare Marie the consequences, Pierre Ballard turned up at the theatre one evening, grinning from ear to ear and brandishing the stamped permit over his head like a revolutionary banner:

"We have it!"

Marie leapt to her feet with a jubilant whoop, and even Madame Giry, tired as she was from a day of queues and doubtful about the whole enterprise, looked deeply pleased. It had been granted at last, Ballard said, because some decree or other had today allowed a cautious reopening of the Théâtre Français for an uncostumed, sombre performance of Molière. And where there was one theatre, there could be others.

"To old Molière!" he cried, his sharp bony face aglow. "And to music!"

They celebrated at the piano with a bottle of vinegary wine that Ballard drew proudly from a string bag and drank almost entirely on his own, and with the last of the chocolates Christine had stowed away backstage. Meg gave her a startled look, guessing their origin, but Christine only set the box on the piano resolutely, and took a chocolate herself to disguise her hands shaking. Erik had brought these one day when they were tuning the piano here. His chin had been all stubble when she kissed him, and they'd laughed… The sweet marzipan tasted of him, of hope and music and all the things he no longer wanted.

How could he not want this? How could he just turn away, thrusting aside every fragile thing they had so painfully rebuilt?
When the chocolates were gone, Christine ripped a corner of the gilt paper that surrounded them, and crumpled it into her pocket. She caught herself searching the shadows again — but it was a futile gesture: she knew before she looked that she would not see him. He did not want to be seen. She was alone.

And alone she must sing. If Pierre Ballard managed to secure her the audience, Christine thought she could do the rest. There was no choice: with the promise of a concert, her music had grown from a throbbing beat at the back of her mind to a creature winged and triumphant, impatient to break the last of its restraints and be set free.

*Mademoiselle Christine Daaé in performance.*

Her name with no scandals, no past. Only music. If Erik had only had the courage to stay with her, if he only understood… But he did not, or could not.

He no longer wanted music.

The man to whom she had opened her soul was the ghost of a dream, vanishing the moment she thought she held him, leaving her alone in the street to call after him with her desire exposed and echoing among the buildings. It was not her love Erik yearned for, no — he wanted the impossible: a bourgeois fantasy that could not belong to her any more than it did to Madame Giry or Meg or any of them. He had written the whole libretto for their new life together, from the false name they would share to the ordinary, respectable work he would do, never thinking for a moment that she might not accept the role.

And she could not accept it.

The window latch clinked on the wooden frame and swung like a pendulum, to and fro, free. Christine pulled her unruly hair into a braid, using the glass for a mirror, then padded barefoot to bed, leaving the window uncurtained to the moonlight, unlocked.

She could not help it. She still wanted him here, it was as simple and as hopeless as that.

Turning into the pillow, she let it stifle her wretched, foolish sobbing. When that was spent, she clenched her jaw and stroked the frustration from her body, ruthless as a surgeon amputating a limb, then curled into a ball and stayed thus a long time with her eyes open to the darkness, thinking of tomorrow. Her hungry stomach churned and whined, begging for more than an empty supper of tea, but Christine ignored it. The body could be silenced. It was the winged, clawed spirit in her that longed for freedom and could accept nothing less.

There were spaces between the notes that belonged to Erik's voice. He was hers, whether he willed it or not; he was of the theatre as much as she was, and it would always, always be so.

Tomorrow, she would stand on stage and sing, and there would be no sorrow and no shame in that music. Life, only life.

* o o o *

How could Chagny not see it? Was he such a colossal fool as not to seize his advantage when it was so clearly given? The Devil only knew how often Christine insisted on visiting him, and how willing she was to accompany him on carriage rides that at another time should have been scandalous — but these days nobody much cared for the niceties. Women of every creed and station spent their days tending to the wounded and sick in ambulances all over Paris, and nobody looked askance at a young officer accompanied by a charming friend.
And yet the Vicomte's conduct towards her remained impeccable, whether in the carriage or at her theatre, and he made not the slightest move to renew their association. Could it be that they knew they were being watched?

Erik found himself pacing the floor of the dressing-room and stopped at once. The last thing he needed was for the squeaking if the floorboards to betray him to Christine or to any of the others.

He ought not to have made himself known at the cemetery, that had been rash. Now he was reduced to shadowing them day after infuriating day and finding absolutely nothing to complain of. Truly the Vicomte was an imbecile: his fiancée was restored to him, the way left clear for a reconciliation, and yet the two of them spoke of politics and crutches and childhood memories, and were as polite to one another as a pair of nuns. Once or twice there was even a genuine nun present when Chagny visited Christine at the theatre, although more and more often the wheelchair was manoeuvred here by his friend Guyon, himself tediously predictable in his efforts to catch the eye of Meg Giry. Guyon brought art catalogues that Meg later pored over, engaged her in animated discussions about the Republican ideal, and was excessively polite to her mother: in short, performed all the stunts expected of a hopeful suitor that were so completely neglected by the crippled Vicomte.

It had almost looked like things might be changing when Chagny presented Christine with a glorious new coat, warm and elegantly styled, with a fox collar that was far beyond the means of any architect's savings. Christine allowed him to put it on her — a comic spectacle when her gallant suitor wobbled on his crutches — and thanked him from the bottom of her heart... but her cheeks were tear-stained and Chagny did not even try to wipe the tears away. Then they simply went on as before: Christine began the day's rehearsal; Chagny and Guyon went on their way, and nothing changed.

What was Chagny waiting for? Why could he not simply get on with it and play the hand he was being so patiently dealt? There was a limit to what one man could endure.

The theatre was becoming busier by the day as they readied it for this infernal concert, with ever more backstage rooms being cleared out and opened to the air, and Erik found his temper fraying in accordance with his shrinking domain and his growing hunger. It might not have been so terrible if he could have kept to his room at the Gandons', and starved there in peace instead of lurking here among the abandoned props — but the risk was too great, he could not chance it. Christine invariably walked along rue Fontenelle on the way to rehearsal, and each time her footsteps would slow outside the store. It was torture to think he could just return, light a lamp, wait for her there. Not again. He was through with the lies. He was leaving the stage to the one who belonged up there, soaring towards the light with her own exquisite music upon her lips. Christine would have the fame she deserved, and the roses, and the admirers. If Chagny was too much of a fool, others would take his place. She would have her music.

Perhaps he could start again in time, if the war did not end it all. Rebuild his career, return to Sedan, finish what he had started. Learn to be grateful for the crumbs the world tossed him, just as Chagny had so eloquently advised. Perhaps he could return and see her one day, shining on the stage of the new, opulent, magnificent Opéra. Perhaps he would not hate it.

For now, he could do nothing more than observe as she tamed the theatre to her needs. Marie's accompaniment had been passably decent, if erratic in tempo; Christine had managed to turn it to a strength by entrusting the girl with her more chromatic pieces, so that their peculiar atonal quality was rendered almost otherworldly. Set to Christine's music, the words of her father's tales rang out as eerily beautiful chants: ancient, sacred, bell-like. Around her, under Madame Giry's watchful
eye, the stage had been repaired of creaks and coated with new rosin, a moth-eaten velvet curtain dragged out from some forgotten box backstage and hung, several cartloads of mismatched wooden chairs brought in. The curtain was repaired at great effort by what seemed like every out-of-work seamstress in Montmartre, and the chairs cleaned and arranged in tidy rows by a swarm of their ragged children. Drunkard though Ballard was, he evidently had enough useful friends and connections to call upon, and the place was beginning to resemble a real theatre.

It had a certain style now, far removed from the tawdry dance hall it had been. Even the advertising posters Meg had drawn were graceful and restrained, making the garish words Ballard had thought up seem like nothing more than simple unadorned fact:

*Mademoiselle Christine Daaé. The most beautiful voice in Paris.*

And why stop at Paris? There had never been her like before and never would be after. Christine was growing ever more assured in the way she saw and heard and composed, and it gave her voice a new strength, a power that held Erik as hopelessly mesmerised as ever. Each morning he thought he must end this madness and leave.

Each evening he knew he would stay.

If her music was not torment enough, through every rehearsal Christine kept glancing at the darker corners of the theatre, each time sending his heart crashing through his chest. At times Erik was certain she saw him, but reason reminded him she had always managed to find him, ever since the chapel, as though her heart could see through walls. That was nothing new. It did not mean he was loved for himself. It was only a habit, one she needed to break.

He caught a sound now and kept himself very still, his fingertips held to the dressing-room door.

Christine was singing again.

Her voice reached him through the wooden panels and, helpless, Erik let it touch him, hold him like the ghost of her body surrounding his. Yes, there, that was the exact chord progression they had worked on together — oh God, to feel her as he had then, to lace his fingers into her hair while she sang…

The tears came, as they always did, and he could not escape.

An hour went by, perhaps more. Hunger reminded him of himself. The absurdity of one torment displacing another might have merited a philosophy treatise, but he was too famished for philosophy. Once, he could have gone days without thinking of the demands of his gut, but back then he had been as near a ghost as a man could become. Now that he was marooned among the living there was no helping it; he had to find bread and whatever foul canned bilge could still be bought and eaten uncooked.

He would survive. Chagny could take his notions of stoically accepting one's lot and burn them; he was not just going to roll over and play dead.

A quick search of his cache behind the false back of a cupboard yielded three hard biscuits, a tin of what passed for salted fish, and wine. Erik found the plate he kept along with and his silverware, filled his wineglass, and sat down at the narrow dressing-table to eat this pitiful supper. The mirror in front of him informed him that three weeks of living like a stowaway rat on a ship had done nothing to improve his complexion, but he was alive. He would survive, and he would see that Christine was not abandoned again. That was enough.
It had to be enough.

A peculiar scuffling noise outside his door caught his attention. Erik carefully replaced his fork, concealed the evidence of his meal under a pile of rags, and rose from the dressing-table. An insane thought flashed through his head: perhaps it was Christine and her suitor, searching for privacy. A dressing-room with a mirror, a faded velvet couch…

It was nothing of the sort.

"Erik."

Madame Giry's voice. Erik kept silent, though his heartbeat sounded thunderous in his own ears. She was bluffing. She might suspect his presence but she could not know he was here; she must be doing this at every door hoping to flush him out.

"Erik."

His name always sounded odd when she used it, not like a name at all, but like a confession — *mea culpa*…

He heard her sigh and move on. A bluff; he had been right.

Still, it reminded him not to linger overlong in one room. He cleaned away the remnants of his supper, found his coat, and after listening for a few minutes to the silence outside, opened the door.

The corridor was dark and empty. The gas was off as usual, and he could only just make out the outlines of doorframes and the passage that led towards the stage.

His fist closed on a thin wrist like a vice, instinctive as breath.

"Erik."

He jumped and cursed, dropping her wrist, and his heart jolted so painfully that he damn near passed out. A door behind him swung ajar from the impact, admitting a sliver of moonlight.

"Madame," he all but growled, "you forget yourself. I might have mistaken you in the dark for an intruder."

She was scarcely more than a silhouette, but Erik caught the thin-lipped smile that cut her mouth at his words. "No. It is you who has forgotten yourself. I might have mistaken you in the dark for a phantom."

Before he could think of how to defend himself, she was gone, vanishing into the depths of the corridor.

He could not follow her.

Instead, once his breathing resumed and his heart stopped hammering in his teeth, Erik returned to the dressing-room. With some difficulty, he found the crushed hat he had not worn for days and a roll of nearly clean linen for bandages, dressed and masked himself, and went outside.

The night was bitterly cold and the hour much too late for visits, but he did not care. The past was gaping behind him like an open grave, but he refused to look back. He would not become a ghost again. He would not.

"Chagny!" he called when he finally reached the silent sleeping house where the Vicomte
convalesced, and he rattled the massive front door and the handle. "Chagny!"

After an interminable long time, the ornate lion-shaped door handle turned, and a manservant's bleary face looked out at him. At the sight of the rumpled, bandaged visitor, he appeared to be struck dumb, and only opened and shut his mouth.

Erik raised his hat. "Erik Andersson," he said conversationally. "Kindly let the Vicomte de Chagny know that I shall call on him first thing tomorrow."

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**Chapter 58: Daybreak**

Happy New Year! Welcome back and thank you so much for your patience. It's been another long break thanks to the holidays, but after a run of marathon nights, here is the (rather long) new instalment. I am very excited about finally reaching this point in the story and eager as always to hear what you think!

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**Chapter 58 — Daybreak**

"First thing tomorrow? Surely he means today... Ah, not again!" Guyon threw up his hands and folded his cards with an offhand shrug. "You really are a lucky devil, fourth straight hand! Pass me those papers, will you, uncle will be looking for them in about, oh," — he glanced at the clock on the mantlepiece and winced — "five hours. When did it get this early?"

"About forty francs ago. That was the last partie, I'm done."

Raoul tossed his own cards to the table over Guyon's and pushed his winnings aside to make space for the latest haul of documents from the governor's office. There were telegrams, notes, even a few private letters. Try as he might, he still could not find it in himself to handle them with Guyon's casual indifference, but they at least these afforded a glimpse beyond the stale news and gossip to which the news-starved papers were reduced.

"Here," he said, "You better check it's all there."

While Guyon checked through the letters, Raoul wheeled his chair around from the card table, and prodded the last of the embers smouldering in the fireplace. The draughty sitting room was starting to feel uncomfortably chilly, for all that it was autumn still. It had to be freezing outside. Where had Christine's mad suitor been hiding out all this time? Surely not at the cemetery… Christine was so certain he had not gone far, yet they had stopped many times outside what she swore used to be his lodgings, and never saw a light.

And now he was back.

Guyon raised the cards in a question, but Raoul shook his head.

"Don't be stupid. If your uncle finds you with that dispatch, it'll be both our necks."

Guyon waved him off. "He is with his mistress, I hardly think he's going to leave a warm bed to turn up here like a schoolmaster in the middle of the night. But all right, never fear, I'll have this lot at the war office by seven and he'll be none the wiser. There is nothing of interest here in any case, only more on Gambetta's army still sitting idle in Orléans."

He cast a curious glance up at Raoul. "What do you make of it? The victory at Orléans was all very
well, but it has been a week and more since then; they ought to be marching to our aid with all possible haste by now. What are they waiting for? Christmas?"

"They saw a battle," Raoul was only half-listening. The fire licked the coals lazily, then petered out again. "They're green troops, weary, bloody and confused… It isn't like in the books. And the Prussians will be upon them the moment they venture out."

Guyon flipped through the last of the documents then set them aside. After a moment, he asked, "What's the matter? Don't look so grim, I told you, I'll handle the papers."

"Forget the papers!" Raoul poked the embers until one cracked into sparks, then dropped the poker with a clang and turned to face him. "I cannot believe Andersson turned up here. We haven't seen hide nor hair of him in weeks."

"'We', is it?" Guyon gave a chuckle. "That would be you and Christine, the 'most beautiful voice in Paris'? Who, I could not help noticing, is now wearing your furs."

"Oh, leave off. Christine has nobody to look out for her. And she is family, or near enough."

"Family as in sister or as in—"

"I said, leave off!" Raoul caught himself trying to bolt from the chair, and turned aside in embarrassment from Guyon's startled look. "No more of that, please. Bad enough that I'll have Andersson to deal with tomorrow — today. I need to let Christine know."

"Forgive me," Guyon said seriously. "I did not realise there was still feeling between you."

"Christine is my oldest friend. There will always be feeling between us. That much will never change."

"And Andersson?"

Raoul huffed, "Andersson. That will never change either." He scrubbed his hands over his face tiredly. "Look, I haven't the stomach for this now. No doubt Andersson means to accuse me of some fresh sins and I'd like to have an hour's sleep before he tries to blow my brains out. And Christine is performing tomorrow."

Guyon shrugged. "Perhaps he means to thank you for taking such good care of her in his absence."

"You're hilarious, Guyon. I shall be sure to recommend you to Pierre Ballard as a first-rate entertainer."

"Mock all you like, but I confess I too am envious of your understanding with Mademoiselle Daaé. She invites you to hear her sing, she accepts your gifts… Whereas Marguerite will take nothing from me but old catalogues from the Salon, and even those she returns. I tell you, I have never met a more frustrating woman to court. And a ballet girl at that!"

"What you mean is that you have finally found one impervious to your tried and tested charms. I wish you would turn them on someone else, Guyon. Madame Giry is not like the ballet mothers you hear about, and she has trouble enough with Christine without a rake like you chasing after her daughter. You're wasting your time."

"I own her mother is formidable. But Meg is… She is more than worth the effort." Guyon smiled suddenly, and looked almost bashful. He nodded towards the wall opposite. "I sent her a painting."

"I must confess I am impressed..." Raoul continued. "But I confess I too am envious of your understanding with Mademoiselle Daaé. She invites you to hear her sing, she accepts your gifts... whereas Marguerite will take nothing from me but old catalogues from the Salon, and even those she returns. I tell you, I have never met a more frustrating woman to court. And a ballet girl at that!"

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"I own her mother is formidable. But Meg is... She is more than worth the effort." Guyon smiled suddenly, and looked almost bashful. He nodded towards the wall opposite. "I sent her a painting."
Raoul turned and saw a lighter square among the shadows that announced a missing piece. He could not conceal his incredulity. "You sent her your Rembrandt! Why?"

"She began to copy it when she was here. I imagine she might like to finish it. And, as it is a loan and not a gift, she can hardly reject it." He picked up the packet of documents and stood to go. "Good night, Chagny. Wake me if you need a second."

"A second?"

"Naturally. For that duel with Andersson. It would be much better fun than freezing my tail off on the ramparts."

Raoul watched the door shut behind him. A duel might be a joke to Guyon, and perhaps rightly so, but for his part, Raoul did not in the least feel like laughing. He wished he still had the innocence to play at battle. He looked down at his bad leg, thin and useless under the fabric of his trousers, and recalled Andersson's unmasked face glaring down at him in the frozen mud of the cemetery — and before that, last winter, the red-spattered snow on the tombstones melting in places from the warm blood. Andersson may have taunted him with a rematch, but the words had been nothing but hollow bluster, meant to goad him into answering anger with anger. To Raoul's shame, he had succeeded well enough, and just for a moment it had felt good, horribly good, to hit back with all the strength he had, even if that was nothing but words. To see him flee. Yet he now found himself wondering, not for the first time, what it was the man had really wanted. Proof? Of what?

Finding no answers, Raoul took the lamp from the card table and shoved his heavy wheelchair one-handed towards the door, its wheels squeaking reluctantly. By the time he had manoeuvred it into his bedroom, his arms were sore and he was too tired to bother undressing. He put out the lamp, heaved himself over onto the bedcovers and within moments was sound asleep.

An urgent whispering just inside the door woke him what seemed like only a few minutes later.

"Monsieur le Vicomte? Monsieur le Vicomte!"

"Huh…" Raoul rolled over painfully onto his back and blinked into the murky blue-shadowed depths of the room, where a hunched elderly figure was just visible by the door. "Maurice? What time is it?"

Maurice coughed pointedly, in a way that made Raoul aware that it was later in the morning than he had first thought; the window was shuttered but daylight seeped in around the frame. He sat up and tried to knead some life back into his bad thigh; the leg felt like a plank of wood crawling with termites.

"It has gone eight, sir. Your visitor is downstairs."

"All right." Raoul sighed and rolled out of bed, resigning himself to the inevitable. "Show him up then. Only give me a minute to wash."

"Of course. Shall I open these shutters?"

"Never mind that. Tell Monsieur Andersson that I'll be with him presently. And Maurice, if he is in any way uncivil to you, you have my full permission to slam the door in what passes for his face."

"Thank you, monsieur. If I may be so bold as to inquire..." Maurice hesitated, doubtless wondering how to phrase the indiscreet question. "Your friend's bandages?"

Raoul grimaced. "It is only an old injury," he said in perfect candour. "He makes too much of it."
"Then it is not, that is to say — not contagious?"

Raoul glanced at the anxious servant in surprise. "I should say not." The unexpected question made him grin despite himself. "He would be most put out to hear it suggested that others might be made to look like him. Monsieur Andersson does like to feel he is a special and unusual sort of man."

"Ah. Only I had thought, as there is such a riot of smallpox at present… One cannot be too careful."

"You may have my word that you are in no danger," Raoul assured him.

It was not until after the relieved Maurice bowed out of the room that he replayed the words in his mind and wondered at his own confidence. No danger of contagion perhaps, but did he honestly believe Christine's suitor to be no danger, knowing who and what he was?

"Merde," he said with feeling, because there was nothing else for it. He was saddled with this shadow of the past, as surely as he was saddled with the lump of flesh and bone that used to be his leg.

His hip protested at the complicated manoeuvre from the bed into the chair. After another minute's struggle, Raoul gave it up in exasperation and reached for his crutches. He could manage a stumbling walk to the next room at least, even if he had grown to rely on the wheelchair for the most part.

He splashed his face at the nightstand, dragged a comb through his hair, and hobbled out to meet his so-called friend. He could not begin to fathom how Andersson had spent the preceding weeks, but Raoul thought he had better have a damned good reason for coming back. If he so much as breathed another word about Christine's supposed obligation to wed him, or dared to imply, as he had at the cemetery, that there was anything improper in Raoul's attention to her…

The sitting room was so bright with diffuse sunlight that for a moment Raoul saw nothing but a dazzling white glare. Disoriented, he stopped at the doorway. Every one of the ceiling-high windows was uncurtained.

"Careful, Vicomte," a familiar voice advised from within, "I would not want you to break your other leg on my account."

"Andersson. You are pleasant as ever."

Raoul caught his shoulder against the doorframe to regain his balance as his eyes adjusted to the light, and shifted the crutches under his arms. Andersson stood by one of the exposed windows, holding the drape which he had evidently just opened. He looked every bit the gentleman for a change, as well-groomed as Raoul had seen him since his visits to the ambulance. His face was decently covered, suit pressed, boots polished, and his hat, coat and ivory-topped cane rested carelessly across the nearby chair. Nobody would credit that here stood the screaming madman who had accosted Christine in the street with his proposal. Raoul wished belatedly that he had stopped to shave; he disliked to feel at a disadvantage to a man he had last encountered sleeping among the stray cats in a graveyard.

Andersson raised one hand to show that he held a folded newspaper which he had been perusing. "This morning's collection of half-truths, if you care to read it."

"This isn't the ambulance," Raoul said in irritation, "I know the news as well as you do." Better, he added mentally, thinking of last night's game and the papers that he hoped were by now safely
Andersson dropped the paper to the chair with a minute shrug of indifference, and stepped away from the window. "Very well. Then let us go for a walk. Three legs between us should be quite sufficient."

"Funny," Raoul said through his teeth. His hip twitched painfully. "You abandoned Christine. I had thought, Monsieur, that you are here to explain your conduct. If you have nothing to do here but taunt me, I would as soon you returned to wherever you have crawled from."

Andersson strode towards him, snatching his hat and cane from the chair along the way. When he came nearer, Raoul noticed in astonishment that his hat had crease marks all over, as though it had been crushed and repaired. What was visible of his face, up close, also appeared somehow creased, tense — he was not nearly as certain of himself as he had been making it seem. A theatre trick, Raoul decided, the man was simply acting.

"You did not come here to trade insults," he said warily. "Does Christine know you have returned?"

Andersson looked away, towards the windows, then down at the hat he held. He squared his shoulders. "I never left." His voice was very quiet. "Of course Christine knows. She has always known."

Raoul considered this. Reluctantly, he decided it was likely true: how many times had he seen Christine break off mid-phrase in rehearsals to look around, or stop and gaze intently at some point in the shadows where there could be nothing at all to be seen? He had assumed it a habit born of long-lived fear, of knowledge that something in the darkness was stalking her every move. He should have known better.

"The theatre," he said. "Like before."

"Yes… No. You understand I have not spoken with her. And yet she knows." The former Phantom stared unblinking out the window, his eyes watering from the daylight.

"I tried, Vicomte. You do not need to believe me, but I really did try."

"Try what?" Raoul asked, baffled.

Andersson whipped around, an unsettlingly predatory movement that Raoul realised a moment later was only surprise:

"Why, what you suggested! To accept the hand I've been dealt. To demand no more. Did you not say as much, when last we talked? The world owes you nothing; those were your words."

Raoul could find no response. He had not imagined that his outburst, wrought from his own frustration, could have so unexpectedly found its mark. The world owes you nothing. Yes, he remembered it.

"Well," Andersson resumed, "I tried it. Christine rejected my suit; you heard it yourself, so I tried. I thought to allow you live your lives, the lives you should have had. Is that not what you wanted? It is what you deserve. You and your cursed fine horses." His bandaged face contorted into an expression of disgust. "I tried it in good faith, and I tell you, it cannot be done. Not by the living. When you give up fighting, when you demand no more and meekly wait for the current to pick you up and carry you along — then you may as well be a corpse floating in the river. Or a ghost drifting through walls, changing nothing. Unseen. Unheard."
"That is not what I meant," Raoul said at last.

"Indeed?" Andersson glared at him like a man who knows he has done wrong and is already preparing to contest the judgment. "Then pray tell, what did you mean?"

"Certainly not that you were to abandon the woman who, for reasons I confess I cannot grasp, seems to want you by her side. Nor that you were to make a martyr of yourself for my sake. Don't flatter yourself, Andersson, you are not the reason Christine severed our engagement."

"No indeed," Andersson said with infuriating sarcasm. "And I suppose you are about to tell me the true reason?"

"Damn you!" Raoul exploded, "She does not want me! Do you understand it, can you get it through your thick skull — she will not be my wife. Not because of you. Because of her."

"Then why didn't you fight? Why did you not even try to win her again? I gave you weeks."

"It isn't a game." Raoul struggled to regain his composure. "There are few women, or men for that matter, brave enough to do as Christine did. She looked into her heart and found music there. I cannot change that, even if I wanted to. I thought I could free her and failed, but I understand it, finally. She is free. It is her birthright. She will not be my wife—"

"Nor mine," Andersson snapped.

"Nor yours, nor anyone else's. You must know she means to perform tonight."

Andersson gave a reluctant nod. "I know."

"Then you know I will be there. I will always be there. I swore to look after her."

"That is most noble of you. Christine's own shining knight, in his shining wheelchair."

Raoul clenched his fists on the crutches and tried to breathe. His traitorous leg trembled uselessly. Andersson reached across and Raoul stumbled backwards, thinking he meant to strike, but he only held the crutch steady, until Raoul had regained his balance.

"It is a fine morning." Andersson gestured at the bright window behind him. "Let us walk."

"Does this entertain you?" Raoul asked bitterly. "To mock my predicament?"

"I am perfectly serious, Vicomte. Let us walk. Only to the river and back if it pains you, but walk you must, or that leg will atrophy to naught but bone. Ask your physician if you do not believe me."

"I have no physician."

"Then you had best simply believe me. Come, Chagny, you must live by your own philosophy." Andersson held out his hand. "Take the hand you're dealt."

"You're offering to help me."

Andersson blinked, as though the idea had not exactly crystallised in his mind before. Then he shrugged. "I am offering to help you fight. Life demands it, Vicomte; the moment you cease to struggle, you begin to die. Look at your leg — even the muscle and sinew know it. One cannot live by surrender."
"Some might call it turning the other cheek," Raoul pointed out, though he indicated for Andersson to precede him.

"Some might tell you to break your other leg. You are not obliged to listen."

They went through the foyer, donned their coats and headed out, towards the stairs. Standing at the top of the elegant precipice, Raoul felt a prickle of cold sweat beneath his shirt collar. He had not negotiated the stairs without assistance for weeks.

"Here," he said hoarsely. "My crutches."

Andersson accepted them without another word. Raoul gripped the railing and slowly, painfully, began the terrifying descent.

o o o

The crisp cloudless day felt more more like winter than late autumn, and the sky over the Place Saint-Pierre was a blue, blue expanse of light. Far above, the blue was pierced by two black dots of the retreating balloons.

"That's that," Meg said finally, when the balloons were no longer visible even to their mind's eye. "All my drawings. I do hope they make it to London. I keep imagining them dropped as ballast or drowned in some river along the way."

Christine blinked away tears that blurred her vision from the light, and squeezed Meg's inky fingers. "They'll make it, I'm certain of it. It is a beautiful day, and the breeze is perfect."

"Perfect it may be for balloons," said Madame Giry, touching a hand to each of their shoulders, "but it is far too cold for the likes of you to be standing about skygazing. Christine Daaé, if you mean to sing tonight, you had best come inside and keep warm. You too, mademoiselle. Indoors, if you please."

Christine followed Meg meekly in obeying Madame Giry and retracing their steps along the cobbled streets back to the theatre, past rows of rundown façades and boarded-up shops. In this shimmering light, even their dire condition appeared more hopeful than usual.

The women doing their washing in the fountain on the corner stopped when they saw their little procession. One put her reddened fists on her hips, unbent her back with difficulty, and Christine recognised Madame Maréchal. Marie's mother had her daughter's impish smile.

"Our Marie's not giving you any trouble, is she?"

"Not in the least," Christine said warmly. "I do hope you can come and hear her tonight."

"Her! I should come and hear you, that I should. Well, we'll see how the day shapes up."

She returned to her washing amid good-natured ribbing from the other women about her daughter's rise to stardom and the extra pennies it would naturally bring in. Christine returned their greetings, then hurried to catch up.

Madame Giry and Meg waited for her at the corner of rue Fontenelle. Christine found her gaze drawn inexorably to where the Gandons' storefront was visible a little way ahead. The shutters were down for the midday break, but Louise at least would certainly be in...

Meg tugged at her arm impatiently. "Come on, before I freeze solid out here!"
"Coming," Christine said, shaking herself. Today of all days she did not want to see that blank upstairs window.

They passed the store, and Madame Giry led them into the theatre through the clean, newly repainted side door. There Madame Giry was at once co-opted by Pierre Ballard into a discussion of how the evening's admission was to be organised, leaving Christine and Meg to continue alone.

Within, everything was ready, or as ready as it could be in the circumstances. From chairs to curtains, from foyer to stage, the house was spotless. The sharp smells of fresh beeswax and paint warred cheerfully for Christine's attention. She breathed it all in, filling her soul with the memory. There was nothing more to be done now but have their small midday meal, run through the last few songs again, and wait.

Christine glanced towards the stage, where Marie sat cross-legged in her favourite spot just behind the piano, munching on her lunch of bread dipped in soup. Christine smiled; the girl had evidently decided the occasion merited a certain formality of dress, and had exchanged the cap she usually favoured for a triangle of red velvet, tied as a kerchief at the back under her hair.

"I hope that scarf is not a piece of our curtain," Meg said doubtfully to Christine. "Or that at least it was not cut from anywhere too obvious."

"Only an offcut," Christine laughed quietly. "It suits her."

"Christine Daaé," Meg marvelled, "I can't remember when I last saw you like this. You are glowing like a child with her first pair of pointe shoes! Should you not be at least a little bit nervous? I tell you, it isn't natural. You're supposed to be performing music of a serious and morally uplifting nature — I should know, I wrote it on all your posters."

"They are beautiful posters. And I do believe you are nervous enough for both of us, so there is really no point in my being worried as well."

"Perhaps it is all this paint. The smell is making you giddy."

"Oh? Then why is it not having the same effect on you?"

"Months of practice," Meg parried. "I grew accustomed to it in Monsieur de Gas' studio."

Christine grinned, conceding the point, and turned toward the door leading backstage. "Let's go find something to eat. Is Monsieur de Gas coming tonight?"

"No, he's on duty, but Victorine promised to come."

"And Henri? Is he coming?"

They went through the corridor and Meg pushed the door to Christine's dressing-room, studiously avoiding Christine's gaze. "Monsieur Guyon may be here, to help Raoul with the wheelchair."

At the mention of Raoul's wheelchair Christine felt a familiar twinge of sorrow, but she pushed it away. She would not dwell on it, not today. Today was for her.

Of all the dressing-rooms along this corridor this was the last and the only one to have a window. That was why Christine had chosen it; on a day like today, it was good to see the sky. She shoved aside the wooden placard that served as a shutter, leaning it against an open cupboard, and the sunlight poured in, lighting the room more brilliantly than any stage.
"Look," Meg exclaimed, "Maman is spoiling us!"

On the dressing table, between a jar of greasepaint and some hairpins, was a tray that must have been put there by Madame Giry, with two plates and cups, a basket of fresh bread, a dish with a bit of dripping in place of butter, and an open tin of what smelled like sardines. A veritable feast, and very much welcome. There was even a pot of coffee.

Meg pulled up a second chair. "We'd best keep some back for maman."

Christine said nothing. In the light, she saw the crack at the edge of the cupboard, where she had rested the placard. It was barely noticeable, only a razor-thin bit of emptiness along its side, but it was there.

She crossed the room, pushed aside the placard, and swung open the false back of the cupboard. Behind it was an empty biscuit tin. Nothing more.

"Christine? What is it?"

"Nothing," Christine said. "Must have been a mouse."

Letting the cupboard door shut, she returned to the dressing-table and began to pour the steaming coffee.

She hoped Meg could not see that her hands were shaking.

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Chapter 59: Mademoiselle Daaé In Concert

After a crazy few weeks and a lot of work and travel, I'm finally back. Apologies for the snail-like updates. Lots of reviewer questions this time, which I hope I've addressed via PM and/or Twitter — but please let me know if I missed anything!

This story would simply not be here without you, and your support and fascinating reviews. I know it seems trite but I'm absurdly grateful for every review and always thrilled to see that alert in my inbox.

Small request: if you review as a guest, without signing in, would you mind identifying yourself with a nick/name/number/letter? You don't need to register to do this, it just feels a bit more personal. (Having said that, I don't mind if you do prefer to remain totally anonymous.)

OK. That's enough housekeeping, back to the story!

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Chapter 59 — Mademoiselle Daaé In Concert

"Marguerite, Christine!" Madame Giry called impatiently, rapping on Christine's dressing-room door. She opened it and looked inside, meaning to ask when they intended to join her for the bean soup that was to be their meagre lunch — and stopped.

The tiny room, little more than dressing-table and cupboard, was today bright with sunlight and full of the smell of fresh coffee. Wisps of steam rose from a coffee-pot, leaving momentary clouds upon the mirror that dissolved as soon as they appeared. The usual dressing-table clutter had been pushed to one side to make room for a serving tray, and before it Meg and Christine sat huddled together like two skinny students in their dormitory, both still in their coats, tucking hungrily into
what was certainly not bean soup. The meal was already half gone.

Madame Giry surveyed the plates, and felt her heart sink into that old, painfully familiar place. Bread with dripping; tinned fish; coffee. Siege fare, but certainly not of the sort served by the municipal soup kitchen, nor anything a well-meaning local might bring.

"Thank you for all this, maman," Meg said, putting down her knife and fork, "but what about you? Come and join us."

The food itself might have been simple enough, Madame Giry thought wryly — but she would have given much to know just how their unfortunate ghost had contrived to make the coffee.

Christine stood up so quickly that she almost knocked her empty cup from the table. "Take my seat, Madame Giry, I'm finished. I'll be with Marie if you need me; we still have two songs to run through."

She brushed the crumbs from her hands, pushed her hair back into its pins, and was about to dart past, but Madame Giry stopped her at the door.

"One moment, please."

Christine reluctantly drew her hand back from the door handle and remained where she was. "Is something wrong?"

Madame Giry glanced over to where her daughter still sat with her coffee-cup, curious but uncertain as to whether she would be permitted to stay, and knew if she spoke now, it must be to tell them both, or not at all.

Ah, it was hard to speak; harder than she could have anticipated. Habits of half a lifetime did not die easily or well, and she was too used to keeping Erik's secrets.

She commanded herself to look into Christine's serious, attentive face, acknowledging how far this young woman had come from the awe-struck waif rising to sing her first aria. Still, it took a great effort to break her silence. Pinpricks of sweat stood out at her temples.

"Erik is here, in the theatre. I spoke to him last night."

Christine did not reply. A faint noise from Meg sounded halfway between curse and whimper; she had realised who was responsible for their meal. Madame Giry continued to hold Christine's gaze, bracing herself for the hurt that must come.

"I ought to have told you at once. I could not do it... He is playing the ghost again. My dear, I'm so sorry."

The line of Christine's mouth quirked slightly, and then to Madame Giry's great shock, she reached out and laid one hand over hers, in unexpected camaraderie.

"Don't be sorry," she said softly. "I'm glad Erik is here."

Madame Giry looked down at Christine's hand, at fingernails cut ruthlessly short for the piano and the gold band on her ring finger, and sighed. She covered her hand with her own.

"You knew." She supposed she should have expected it.

Christine gave a small nod.
"He has been here all along then?"

"I cannot tell," Christine said honestly. "He will not let me see him. But I guessed he was here today." She glanced at the tray on the dressing-table and the empty plates: "To think we used to despise tinned fish."

With a cry of exasperation, Meg replaced her cup on the tray, jumped to her feet and went to the side of the dressing-table. She gave it a hard shove, sending the table with its mirror to skid an inch along the floorboards. The silverware jangled and the coffee pot almost fell, but there was nothing behind the mirror save a less faded square of the same patterned wallpaper.

"Try the cupboard," Christine suggested.

"Don't you dare laugh!" Meg cried defensively, looking between Christine and Madame Giry. "You are both mad if you mean to humour this. Christine! Does it not bother you to know you are being watched? You know he is no ghost, and I tell you, it bothers me!" She picked up a fork and dropped it back on a plate with a clang. "What next? Roses, notes, accidents? More marriage proposals? Another fire if you continue to refuse?"

"No," Christine said, "none of those. You are right, Erik is no ghost. And this is hardly the Opéra. Look."

She went over to the small cupboard by the window and opened it, then swung open what Madame Giry realised was its false back, and stepped aside to allow Meg to see. Inside was an ordinary tin that had held ship's biscuits, such as had become a siege staple of every middle-class kitchen.

Meg's eyes widened. "Here? He has been hiding out here? In your dressing-room?"

"No! That is," Christine cleared her throat, "he must have stayed here at night, after everyone's gone... I thought I caught sight of him backstage once or twice, but I wasn't sure, until today."

Meg eyed the false back of the cupboard as though waiting for it to fly open in turn. "Why?" She asked finally, at a loss. "Why would he do that, if not to return to what he was?"

"His house was searched; you saw it yourself, Louise and Jean were arrested. He must have needed shelter. And I suppose..." Christine trailed off, then shut the cupboard door quickly, with a remorseful air that Madame Giry recognised: she too knew that secrets were promises and sacred, meant to be kept. Christine squinted up at the sunlit window. "And I suppose he has missed it. Erik needs the theatre, like all of us."

Meg was shaking her head even as Christine finished speaking, but Christine only lifted her chin and repeated, "He needs the theatre."

There was a bright, brittle edge to her words that spoke more of hope than conviction, but Madame Giry did not have the heart to test its strength. Not today.

"Very well," she declared, breaking up the argument before it could arise, "it's curtain up in less than three hours, and there is still much to be done. Let us get back to work."

"Yes," Meg agreed, grateful for the deflection. "Monsieur Ballard was worrying earlier that we don't have enough seats."

"He has found more chairs at the school. And more glasses and wine casks too, since he is determined to make an evening of it."
"He is convinced we're to expect all Montmartre here," Meg said doubtfully.

"Not only Montmartre. Ah, that reminds me!" Madame Giry turned back to Christine, "Camille Michaud from the Variétés was at the butcher's this morning. He tells me your poster there caused a great deal of excitement. He may be coming to hear you."

But Christine was not listening. She moved past Madame Giry to the door, and with a strange, tense look, pushed it open.

The corridor beyond was completely unlit.

Meg frowned. "Didn't Ballard promise we would have gas today? The lights were on before. It looks awfully dark…"

Christine stepped out into the corridor, with Madame Giry and Meg following close behind. The only light came from the open dressing-room door behind them; beyond it, the long narrow passageway disappeared into darkness. The gas globes that lined the walls at intervals had gone out.

Christine touched the nearest lamp, disturbing a cobweb.

"Don't!" Meg gasped, catching at her sleeve. "Just leave it alone. You don't know what's going on."

But Christine only tried turning it up, producing not so much as a hiss from the jet, then looked back at them. "There's no gas, that's all."

"That's all?" Meg echoed in disbelief. "That's all?"

"It's fine. We have lamps."

"Next you'll tell me these things happen. Christine, you know what this is."

Christine whirled around, curls flying. "As do you — we're short on gas, we have been short on gas for weeks! Madame Giry..." Her voice dropped to a plea, and she looked very young all of a sudden. "This is nothing to do with Erik. It isn't."

Madame Giry considered her thoughtfully, then looked along the deserted corridor. "How many lamps do we have?"

"At least twenty, and another dozen or so if we take them from the offices. Ballard may know where to find more."

"And oil?"

Christine huddled into her coat, tugging it closed. "I don't know," she admitted. "There should be a spare drum backstage. It may not be enough."

There was a long silence.

"Why don't you ask Erik," Meg said in a defeated voice. "For all we know he may be here right now."

"He isn't," Christine said firmly.

"How can you be sure this isn't his doing?"
"Why would Erik try to stop my concert?"

"I don't know. Why does Erik do anything?" Meg pulled her gloves from her pocket and drew them on with rapid, jerky motions. She was upset and angry, Madame Giry saw, as she had every right to be, but there was not a thing to be done for it. "I don't know why he does what he does, and I don't want to know. He is your — friend, suitor, whatever he is, and I suppose you must have some idea of what he's about. Maybe you think it's all right when he avoids you for weeks and sleeps at the theatre. Maybe you even like it a little, it gives you a thrill."

Madame Giry bit back an exclamation of dismay.

"But me, I'm just a regular person, Christine. I can't live like this. I can't go back to how it was at the Opéra, always looking over my shoulder, wondering what will come next. I will not go back to it. Let me past, please, I need to go."

"Meg!" Christine caught her elbow. "Where are you going?"

"Out."

After a brief hesitation Christine released her elbow and stood aside, hanging her head. "All right."

Meg softened. "I'll go see if I can talk to Victorine, she has been buying oil for Monsieur de Gas. She may know where we can get more, and quickly."

"Thank you." Christine let out her breath in relief. "I appreciate it."

Meg wrinkled her nose at her in mock indignation, and walked away into the gloom.

Watching her, Madame Giry adjusted her shawl to lie more securely over her arms, then said, "You know Meg is right. It is dangerous, this new masquerade."

"It is not like before," Christine insisted. "I don't believe Erik means to play the ghost. He has left us some food; that is all."

"And the lights?" Madame Giry waved her shawl at the extinguished lamps. "I do not like where this is heading."

"Not you as well, Madame Giry! Erik would not stop my performance."

"Would he not? You must have considered that he could see this ambition as an impediment to marriage. Perhaps if he thinks he can divert you from it…"

"It is an impediment!" Christine flared, and Madame Giry realised she had unwittingly struck the heart of it. "I need to sing. And it is an ambition Erik used to share."

"The Phantom used to share it. I daresay Monsieur Erik Andersson may not."

"They are one and the same."

"Yes," Madame Giry said, "that is what I'm afraid of."

The day had been bright but cold, all the colder for the lack of cloud, and as soon as the sun disappeared beneath the rooftops, the breeze took on an icier edge. Erik found he was shivering even in coat and gloves, and had cause to be grateful for the scarf he had bought in the city after
walking the Vicomte back to his gilded cage. This weather did present him with one welcome advantage: the populace of Montmartre, young to old, was so swathed in layer upon layer of scarves, shawls and blankets, that the crowd waiting outside the theatre could well have passed for a tattered chorus from *L'Africaine*. All around him were faces drowning in scarves, and kerchiefs pulled low over the eyes.

Nonetheless, it did no harm to be prudent. Erik kept his own bandaged head down and did his best to blend in with the swelling buzz of the people around him, stamping his feet against the cold as he waited for the doors to open. He tugged his scarf higher, up to his nose. The last thing he needed was to be recognised as the infamous *franc-tireur* singer and be set upon by the Gandons or their neighbours, pestering him with questions and distracting attention from Christine.

No, this evening belonged to her.

*Mademoiselle Christine Daaé in concert. One night only.*

He felt as nervous and excited as a young gallant at his first rendezvous, and could scarce keep himself from slipping out of the crowd to take one of the other, quicker and simpler ways into the theatre. To catch the merest glimpse of her now, before she was seen by anyone else...

Patience, Erik counselled himself. Those other paths belonged only to ghosts. He might not yet be a man so fully formed that Christine would take him for a husband, but a single discreet glance through the window had confirmed what he hardly dared believe possible: Christine had accepted his offering.

She had eaten the bread and drunk the coffee, knowing all the while they had come from his hands... That was something at least. It was worth any risk to know that she would not be hungry today and he had been able to provide it; that she was willing take at least this much from him. It was a restoration as small and tentative as the first feeble steps he had forced upon the convalescing Vicomte, but it gave him hope. He could build on that.

"How much longer?" a girl next to him asked plaintively of another, stockier one next to her, pulling down her scarf to blow on white-cold fingers. "I'm freezing. What's keeping them so long? The posters said six."

"Here, have a drink." The other passed her a flask from the folds of her shawl, unstoppering it with a practiced flick of her thumb. The scent of strong wine stung Erik's nostrils. "Warms you up a bit, eh? Hey, leave some for me!"

Erik moved aside a step or two, behind another gaggle of young women wrapped in blankets. An off-duty army *cantiniere*, smelling business, was moving between them with her canister and ladle, filling cups of wine for a couple of centimes each. She had no shortage of customers. At this rate half the audience would be inebriated before the performance commenced, and the evening risked degenerating into squabbles and blows. He, too, wondered at the cause of the delay, but only mildly: Christine was Opéra trained, and she had the most capable of assistants in Madame Giry. Her show would go on.

And he would be in her audience. Not concealed, but seated in plain view amongst the others, his very presence a question. And if Christine answered... If only she did answer, she would find her Erik ready to be contrite, to accept his punishment; ready to do anything if she would permit him to begin their courtship anew. He was resolved to be the humblest of men this time, to demand nothing and wait on her verdict. After all, even Chagny had managed to restrain himself from pressing his suit for the better part of a year. He could do no less.
"Hey, you there," a hoarse female voice broke into his thoughts, and Erik instinctively jerked his head up to see the girl with the flask again. She had pushed her thick scarf off her face and now had the reddened complexion and high spirits of the slightly drunk. "Don't I know you from someplace?"

Erik shrugged mutely, turned away and did his best to lose sight of her among the scarves and greatcoats.

"Wait," the girl was right behind him, "hey, hold on! Listen, aren't you the—"

Here it comes, Erik thought — but before she could expose his flimsy cover to the crowd, there was a commotion and somebody up ahead raised a great shout:

"They've opened the doors!"

The people on either side of Erik surged as one towards the long-awaited opening of the theatre, suddenly animated despite the cold, eyes gleaming with curiosity. Exclamations everywhere were marked by puffs of frozen steam in the blue evening air:

"Can you see?"

"Is Christine Daaé there?"

"Go on, don't just stand there, go!"

Erik was jostled by elbows and sleeves of those eager to secure the best seats, but he did not mind. A seat at the back or off to one side would do very well; the acoustics of the theatre were such that he would miss nothing there. Then he was at the entrance to the foyer, level with the posters Meg Giry had so carefully inked, his two sous at the ready.

"Thank you, monsieur," said the dirty-nosed child of eight or nine whose job it was to collect the coins into a roomy hat. She wiped her nose on her patched sleeve and then peered at him more closely.

"Wait a minute, aren't you—"

"No," Erik interrupted, "I aren't. Two sous, isn't it?"

The girl was unsatisfied, but the crowd pressed impatiently and she had no choice but to get on with admission.

"Through the main doors," she instructed sulkily, and added as she took his coins, "You're Mademoiselle Daaé's man, I know you are. Well, she left a message for you."

Erik felt himself choking on his breath. "Message."

"Aye. She said you're to come to the stage door after the performance, and you're not to run off if she's not ready but to wait there for her."

It was all Erik could do to acknowledge this and make briskly for the doors to the hall itself, which still remained shut.

"Bloody hell," someone swore, and Erik suddenly saw what had prompted it.

The doors were opening inwards — very, very slowly, as though gliding of their own accord.
A hush fell over the waiting crowd.

Another inch, and another — and then the doors were flung wide by somebody behind, in mute invitation to enter.

Within, the house was dark and silent as the deepest starless night.

The audience paused uncertainly. Nobody seemed to know whether they were expected to proceed into an empty, windowless, unlit hall. There was no one to welcome them, no usher, no sign of an orchestra, nothing visible of the stage. The vivacity of a few moments ago gave way to an anxious muttering.

Erik strode to the front and crossed the foyer, his footsteps echoing a rhythm on the tiles. When he reached the open doors, he did not pause, but went straight inside.

Behind him, a few of the others shook off their stupor and followed.

The house was not absolutely dark after all — there were oil lamps set against the perimeter of the hall and along the central aisle, burning so low that their reddish light barely touched the edges of the rows of empty seats. Beyond the front row, the stage was a black velvet void, and the walls above receded into darkness.

It was beautiful and it was terrible, and it seemed to tug at his very soul. Erik felt the cold breath of memory raise the hairs on his flesh. What had Christine done here? Nothing in the rehearsals had resembled this.

He walked on in a daze, only vaguely aware of the rest of the audience continuing to file in behind and around him, milling in the aisle and spreading out along the walls as they tried to see their way. People bumped into each other, stumbled and trod on each other’s feet, and their confusion reverberated through the house with a low, deep buzz that served only to emphasise the larger silence.

At length the press of bodies became too much, and the braver among them began to sit down: only a few at first, here and there, then more and more until the hall was filling fast. Children, nimble and irreverent, snatched up lamps and used them to guide others to their seats, earning themselves a coin or two in the process.

The sight of those crazily swaying lamps finally shook him from his daze, and Erik hastened to find a seat. He chose a wooden chair by the wall, close to where he could just guess at the outline of the side door. The side door itself was firmly shut, but it felt a comfort somehow to have at least the possibility of escape.

The audience, so rowdy only a few minutes ago, was now settling in an eerie subdued mood. The silence, the near-darkness, the seemingly vast cavernous space, could not help but impress on them that something astonishing was happening here, and nobody quite knew what to make of it. Curiosity, however, would always triumph over fear, and the remaining seats were filling up as quickly as the darkness permitted.

Two people were stumbling in his direction. "There are seats here, sister, near the door."

Erik half-turned to look beside him. "Chagny." He shifted his chair to make space for the crutches. "Andersson?" The Vicomte peered warily in the direction where he perceived his voice to have sounded. At length he gave a nod of thanks and took the offered seat next to Erik, resting the crutches to one side. The nun who accompanied him lowered herself primly to a chair in the row
behind, murmuring what sounded suspiciously like an invocation against evil spirits.

"I see you have risen from the wheelchair," Erik noted. "A remarkable recovery, for a man who could hardly manage to cross the street this morning."

The Vicomte shrugged. "I left it behind in the carriage. It draws too much attention in this crowd."

"If you intended to travel incognito, you might have done better to leave the nun."

The sister in question was turning this way and that, crossing herself nervously. "How dark it is here," she murmured.

"Yes. It reminds me of something..." Chagny's eyes searched the darkness for the invisible stage, and Erik was surprised by his wistful tone: "The beach in Perros. It looks just like this at night. The water is black, and the lights fall away before it. Complete darkness."

"Before you ask," Erik cut in adamantly, "this was not my doing."

The Vicomte blinked. "What was not your doing?"

"The lights." He gestured at the faintly burning lamp near the edge of the row, and the others like it that had been set against the wall. "I have no more idea what this is about than do you."

"Christ," the Vicomte said impatiently, breaking from his reverie, "everything is a mystery with you. I presume there is no gas. Nor heat, for that matter. Pierre Ballard must be tearing his hair out." He removed his gloves and rubbed his hands together to warm them. "It is barely warmer than outside."

This was true, Erik realised; the theatre might have been warmed a little by the breathing of a multitude, and the absence of wind was a relief. But of heating there was none, and his breath fogged before him just as it had done in the street.

"Are you warm enough, Monsieur?" asked the nun solicitously from behind the Vicomte's back. "You know it did your wound no good to chill it so badly this morning." She made to stand, blanket at the ready, but Raoul raised his hand to stall her:

"There is no need; thank you, sister." Dropping his voice to avoid her hearing, he said, "You're a lousy physician, Andersson. My leg hurts something terrible after your walk."

"Good. Then you're still alive."

"I am beginning to wish I was not. But you may be right." Chagny rolled his knuckles over his damaged hip, trying to ease a cramp. "I suppose I should thank you."

"Don't," Erik said curtly.

There was a sound. It was very deep, like a tolling of an enormous bell or distant thunder, but it was unmistakably there and growing louder. Most of the audience seemed still unable to hear up, but as it went on, Erik could see a few turning this way and that, looking up towards where they guessed the stage to be.

The sound grew louder still, becoming a true note, low B flat, coming from beyond the velvet nothing that had to be the curtain, where the piano was hidden.

Erik listened.
The walls copied the sound, changed it, broke it into its component fragments until it seemed a chorus of pianos and a myriad voices. The rest of the audience sat motionless — or perhaps it was he who had forgotten their existence.

A soft susurration joined the chorus, seeming to rise from everywhere at once, like smoke filling his hearing and clouding his head. Through it, the low note went on. The music itself seemed to be stirring, coming to life to take its first breath.

It was a long moment before Erik placed the hissing sound: pulleys, raising the curtain.

A sharp high squeak, ropes tugging, and the sound stopped. In the darkness, the opening chords Erik recognised unfolded and tumbled down, like a cascade of dark curls falling loose from a pin. Then all was still.

With a gasp of air, a single candle stage centre came alight. Its glow was a circle of gold in the black cavern of the stage, burning steady and high, and the infant flame seemed to summon the music.

Somewhere beyond the light, Christine began to sing.

Chapter 60: Here I Stand

A/N: Aaand here we are at last. The chapter I imagined when I first decided to write this story. Quite an emotional moment for me.

Trivia: The lyrics used here are mine, and the tale is very loosely based on Scandinavian folklore. The title of the chapter itself comes from a Leonard Cohen song, "I'm Your Man".

Please remember to tell me what you think (and yes, LittleJohnFan, I get the reference!).

Chapter 60 — Here I Stand

It was true, Christine thought, there was magic in the darkness. With no light to reveal the battered piano, Marie's hesitant introduction flowed into the theatre from everywhere at once, like the start of an underground river finding its way between rock and bone and fragments of seashells, droplet by droplet, until at last the rivulets of sound ran together and the broken chords merged into a single dissonant whole.

Marie released the pedal — slowly, the way they had practiced it. The sound faded, leaving only its echo behind, trembling in the pause, begging for resolution. Begging for song.

Alone downstage, Christine took a first tentative breath. The air was cold enough to sting her throat, smokey from the burning lamps — chapel air, scented with childhood's brightest memory. There it was: a stone wall weeping with an angel's voice, and a child eager to believe.

Angel of Music, why do you cry? I will sing for you, so you don't cry anymore.

Her breath hitched in her throat; the pause stretched. The smallest sounds of anxious movement came from the pitch-dark wings behind her, where Madame Giry and Meg and Pierre Ballard were crowding closer, wondering perhaps if she was all right.

Let me sing for you, she pleaded with the memory of her father, and of her lost Angel of Music, and
every ghost she had ever loved. Her whole body was trembling, resonating with music that
demanded to be born. *Hear me.*

The audience, unseen, became a single hungry presence, a many-headed creature lit here and there
by a lamp in the dark hall. They were waiting to hear what she might do. In spite of the darkness
and the cold, shivering in their blankets and scarves, they had come. And Erik… Erik might fear
her music almost as much as his own, and but he was here. He had to be here. Somewhere in this
theatre, hiding from her and from himself, he too was waiting to hear what Christine Daaé might
do.

She had one chance, only one chance to be heard.

Christine exhaled and gathered herself to try again, and felt a moment’s sharp panic: what if no
sound came? What if her voice abandoned her again?

*Christine,* a whisper rose from the house — or was it only the swish of blankets and coats, a brush
of air? *Christine Daaé…*

*You are Christine Daaé,* spoke the imagined Erik from her old dream, drawing her back from the
piano until his breath touched the nape of her neck. *You are Christine Daaé, and one day they will
breathe your name as reverently as they do Beethoven’s.*

But here in Montmartre, a stone’s throw from the ring of Prussian guns, what did that matter? Even
Beethoven’s name meant nothing except that it was German. It was only music that could still be
ageless and nameless, beyond siege and war.

Christine stepped forward until her hips came up against the edge of the unseen table that had been
placed there before her. It was time.

She struck a match, groping blindly for the candlestick — and there was a sudden, hot light. Voices
cried out. The wick blackened, glowed red, and burned. Christine's eyes watered; the world swam;
she could see nothing of the theatre or the stage — but she could hear more clearly than ever, and
she could sing.

Nothing and nobody could take her voice away again. It was hers.

The song began.

*Hear me,* she sang, and it was her father’s violin sounding the start of another of his stories,
drawing her away from her childish games, calling her to sit with him by the fire. Voice and violin,
and his voice again, soft and bemused, as though he too listened to a story told to him by the music
itself. *Listen,* the violin beckoned, *and you may hear my tale…*

Bathed in the candle's flame, Christine raised her voice to encompass the theatre, and set to her
own music, the story lived again.

*In the darkest North, where winter is endless,
And fire dies before it is born,*

*There, in a cave deep in the mountains
Lived a wild young girl*

*A wild young girl,
Wilder than the mountain,
Wilder than the grey-bearded sea,
She was a daughter of the seafolk*
Born a season too soon

The seafolk bear their calves in summer
In the gentler waves of the South
But the witch-girl was a winter child
And born to live alone

The mountain streams that feed the sea
Begin deep in the earth
And to the witch-girl who was their sister
They gave their most precious secrets
Of gemstones and gold

Of gemstones and gold she had plenty
But her soul belonged to the sea,
And one night when a longboat came on the river
She thought, it has come for me

She walked to them gladly, gladly
Her arms flung open wide:
A sea creature, terrible, ghastly
Coming for them in the night
...Coming for her in the night.

The candle sputtered then burned cleanly again, lighting its own smoke and a sprinkling of dust motes that glittering in the updraught. Christine watched its heart, the place where the flame burnt so hot it became invisible. She took up the candle and raised it higher, holding it closer, until its heat touched her face. The true story ought to have continued with the hero's sword, and the wild girl's dying curse, and the gemstones crushing the fingers and throats of those who plundered them, in retribution for their sister's death. She bypassed it all, letting it go. What she wanted came next:

Listen, the voices of the air are singing!
How ancient they are, how soft
Where once they blazed like trumpets
Heralding the birth of this world.

Listen! Can you still hear them?
The children of monsters are gone,
And long gone are their slayers:
Blood becomes water,
Flesh turns to stone;

But their voices, their voices still linger
There, on the edge of the world:
The song is all that remains
When everything else is done

Our song is all that remains of us,
When everything else is done.

The song ended, and the music faded slowly into memory. The piano sobbed once under Marie's hands, and was still.

Nothing. The candle was warm in Christine's grasp, and it bled a sudden tear of hot wax over her
knuckles. She flinched, but did not let go. Nobody spoke; there was no applause; the dark theatre remained perfectly silent. She might have thought the people had all left, save that the lamps scattered around the hall still flickered and jittered. Even in the wings, nobody stirred.

She blew out the candle and replaced it in its holder. Bright circles filled her vision.

Then, with no warning at all, the world went white.

"Lights!" shouted someone, and the theatre burst into life. "Lights. Lights!"

The gas had been switched on, seemingly everywhere at once, though Christine realised a moment later that it was only the effect of being so long deprived of full white light. Pierre Ballard stood beaming by one row of gas-jets, like a magician with his lighting rod, and several others, Marie's mother and brothers among them, were busy lighting the opposite aisle.

"Do it again!" came a woman's cry from the back, "Another song!"

"Again! More!"

And loudly from a cluster of underfed, cheerfully drunk students, still in their kepis and slacking off from guard duty — "Marry me! No, not him, me!" The would-be suitors were elbowed and shushed by their friends before their demands could become too improper, but it was only banter. "You're beautiful!" the first called, laughing, before being yanked by his scarf back into their midst.

Christine blinked, trying to clear her head. Everywhere were people: so many people! More than she had expected, more even than had been packed into the hall for Erik's hearing. In their outdoor clothing they looked not like a theatre audience but like the crowd that had watched those first great balloons take flight into the piercing blue of the autumn sky. They were laughing, crying, calling something.

Her name. They were calling her name.

"Christine Daaé!" came from the wings also, and Christine caught sight of Meg climbing on a chair to be seen over the others who had been backstage. She had raised her arm in triumph, just as though she intended to lead them in a Marseillaise, "Christine Daaé!" Marie had run to join them, and was at once lifted high into the air on a dozen shoulders. "And our Marie!"

There was in all the cacophony a little space in the audience that seemed devoid of sound, and Christine felt her eyes drawn to that spot.

She turned, slowly, toward it.

Erik sat ramrod-straight in a chair by the side door, among a hundred similar chairs occupied by a hundred strangers. In his plain black coat, hat and scarf, he might have been invisible, save that most of the other men here, even the wounded, had abandoned civilian clothing for the uniform and kepis of the Garde Nationale. Even so, there was nothing out of the ordinary in his appearance.

And yet he could not have looked more different. He did not pretend to applaud or cheer with the others, and what little of his face was exposed between bandage and scarf was impassive as the statues in the Angels' Garden. Only his eyes burned — with that same fierce, desperate longing which Christine recognised at once as the mirror to her own.

Never looking away, Erik laid his ungloved hands before him and opened them to her, one then the other, palm up. His hands were empty, bare. No roses, no marriage documents, no rings. He came
to her with nothing. Only himself.

Yes, Christine shaped the word finally, when she could move. She held Erik’s unwavering, fearful gaze, and could not let go. *I accept.*

A movement under the stage startled her, and she glanced down to find Madame Giry and Raoul, and Meg behind them. They were heading for the narrow steps that led up one side of the stage, Raoul pale and gripping his crutches with too transparent an effort to hide the pain, but all of them looking so thrilled that Christine wanted only to embrace them, and laugh, and weep in relief.

"You are your father's daughter," Madame Giry told her, kissing her cheek. "That was Gustave's gift also, to make them listen."

Christine pressed her own cheek to Madame Giry's in gratitude, feeling the skin grow damp, and did not know which of them these tears had sprung from. What would her father have made of this? She tried to picture him here, playing the violin the way he used to do in the inns when they travelled — but his face in her mind's eye kept losing focus, blurring into the photograph she had seen too many times. *The song is all that remains...*

When next she looked back to the seat by the door, Erik was no longer there.

Christine's heart thudded. She could not help her fingers reaching out to where he had been, but the empty chair was already being taken by a stranger, a woman with a baby at the breast, who slid into it gratefully, fumbling with her clothing as she arranged the infant over her. Another moment and she might have always sat there. Erik was gone, and the world closed over the gap.

A wave of disappointment washed over Christine — and then, unexpectedly, receded.

Erik had heard her music. He needed to hear it. He came here to sit in the midst of a crowd, among the very people who had been at his hearing. She did not want to think what it must have cost him, to follow her here: this was not what he wanted, not at all like the dream he had woven of ordinary middle-class bliss; this was music and theatre and life on the margins of the normal world. Monsieur Andersson, architect, did not want any part of this.

But Erik did. Wanted it and struggled against it, and wanted it still.

He was returning, she realised. He was returning to her — despite himself.

"Christine?" Meg said beside her, touching her arm. "What is it?"

Christine shook herself. She tried for an apologetic smile. "Just thinking. I can hardly believe all those people stayed despite the dark. I half thought Marie and I would be playing to an empty theatre. You and your mother worked a miracle back there with the lights."

"I did nothing; it was all *maman.*"

Christine turned to thank Madame Giry, but she was already heading offstage to talk to Marie and her mother. Christine glanced around. "Where did Raoul go?"

"Here." Raoul balanced against the prop table, where the candle had melted to a shapeless mound of wax over its holder. With Christine's help, he managed to get his good leg under him and adjusted his weight on the crutches until he could stand alone. "You were magnificent, Lotte. Your voice, that music; all of it."

"Thank you..."
"But it is a sad song you chose. I remember that story — the demon-girl, the warriors… Your father told it well." He shuddered, as though dislodging the last fragments of the past. "You did not like it much, as a child."

"No," Christine admitted. "I was too young then. It frightened me."

"It frightens me now," said Meg. "And yet I want to hear it again."

"I suppose that's why Father liked to tell it."

Raoul reached into his pocket and brought out a small brown-paper bag. "Here; something for you," he glanced at Meg, including her courteously, "both of you. It isn't much. I would have brought flowers if I could find any."

"Oh!" Christine exclaimed in delight, opening the bag. "Sugared almonds! Like we used to have in Perros… Wherever did you get these?"

Raoul grinned, "I went for a walk in the city this morning and stumbled on a confiserie that was still open." He raised a crutch, "And I do mean stumbled. But it was worth it. Go on, try them."

Christine offered the bag to Meg and then took one herself. Raoul was right, they were just the same as the treats they once shared as children: sweet and spiced and almond-bitter, and with the taste came again all those memories of listening to her father tell them his tales. She closed her eyes for a moment, to better keep safe all that was still hers.

"Christine Daaé," Raoul said, and shook his head slightly, almost incredulously, studying her as though what he looked at did not quite answer to the image of her in his mind — as though it was greater than what he remembered. "I cannot even pretend to understand you. But I am very glad to know you."

Christine smiled and responded with a small, gracious curtsey, as she would have done at the Opéra. "And I likewise." She took his hand when he released a crutch to help her rise, and squeezed his fingers. "Will you stay to the end?"

Before Raoul could answer, Marie ran in from the wings, fairly cannoning into the three of them, joyous and flushed red as the velvet kerchief in her hair. She cast one look over Raoul and Meg and then dismissed them completely.

"Well?" she cried to Christine. "When are we doing the rest?" She jabbed a thumb in the direction she had come from, "Madame Giry doesn't know how much longer we'll have the lights. Let's get on with it!"

By way of apology, Christine held the bag of sweets for her, and waited while the girl took her share. Marie did not eat them but wrapped them into her pocket carefully, for her brothers. "Well?" she said again, dusting the sugar from her hands on the sides of her skirt.

"You're right," Christine said, "we had better get them back to their seats."

"I'll help," Meg promised. And the show went on.

The evening lengthened far beyond what Christine had anticipated, the mood of the audience becoming ever rowdier and more excited, the people intoxicated as much by this brief respite from grim reality as by the music and the endless bottles of wine.

Christine sang faithfully, until she had sung every song twice over, but it was not long before
lighter fare was needed. Pierre Ballard took over the piano from Marie. Under his practiced hands, the music grew at once livelier and simpler, familiar playful tunes everyone could dance along to, and the party began. Chairs were pushed unceremoniously to the edges of the hall, couples swirled and kicked and flirted, children whooped, babies wailed, and for a time it seemed the war had ceased to exist. It was theatre in the best and truest sense of it, a vibrant shared illusion that existed only here, in this moment.

Christine let them be. She perched on the edge of an upturned soapbox to one side of the stage, hidden from view by the fringe of the raised stage curtain, and watched the carousel of dancers below. Madame Giry has been right, there was quite a party from the Variétés, all of them red-cheeked and dancing, even the ever-harassed Camille Michaud. She noticed too the elegant and too-smartly dressed figure of Henri Guyon as he slipped in by the side door and looked around, no doubt searching for Meg. He found her at last among the tipsy students and, beaming, squeezed through the crowd towards her. Halfway there he was stopped by Jean Gandon, of all people, and Christine watched curiously as they exchanged a few a quiet words, until Raoul came over to join them. The theatre, even one such as this, was ever a strange place, she thought, a melting pot where the poorest dressed as kings to entertain nobility, and the wealthiest of the nobility paid homage to singers and dancers and actors born into families of no name. The world and its laws remained outside.

"Christine," spoke a voice behind her, low and quiet, and yet carrying clearly through all the music and laughter. "Christine…"

Her heart leapt at it; knew it at once and intimately, down to every minute variation of pitch. Knew it and craved it. She realised she had been for waiting it, had been expecting this very moment. Only she had not known it would hurt this much.

"Christine Daaé…"

Christine clenched her hands in her lap and squeezed her eyes shut. He doesn't want this life, she thought in the dark behind her eyelids, in the shadow of the revelry below. He wants to be free.

The music changed to a frantic cancan beat; the dancers below cheered.

"You live." She made it a simple statement, unadorned.

He cast his eyes down as though she had chastised him. It felt like minutes before he finally spoke, looking still at the floor between them, so that his face was entirely concealed from her view. "You
asked me to meet you at the stage door, but... I could bear it no longer, Christine. I demanded too much. I had grown proud again; I forgot what I was.

She waited, her heart breaking quietly. Erik sank down onto his knees and fingered the hem of her dress, simple and black as it was, then raised his eyes to her in a question. "No costumes."

"No. Costumes aren't permitted now. And it was only a concert."

Erik brought the fabric to his lips and kissed it, quick and light, before drawing back to kneel again.

"Please," Christine grasped his wrists to tug at the sleeves of his coat, "You mustn't do this! Please get up."

He tilted his face up incredulously, catching the light. "Then you forgive me?"

"No," Christine said. Erik flinched, but she went on, "There is nothing to forgive."

"You don't understand. I was wrong."

"You were right," Christine contradicted him adamantly. "You are a man like any other. It is good you should want a wife, and a home and... peace. It is the right thing."

Erik's puzzlement was almost comic, but Christine's chest felt like all air was being squeezed from her lungs; it hurt to breathe.

"I forgot what I am," Erik repeated doggedly, clinging to the line he must have told himself too many times in his self-imposed exile. "I forgot—"

"You forgot what I am," Christine finished for him. "But I'm a musician, Erik. A singer, maybe a composer, if I can keep working. I was born to this," she spread her arms to encompass the heaving theatre. "I can't let it go. I don't know how to be anything else."

Erik shook his head impatiently. "No—"

"Yes! And you know it just as well as I do," Christine tried to lower her voice, "I am what I've always been, ever since I can remember. My father's daughter. His only child."

"Christine Daaé."

Christine nodded. She could not stand it; her hands went to touch him, his half-masked cheeks, his jaw, his mouth. Erik shivered and moved closer seemingly without volition, putting himself in her hands; painfully, heart-searingly desperate for the feel of skin touching skin. When her thumb grazed his lower lip, he made the strangest noise in the back of his throat, halfway between a gasp and very low rumble, like she imagined a lion's purr must sound.

He caught her hands and kept them and he rose to his feet, bringing Christine up with him. Then he leaned closer, breaking all limits of propriety, and his voice filled her ears with magic that could not be denied.

"If this is where you belong," that voice said, "why are you hiding here, on the edges?"

To that Christine had no answer, but Erik seemed not to expect one. His arms encircled her without touching so much as the fabric of her dress, yet holding her all the same. He looked directly at her, and his eyes in the gaslight were wide and dark and flecked with gold.
"Mademoiselle Daaé," he asked in a formal tone that was at odds with the intimacy of his arms around her waist, "may I have this dance?"

Christine thought she had misheard. Surely he did not mean the jumping, feverish cancan to which the people were moving below. "Dance?"

Erik took her hands, one then the other, and laced his fingers through hers. "Not here."

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**Chapter 61: Living**

**A/N:** This is sort of the second half of the "end of Act II" as Peekaboo quite rightly noted in a review. Mostly written in the middle of the night and other strange moments when I had a few minutes, so I apologise for any quirks or lapses in formatting, and for the extended wait. I will probably take several weeks again for the next instalment; I wish it could be faster but I need to do some research and that will take time.

There were lots of questions and some very interesting thoughts on what exactly E/C are going through right now and what Erik wants. I don't want to hijack this note for an essay, but suffice it to say that there are always layers to any "wanting": Erik longs for freedom from fear, and the peace that he imagines comes with having an ordinary marriage/home. Christine understands something of that tension. But somewhere at the heart of all this is their shared need to create music. A lot of this is based on Leroux, or at least my understanding of Leroux - particularly Erik's desperate desire for the ordinary life he cannot have, and Christine's own struggle with losing (and regaining) the musical gift with which she was born.

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**Chapter 61 — Living**

"Astonishing," Henri Guyon remarked to Raoul, "they're all drunk beyond reproach and capering just as though they had not a care in the world… But oh, just look at her!" His eyes as he spoke never left the figure of Meg who was dancing faster and faster, laughing, white stockings flashing as she spun from one partner to another in the dance that all here seemed to know, but which Raoul could not name. It was certainly no quadrille, and he could not imagine it performed in a ballroom: the way some of the women kicked their legs could be fairly called obscene and the men were little better. And yet here was life in every step, the simple unfeigned joy of being alive and free to move, and Raoul found he understood it perfectly. And envied it.

He pivoted on one crutch towards Guyon, and tried not to sound too much the peevish invalid. "If you're staying, you might as well join the capering."

"Hmm. I'm thinking about it." Guyon watched Meg being swung into the air in a swirl of petticoats. Privately, Raoul agreed she was the clear stand-out here, with her pale hair whipping around her face, and the supple balletic grace in her movements that recalled so clearly the ashes of the Opéra. Some things had survived that fire after all: dance, music… All that which could not burn.

_The song is all that remains of us_, Christine had sung, in a voice like the candle she lit in the darkness, and the words had stung Raoul's eyes as much as the light. What would remain of him, when all was said and done? He never could carry a tune. Yet he had seen how next to him, Andersson caught those same words greedily, guiltily, grasping them like a man dying of thirst who feels the touch of cool water at his mouth and knows it is too much — that it must surely kill him — and drinks and drinks and drinks. Raoul had not wanted to stay there, in the shadow of such
awful, passionate need.

Why could it not be simpler, he thought hopelessly? He watched Guyon watching Meg dance, and envied them both their ease.

Guyon finally managed to drag his gaze away from all that Meg's dancing inadvertently exposed, and gave a sigh of pure longing. "Those legs. Can you imagine what she might do with them if she put her mind to it?"

Raoul did his best not to imagine it. "Need I remind you," he warned, "that Mademoiselle Giry is all but sister to Christine, and not friendless in the world. Have a care."

Guyon only grinned. "Lighten up. A man can dream, can't he? And you cannot play protector to every charming woman left in our fortress of a city. Besides," he glanced towards the stage curtain and gave a discreet nod to draw Raoul's attention there, "It appears your Mademoiselle Daaé is also not friendless in the world."

Raoul followed the direction Guyon indicated with a sense of déjà vu, and knew what he would see there, even before he caught a glimpse of a man's black coat and Christine's slender figure retreating into the wings.

Guyon was right: he could not play protector.

"There is no one there," he lied, badly.

"No. Not anymore." Guyon gave him a look so rich with amusement that Raoul thought it best to direct his attention elsewhere. Just then a new dance began, wilder than the last, and he shook his head:

"I'm willing to bet someone will serve Ballard a notice tomorrow for all this lively entertainment."

Guyon responded with a disparaging noise, but there was good reason to be anxious: a group of the local Garde Nationale had gathered in the open doors to the lobby, smoking and looking dour, and in the centre was Jean Gandon. Of middling height, bespectacled, without even a kepi on his mop of red hair, he cut a curiously unwarlike figure for one who had been imprisoned as a ringleader after the failed uprising — yet the others plainly deferred to him, and fell silent when he talked. Several of their faces Raoul recognised from Andersson's circus of a trial, and from the prison visits that Guyon had dragged him on in his crusade to force the government to honour their truce. Jean had been among those finally released; less upon the government's honour than the weighty argument of Guyon's purse.

"What did Gandon have to say to you earlier? I saw you talking."

"Nothing much," Guyon said as he looked for Meg in the mêlée of dancers, "a simple hello. I told him I was surprised to see him tonight; they have all been laying low after their release. He invited me to join their meetings."

Raoul frowned. "You are not considering it."

"Why not? I may."

Indeed, Guyon's sentiments had been growing ever redder since that debacle, and Raoul now found himself wondering at what point disgust at the government could cross from disaffection to outright treason.
"You ought to be careful," he said, "Gandon commands a fair number of men, and they are not afraid to take matters into their own hands. I've seen it, in this very theatre. They hold their own trials and pass judgements without the least thought for the law. And they are well armed. If you give them the impression they could carry the day... I do not like to think how it would end. It is the Prussians we ought to be fighting."

But Guyon had already returned to watching Meg dance, and was not truly interested in anything else. Raoul was just about to suggest that he would go in search of the coachman, to see if the man could be roused enough to bring the carriage, when a touch at his elbow drew him back from the crowd and Guyon.

"Monsieur, forgive me," Madame Giry said, releasing his sleeve. She cast a worried look in Guyon's direction. "I must ask you a favour."

"Of course." With sinking heart, Raoul readied himself for the inevitable questions regarding the character of the young man trying to court her daughter. Frantically, he tried to formulate an assessment of Guyon's history with women that would not be too damning in Madame Giry's eyes, but she surprised him:

"Do you see the gentleman by the stage, in the white gloves? The one pacing up and down."

Raoul looked, struggled for a moment to put a name to the face, then raised his eyebrows: "Is that not Michaud, from the Variétés? He is a great deal thinner than I remember. What is he doing here?"

"He has come with their director of music, his wife, and I know not how many others. You are acquainted with some of them, I believe."

"In passing. They had some thought to make me a patron when Christine was engaged to dance there. I confess I'm surprised to see them in this crowd; this is hardly the Boulevard Montmartre."

"They saw the posters. How could they not come?" There was a note of pride in Madame Giry's tone at her daughter's work, but a moment later her worry returned. "The Variétés reopened this week, in a manner of speaking: they are holding a charity gala in aid of the wounded from the ambulance in their lobby. The name Christine Daaé still carries some fascination in this city. And now they have heard her sing."

Raoul understood. "They want her."

"Michaud has asked to be shown backstage. I told him he must wait, that Christine will see him after the dancing but," — Madame Giry watched him continue to pace — "I do not trust his patience to hold much longer. If he insists on seeing her, he will rouse half the theatre to his cause."

Raoul pictured it: a wild, drunken search party combing the dressing-rooms, calling Christine's name, accompanied by the National Guard. In the tinderbox that was Montmartre, the confusion alone would be more than enough cause to start a riot.

"I must try to find her," Madame Giry said, bracing herself. "I do not know who else may be looking; other theatres have reopened also. Monsieur, I would be in your debt if you could engage Michaud in conversation until I return."

"And if Christine does not wish to be found?" Raoul felt a traitor speaking it, but the possibility had to be admitted.

The carefully blank look in Madame Giry's face said that she, too, must have seen that stage curtain
fall behind Christine and her returned suitor.

"Then they will not be found," she said at last, and Raoul realised that in this, she was as powerless as he.

"I will speak to Michaud," he promised. He reached deep within his memory for the easygoing smile of the Opéra patron he had once been, and did his best to put it on.

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Erik's coat, scarf and hat might have marked him a stranger backstage, a man off the street, but the assurance in his step and the way he avoided obstacles a moment before they could be seen dispelled any illusion: he had learned these corridors as well as Christine did herself. Perhaps better. The frenetic cancan music grew distant as they wended their way past coils of discarded ropes and around peeling wallpaper and boxes of leaflets, heading deeper into the heart of the theatre. Christine thought she guessed their destination, and the quick, questioning glances Erik darted toward her told her he was remembering it too: that first day after his return to Paris, and their dance in the empty practice hall of the Variétés… They had moved together, their voices merging in a single perfect chord.

It cannot be like that, he told her then, his eyes full of fear. Never again.

Yet here they were.

"This one," Erik said, pushing open the creaky door. Beyond it, the rehearsal room was black.

"There is a wall-lamp just inside." Christine's breath fogged in the unheated air. "On the right."

"Yes. A moment."

Erik struck a match and held it up to the gas globe — and Christine felt a swooping thrill at how strangely beautiful he made this simple gesture: the dark arc of his raised arm, and his fingers reaching for the light…

It was only a moment, and yet it gave the lie to the gentleman's costume he wore, exposing in that single breath all that he tried so hard to keep hidden. Then the gaslight spilled over him, painting a half-portrait of the unmarred side of his face, and sketching the room in the ordinary evening shades of red and gold.

Erik blew out the match and looked at her uncertainly. "It isn't much. Not like the Variétés."

"It is enough for me," Christine said. "Let's go in."

This was the sole rehearsal room the theatre possessed: a simple square space without even a barre, let alone a mirror, but clean and breathing with life after weeks of the theatre's reawakening. The wall panels were of unpainted wood, darkened with years of soot from the lamps, and the floor an uneven medley of repaired boards. There was a pair of music stands in one corner and a small old-fashioned piano with the tinny sound of a harpsichord; and over by the door, a rosin box left by the dancers who must have practiced here before the war. Opposite, two small windows were draped shut with heavy velvet curtains that had probably once been red, but were now a dusky grey.

Erik was right, it was a world away from the Variétés, and a lifetime away from the gilded splendour of the Foyer de la Danse, but it was a theatre nonetheless, and it had its own soul.

Christine let the door fall shut behind them. Even with it closed, the music coming from the hall
remained audible — but only just, like a song lapping at her memory, ebbing and flowing, and starting again. It reminded her a little of her own music.

Erik watched her absorb it. "Their dancing sounds better from here," he agreed, echoing her thoughts.

"It does. Stronger, like there is a purpose to it. A heartbeat."

Erik's brow furrowed against the edge of his mask. He moved a little closer, a barely perceptible change, and Christine almost thought he meant to kiss her — but instead he stretched out his empty hand. It was an offer and a request.

The heart of the music beat around them, pulling them in.

Christine put her own palm against Erik's broader one and raised their joined hands, reflection to reflection. A mirror. Then their fingers curled into each other's, and they were flesh again. Erik's grip on her hand tightened until it was almost painful, his knuckles turning purplish-white, as though he could never again let go.

"Shall we dance?" he said.

Christine took his other hand and found she was clutching him just as hard. Erik drew her closer, awkwardly, until they were only a step apart, and she allowed his arm to encircle her waist. The rhythm drifting from the hall flowed between them, rolling back and forth in what might have been a waltz.

"One two-three..." Christine whispered, but did not move. Erik, too, remained motionless. His coat was unbuttoned and she could see each anxious breath rising from his chest to his throat, moving his collar and scarf and the linen strips of the bandage above his mouth. The theatre shivered with music but they stood still, holding the distance between them.

When the song ended, Erik held her gaze, and Christine understood what he could not bring himself to confess.

"You stayed here." Her words rippled into his silence, like pebbles in water. "You hid in the theatre, and you listened to the rehearsals. I know, Erik. I knew it when I found that cupboard in the dressing-room. Let it go."

Erik's hand in hers grew warmer, in shame, and he dropped his arm from her waist. He moved back a step, his fingers working on the lapel of his coat, crushing the fabric. "I tried to give you peace. When a man's suit is rejected, he ought to step aside, that is the right thing to do. But I could not leave."

"You had nowhere else to go." Christine tried to smile, crookedly. "It was the first time I was grateful for the siege."

He looked at her squarely, rejecting the platitude. "I knew the danger. I knew I had no right to be here, and that I could not remain and count myself a man. But days became weeks, and still you sang... And I listened."

Christine sighed a long breath, accepting it. Some things could not be changed. "Show me where you hid."

"Does it matter?"
"Perhaps not. But I would see it all the same."

With a small, resigned bow, Erik turned to the nearer of the two windows. He fingered the edge of a curtain, then lifted it aside to permit Christine to look beyond it.

The window was set in a shallow alcove, and the panelling boards on the side of it were loose. Christine nudged a board. The wall behind it was hollow, creating a crawl space that continued into the darkness towards the other window, just wide enough for a man to squeeze into. The cold draught blowing in from the opening smelled of damp brick, like a cellar or tomb, and when she touched the wall, a bit of cement crumbled away on her fingers. Christine shook it off, suppressing a shudder.

"You stood here? Between the walls?"

"Yes. Once or twice." Erik dropped the curtain, avoiding her eyes.

"It looks uncomfortable. And cold."

"It was. There were other places. The edge of the wings, dressing-rooms, corridors. Odd corners. Anywhere I could hear you."

"Anywhere, except beside me." Christine was appalled by the accusing knife-edge in her own voice. Where had it come from? She saw Erik freeze at it and wanted to stop, but the words only went on spilling out faster:

"I was right here, in the theatre, and you heard me. You heard me! But you hid yourself away, and you would not answer." She swallowed the hard lump in her throat. "You were waiting for me to play Madame Andersson, but… I can't give you heaven. Or even peace. Only this."

"Christine." Erik's bandaged face was almost a silhouette, backlit by the gaslight behind him, but even so she saw the way his brows jutted together, and the hard line of his mouth.

"I was a fool," he snapped the word like a whip. "Worse; a proud fool. I thought if I could not be yours as a man, a husband, then there was nothing left for me."

"Nothing," Christine echoed incredulously. She raised her left hand to show him: the band around her finger gleamed bright as the edge of a candle-flame. "I love you." The words burned in her throat with the injustice of it. "Is it not enough? Must I change my name for you to believe it? I love you. I love you. I love you!"

Erik raised his hands to cover his face, and still she could not silence herself.

"I love you."

"Please…" He dug his fingers into the back of his bandage, hunching his shoulders.

"I love you."

His hat slid to the floor, and he sank down after it, his arms about his head. Christine knelt beside him, and caught his wrists. Her strength was not enough to prise them away, so she only held him hard, until at last he looked up at her with dry, bloodshot eyes.

"You love the music, Christine. The feel of it in your head, in your mouth… and here." He moved his hand down over her chest and to her neckline, and cupped her breast over the corset, leaving no illusion of innocence to his words. "Here."
Christine did not flinch, though she knew he felt her heart hammering madly. "I love you."

Erik tugged at her corset; loosened as it was for her singing, it came away easily to leave a gap wide enough for his hand. He reached her nipple with one fingertip and brushed it, so gently it might have been a dream.

"I love you," she repeated.

He pressed harder, unfairly, using all he had learned of her body. "I am not what I was. Do you understand, Christine? I will not return to it again. I want a normal life. No Phantom. No music."

"That is not…" she struggled to speak, "That is not what I—"

"You want the music. You hear it, and you open your heart to it, and let it possess your body until you become it." He pushed her corset aside impatiently and bent to kiss her exposed skin there, lips and teeth and lips again, trembling with need. "I want it too," he admitted, and each kiss dropped like molten candle-wax, painfully hot on her breast, over her heart. "I want to sing with you to the end of my days, until we have no more breath to draw. But I cannot. I cannot."

"Erik." She spoke his name, and caught his face to tip it up to her. "It needn't be that way. The Phantom is gone, but the music was never his. It was mine, and yours, and ours. Do you see? We can have it still."

"I want to live." He was weeping, as though her words had been lashes with wicked steel claws and had left him raw. "I want to live with you, in the light. Not in a theatre surrounded by dust and props, out in the real light, breathing real air, seeing the sun."

"Erik…"

"I am not like you. You can live with the music and it will serve you, but I… It is like living with a wild beast that cannot be tamed. Sooner or later it will devour me. I can't live with it."

"And I can't live without it." Christine brought her forehead against his, and her lips found every inch of open skin to kiss, his cheek, the side of his nose, his mouth. His skin was rough and hot and salty-wet, and she clung to him with all the strength she could muster.

"What are we going to do?" she muttered.

Erik pulled her hard into him, burying his hands in the hair braided and coiled at the nape of her neck, and matched her breath for breath, tracing each kiss with his fingertips, re-learning the landscape they had so nearly lost.

"Live," he said, and no matter how he fought it, his voice was music still. "We are going to live."

They kissed until, in the distance, the guns in the fort boomed their nightly exchange with the more distant rumble of the Prussian cannons.

Erik drew back, lips wet, breathing hard, his collar crumpled. His bandage too was askew, and with a sharp move, he ripped it away. The skin beneath was red-raw, but the weeping blisters had closed, leaving only the old scars.

Christine touched him, whole. "You've been leaving it uncovered," she said, pleased. Her fingertips explored the ridges of scarring where the worst of the blisters had been. "Look; it's healed."

Erik followed her touch in wonder. "Only you would call it 'healed', Christine."
Christine laughed very softly, and crushed him to her in an embrace. "I love you," she said, and it felt like her voice was returning all over again.

There was a sharp rap on the door.

Christine grabbed at her loosened dress and Erik stifled a curse and groped around for his bandage, but the door did not open. They looked at each other — rumpled, dusty, thoroughly disreputable in their panic — and Christine began to laugh. Erik looked offended, but she could do nothing except lean forward to kiss him again, deeply, tilting her head to get closer still.

"Let them come in," she said, surfacing for a moment, dizzy with the sweetness of it. "I'm not letting you go."

Erik groaned and pulled her up to stand, never breaking the kiss, and before Christine quite knew what had happened, she felt the heavy curtain swish over her, concealing the two of them from view. It was darker in the alcove, and the wall was icy cold against her back.

"Shh." Erik pre-empted her objections with his fingers at her mouth. "Listen. Who is that?"

A man's voice sounded in the corridor outside, muffled so that Christine could not pick out distinct words, but his tone was insistent. In response came Madame Giry's voice, calm and so clear that Christine was certain her words were pitched to be heard by them:

"There is no doubt it is an excellent offer, Monsieur Michaud, and Christine will certainly hear it. Let us check the offices; I believe she was just going to speak with a gentleman who writes for the Figaro. This way, if you please."

There was another exchange and then, mercifully, the sound of retreating footsteps.

"Camille Michaud," Christine mouthed in chagrin, and moved to readjust her dress. Seeing Erik's puzzled frown, she explained, "From the Variétés. Madame Giry was right, they have all come."

"And now they can all leave," Erik grumbled, but he was starting to fix his collar as he said it.

He ducked back behind the curtain, returning a moment later with his bandage and hat, which he put back on. "We had better hurry, if he is to discover you busy with the demands of stardom and giving interviews to the Figaro."

Christine shook her head. "Never mind about that. I can't make it into an office unseen, not before him."

"I would not be so certain."

Erik's gave her a taut almost-smile, and then his expression changed. He looked intensely focused, almost as if he was preparing to sing. Reaching around Christine's shoulder to the end wall of the alcove, he moved aside the loose panelling board that she had found earlier, then another, to expose a trapdoor.

"I did not construct it," he promised, seeing her dismay. "I only discovered it when I first found the hollow wall. But I did explore where it goes."

"Where?" Christine battled the memories that the damp-brick smell awoke. "Not another cellar. Please."

"Outside. To be specific, outside the door by the manager's office. It is only a short climb."
Christine looked at him uncertainly. "We don't need to do this. I don't care about the Variétés — this place is enough for me."

"No," Erik said very softly. "No. It is not."
What a difference less than two weeks could make, Madame Giry reflected as she tossed the last few lumps of precious coal — actual coal! — into the stove’s hungry maw. She shut the fire door and straightened her spine, bone by bone, letting the heat ease movement back into each cramped muscle. Such luxury, this. Warmth and food; a bubbling cassoulet on the stove instead of bread with congealed dripping, and a pot of fresh coffee later if the fire lasted; supper, then quiet conversation late into the night with her daughter and Christine after she returned from the Variétés. Perhaps Erik also, if he chose to stay.

How was it possible, that in the midst of so much chaos and suffering, among the queues and the rumbling forts, when rations shrank daily and one could not walk down the street without seeing a coffin, they had returned to a life that belonged in another time? Absurd to think so, but she could not shake the sense that this peace was something almost magical; that it had been born from the spell cast by Christine's concert and was like her music, a miracle. A candle in the dark.

Outside, November was drawing to a close, and the days grew ever shorter and darker. Gaslight was gone; the heating also. The building had become so icy that they seldom removed their coats even indoors, and the apartment was lit by a single oil lamp which Madame Giry now carried with her from counter to sink to stove as she tidied up the kitchen.

And yet, not even this descent into hunger and cold seemed a sign of imminent surrender. Life endured. Christine had moved from the Folies to the grander stage of the Variétés; Meg sketched the audiences and the queues for tickets; even little Marie played on in Montmartre. The Prussians might be waiting for them to grow despondent, but all over Paris, theatres were reopening. Where there was art and theatre, there had to be hope. Or if not, there could at least be music.

Who could tell; if the siege went on much longer, there might even be ballet.

And just how much longer could it go on? To believe the official papers, Paris was about to burst forth to join hands with the victorious army of the Loire. All the delays and disasters were simply part of governor Trochu’s secret plan. Le plan de Trochu, people in the streets now called it whenever anything remotely mysterious occurred. No bread at the bakery again? Ah, it's in the secret plan. Cannon being moved south when last week they were moving north? That would be the plan also. It was a wonder the plan did not yet require its own salary and a box on the grand tier.

Madame Giry nudge the lid a crack and gave the pot a stir. The escaping cloud of savoury steam assaulted her senses, making her giddy with suppressed hunger, and she hurried from it to the dining room, holding up the lamp to light her way.

They were unimaginably fortunate to have a good meal each day, she thought as she closed the door behind her. The week’s ration of three chunks of tough sinewy meat would have sufficed only to keep their dignity while they starved. The remainder of their meals, from dried vegetables to rice to coffee, were prizes collected from friends: from the house of Monsieur De Gas, where Meg was still welcomed although the artist himself spent most of his time on the ramparts; from the house of young Henri Guion, who had started to add parcels of the most impractical foodstuffs to the art catalogues he still insisted on sending; from the convalescing Vicomte.
The greatest part of their comfort, however, they owed to the daily expeditions Erik had been making into the city. This much was no miracle, but the hard work of a man determined to survive, and to keep alive all those he cared about — and that in itself was a transformation.

It was extraordinary to see how this damaged, once dangerously self-absorbed man bent all his formidable will to a cause outside himself. He spent gruelling long hours combing the markets for food so that Christine and the rest of them might eat; he brought in loads of firewood that he had chopped from the remnants of trees in some unfortunate park; he humbled himself before officials to collect ration cards and then found shadier characters willing to exchange those cards for the more rare, precious items like a few potatoes or even an egg. These past few days he had somehow contrived to find coal and oil, so that they might be able to cook a hot meal and have a light in the evening. Whatever comforts they enjoyed were due to him, and yet he seemed to want no greater praise than the smiles Christine bestowed on him.

Not that Christine was shy about expressing her gratitude. Her face glowed with genuine pleasure at the evidence of each new successful errand, and she made no effort to hide her feelings. Nor did she remove the ring to which she had no legal claim, but wore it openly just as though it were a wedding band. It was a brazenly dangerous folly, this renewed non-courtship of theirs, but God help her, Madame Giry did not have the heart to interfere. To see the two of them together, heads bent over Christine's music book in a discussion of something only they seemed to understand, she could almost believe that Gustave's old tales of the Angel of Music were true — that somewhere beyond the war and the darkness, there existed a sublime and awesome force that spoke through music, and was capable of healing souls.

"Maman?"

Madame Giry started, only just keeping hold of the lamp. Long shadows swayed across the dining-table. "Meg! I did not hear you return." She placed the lamp on the table and turned up the wick a notch, revealing the oval of her daughter's face in the coppery light. "Why are you sitting in the dark?"

"I did not like to go in the kitchen; it smells too delicious in there. I set the table instead." Meg sat with her chin propped on her hands, looking up at her mother over layers of the scarf she had not removed. Her face was changing, Madame Giry noticed, acquiring stronger lines of cheekbones and jaw. She was growing up. Or perhaps only growing thinner.

She pulled out a chair for herself and sat across from Meg. "Thank you, my dear. How is Monsieur De Gas — he is on duty tonight?"

"Yes; all this week. He says it's bitter cold on the ramparts. Victorine has been knitting socks and things for him; she gave me some wool she had left over, so we could knit ourselves something warm."

Madame Giry raised her brows. "Did she? That is... kind of her."

"Very. So I didn't tell her none of us can knit."

"Ahh. For a moment I wondered if I was about to discover another of your hidden talents."

Meg laughed ruefully, "I wish I could knit. It would be a more rewarding pastime right now than drawing. The balloonist this morning wouldn't take any sketches at all, after I waited two hours in the rain, all because someone from the government gave him a whole packet of documents. Monsieur Nadar promised he will have another balloon ready this time next week, but that's another week without pay."
Madame Giry acknowledged her frustration in silence. “Even so,” she said after a moment, “you will still draw.”

“Of course. The city is incredible, like a giant army camp. I will never have enough time to draw it all.”

“What does Monsieur De Gas say to these drawings then?”

“Not much. Perhaps he approves; it’s hard to tell with him.” Meg lifted her chin from her hands and raised one hand, studying the shadows made by her fingers on the empty plate before her. She sighed. “Do you suppose this is how the old masters saw when they painted? Everything in a pool of light, and the world just a black background… Ugh,” — she wriggled in her seat as her stomach gave a sudden growl, “I’m ravenous!”

Madame Giry reached for the lamp to go back to the kitchen. “We will eat soon. Supper is almost ready. And Christine should be back any minute, with her… with Erik.”

“…Yes,” Meg said slowly. “With her Erik.”

Madame Giry guessed at the source of her preoccupation. “Henri Guyon sent his carriage for you again?”

“Yes.” Meg returned her probing gaze steadily. “But he did not come himself, it was only his coachman. And you know it is safer than walking alone in the dark all the way from Monsieur De Gas’ house.”

“Safer in some ways.” Madame Giry watched her child’s discomfort with a deep ache. In truth, this was a poor time to be young. And she could hardly raise objections to Meg encouraging a suitor when practicalities demanded that they accept help from any source.

Meg frowned, then seemed to set the whole matter aside with the utter indifference that let Madame Giry breathe a sigh of relief. Really; one ill-considered entanglement in this family was more than enough.

“Here.” Reaching into her pocket, Meg pulled out two envelopes and offered both to her mother. “I picked up these on the way upstairs. This one is for you. The other came from Montmartre; it was left at the theatre for Erik. Marie brought it to Monsieur De Gas’ house, knowing I might pass it on.”

Madame Giry held them nearer the light to see, and an almost forgotten thrill ran through her: letters! She brushed her thumb along the sealed edge of the first envelope, feeling the paper’s reassuring solidity.

“News from outside,” she marvelled. ”After all this time.”

“A pigeon returned two days ago. The poor thing must have been half frozen in this weather. Will you open yours?”

Madame Giry peered at the addresses more closely. She did not recognise the writing on the envelope but that was only to be expected; the letters that came by carrier bird had to be enlarged from their minute photographed size and re-posted within the city. The address, however, was familiar enough.

“It is from Perros.” She fought back a wave of emotion she had not expected. So many weeks had passed since she had last received a reply to the letters she dutifully sent with every balloon that
she had begun to think of them as nothing more than her own meditations, tossed into the storm like a message in a bottle. How strange to see a reply! She wondered how Monsieur Duchamp and his sister were faring, and whether the handful of words such letters were allowed would be enough to tell her anything at all.

Meg was examining the other letter curiously in her hands. “This one is heavy,” she said to her inquiring look. “Good paper, look. And the writing here…”

She was right, Madame Giry saw at once. The letter, addressed to M. Andersson, Rue Fontenelle, did not at all resemble the slim missives of the pigeon post, but looked exactly as a regular, formal letter of the days before the siege. Plainly it had been sent from within Paris itself. She felt a stirring of disquiet.

“How long ago did this arrive?”

“I don't know. Marie said Louise brought it over, all in a huff as he’s not been seen at his lodgings for days. Why, who do you think could be writing to him? It looks official.”

Madame Giry gave no reply, but took both letters over to the sideboard and dropped them into the drawer. She shut it and paused a moment, considering. How many people knew of a ‘M. Erik Andersson’ at Rue Fontenelle? Hundreds, perhaps; half of Montmartre. Yet how many of those would have cause to write to him so formally, and on fine paper? Meg was right, it did look official. And he had already stood trial, if only in Montmartre… She looked at the drawer again. Perhaps it was merely a bill or a letter from his banker.

“Maman? What is it?”

She was relieved to hear the squeaking of carriage-springs outside and the sound of a door being slammed.

“Help me serve the supper, Meg. That would be Christine and Erik returning.”

A peculiar idea: to have enough. Enough not by someone else's reckoning but by the contentment he felt within this small, impermanent, perfect island of peace. This life bore no resemblance to his fantasies: there was to be no white-veil wedding; no comfortable residence that he, a famed architect, had designed for his young bride; no evenings of listening to music from their private box; no carriage rides in the Bois. Instead the remnants of the Bois de Boulogne lay as a grey wasteland of mud and army tents, and the rest of his picturesque lunacy had dissolved into images that were as preposterous in the wartime city as a Meyerbeer elephant in Montmartre.

And yet what he did have was enough to eclipse any dream.

Christine was not his wife, but she had taken him for her own and raised him to stand beside her, defying the world to gainsay her. Erik Andersson was her acknowledged paramour, her protector, the only one permitted the freedom of her dressing-room and a seat at every performance. Perhaps somewhere, Piangi’s ghost was having the last laugh — very well then, he was welcome to it. At the Variétés, raised at last onto a proper stage framed by velvet and gold, brightly lit above the gas-deprived dark and chill house, Christine's star blazed hotter than ever. Within a week of signing on, she was headlining the Variétés’ dutiful line-up of charity recitals, performing everything from opera to hymns to the low street-songs that Marie taught her, and bringing audiences to their feet night after night.
He did not have a husband’s rights, but seemed nonetheless to have acquired a lover’s privileges. After every performance, Christine waited for him alone in her dressing-room, with a key in her hand and the music still in her eyes. Stagehands and costumiers stood aside as he entered. It was the first condition Christine had insisted upon when she had agreed to the offer Michaud had proposed: that after she sang she was to be left undisturbed, and her privacy respected. Erik could not decide if he was more embarrassed or thrilled at how neatly she had created a place for him: with his role so firmly declared there was really nothing to do but accept. He liked to imagine that he would not have tried to conceal himself within the theatre should tickets prove difficult, and that he would not have chafed at having to wait patiently while she was gracious to the crowds of wounded officers and gawping admirers through which she navigated her way backstage. But Christine knew him.

And so when he knocked on her door after every performance, she swivelled in her seat and smiled, and spoke his name. That alone would have been enough to sustain him for the rest of his life. That she did it dressed in little more than her shift and stockings, clasping her coat to her bare shoulders against the chill, filled him with a heady mix of desire and the terrible premonition of loss.

How long could it last? Days? Weeks? How long before the city began to starve in earnest?...

But Christine spoke his name, and welcomed the touch of his hand upon her cheek, and kept her eyes on his when he bared his face and approached to kiss her. Her eagerness was sharp and unfeigned, and when she grasped his hips to join to hers, parting her knees to pull him in closer, he knew no other reality but these few precious moments, Christine tugged his clothing apart, opened his collar, muttered entreaties that drove him too quickly to the brink. The love that poured from him was all he could give, and it was not enough to save them, not nearly enough…

“One day,” she lamented tiredly as he helped her dress and collect her things, “there will be peace again. And heating.”

At that he had to tip her face to his and kiss her hard, hot as tears. “We can make our own warmth.”

“Mmm.” Christine laughed softly, wiping the imprint of his kiss from her chin. “And our own peace, too.” Then added tentatively, “...And our own music.”

“No,” he said to that, as he always did, but Christine’s only answer was a long, thoughtful look, and a touch of her fingertips to his chest that sealed him to her as firmly as any ring.

“Shall we go home, then?”

It was a separate thrill to conduct her home, past other singers and the flurries of curious nurses in the ambulance downstairs, out of the colonnaded entrance and into what one might have taken for one of the city’s last remaining cabs. In fact, the rickety conveyance with its equally rickety driver belonged to an undertaker, but Erik had personally seen to it that the hearse was scrubbed inside and out, and outfitted with brocaded cushions for the comfort of passengers who were not yet beyond all feeling. And at least it had windows, intended for the display of the expensive bouquets within, but just as functional for looking out.

The first time Christine had seen the unusual arrangement he had procured for her, she paused and furrowed her brows, but she did not reject it. And once inside and seated on a pile of cushions, she had declared it to be the most comfortable carriage in all Paris. The horse was thin to the point of gauntness, and incapable of anything faster than a walk, but that only added more gravitas to their slow procession, and there was something to be said for prolonging the pleasure of watching Christine relax. She would sit leaning against the window, looking out into the starry night...
unbroken by streetlights, and in those moments the two of them might have been travellers in some distant land, rolling across the plains in their caravan.

Tonight, as Christine watched the dark, she hummed very softly, almost beyond hearing. The music was beguiling in its very quietness, swaying, teasing at Erik's thoughts. It was dangerously close to the phrases that had been floating in his own mind. He tried a key change; Christine changed key too. Or had she made the change first?

“There are so many stars,” he murmured, trying to push away the distracting harmony.

Christine looked back at him, breaking off mid-phrase. “Hmm?”

“The stars. I never knew one could see so many from Paris.”

“Oh — yes. You can see them better now there's no streetlights.”

Christine scooted closer to him and Erik lifted one side of his coat to envelop her in its warmth. She held one of his hands between both of hers, removed his glove, then blew on the fingertips to warm them and began to rub warmth back into his cold-stiffened palm.

Erik sat very still, all his awareness converged on the feel of Christine's hands on his. How strange, even now, to think that his comfort mattered to her…

She shifted under the folds of his coat to turn her face to his. “You are very quiet.”

He laced his fingers into hers, feeling the solid band of her ring. His ring. “I am counting my blessings.”

Was it possible to feel someone smile? He was certain he did, though Christine appeared to be studying the fabric of the cushions. After a moment, her fingers tensed in his and she said without looking up, “Will you stay the night?”

He buried his half-face in her hair, breathing his fear away, and kissed the cold edge of her ear. “And the day.”

“And the day after…”

“And the day after that,” he agreed. “As long as we both shall live.”

Christine turned sharply. “Don't be morbid. Please.” She reached over, caught his face between her hands, and thumbed aside the edge of the bandage.

Erik thought to apologise but his punishment appeared to be a deep and thorough kiss, to which he acquiesced whole-heartedly. Christine’s tongue cut into him, re-drawing the borders of his mouth, scraping every scar from lips to the inside of his cheek, and for a little while he was entirely hers: her man, made perfect and without sin.

It was enough. It was more than enough.

But damn it all, he could not shake his fear, or the fiery dreams that haunted his nights. In them, Bazeilles was burning, and the Opéra was burning, and all around him the armies closed in.

“Go on, maman, open it, do! We all want to hear it.”
Christine saw the plea for support in Meg’s eyes as Madame Giry hesitated, and added her voice to Meg’s. “Please, Madame Giry. It has been so long since we’ve had a letter.”

“It is not addressed to all of us,” Madame Giry pointed out, but Christine saw she was softening. They were all hungry for news.

Next to her, Erik cleaned his bread-knife on a napkin and wordlessly passed it to Madame Giry to use as a letter opener. His plate, like all of theirs, had been scraped clean to the last smudge, and still, Christine thought she could have cheerfully eaten another whole meal. It was awful to be constantly hungry.

“Very well then,” Madame Giry said, accepting the knife.

“No, wait.” Meg stopped her hand before she could open the letter, and jumped from her seat. “I’ll get some wine. We should celebrate this. Wait!”

She was back a moment later with four glasses and a bottle the best wine they had.

“That was meant for next week,” Christine objected, “your name-day!”

Meg shrugged cheerfully as she poured, “Birthdays come every year. I’d rather celebrate that the outside world exists.” She grinned, “To the world outside the fortifications!”

“And the world inside them,” Erik added quietly. He raised his glass along with the rest of them, but Christine saw he did not drink, and he gripped its stem as if it might snap. Christine brushed her ankle against his under the table, seeking to share touch. Startled, Erik glanced at her, then took a sharp sip. The wine in his glass shimmered ruby-red in the lamplight.

“And to friends,” Christine completed the toast. Her mouth tingled.

With careful ceremony, Madame Giry slitted the top of the envelope and withdrew a small note. She held it up to the lamp, squinting to make out the words in the poor light, and read:

To Mme A. Gir, Paris:

How to shrink my grief to twenty words? My poor Marguerite is gone. A fever, nothing more. War seems distant.
—J.-M. Duchamp, Perros-Guirec

A heavy silence settled around the table.

“Oh,” Meg said. She sat down. “Oh.”

Christine looked helplessly from her to Madame Giry, whose face seemed to have turned to stone. This was the news from the outside world? She could not fit the finality of the letter’s terse words into her mind. She recalled Madame Duchamp-Pierot only hazily: an elegant lady with laughing eyes, a widow who presided over the grand house where Madame Giry used to stay with Meg, and where Christine’s father had sometimes played… So long ago. Now another fragment of those memories was gone.

Erik reached past his empty plate and picked up the envelope between his fingers, scowling at it as at something foul. “It may be simply a trick. Some crook who thinks you are in the lady’s will and would use this letter to collect your inheritance.”

Madame Giry took the envelope from him, shaking her head. “I rather doubt it.”
“Maman, I'm sorry,” Meg murmured. “I liked her very much. I wish we could have visited her again, before the war.”

“Well.” Madame Giry’s voice was tired as she put down the letter, and her eyes were dry. “That is as it is. I might have taken us out of Paris in September as Monsieur Duchamp asked, and had the chance to say good-bye. But that is no use now. At least Monsieur Duchamp is there to handle the necessities.”

“I'm sorry too,” Christine said quietly, to both of them. She felt them waiting and tried to say something more, perhaps about Heaven and how Madame Pierot was gone to a better place, but found she could not. She'd had a bellyful of these platitudes when her father died.

“It is getting late.” Madame Giry rose from the table, her wine barely touched. “It is past time we were all asleep.” She headed out of the room, leaving them the lamp, but stopped at the sideboard. The drawer from which she had taken the letter was still ajar.

“Erik.” Madame Giry turned to look at him, and something in the way she hesitated made Christine worry. The silence stretched.

“Madame?” Erik prompted. He appeared calm, but Christine felt him brace inwardly, as though he expected a blow.

Madame Giry removed a key from the drawer, holding it up to show him before leaving it on top of the sideboard as she had been doing for the past two weeks. “You are welcome to stay, as always.”

Erik inclined his head in thanks. It was becoming an evening ritual, Christine thought, and the thought warmed her right through, chasing away the shadows of grief. She felt a swell of gratitude to Madame Giry that even in the midst of her own private pain, she did not forget them. What might have seemed a pretense of spontaneity was a reminder if acceptance, an understanding.

“Thank you,” she said to Madame Giry, with all her heart.

Madame Giry nodded and went on towards her room, moving easily into the darkness.

In their little circle of lamplight, Meg yawned wide and rose to follow her mother. “I'll see you in the morning,” she said with a sigh. “Perhaps we'll have better news tomorrow.” She glanced at the table. “Oh. The plates…”

“We will clear up,” Christine promised, and was suddenly aware of the echo of her words filling the silence. We. She and Erik.

“If you're sure,” Meg said, relieved.

After she left, Erik turned to her, pushing his chair back, and Christine caught his kiss full on her lips.

It was a small word, ‘we’, but it was enough. The plates would have to wait.
Chapter Notes

A/N: A long chapter for you this time; I hope the wait was worth it! Thank you, again, for reading and for continuing to encourage me. Your reviews matter very much.

Trivia: The Châtiments (Chastisements) is a poetry cycle by Victor Hugo which was banned under the Empire and only made legal again under the Republic. It was massively popular and widely performed in readings in Paris during the siege not only by Hugo himself, but also by many others.

Chapter 63 — Bugle Calls

The dream was heavy and blazingly hot, dragging at his ankles as Erik struggled uselessly to wake up. He was in Bazeilles again, a stranger stumbling through a burning street in somebody else's battle. Grey smoke, stinking of gunpowder, rose before him like layers of scrims, revealing vaguely human shapes sprawled on the cobbles at his feet. Panic squeezed his chest. Which way? He had to get out. He had to get out! In the smoke all façades were an identical grey. Suddenly the ground shifted and a shriek pierced through the roar of the guns as a shell hit — and a black hole gaped in the nearest façade. Around it, the ragged edges of the wall began to peel away like paper. Pasteboard, Erik recognised it, and almost laughed in relief. The entire town was only a set-piece for an opera. He should have known! Catching hold of the peeling edges, he stepped easily through the breach, even as the remnants of Bazeilles collapsed behind him in a hot cloud of dust.

On the other side was a stage. A vast, unlit stage, where there was no scenery at all, only a row of footlights beyond which he could see nothing. Erik moved toward them and realised this was the Variétés, and he stood alone in full view of the audience. They were waiting for him. All Montmartre was waiting for him. 'Sing!' Christine's voice commanded frantically from deep in the wings, but it was too late: he slashed the chandelier's rope and opened the trapdoor and the cold stone steps to his lair were spiralling down from it, down, down, down…

He woke with his face ground into the worn parquet of the living room, numb to his teeth with cold.

Thin uncertain light of early morning filtered around the edges of his vision. Stiffly, Erik turned his head. The divan loomed above him like an upholstered cliff, familiar by now to the last frayed thread: just as well he no longer attempted to sleep on it, or he would have certainly roused the others. Nothing said good morning quite like the thud of a falling body hitting the floor.

Squirming to free an elbow, he extricated himself from the straitjacket of tangled blankets, rolled over and listened. The apartment slumbered on. His keen hearing confirmed three separate voices breathing in long, slow, steady waves. All was well. Another night safely gone.

Erik waited for his heart to slow down, then waited longer still for the fight to go out of his bunched muscles until he felt sure of himself. He spat out the wad of soggy linen that had
prevented his voice from betraying his repertoire of nightmares, and wiped at his chin. The gag's pressure had left his mouth feeling wooden, and the linen furred his tongue with its usual disgusting taste, but he was reassured that it had done its job. A little discomfort was a small price to pay for silence, and silence meant peace. The madness that filled his nights was for him alone.

The clock above the fireplace showed a little before six. Past time to get up, if he did not want to miss the morning's bread.

He climbed to his feet and went to dress and attend to himself with the supplies he had learned to keep in the corner in this transient home of his. A ewer of icy-cold water waited on a stand beside the piano, where it took the place of a lamp. Beside it were the essentials he had brought from rue Fontenelle: a clean shirt, a cake of ludicrously overpriced soap, his razor and comb, a roll of fresh bandages boiled to whiteness and the jar of ointment to relieve their incessant chafing. And there, beside all this mundane paraphernalia, masquerading as nothing of importance, a slim silver hair comb that belonged to Christine.

Erik hid the comb in his breast-pocket and began to shave. This life was his, and no nightmare could erase the reality of it. As long as the siege held, he was entitled to carry Christine's things in his pocket, and provide her with fresh bread for her breakfast, and accompany her to the theatre. When he had helped in the kitchen last night, it had not mattered that he could not prevent her having to do the scullery work, or that he could not give her the life she deserved. All of it dissolved later, in the feel of Christine's mouth seeking his, and the little gasps she made with each painful sundering of their bodies, and the weight of her leg thrown over his hip afterwards, still embracing him as she rested. She kept a rosette now, a flimsy silk thing which she assured him would delay their unions' natural consequences, but Erik had no faith in its good-luck charm, and did not forego his self-control. Even so, it drove him to distraction to see Christine reach for the little box hidden in her dressing-table, and know that she did this because she chose him, and she meant to lay claim to the poor vessel that was his body.

"I wish..." she had murmured breathlessly into shoulder, "I wish we could just catch a train... to the seaside..."

"A train?" He had stopped in astonishment, trying to find her face in the dark by the glint of moonlight in her eyes, but Christine arched after him with so delicious a sound of frustration that for a while he forgot all about trains.

Later, lying languid in the warmth of her bed under their shared covers, he remembered again.

"There is nothing at all romantic about trains, you know." He was trailing a fingertip idly down her spine, revelling in the little undulations of it, and the perfect dip in the small of her back. "They're full of steam and noise and soot, and even a second class carriage is a cursedly uncomfortable way to travel."

"I should like it, all the same. Ahh," she squirmed, but not in protest, and Erik took that as encouragement to continue his exploration, — "I think you would like it too. Everything is beautiful from a train window. The way the world streams past, the sky, the trees..."

He found the spot she liked best at times like these, and gently worked it until she let his fingers follow more sedately in the path they had learned together.

"I do like it," he admitted, and realised the unintended lewdness in his words just as Christine laughed, reaching down to touch his hand: "Do you?"

He gave up his half-hearted attempt to rouse her to another effort and wrapped her instead in a hard
embrace, so that she could not see his eyes. The pressure of her body all along his was a wonder he
could not get used to. "Forget the trains, Christine. The world outside is miles away. It doesn't
matter anymore."

"You're wrong," she said softly, without rancour. "It matters. Madame Giry is mourning, after that
awful letter, and Meg too. If I could, I would buy us all a ticket to Perros, and walk by the shore
again… Have you ever seen the sea in winter?"

"Not that I recall."

"It turns silver, the same colour as the sky. I will show you, one day."

"We should get some sleep." He could not refrain from a last chaste kiss on her hair before he left
her, and a less chaste one on her lips, nipping the skin ever so lightly. He did not want to think of
the sea he had never seen and never would, nor of any other impossible future. The present was all
he needed.

But now, as he made his way through his early-morning routine, Christine's words returned to
trouble him. The letter from Perros had stirred memories best left buried, of the years of his utter
solitude when the young woman who did not yet call herself Madame had disappeared to bear her
child. He did not want to think of those empty years, or of what he had become by the time she
returned.

He went to the sideboard in the dining room to collect the week's ration cards, and paused at the
sight of the drawer left slightly ajar. Had not Madame Giry hesitated rather too long over it the
previous evening for it to have been only the affirmation of his invitation to stay?

Erik pulled out the drawer to its limit, and looked within. Ration cards, household ledger,
receipts… And an envelope he did not recognise. He pulled it out, careful not to disturb the other
items.

It was addressed to him, and stamped with an official government mark. He slit it open with a
thumbnail. The return address belonged to the War Office.

Erik hesitated only a moment. Then he grabbed his hat and overcoat, stuffed the burning-white
envelope in his pocket, and within minutes was striding through grey morning fog, down towards
the boulevard.

"Will you stop a second! Andersson!" Raoul went stumbling and puffing and cursing after the
retreating figure, irritated at the rain-slick pavement for offering no purchase to the crutches, and at
himself for not being able simply to turn back and limp away from this ritual morning struggle.

"Damn it," he spat at Andersson's back, having finally caught up at the Boulevard de Sébastopol,
where the road was jammed solid by a procession of caissons, horses and heavy guns dripping with
rain. The artillerymen themselves were barely visible, hulking under their wet overcoats. "Surely
you realise I cannot move so fast in this wet!"

Andersson half turned to glare at him from under his hat-brim, his mouth curled crookedly beneath
the edge of his mask. "How do you know you cannot, if you do not try?"

"I'm turning back."

"By all means." Andersson flicked his gaze over Raoul's shoulder, and Raoul had to look behind
him. The artillerymen were followed by a detachment of Mobiles, their ragged column indistinct in the damp fog and stretching on and on, cutting off his retreat.

"All right," Raoul gave up. "We walk on, but only as far as my apartment and back, and not at that insane pace. I have no wish to wring my neck trying to outrun a madman with two good legs."

Andersson snorted at this, but Raoul saw he had accepted the compromise. Their usual route for these morning walks took them past his shut-up apartment, empty of servants ever since his departure for the army but still useful for its coal store, and from there to the makeshift market stalls around Les Halles, where Andersson acquired whatever the foragers had gathered under the cover of night. The day before, Andersson had goaded him into continuing all the way to the unfinished new Opéra, a feat Raoul was repaying today by black bruises under his arms where the crutches dug in, and legs too sore to move. The wet pavement and continued drizzle only added to the aggravation.

They waited for a gap in the artillery movement, Andersson tapping the ground with his cane in a hideously complicated rhythm. Its jittery tension communicated itself to Raoul loud and clear, whether the effect was intended or not.

"They've been moving the guns all night," he remarked as much to distract Andersson from his anxious tattoo as to maintain at least a semblance of civility. "Materiel too. And Guyon swears they're preparing pontoons."

Andersson stopped tapping. "What?"

"Pontoons. Bridges, such as they used in—"

"In Bazeilles. Yes, know what they are!" Andersson jerked his shoulder irritably, staring across the road. "It means nothing."

"It means they are to cross the Marne, down past the Bois de Vincennes. Come on, Andersson, you know all of this cannot be just for another skirmish." Raoul watched another gun carriage lumber past, its huge wheels turning steadily. "We're breaking out." The 'we' felt strangely difficult to speak, when he himself could be nothing but a useless bystander.

"Do me a service, Vicomte. Shut up."

Raoul bristled. He was still deciding whether to take offence, considering the man was so obviously wound up about something, when an opportune gap between the wheeled traffic intervened. Andersson plowed into it, and Raoul found it took all his attention just to keep close enough to make use of the space left by Andersson's passage. Behind them, the river of wagons closed again.

When at last they had made it across, splattered to the knee from the overflowing gutter but for a wonder unharmed, Andersson did not even pause. He continued straight on into the nearest side street, barely moderating the breakneck pace he had kept up all morning. Tap-tap-tap went his cane, striking each cobbble with vicious force.

"Andersson!"

Fed up, Raoul drew up to a hard stop under the canvas awning of a boarded-up restaurant, out of the drizzle, and braced his aching hip against a crutch. He waited for Andersson to turn around.

"Either you tell me what's going on, or I shall be forced to send someone to make enquiries. Is it Christine?"
Andersson's eyes became wilder than Raoul had seen for some time, reminding him unpleasantly of all this man was capable of. He had thought it madness once. Now, he recognised it for what it actually was: fear. Intense, mind-numbing fear, the sort that could paralyse a man in the middle of battle as easily as a hunted animal.

"No."

Raoul had expected him to pretend ignorance of any trouble, but Andersson's reply came so quickly that he must have been expecting the question. Indeed, he seemed almost relieved:

"Christine is safe. Do you seriously think I would be here if she were not?"

"Then why in God's name are you running?"

"If I were running, you would not have a hope in Hell of catching up."

Raoul refused to dignify this with a response. He waited. Sure enough, after a brief grumbling pause, Andersson reached into his coat pocket and dragged out a roughly opened envelope. Raoul recognised the stamp at a glance, and felt an unexpected twist in his gut: part sympathy, part hatred, for this man who cared nothing for the plight of France.

"Conscription," he said, and Andersson's silence confirmed it.

They looked at the crumpled envelope for a moment before Andersson stuffed it back in his pocket. His voice when he spoke was that of a mourner, low and uncharacteristically toneless. "I am to make myself known to the battalion commander by December 1. Two days."

"Two days!"

"It appears the letter took some time to find me." He pushed his hands deeper into his pockets and added viciously, "If I knew to whom I owe its delivery, I would be sure to thank them for their diligence. In person."

"This is not a hunt," Raoul pointed out, "we're at war. I saw the order that went out: every able-bodied man from 25 to 35, unmarried or widowed, and married men of 35 to 45…"

"If it is able-bodied men they want," — Andersson grimaced; a peculiar spectacle when only the unmasked part of his face moved, — "why should they send such a letter to me?"

"Why should they not? Are you less than a man?"

"Are you? I don't see you hobbling off to join the march!"

Raoul swallowed down the burst of anger which he knew Andersson had been trying to provoke. "I know my duty."

"I don't give two sous for your duty. Or your war. This," he brought out the fistful of crushed envelope for a moment, "has nothing to do with me. Nothing."

"No?" Raoul could not stop himself, "Then walk away. Go hide in a basement, or sleep in the cemetery again, or live like a hunted rat in a sewer! Go and have others fight in your place, and owe them the rest of your own miserable life."

The outburst died in the damp foggy air between them. Raoul held Andersson's heavy stare, resenting how easily he had been riled. The pain was real enough, but it was his own shame he
exposed, not Andersson's. To Andersson, all this truly meant less than nothing. "Do as you will. But if you live as a man in the world, you can hardly be surprised when you are treated as one."

Andersson blew out a breath and turned to look back the way they had come, to the boulevard, where the Mobiles were now crossing.

"I cannot do this, Chagny. Call it what you will. I cannot." His shoulders rose and fell.

"I know that." Raoul leaned back on the boards that covered the shop-front, taking the weight off his arms, and scrubbed at his face. What a mess.

"Have you told Christine?"

"Don't be absurd. Of course not." Andersson shook the rainwater from his hat furiously and wedged it back onto his bandaged head. "Madame Giry knows."

"Christine must be told."

"No," Andersson snarled suddenly, teeth bared so that Raoul flinched back involuntarily. "Do not even think of informing her. I will take care of it."

"Take care of it, how? I warn you, I am not going to lie to her. Last time you left, I spared Christine the tale of how I came across a raving drunk stalking her father's grave…"

"I was not drunk!"

"Ah of course, that makes it so much better. A deranged stalker sleeping with the cats, but stone-cold sober for it."

Andersson looked thunderous, but Raoul went on, "Have you a plan that does not involve going to prison, or worse? We are under martial law. Deserters and truants can be shot."

"Enough," Andersson said curtly. "We have purchases to make. Move fast, Vicomte; Christine is on for the matinee and I will not have her go hungry because I spent the morning arguing with you."

The show was cancelled. The theatre was abuzz with a frenzy of anticipation that spread through every level and every room: the grande sortie, it was starting at last! No official announcement had yet been made but everyone had seen the columns and the guns: it had to be today, tomorrow at the latest. Christine found herself shunted back and forth between backstage and front of house, with the stage manager and Michaud running themselves ragged trying simultaneously to gather news, pacify the wounded in the ambulance downstairs, and keep the crowds entertained. Finally she was propelled to the front to sing at an open window, wearing a tricolore sash over folds of hastily pinned drapery, adorned with a crenellated crown, and brandishing a faux gold staff which the management deemed suitable to represent the city of Paris arising. Instead of the required Marseillaise, she sang a folk song from Perros, but in the din and mayhem, nobody much minded. The spectacle was what mattered.

She was soaked to the skin and half-frozen afterwards, and could have sobbed with relief at being released at last to her dressing-room. Did the people hear her voice, or would they have been just as ready to applaud a dressmaker's dummy dolled up in the republican colours? She was fairly certain that the mood of the crowd was such that any girl from the chorus could have been thrust into the frame of that window to be applauded just as fiercely. She had thought of saying as much
to the other singers arrayed behind her, some of whom she knew from her time in the ballet, but she could find no tactful phrase that would not make her sound the conceited star, and while she hesitated, that moment of possible friendship was gone. The girls trooped off, chatting among themselves. "The sortie—" she caught as they went past, but whatever the news was, it was soon beyond her hearing.

Christine blinked at her reflection in the dressing-room mirror as she tried to remove the heavy eye makeup without making a smeary mess of her face. She had never been much good at this; it took forever and like as not would still require Meg's help to get rid of the last bluish shadows. But Meg was not here now, nor Madame Giry. It was only now that Christine fully realised how far their protection had extended. She had never had the knack of making true friendships with the others in the ballet, but at least while she had been a strange little orphan wrapped in her dreams, she had aroused no animosity. It was when she was thrust into sudden stardom that they might have grumbled, but she had been Meg's friend, and the foster-daughter of the ballet mistress besides. Between them, they shielded her ascent: Meg, by her easygoing manner and known loyalty, and Madame Giry, by force of her undisputed authority. And besides, that brief spell in the limelight had ended almost before it began. This, on the other hand…

But this could prove shorter still, now the army was moving to break through. A hundred thousand or more, both of the regular troops and the National Guard: a torrent greater than anything Christine could have imagined. Since the morning, the regular booming from the forts had grown so frequent that even indoors, with the windows shut, she could feel it like an oncoming thunderstorm. Each deep thud made the glass in the windows jitter.

Christine set down the sponges and towelled off her red, wind-chapped skin. She wondered what was going on outside, whether there was any news, but her dressing room remained isolated in the bubble of privacy she herself had requested. Funny; she had never imagined that she might empathise with Carlotta, but she understood now how easily this separation of her world could become the secluded cell of a paranoid mind. It was not a comfortable feeling.

She gave up on the remnants of the make-up, ate the small meal of bread and jam from the packet she had brought with her in the morning, and checked the time. The afternoon shift in the ambulance in the lobby was the part of her day which she had been dreading.

"But my dear Mademoiselle Daaé," Michaud had remonstrated, pacing his immaculate office with his kepi in his hands, "all the artists in Paris are doing as much. Just look at what Mademoiselle Bernhardt has accomplished at her Odéon! The wounded there have soup prepared by her own chef, and the artists nurse the patients and attend at the operations."

Christine could only stare at him in dismay, which poor harassed Michaud was glad to interpret as admiration. She could not explain to him how deeply it disturbed her to see the rows of sick-beds placed right in the lobby of theatre, with the arms of marble statues used as coat-hooks to hold blankets and crutches, and bedpans on the marble floor. The Variétés was not the American Ambulance, with its antiseptic seaweed beds and the breezy warmth of the tents. Already the lobby had acquired the stale, suffocating air of a room converted to a hospital, and the sounds and smells of it were familiar to the very pit of her stomach. They had no place in a theatre. They reminded her too much of the end of her childhood.

"I will not nurse the wounded," she had told Michaud, astonishing him, and undoubtedly adding another mark to her catalogue of strange fancies to be humoured only because she was now a star. "But I could sing for them. If you like."

The compromise they had reached was not what either of them wanted, but it was the best
Christine could do. She was to sing in the lobby as she had suggested, a simple uncostumed recital for the benefit of the patients, and then to walk among them to talk to the more lucid of the men, allowing them to pay their compliments and turning the ambulance into a sort of soirée. It was little enough, but Christine could find no way to be at ease in the joint role of hostess and ministering angel. Worse, every other young woman in the theatre seemed eager to play nursemaid, especially to the more attractive of the wounded officers, and Christine knew they regarded her reluctance with amusement and condescension, and gossiped about her just as much as her fellow dancers ever had.

In some ways, nothing had changed at all since she had been in the ballet before the war. Save one: she was known to keep a lover, a wounded architect from Montmartre who attended her every performance and shadowed her like an ill-tempered ghost. But he was corporeal enough, and not especially intriguing when there were so many more interesting wounded men to go around, and so she and Erik were left for the most part to themselves. Christine wondered whether he had tried to come today and had been turned away with the cancelled performance, or whether he had deemed it best not to brave the crowds. Or perhaps he was out on the boulevards with everyone else, waiting for news. She wished he was here. The afternoon's recital was private; he would not be admitted now until it was over, and Christine found herself half-hoping he might find some way to hear it. This recital would be easier to bear knowing he listened.

She drew a steadying breath, crossed the corridor to the stairs, and descended into the lobby.

"Please welcome, Mademoiselle Christine Daaé!" A burst of applause greeted her from audience and chorus, and she saw Michaud over by the entrance doors mop his brow with a handkerchief, relieved to see her appear on cue.

It was not as bad as she had feared, once she had steeled herself to the surroundings and was able to meet the waiting gaze of the wounded men, uniformed for the occasion and seated in the upholstered chairs arranged in a semicircle around the staircase. The performance had been underway for a good half hour before her entrance, with a series of songs accompanied by a string quartet drawn from the orchestra, and a reading from the Châtiments by an invited actor whose name she did not know. Many in the audience looked visibly tired, and Christine thought they might be willing to let her go after an aria or two — but as she stepped up to take her place at the top of the staircase, the applause intensified and she knew they had their full attention. They had been waiting for this; for her. There were men with crutches by their side and others with all their limbs bandaged; there were men whose faces were entirely concealed by bandages and others whose injuries were less overt but who had the overbright look of fever. The insufficient lamplight leant a waxy yellowish cast to their skin, making it look cadaverous against the red velvet and mahogany, but their faces were lively and they followed her every gesture just as though she were a nurse offering laudanum. There was no question of refusing her duty now. They listened — and so she sang.

One face in particular caught her eye: an elderly working man in a National Guard uniform, a craftsman by the look of him, with white hair and a neat peppery beard, who sat perched on a wooden stool at the back to one side of the others. His wrinkled eyes were closed and as Christine sang, she saw him mark the rhythm with his fingers on the kepi he held in his lap.

For an hour or more afterwards she stayed and talked to these men, not so different after all from Raoul in the frustration at their confinement, and eager for any breath of news the city outside. Of news she could offer none, but she shared their stories from the ramparts and the awkward humour of those less accustomed to mixed company. They were predominantly lower-ranked officers of the regular army, and some Garde Nationale from the bourgeois battalions, picked no doubt by the Variétés for their suitability to being housed within its lobby. Among them, the old National
Guardsman was an outsider, and Christine found herself gravitating to him curiously, drawn by his contemplative air.

He raised his head as she squeezed her way to the corner from which he had not moved.

"Ah," he sighed in recognition, and she realised it was his vision that was damaged, for he had to narrow his eyes to see her at all. "I knew I was not wrong: you are indeed the young lady who sang at our Folies a fortnight ago." Christine acknowledged this gladly, even as he went on: "But why did you not sing your songs today?"

He seemed genuinely curious, and Christine felt her polite smile become strained, like an inappropriate garment she was not at liberty to adjust. It was true; she had avoided singing her own music at the Variétés.

"I was asked for something in keeping with the occasion." She disliked how cowardly that sounded. "My music isn't like that… It's… Simpler."

"Ah, now that's a thing. Simpler." He looked past her, towards a smoking lamp behind which two of the girls from the chorus were talking to a young officer with a splint over one hand. "There is not enough of the simple around, if you ask me. All this," — he nodded at the ornate chairs around the lobby — "what'll it be worth if Paris goes the way of Saint-Cloud? Beautiful buildings, but they all burn just the same, and ash is ash. You can't buy coal with it, or milk for the little ones."

"You fought there," Christine guessed. "At Saint-Cloud."

He turned his attention to her incredulously, trying to focus his eyes, and shook his head as though she had said something very silly. "It doesn't matter where I fought. It is the same everywhere, in every city and every country. You must have seen how it is in Montmartre. That is where the real fight is." She saw him prepare to continue, but he seemed to change his mind and instead said, "You should sing your own songs, Mademoiselle Daaé. We could all do with something less suited to the occasion."

Christine dipped her head in a nod, though she was not certain what it was she acknowledged — perhaps only what she had known all along, even when she had signed on with the Variétés:

"My songs do not belong here."

"No," he conceded. "Not yet. But I hope to live long enough to see a world where they do."

A movement at the edge of her vision alerted Christine, and she turned a moment before a familiar silhouette separated from the shadows. Erik, an inner voice whispered in her mind, and as he stepped into the light, that first sharp pleasure of recognition mellowed into a new warmth inside her. She lifted a hand to him, aware that she was smiling.

"You heard me sing."

Erik did not move to take her hand. Instead, he tipped his hat and gave a small stiff bow, scrupulously correct. "An admirable performance, as ever." The words were correct as well, and his expression in the flickering lamplight was stony. "I have the carriage. If you're ready."

"Erik…"

"Your coat, Madmoïselle Daaé."
**Duty Bound**

Chapter Notes

A/N: Thank you for your support of this story and just for being here. Your reviews and comments make my day/week/month! Please take a moment to let me know your thoughts. Or at least one thought. :)

A bit of historical trivia: The first serious attempt at a sortie was actually supposed to happen in mid-November (1870) but due to various delays wasn't initiated until the end of the month. By then, Gambetta's Army of the Loire had managed to take Orleans and the government in Paris decided to change prior plans for a sortie to the north to a more risky plan to break out to the south-east, towards the Army of the Loire. This was, of course, well known to the Prussians.

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**Chapter 64 — Duty Bound**

Erik remained morose and withdrawn all the way to the apartment, and excused himself from supper at the first opportunity, having scarcely even touched his share of the cold cassoulet. There was not much to go around, and Christine saw Meg frown at the unfinished plate. Erik disappeared into the gloom of the living-room. He did not light a lamp, and she could not help but doubt whether he intended to stay there at all. She wished she knew the cause.

"Christine, how can he not be hungry?"

"I don't know. Here, have mine." She let Meg finish her plate and took Erik's for herself. She had scraped up the last forkful before she noticed Madame Giry watching her, in the same quiet, neutral way she might have observed their rehearsals. Obscurely embarrassed, Christine finished what was left of Erik's meal, and stood to collect the dishes.

Madame Giry touched her arm lightly as she reached for her plate. "It's all right, my dear. Go on." She did not need to indicate the living room; Christine nodded her gratitude and fled.

Behind her, she heard Meg speaking in a questioning tone and the rustle of newspaper as Madame Giry reached for the evening news. The distant bombardment from the forts was growing more erratic but was still there, a dull headache that refused to go away. Christine looked back, wondering if she ought to stay and find out whether the sortie had at last been announced, or whether anything more had been heard from the armies riding to their relief, but a sound from the living room made the decision for her.

It was not a sob, exactly, or a sigh — only a lonely note that struck her in the heart just as it had done many years earlier, when she had heard that sound coming from the chapel walls.

She closed the living room door softly behind her.

When her eyes adjusted to the faint moonlight slanting through the window, she saw Erik seated at the piano with the keys laid open before him. In his hands was a small silvery shape that, coming closer, Christine recognised a comb he had drawn from her hair a night or two ago. As she watched, he put it aside and touched the keys, too lightly for the sound that emerged to have come
from the instrument. His shoulders shook with it.

Christine approached. "Angel of Music," she said, remembering, — "why do you cry?"

He dropped the lid. Christine jumped at the noise, and snatched back the hand she had reached to him as he turned around. The whites of his eyes gleamed in the dark.

"Forgive me," he said hoarsely. "I am… out of sorts this evening."

"Because of the sortie?"

He looked away. "It would be best if you left, Christine."

She risked a touch to the back of his neck, tracing her fingers along the marred jawline under his mask. "I'm frightened too."

He kept still, but she felt the tension in every roped muscle under her touch. With her free hand, she reached down to raise the lid again, and found the first chord of their old song.

"I will sing for you, Angel, so you don't cry anymore."

She had not expected a response, but Erik pushed the keys with sudden weight, adding a second broken chord to complete the measure, then threw down a rapid, fluttering, angry phrase. Startled, Christine kept her hand where it was. The music was new. She found herself trying not to breathe, for fear of jolting him from it. It had been such a long time since he had permitted himself to compose.

Erik shifted closer to the keyboard and, lifting both hands to it, expanded the sound. There was in his playing a kind of reckless spontaneity that filled Christine with dread, as though she was watching him step up onto the railings of a bridge above a raging river. She recognised the echo of the Moonlight Sonata woven into a brighter, sharper transposition of the theme they had worked on together the night he returned from Sedan. Only there was no liberty in this variation. The sound was not loud but brash, unforgiving, martial, without a single slur or pedalled chord to soften its edges. Worst of all was that it compelled her, even thrilled her; her heart pounded with its rhythm and her body could not withstand the urgency of its battle cry.

"Stop," she pleaded when she could stand no more. "Erik, no. Don't mock it." She covered his hands with her own, crossing them against his chest despite his resistance, and pulled him tight against her, his back to her chest. "You make it sound like the Marseillaise."

"Everything is a Marseillaise now." He wrenched free with an impatient twist of his shoulders, but at once grabbed hold of her elbow. "No, stay." He grimaced at his own ugly tone and released his grip, moving aside apologetically to make space for her on the bench. "Please. Sit with me."

Christine let him draw her down next to him, at the upper register. "Try it again," she suggested, nodding at the keys. "From here."

She repeated the fluttering phrase he had flung earlier as a challenge, but simplified it, letting the melody flow slower, calmer and more introspective. Without the embellishment of anger, it was lovely.

Erik glanced over at her, poised between wariness and admiration. "Slower still. Start from the A."

She played it at half speed for him, then folded her hands away from the piano to let him try it out for himself, finding his own voice within the changes she suggested. She mourned how long it
took, how desperately he struggled to release the music without surrendering himself to the terror lurking inside him. He was like a violinist with a damaged instrument, afraid that at any moment an over-tightened string might snap.

"Again," she insisted when Erik let the sound fray into silence. The skin above his collar was damp. "Until you feel it here." She slipped her arm under his jacket and waistcoat, over the thin fabric of his shirt, and counted out the beats against his spine.

Erik made a small, helpless noise that briefly drove all thoughts of music out of Christine's mind. Then he half-turned to her and cupped her chin, lifting her face to his.

"Play!" she told him, fiercely. "Play it as you hear it. This is your music, not mine."

"Enough." He released her and moved back as far as the bench permitted, balling his hands into fists. "That is done with. We are living in the age of soldiers now. When a hundred thousand rifles are about to fire, this is the only music that matters." And he drummed out the *Marseillaise* with one hand on the keys, keeping perfect time, like the heartbeat of war. "Tomorrow or the next day —"

"Tomorrow or the next day all this will end, and what then? Erik!"

Erik turned to her vehemence, and the bruised, cornered look in his bandaged face seemed to disfigure it far more than any deformity. "Then you will see that every decent man picked up a rifle and did his duty. And you will know your Erik for what he is."

She gaped at him. "Duty? You're thinking of *enlisting*?"

He was silent. Christine shook her head slowly, baffled. "That is a lie. I know who I spoke for in Montmartre, and I do not believe that man could ever return to the war."

Erik's gaze roamed over the piano. "Every man has his duty."

"But not every duty is the same."

"No more blood. That was the vow." He pointedly did not meet her eyes. "Tell me, what would you do if I asked to be released from it?"

For a moment Christine felt numb. Then she realised what it was he was really asking, and scooted over to gather him into an embrace, her cheek rasping against his stubbled one. "Nothing. I can't release you, any more than you could release yourself. It is not I that holds you to it. But," — she found his mouth and gently grazed it with her own, "you are not asking."

"No," he admitted, and Christine felt she had withstood a test. Erik clutched at her waist as she strengthened the kiss, holding nothing back, willing him to know he could trust her. This was what he had sought: proof that the war had not dulled her horror of bloodshed, that even the most stirring call to arms could not break her. Whatever had unsettled him today had made him crave that reassurance, and willingly, she gave it.

"Let's try that piece again," she said when she could bear to withdraw from him.

Erik's mouth was still raw from their kiss, and his voice low and harsh. "Yes," he said, "let us." He made it a declaration of war, the two of them against the world.

Christine held his gaze and very softly hummed the melody of their first and oldest song. It was not a hymn, but Erik joined in harmony to make it one, and the words they did not sing brushed against
the strings of her memory. It was the song of the Angels, born to bring music into the world.

Christine and Erik had been engrossed in their music for the better part of an hour before Madame Giry could bring herself to disrupt them. It was after curfew; the day's relentless cannonade from the forts had at last died down to an uneasy rest, and still they played on. As yet, no irate neighbours had knocked at the door to demand silence, but there were limits to what was prudent in this age of neighbourly denunciations. Caution would be wise. On the eve of the grande sortie, an evening spent at the piano could well be construed as a lack of national feeling.

She watched from the doorway for a minute or two, marvelling to herself at the scene. To see them animated by one idea after another, alternately excited and frustrated, bursting into complicated sequences or repeating the same phrase over and over with minute variations — these were the moments in which all her doubts about this entanglement were consigned to the wayside.

And yet, there was the matter of the missing letter.

Madame Giry gave a discreet cough, and saw Erik glance toward her. He shifted closer to Christine, as though he meant shield her from the truth he had not shared.


Christine rose to make her way out, her fingers brushing Erik's in a fleeting caress. Madame Giry waited until she had gone past before coming through the doorway and pulling the door almost closed behind her. A wedge of light from it fanned out over the rug and up to where Erik sat at the piano, sketching the profile of his intact side as he shut the lid.

He did not wait for her question. "It was addressed to me. You had no business concealing it, Madame."

Madame Giry acknowledged the rebuke, waiting for him to continue. When he only watched her in silence, she sighed. "It arrived last night. There was not the right moment."

He glared at her. "That letter was posted two weeks ago!"

"To rue Fontenelle. Where its contents will have been inferred, and judgements passed. It would have been safer by far to collect it in person."

"I had duties here."

"That is so. But you knew this must come; the decree says young men must serve. I warned you when you returned: Paris is become a city of soldiers."

This drew a huff from him. "Incompetent soldiers. Clerks and shopkeepers playing at heroes with their uniforms and guns. Half of them don't know one end of a rifle from the other."

"Indeed? And do you intend to lend them your expertise?"

"No." He rose smoothly from the bench, as though he had not a care in the world, and gestured for her to precede him out of the room. "I believe I can smell coffee. After you."

"Erik." Madame Giry took a step closer to the door, adroitly blocking his escape. "A conscription letter is not an invitation you can decline. Not unless you mean to return into hiding."
He stood tall in front of her, demanding with his very bearing to close this discussion, but she'd had too many years of facing irate managers to be so easily intimidated. "Whatever we may think of it, that is the law. You ignore it at your peril. And not only your own."

He gave her a humourless smirk. "The wonderful thing I have discovered about the law, Mademoiselle White Girl, is that there is always a greater law above it."

"That of God?" she said, taken aback by the name she had almost forgotten.

"That of greed." Erik gestured to the door again. "If you please."

"The American Ambulance! Have you entirely taken leave of your senses? It is halfway across the city and in the wrong direction. No." Chagny planted his crutches before the heavy front door that led from Guyon's residence out into the street, and refused to budge another step.

Truly, the man was determined to make this as difficult as humanly possible.

"I have not slept," Erik said through his teeth, "I have not eaten, and just now I have no time for idle curiosity." The freezing pre-dawn air made his teeth chatter, and his feet were numb with cold from standing around. Frost glittered on every step and cobble and last night's puddles were solid ice. "The Ambulance is a perfectly manageable distance. Let's go."

"Look there. In the east." Chagny freed one gloved hand to point towards the end of the street, where it opened onto the boulevard leading down towards the Seine. Above the dark rooftops, white puffs of smoke drifted like spent fireworks through long streaks of cloud tinged violet by the coming sunrise. Every minute or two, a dull thunderclap sounded, and another puff would go up.

"That's a battle, Andersson! The sortie has finally started and I for one would like to see what is going on."

"What do you think is going on?" Erik did not care to look too long at the horizon; it was difficult enough to close his ears to the voices of the heavy guns and stop his mind from spiralling into nightmares. "A mass of half-trained men and starving horses shuffling across the Marne, up to their knees in mud, while the Prussians fire at leisure or wait to draw them deeper into a trap."

"Trap?" Chagny looked startled. "What makes you say that?"

"Damn it, Vicomte! Did that bullet hit your leg or your head? You cannot tell me that an attack that's been promised for weeks, with every detail published in the papers, is anything but suicidal. Every child in Paris knows where the diversionary attacks will come, and how many men to each, and the rest of it. Do you imagine the Prussians don't get copies of Le Combat? Or that they are unprepared? This is exactly the desperate run they've been waiting for."

"There is nothing desperate about it. Gambetta's army is waiting to join us—"

"Gambetta is not here. And neither is his army."

"They have been here for days! They left Orléans last week and are marching straight for Fontainebleau; Guyon showed me Gambetta's letter before he left."

"Left where?"

"To shuffle across the Marne," Chagny said in a brittle tone. "He is taking his men with the rest of
the Third, doing what the likes of you can only sneer at. That reminds me," he glanced back over his shoulder to the door, "Guyon left a package for Meg Giry, something I am to give her in case… In case he cannot."

"Marvellous." Erik swallowed down the nausea that rose each time another distant explosion echoed in the deserted street. Beneath those puffs of smoke were soldiers crossing pontoons, just as they had done in Bazeilles. A forest of bayonets rising from the fog... then blood, and gunfire, and death. He felt a piercing headache coming on. "You can go back and spend the morning wrapping lovers' gifts, or get your binoculars and go battle-watching. I am going to walk to the Ambulance. Come or stay, it is all the same to me."

"Why the Ambulance, tell me that? Swinburne is no longer my physician. And if you mean to test my strength, the Panthéon is almost as long a walk, and nearer the news."

"Don't let the shock stun you, but not everything in this world revolves around you. I have business at the Ambulance."

"Business." Chagny lifted his jaw and crossed his arms contemptuously; a manoeuvre made more than a little precarious by his crutches. "You need me to accompany you to the Ambulance. Very well. Do me the honour of explaining, and I will consider it. Or continue these games and go on alone. It is all the same to me."

Erik measured Chagny's stubborn stance against the precious time he was wasting, and suppressed a curse. "Do you not see? If this sortie succeeds for more than an hour, and indeed, even if it fails, they will mobilise more men. I need to deal with this conscription. Now."

"But you cannot. The days of buying a replacement are gone — and who would replace you? All Belleville and Montmartre are already up in arms. There is no one left to take your place. Wait." Chagny's pale eyebrows rose until they fairly disappeared under the brim of his hat. He indicated Erik's bandage: "You mean to pay Swinburne to sign you off as wounded."

"Something like that."

"He will do no such thing."

"We'll see."

"He is an honourable man, Andersson. He will not perjure himself."

Erik gave him a feral grin. "Everyone has their price."

"If it was only a matter of money," Chagny said quietly, "I would help you if I could, for Christine's sake. But you must understand, Swinburne is the wrong man. His surgery is all that matters to him, and besides, he is a foreigner here. He will not risk compromising the entire American legation by meddling in French affairs." Chagny hobbled forward a step on his crutches. "Look. Guyon's father is a physician; he may know someone more suitable. Give me a day and I'll see what I can do."

"I don't need your money. Or your influence."

"Then what is it you want of me?" Chagny looked so honestly bemused that Erik could not bring himself to dissemble any further. The words came out before he could moderate them, humiliatingly uncensored:

"I cannot do this alone." He took a long breath and tried to compose himself. "I need a witness.
And if it does not go well or I am for any reason delayed, I will need you to take a message to Christine."

For a wonder, Chagny asked nothing more. He collected his crutches, nodded to Erik to go on, and without another word they set off.

Erik kept his gaze fixed directly ahead and made his steps steady, trying hard to recollect at least the appearance of dignity. Chagny's swinging half-walk set a respectable pace once they were out on the smoother paving of the boulevard, and he discovered he had to lengthen his own stride to keep up. It was just as well, for the sun was already rising. What had seemed so simple last night — a few carefully chosen words with the American surgeon in his seaweed-infested tent — in the cold light of morning was beginning to seem like madness.

He should have given more thought to going into hiding. Even in an encircled city there were basements and attics, dark places where he would not be known…

No. A thousand times no.

_Courage_, he schooled himself as he forced his legs into a faster rhythm, and blinkered his mind to the narrow tunnel of what needed to be done. A few hours at most, and then he could return to Christine. He consoled himself with thoughts of how she would throw her arms about him to learn that he was free, enveloping him in the warmth of her scent.

The boulevards were still deserted at this early hour except for the huddling queues awaiting their rations outside the butchers' shops, and the occasional orderly rushing with bag of dispatches from one signalling point to another. The closer they came to the centre of the city, the less audible was the sound of battle, but Erik was certain he could feel the vibrations of the gunfire through his feet, and the hits were becoming more frequent.

Chagny stopped at the corner of rue le Peletier, where the makeshift stalls of the foragers were attended by a few sullen women in thick quilted overcoats and gloves. The stall nearest them, built of two school desks roped together, displayed a single bunch of three dirty onions and a small cabbage. Behind them, the black backdrop of the Opéra reared incongruously. Erik tried his utmost not to see it.

"Which way?" Chagny asked, puffing to catch his breath. He too averted his eyes from the ruin.

"Left; go around the market. We've no time for it now."

Chagny frowned at the line of stalls. "Are you certain? There is nothing more between here and the Ambulance. What will you bring back for breakfast?"

"Breakfast is cancelled today." Erik looked around, trying to gauge how busy the side streets were likely to be. He could not afford any more delays.

"And dinner? Are you in such a hurry that you would let Christine starve?"

"There is enough bread for this morning."

Chagny narrowed his eyes. "And beyond it?"

"I am not leaping off a cliff, Vicomte. Or going into hiding."

"You are taking yourself to the Ambulance, where—"
"Where I will not spend one hour more than necessary. On that you may have my word. This is a simple transaction, nothing more. Swinburne signs a paper, and in return gains what he wants."

"Which is what, exactly?"

Erik looked at Chagny's aristocratic face, the symmetrical features, the tall forehead and the wide, ludicrously honest eyes, and he knew the murderous rage he felt was not at this man but at himself:

"His very own freak."

With a vicious swipe, he yanked his bandage to one side. The smack of freezing wind on the raw flesh of his cheek knocked the breath from his lungs, making the Vicomte's gasped breath all the louder.

"What are you doing? Andersson!"

Erik pulled the bandage back up into place and secured it with hands that refused to move properly. His headache had grown to a pulsating agony in his temples. "The good doctor is a learned man. He has students. I shall present to him the perfect teaching aid for instruction in the disciplines of anatomy and physiology. All the joys of studying a cadaver without the drawbacks. What could be simpler?"

Chagny was staring at him in alarm. "You cannot be serious."

"Quite serious, I assure you."

"If you are right, if Swinburne accepts… Have you any idea what they could do to you? Photographs, measurements, skin samples—"

Erik realised he must have made some noise because the Vicomte abruptly stopped his litany. "I will do what I must." He tried to twist his mouth into a grin. "I have no shortage of experience in this particular field."

"You would choose to be prodded like a... like a—"

"Freak," Erik supplied.

"—rather than do your duty?"

Erik looked back to the horizon, where the hanging gun-smoke had turned to bloodied fog in the morning light. The decision was so easy, after all.

"Christine is right," he said. "Not every duty is the same. My place is by her side, Vicomte; and I will do whatever it takes."

"You would humiliate yourself and her."

"Christine has made her choice. She knows what I am."

Chagny gripped his crutches so tightly that for a moment Erik had to impression he would have liked to hit him. Then he swung himself around. "I cannot go where you're going, Andersson. I'm sorry."

At any other time the sight of the Vicomte pirouetting his crutches on the icy cobbles would have been amusing, but right now it was nothing of the sort.
He was leaving.

"It’s a long way back," Erik called after him viciously, "the footpaths are slippery. Do you really think anyone in this city will notice a lone cripple sprawled in the gutter?"

Chagny looked up at him from under his furrowed brows, and Erik did not like what he saw in his eyes.

"It is a perfectly manageable distance. Good luck, Andersson. God knows you need it."
Erik seethed all the way to the ambulance, barely noting the growing traffic on the boulevards. Damn the Vicomte. Ungrateful bastard. He ought never to have encouraged him to walk. Without his assistance Chagny could not have risen from his wheelchair, let alone walked off on his own to leave him with no cover for being here. Still bunching the conscription letter in his pocket, Erik barged straight through the wide-open entrance of the ambulance and walked on ahead, ignoring the surprised query from a group of medics who stood smoking at the first tent. A nurse in a heavy overcoat side-stepped him, nearly losing her armful of linen. Perhaps Chagny's defection was just as well, jeered a sardonic part of his mind, it was a fine rehearsal for the humiliation he was about to endure.

But it would be worth it. It would all be worth it to return to Christine a free man.

He was eventually forced to slow down by the silence. Away from the main thoroughfare all was quiet and still. Here the sounds of the city and the battle beyond had faded to a dark threat below the limit of his hearing, and only the crunch of frozen leaves under his boots disturbed the peace. Erik continued more circumspectly. The tents of the wounded squatted among bare trees, grey canvas doorways flapping suddenly in the morning fog before vanishing like ghosts at a deserted fairground. An old music-box tune suggested itself, but Erik quashed it and went on along the tree-lined path between the tents, trying to keep up a self-assured pace, trying to conceal his bandages under hat and scarf, trying to ignore the music in his head and the urge to turn around and be gone. He had forgotten how to be a freak, but an army of memories ranged behind to remind him and he did not dare stop.

A knot of activity at the far end suggested he had at last found Doctor Swinburne. Drawing nearer, Erik saw the open doorway of a tent and within, the surgeon’s customary white coat and the dark suits and hats of the hangers-on who clustered around him. Before he could change his mind Erik plunged on, adopting a deferential stoop that would not mark him a stranger among them, and slipped through the doorway to insinuate himself at the edge of the little crowd. His heart was thundering. Nobody turned to him. He was in.

The tent was dark after the daylight, and stank of a butcher’s shop.

“He will lose more than the arm if we don’t operate,” said the man in front of him, a stocky American in a fur cap, addressing his neighbour in accented French. The subject of the conversation appeared at first glance to be a soldier's corpse laid out motionless on a stretcher, until Swinburne gave a sharp tap to the swollen shoulder and Erik saw movement flicker over the waxen face. Not yet a corpse then, but near enough.

“Nonsense,” the neighbour scoffed, “the bones will knit, if you consider the application of Doctor Swinburne's method—”

As though on cue, Swinburne grabbed the soldier’s arm and with a practiced manoeuvre gave it a wrench. Sinew crunched; the almost-corpse roared and bucked and then lay very still. Erik’s vision swam with fiery orange blotches and blood rushed to his temples. For a moment he was the Ghost
in Bazeilles, the Angel of Death with a rope twisted about a wounded man’s neck. His hand spasmed in his pocket, crushing the conscription letter.

Then all at once it was over. The wounded soldier lay breathing heavily, alive, his eyes goggling stupidly at the canvas ceiling. His twitching movements were not those of a man in control of his senses and Erik realised he was drugged. The hangers-on began to babble enthusiastically among themselves as two medics picked up the stretcher and carried it out, and the imposing Mrs Edmonds swept in with Swinburne’s secretary, holding a stack of papers. The pandemonium was making it difficult to breathe. Erik looked towards the exit.

The moment he had raised his eyes from the succession of faces and coats, he regretted his lack of vigilance. Swinburne was looking directly at him.

The surgeon’s brows quirked ever so slightly, and he made a motion with his bearded chin which Erik interpreted as invitation to make his presence known.

Erik stayed still, keeping to the shadows. Let the doctor make the first move.

Swinburne murmured something to Mrs Edmonds, answered the secretary's query and accepted the proffered binder of documents, then returned his calm gaze to where Erik stood.

There was nobody there.

The surprise that registered in his distinguished features almost made Erik give himself away, but he controlled the mad desire to laugh and remained unmoving in his new hiding place on the far side of the tent. He waited to see if this man truly had the intelligence with which he was credited.

“Mrs Edmonds!” Swinburne gestured with the binder to halt the lady before she could depart the tent. “Be so kind as to send Whiskers in here — I spotted a mouse just now. An uncommonly large one at that.”

Erik made a soundless growl in his throat: the nerve, to mock this for a game of cat-and-mouse! Still, he was willing to credit the doctor’s ingenuity; if nothing else, he was acknowledging his presence.

Swinburne went on, “And tell the Ambassador he might have a cup of coffee while he waits. I shall need a quarter of an hour;” — he flicked through the binder he held, “to study these notes.”

“Of course, Doctor.” If Mrs Edmonds was surprised to have her high-ranking visitor delayed, Erik heard nothing of it in her reply. As she left another patient was already being carried inside, but Swinburne motioned to an underling to take over, glanced at where he had last seen Erik, and strode out of the tent.

Erik shadowed him reluctantly, ghosting among canvas and trees. The doctor’s attitude disturbed him. He had no doubt that Swinburne had recognised him as the freak he had often seen in the company of Mademoiselle Daaé during her many visits to the ambulance, yet neither his appearance nor his abrupt disappearance seemed to have the unsettling effect he had intended. This was Chagny’s fault, Erik thought resentfully. He would not have had to resort to these fairground tricks if the Vicomte had not deserted at the last minute. Chagny could have come in here to see his physician and it would all have been respectable and above suspicion.

He thought about returning to Christine, and walked faster.

Swinburne went into the tent he used as his private office, ignoring the crowd of disappointed supplicants waiting outside. A quarter of an hour, he had said to Mrs Edmonds. That was all the
time he had.

Erik took a long breath and stepped out into the open. He adjusted his hat, gripped the letter in his pocket, and walked right past the stunned mutterings of the crowd and into Swinburne's tent.

At the rustle of the door-flap Swinburne looked up from his reading, removing his silver-framed spectacles when Erik stepped inside.

“Well, well. The very large mouse. Please, take a seat.” He indicated the second chair on the other side of the desk.

Erik glanced down at the chair and remained standing tall and silent.

“As you will,” Swinburne said, unfazed. “I take it you have come on behalf of young Raoul de Chagny.”

At this, Erik almost did sit. What the devil did Chagny have to do with this?

“I warned him he was compromising his recovery to sign himself out at so early a stage. He is confined to the chair then? You must understand, the ambulance cannot readmit him.”

“This is nought to do with the Vicomte, or his damned injury! And it so happens,” Erik said, calming down a fraction, “that he gets around admirably well on those crutches of his.” Too well, he added mentally, but managed to restrain himself from being drawn deeper into this ridiculous farce. “It is not Chagny I have come to discuss.”

“I see,” Swinburne said, although he plainly did not.

Erik swung the chair towards himself and dropped into it abruptly, making the springs cry out.

“You made me an offer. Have you the decency to recall it?”

“I confess you have the advantage of me.” Swinburne opened his hands in what he probably thought as a disarming manner, but which Erik found infuriating.

“This!” He thrust his bandaged face forward. “You sought to examine it, did you not? Catalogue the distortions, discover what the bandages hide, compose a report to your learned colleagues. You and I both know this is no mere burn or purulent wound.”

Swinburne picked up his spectacles, polished them on a handkerchief, and put them on. The lenses glinted like knives. “Let me be sure I understand. You wish to have me examine this—”

“Deformity.” Erik bit off the word, detesting that he was reduced to a sideshow owner crying his wares. “A true deformity and not some dime-a-dozen bullet hole the likes of which you see every day. A medical curiosity. You may examine it, measure, photograph, write all the damned reports you will — but in return, I will have this gone.” He brought out the crumpled yellow wad of the conscription letter, unfolded it on the desk and flicked it towards Swinburne.

“Monsieur Erik Andersson,” Swinburne read, holding it at a distance for his spectacles, “Architect. This is you?”

“Who else would it be! I need a letter, Doctor. I will not serve in their army. I have other duties.”

Swinburne passed the letter back, smiling in a slightly bemused manner. “You have a respectable occupation for someone claiming to be a fairground curiosity, Monsieur Andersson. And a remarkable talent for concealing your person, if the earlier display was any indication. Why not put
it to good use? You would not be the first man in Paris to evade his duty.”

“I will not go into hiding. Mademoiselle Daaé is at the Variétés now, and I will not have her questioned or shamed. No. I want a letter, Doctor. One that sets me free.” Erik flattened his palms to his thighs to disguise the tremor in his fingers.

“You must realise I cannot do that.” Swinburne passed him back the letter. “Your deformity, if such it is, is of infinitely less interest to me than those bullet holes you dismiss.” His impersonal tone was so much at odds with what Erik had expected that he could only remain where he sat, paralysed with disbelief as Swinburne began to get up. “If you will excuse me. I cannot keep the Ambassador waiting.”

He was being dismissed, Erik realised. Just like any other stranger, unremarkable, unexceptional. He felt he was sliding endlessly down a black well, whose slippery sides offered no purchase.

He had become a man like any other, nothing more, nothing.

“The Devil's Child.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“The act. In the fairground. The Devil’s Child, born with a death’s head.” The sickening sensation of falling stopped. Erik removed his hat to display the extent of the bandages and loosened the scarf from his neck, but did not touch the bandage itself.

Swinburne sat back down slowly. “You were displayed.”

Erik held his stare. “The letter first. Then you may do as you will.”

“You are in earnest.”

“Quite.”

Swinburne folded his hands before him on the table and contemplated him for what felt like minutes. Erik pictured Christine in his mind, her smile as she turned to him in their hearse-carriage, her hand on the windowpane, her voice. In the darkness she was the only star.

“Very well,” Swinburne said at last. “You shall have your letter. But I will have another bargain in return.”

The distant hammering of the cannonade had resumed with the dawn, as though some angry deity was trying to knock a hole through the sky. Christine opened the curtains in the dining-room and found the glass veiled by an intricate lacework of frost. The apartment was very cold, but that had to be as nothing compared with the weather outside — and the soldiers were out there… She put her thumb against the glass and peered through the little peephole it made. The balcony railing was covered in a dusting of white frost, and white light reflected back to her from the windows opposite, shimmering as another explosion thudded.

Winter music, she thought, huddling deeper into the coat she had put on over her morning dress, as the music began to form in her mind. An storm in every octave, furious and threatening and brittle as ice, pulsing with life under its rage. But through that storm a hidden melody would begin to grow, weak and unnoticed at first but becoming stronger, until at last it tamed the storm, quietened it, and emerged from the silence as a solo. A violin? No, a voice… or rather two, singing in perfect
unison. Yes.

That was it — the start of the third movement. Would Erik understand it when she sang it for him? She wanted him suddenly to be right here, right now, standing where she could reach for his hand and touch him and let him hear as she heard. But he was not.

He had left before first light, and was still not back. Christine thought she must have been expecting it, for it did not surprise her in the morning to find the door to the living-room still standing open, the divan empty, and the piano mute and its bench tucked away. Even Erik's shaving box had been removed from the side table and placed discreetly underneath, as though he did not know whether he would return to claim it. She wanted to believe it only another morning errand, but last night he had talked of duty and war, and this morning the rattle of the guns confirmed a battle... The music he had composed had sounded just like this.

Crossing the dining-room, she stopped in the doorway and studied the empty living room through the cloud of her breath. Then she sighed and shut the door.

“Theres bread!” Meg called from the kitchen. “And coal,” she added more quietly, turning to greet Christine as she walked in. Meg too was in her coat and her nose was pink with cold. “Erik must have been up at some ungodly hour to have brought it in so early. Where's he gone?”

“To be alone.” Christine took the breadboard and reached for a knife.

Meg blinked at her. “Alone.”

“Yes. What of it?” The bread was coarse and crumbled irritatingly as Christine's knife sawed through it. She tossed the chunks into the bread basket and stood back to let Meg light the stove.

“He picked an odd day to be alone, that's all. There's the sortie. The way the guns have been pummelling the forts today, I keep expecting them to start on the city.” Meg pulled the coffee tin down off the shelf and opened the lid, rattling the last few beans. “Do you think he’ll bring more coffee? We're out. It's not so bad to be hungry when there's coffee.”

“There's still tea. Here, pass me the kettle.” Christine tried the faucet; it trumpeted at her and yielded nothing. “The pipes must have frozen again in the night. We’ll have to wait.”

“We have time. I haven't seen maman yet this morning.” Meg held her hands out to the stove, opening and closing her fingers to warm them. They were stained with ink, Christine noticed, and the right hand was calloused from gripping a pen. There was ink in her loose hair too, and even a smudge on her cheek.

“It’s unlike your mother to sleep so late.”

"She was up long after midnight, I heard her pacing back and forth in her room. I know she is still thinking about Perros and poor Madame Pierot…” Meg pulled out her handkerchief and crumpled it to blow her nose. “I wish we had never set eyes on Monsieur Duchamp’s stupid letter, when there's not a thing we can do from within this city. I hope to God the army manages to break through.”

Christine came over to join her by the stove to warm her own hands. “I have a feeling it's not only thoughts of Madame Pierot that kept your mother awake. What were you doing awake half the night?” She nodded at the ink stains, “Drawing?”
Meg shifted uncomfortably. “Henri asked for a sketch. He is in the sortie.”

“You didn't tell me! He's fighting?”

“Of course. He is an officer. This is not just another Le Bourget, you know, everyone is fighting. When I went to see Marie yesterday, there was hardly a man to be seen in all Montmartre.”

“I know that,” Christine said more curtly than she intended. Meg looked at her askance, but did not ask about Erik. Perhaps it did not even occur to her to ask. Christine hid her hands in her coat, trying to hold onto the warmth. “Erik spoke about enlisting last night.”

“Oh! I suppose he ought to have been drafted with the others. Why wasn’t he?”

“Maybe he was. He wouldn’t tell me.”

The sympathy in Meg's eyes hurt. “Do you think that’s why he’s gone today? To sign up?”

“Don’t.” Christine winced. “Please, just – I’m sorry I said anything about it. He is probably trying to find out news of the battle, that is all. It must be chaos on the boulevards this morning.”

“But if he was drafted?”

“The sortie may succeed,” Christine said firmly. “It will succeed. And we shall all be free again.”

Meg looked at her without replying. In the silence, only the guns rumbled, and the pipes creaked as the ice in the tap slowly gave way.

“I drew him,” Meg said suddenly.

“Henri?”

“Erik.” From her pocket she pulled the sketchbook she used outdoors, and flipped it open.

Christine stared. In Meg’s book, a man sat at a piano, seen from the back as he lowered his shoulders into an unheard music. Before him, above and around the piano, were tall open doors looking out onto a veranda. Sunlight streamed through the glass, dappled by the shade of an unseen tree somewhere in the garden. Christine felt her eyes watering. “It’s him,” she said. “Meg, it's him…”

Meg grinned sheepishly. “It wasn't going to be. I was going to draw Henri. But you and Erik, and that music of yours — what you played when you played together. I couldn't get it out of my head. So I drew it.”

Christine touched the drawing. “This is how you heard it? The veranda…”

“It's the garden. In Perros, remember.”

“Yes,” Christine said, “of course. I didn't know, but you're right, it feels just like that. That tree, the light falling. And Erik at the piano… Oh, Meg. May I keep it?”

Meg was already pulling the page free from its binding. “Of course. Take it.” She watched Christine put it carefully into her pocket. “We could go back there when the siege ends. It would be good to see the house again. And I think maman would like it.”
“So would I.” Christine turned the tap and waited while the trickle of rust-coloured water gradually cleared, filled the kettle and passed it to Meg. “You should let Monsieur de Gas see this one when he returns.”

“If he returns. If any of them return.”

Just then, footsteps sounded from the entrance hall, voices and the slam of the front door. Christine and Meg turned to the kitchen door as the floorboards creaked just outside and a draught of cold air announced someone coming in. Two people.

“Maman,” Meg said, just as Christine exclaimed, “Raoul!”

Madame Giry stood aside to let him approach the kitchen door.

“Mademoiselle Giry,” Raoul sketched a brief anxious greeting to both of them, “Christine. My apologies for the intrusion, I know it is too early.” His coat glistened with dew at the shoulders from the morning mist, and he leaned heavily on the crutch at his good side, his hat in his hands. Plainly he had been trying to move faster than he should, and the pinched corners of his mouth spoke of the effort of it.

Christine went to him at once, putting her hand over his to steady him. “Something’s happened.” She noted with dismay the spray of mud over the shoe on his good leg. “You didn't walk all the way here!”

“I'm fine.” Raoul squeezed her fingers, asking for her forbearance, as he pulled something from an inside pocket of his coat: a slim package wrapped in butcher’s paper and tied with a ribbon. “I promised Guyon I would see this delivered — Mademoiselle Giry, Henri wanted you to have it.”

“Really, monsieur,” Madame Giry said in dismay, even as Meg reached for the package.

“Newspapers!” She tore a corner of the paper to look within, and stopped in surprise. “Oh. Is that English?”

“It’s the three latest issues of the London Illustrated News. Direct from London by way of the American Legation.” Raoul released Christine's hand to readjust his weight on the crutches. “I promised I would see the paper safely into your hands. Henri assures me his uncle will not miss it, but one cannot be too careful.”

Meg opened the paper with shaking hands and smoothed it out. On the front page was a large reprint of a drawing Christine recognised: the Opéra, with a vegetable market in front of its ruined façade. Meg's work.

“Thank you,” Meg said. The paper was unsteady in her hands, and she closed it abruptly, and pressed it to her chest. “I was wondering if my drawings had reached London.”

The boiling kettle hissed a warning, and Madame Giry plucked it from its spot on the stove just as it began to steam. “Do go through into the dining room, monsieur. These are strange times, but we have not yet reached the point of receiving visitors in the kitchen.”

Meg held the door open. “Yes, please come and sit down. You must have breakfast with us — well, tea and bread. Is there any news from the battle?” She led the way to the dining table and pulled out a chair for Raoul.

After the heated kitchen, the dining room felt so cold that it made Christine's teeth chatter. Raoul shook his head regretfully, refusing to sit. “Much as I'd like to stay, I'm afraid there is something
else. Christine?

“Yes.” Christine clamped her chattering teeth together, trying very hard to feel nothing, fear nothing. She had surmised the reason for this sudden visit the moment she saw Raoul come in, and the urgent concern in his voice now left her no doubt. “It's about Erik. Isn't it.”

Raoul rubbed his forehead. “I'm sorry. He has received a letter — he showed me—”

“A conscription.”

“You know?” he said in surprise.

“I guessed.” The martial music Erik composed returned to throb in Christine's head in time with her pulse, making it hard to think. “He will not wield a gun again, Raoul. You know it! You spoke of it yourself at his hearing, and it is true. He will not fight.”

“I do not think he means to fight, Lotte.”
Chapter 66 — Sortie

“He can’t.” Christine stared at Raoul in dismay. “He mustn’t. There have to be other ways.” She tried to keep her voice low and calm although she could tell by the tense silence from Meg beside her that it was an unconvincing performance. “How long ago did you leave him?”

“I came as soon as I knew. Let us go now, before he finds Doctor Swinburne and does something irrevocably stupid.”

“How long, Raoul?”

“An hour, no more.”

“We’ll be too late.” Christine felt lightheaded with the absolute certainty of it. “Whatever he intended, he will have done it by now, he must have.” She went to the sideboard and pulled open the drawer, knowing as she did so that she would find the ration cards untouched. There; a flurry of little blue cards scattered under her palm. She should have known it was not the queues that delayed him.

Raoul pivoted to look after her as she circled the table toward the doors. “Swinburne is a busy man. We're in the middle of a battle, he will have his hands full with the wounded coming in. By the time Andersson gains his attention—”

“He will find some way. He always does. Doctor Swinburne did offer to examine him, more than once, and God knows Erik is not like to forget it. He thought…” Christine swallowed down the painful memory. “Erik thought Doctor Swinburne meant to find out the cause of his deformity and show it to his students.”

“Even it that's so,” Raoul insisted, “today of all days, examining medical oddities will be the last thing on his mind. There is still time. Make Andersson see how disastrous this plan is! What architect parades himself before medics as some sort of living cadaver, instead of doing his duty? Please, talk some sense into him before he ruins you both.”

“How do I do that?” Christine heard a shrill note creep into her voice. “Should I send him to the ramparts? I have nothing to rival what Doctor Swinburne could do to help him.”

“He may at least listen to you! He certainly does not listen to anyone else. Just dissuade him from this plan and we will think of something.” Raoul leaned on one crutch and raked the fingers of his free hand through his hair. “It defies belief that in the middle of a battle for Paris, for all France, that man’s first thought is for the mirror!”

“That is not fair.”

“And this is? Was he alone in the world, he could sell his face to the whole of the Académie Française for all I care, but he has no right to drag you into this circus. You are his now, and if this reaches the papers—”

“I am not his!” Christine stopped with her back to the parlour doors. Raoul was regarding her as if
she were a diva in a temper, and even Meg, who had retreated to the other side of the table, had pity in her eyes. A flush of hot embarrassment made Christine step back. She pushed the doors open behind her, and turned on her heel into the parlour Erik had abandoned.

Here daylight fell through the window in all its wintry softness, incongruous when the distant battle still rattled the glass. The tidied room, bare of any sign of Erik's stay, was stark proof he had planned this absence, that he intended for her to know nothing as he bargained away his dignity for the fragile promise of peace. Christine stared at the closed piano. Music, music, music thrummed in her veins and it sounded wrong, tainted with blood like Erik's awful Marseillaise of the evening before. Music lodged in her head and tore at her with the iron claws of his fingers the night he had returned from Sedan.

...The bayonets finish what the bullets start, and men walk upon men...

He had crawled from that pit of horror somehow, dragging himself and Raoul from a hell she could not begin to imagine. What had he left behind? The twisted, wronged logic of the rope? The Phantom? Of one thing she was certain, it was Erik who had returned to her, carrying her ring in his pocket and a part of their music in his heart. It was Erik who was now at the ambulance, pursued by the menacing voices of the Prussian guns — hearing their taunts in a way she knew she could not. That he would bargain away all he had worked for so as not to return to that slaughter spoke louder to her than the roar of any cannon.

She had a sudden vivid image of Erik in Montmartre, walking away from her in a circle of armed guards, returning to a cage. She could not let it happen again.

The little side table in the corner had been cleared of Erik's things and returned to its usual function of holding a lamp, but bending down, Christine found the shaving box he had tucked away there. Underneath it were a spare folded shirt and her silver comb. She pulled it all out and carried the armload to the divan.

There was no time to be delicate about this. Christine threw open the latch on the wooden box and raised the lid, half expecting to find nothing inside. But no, to her relief there were Erik’s razor and shaving brush, along with a mirror barely large enough to see her own chin, two rolls of bandages — and underneath, just where she had suspected he kept it, an envelope fat with folded papers.

She shook these out and opened up the first. The document was creased along the folds but the official seal was intact, with the two names inked side by side. Erik Andersson, architect, hereby declares his intention to wed...

Her own name stared back at her like a reflection in the mirror. Did she dare?

Did she not? The name Daaé had been her father’s, she had worked hard at the Variétés to clear it, but in doing so had made it her own. Mademoiselle Christine Daaé in concert. A precious thing, her name: a collection of sounds from her childhood, the wisp of longing that was her father's ghost. Her inheritance.

Hers, to keep or give away as she chose.

Erik was at the Ambulance and time was short.

“Christine?” Meg asked from the doorway. “What are you looking for?”

Christine glanced up to find them all there in the doorway, Meg and Raoul and Madame Giry, all
three breathing identical worried puffs of white steam. Against all odds, it made her smile.

“It’s all right,” she said, but she could see they were not reassured. “I found what I wanted.” She waved the unfolded document before her and stood up, pushing aside the rest of the things on the divan. “There is something can do.”

Raoul opened his mouth to say something, then closed it with a snap. Meg, with less restraint, said, “You’re both crazy,” and looked to her mother as though expecting her to put an end to this.

“It needs only your consent, Madame Giry.” Christine held Madame Giry’s questioning gaze until, at last, she gave a small nod in invitation and Christine passed her the marriage licence.

“You know this is quite impossible,” Madame Giry said gently. She tapped the date on the seal. “It expires today.”

“Yes, Erik told me we had thirty days. There isn't much time, I need to go now. Perhaps if you went ahead to the mairie...”

“Why in God’s name?” Meg began, before stopping herself with a realisation. “Married. Married men are not being drafted.”

“Not yet,” Raoul said, “but it is only a matter of time and numbers — Christine, you cannot be serious. After everything you said!”

Christine touched the gold band on her finger, turning it in a familiar motion. “Yes,” she said simply. “After everything I said.”

Raoul looked from her to the ring and back again. “Christine... Andersson.”

“Christine Daaé,” Meg spoke up fiercely, looking at Christine as if daring her to object. “It's on all your posters. I'm not changing them now!”

“You won't have to,” Christine started to button up her coat to go outside. “Nothing needs to change here. We will simply go on as we are. And I will not take a new name for the stage.”

Madame Giry’s worry lines deepened into a frown. “This is not the moment for wild decisions. If the army breaks through and lifts the siege, marriage will serve no purpose but to bind you in a way you cannot undo.”

“And if the siege continues,” Raoul added, “sooner or later all men will be called up, married or not.”

Christine was already tying her scarf and lifting her braided hair over her collar. To Raoul she said, “Go to the mairie for me if you can — please. Find someone who can help with the ceremony. I will meet you there as soon as I can, with Erik.”

“Just like that?”

His ironic tone scalded her with a reminder of their own prolonged engagement, but he winced and she saw that he too regretted bringing it up. She touched his hand briefly, acknowledging the past. “Please.”

“I'll accompany you to the ambulance.”
“No, No, Raoul. You've done all you can and more. I need to talk to Erik alone.” She carefully avoided looking at his bad leg, leaving unsaid what they both knew: Raoul could not endure another walk back to the ambulance; reaching the mairie in Montmartre would be trial enough. He looked embarrassed and deeply unhappy, but seeing her determined, voiced no more objections.

“Madame Giry?” she prompted. “The mairie...”

Madame Giry pressed her lips together, and for a moment Christine thought she was about to refuse her consent, but she only glanced at the licence again before folding it into her own coat pocket.

“Here, one moment.” Meg ducked back into the dining room and returned to pass around the morning’s bread between them. When Raoul declined his share, she wrapped it in a napkin along with her own and put the package into her pocket with a sigh. “I'm coming too.”

They trooped towards the front door in silence. Christine wondered at the calm that was settling over her now the decision had been made, and at how strangely quiet her thoughts had become. Even the military music in her mind had receded to the faintest pulse of her heartbeat.

Christine Daaé, singer, hereby declares Erik Andersson, architect, bound to her in a way that could not be undone.

So be it then. She was not afraid. Around the walls the guns raged impotently, but they could not take him, he was spoken for. Christine Daaé claimed him for her own — and she was not letting go.

They emerged out into the teeth of the wind and the louder sounds of battle. As soon as the door to the building closed behind them, Madame Giry motioned for them to wait and to Christine’s surprise, removed her own thick woollen shawl and wrapped it over Christine’s hair and shoulders, fluffing it up to shield her cheeks from the wind. It was warm, almost safe. Christine felt a lump rise in her throat.

“Thank you,” she started to say, but Madame Giry waved this aside, battling the wind to keep her uncovered hair from escaping its coil.

“Christine Daaé, I make you no promise to support this mad scheme. But if you bring him out of there, safe...” The intensity in her voice caught Christine off-guard; she could only wait.

“Then you may do as you choose.” Madame Giry gave her a small smile, but her eyes were sad. “Choose wisely.” She turned to shepherd the others towards Montmartre, leaning into the wind.

Christine saw Raoul and Meg glance back, then pulled the shawl across her mouth to keep out the cold and went her own way.

o o o

“My dear Monsieur Andersson, it is a course that benefits all.”

Doctor Swinburne clasped his hands on the heavy desk before him and spoke in the measured tones of a treating physician. “Entertainment of as fine a quality as I hear you provided some weeks ago in Montmartre would boost our wounded men’s spirits, soothe their impatience, and encourage them to remain until their recovery is complete. You would help them immensely. Now, is that not a better plan than this nonsense about displaying your injuries?” He favoured Erik with a
benevolent smile through his beard. “Think of it as your contribution to the war effort.”

“My contribution.” Erik’s own voice clanged like a bell in his skull. He tried to hide his confusion. What did Swinburne mean by entertainment? Entertainment in Montmartre… Could he have imagined that Christine's one concert there had been Erik's doing? Then all at once he grasped it: “You refer to my —” he caught himself before he could say ‘arrest’ — “my recital. The duet I performed with Mademoiselle Daaé.”

“The young vicomte spoke so highly of it in explaining his absence that I confess I was sorry to have missed it. And we hear much of Mademoiselle Daaé’s successes these days at the, er, Odéon —”

“Variétés.”

“That's the one.” Swinburne sat upright in his chair, all his attention focused unnervingly on Erik’s face. “If you are as capable a singer as she is then I'm certain you could do much good here. Men will take you for one of their own with that bandage you insist on sporting; it will lift their spirits. Now, what say you to that?”

“You propose to hire me as your,” Erik bit off the words, “singing freak.”

“Now really, there is no call…”

A demon with the voice of an angel. The room began a slow rotation about Erik, as though he was a hanged man dangling from a rope. He looked at the floor, glad of the solid chair beneath him and the weight of the hat he clutched in both hands, and willed the world to be still.

Old memories scrabbled at the walls of his mind. Paolo the gypsy had heard him sing one morning, in an incautious moment when the sunrise had looked too magnificent to his childish eyes to keep silent. The keeper had stood there, slack-jawed, rooted to the spot behind the wagon where he had gone to relieve himself, and listened. And listened. The Devil’s Child had paid dearly for that error, first in threats and cajoling, then in beatings that grew more savage in proportion with his stubbornness. Paolo had glimpsed his goldmine, the singing monster who would draw more crowds than any sideshow attraction before him, but that one glimpse was all he ever got. The Devil’s Child never sang again in his hearing.

Swinburne’s voice was still rising and falling and rising again in that patient tone of his that seemed calculated to reassure, but Erik cut him off.

“Never.”

He stretched his mouth into a copy of Swinburne's vapid smile, but with no trace of benevolence. “If it's entertainment you require, you may stage a freak show. A human spectacle, such as you surgeons seem to enjoy.” He broadened the smile until it deformed the bandage. Let him see it for what it was. “My letter, monsieur le docteur. Then you may see for yourself what this face is worth.”

Swinburne's brows angled upward until his forehead resembled a washboard. “You would rather display your face than perform for us here as a musician, as an artist? Forgive me, I don't understand.”

“There is nothing to understand. I will not sing for you.”
“Your recital—”

“Was an exception. The Vicome was quite right, it was a most unusual occasion.”

“Ah. One night only?”

“Exactly so. And the true attraction was Christine Daaé.” Erik twitched in the chair, only with the greatest difficulty keeping his frustration at bay. “Let us keep to the matter at hand, Doctor.”

“Tell me, wasn’t Mademoiselle Daaé’s first concert billed as ‘one night only’?” Sparks of amusement danced in his eyes, too intelligent for Erik’s liking. “The first of many such nights in the young lady’s case.”

Erik made no response, but Swinburne continued just as if he had voiced enthusiastic agreement: “Monsieur Andersson, I see no reason our wounded cannot benefit from music just as those at the Variétés do. We have precious little need of sideshows right now — but we could certainly use a singer.” He reached into his pocket, flipped open his fob-watch and frowned. “Excuse me; the Ambassador will be getting impatient. I urge you to take a few days to consider the merits of my suggestion. There is no hurry; with the sortie going on we will be at capacity by tonight, and well occupied for a time with keeping souls and bodies together. But soon enough, sir, those souls will have need of you.”

Erik stood a moment before the surgeon did. Now; it had to be done now. Under its linen swaddle, his deformity ached and burned and tugged at his jaw as if the very scars were crawling from his flesh. Swinburne was dismissing it, but how could he be expected to know any better when all he had seen was the mask — not even a mask but mere bandages, as commonplace a sight as any in an ambulance?

“Think on it,” Swinburne was saying as he offered a handshake.

Erik raised a hand to the back of his own neck and grasped the linen knot.

“Darling! There you are.” A voice at once foreign and familiar through to every bone in his spine sounded just behind him. Christine — but the lilt, the cadences she was using, were as artfully constructed as any costume and every note sparkled as if under a spotlight.

Erik dropped his hand guiltily and turned, noticing from the corner of his eye Swinburne look towards her in surprise, which at once, inevitably, blossomed into admiration.

Christine came in. In her fox-collar coat, with a shawl draped negligently from one gloved hand, she was the very image of understated elegance, made all the more dazzling by the sparse surrounds of the surgeon’s tent. It was, Erik realised belatedly, an effect of which she was well aware.

“Good morning, Doctor Swinburne. I am so sorry to disturb you, but there has been a little misunderstanding.”

“Mademoiselle Daaé!” Swinburne greeted her, recovering his manners. “What an unexpected pleasure to see you here. Coincidentally, I had just expressed to Monsieur Andersson my respect for your recent work with the wounded at the Variétés.”

“You are kind, Doctor. I do regret this visit must be a brief one, forgive me;” — she turned to Erik, “Darling, they are expecting us at the mairie right now. I’m sure Doctor Swinburne will excuse us.”
“Of course,” Swinburne bowed graciously, although he looked as baffled as Erik felt. “As a matter of fact I too have some urgent business to attend to. Was there anything I could do for you, Mademoiselle?”

“Not at all, now that I have found Monsieur Andersson.”

Erik could only stand mute as a mannequin while Christine, this glittering star who was his Christine, approached him and wrapped a proprietorial hand around his arm. The pressure of her fingers was far greater than he had expected, a cue to follow, but he could not for the life of him fathom what his role was to be. “Christine,” he said tightly, acknowledging defeat. Chagny must have fairly galloped on his crutches to alert her for her to have discovered him so quickly. Erik tried to feel annoyed, but the pressure of Christine's hand was distracting.

“Ah, there.” Christine had spotted the conscription letter still open on the desk, and reaching across, plucked it up deftly and slipped it into her pocket.

“Uh, errr…” Swinburne looked from her pocket to Erik and back again. He almost pitied the man. “A misunderstanding, you say?”

Christine gave him a smile that lit her eyes; it looked utterly genuine. “So silly, really. We neglected to finalise a few details of our marriage, and well — you understand how the government is at the moment. The right hand seems not to know what the left does.”

Erik frankly stared at her as she removed her glove and demonstrated to the doctor’s bemused gaze the ring she had been wearing for weeks. “It is a poor time for a bride to be left without her groom, wouldn’t you say? There should never have been a conscription. We are fortunate; the mairie seems prepared to help. But we do need to hurry,” she added to Erik, with a glance that was at once a plea and almost a challenge. “Come, darling, I don't know how long they will wait.”

“Of course,” he said mechanically, before his mind had fully caught up with the substance of the extraordinary libretto she had composed, let alone his part within it. Darling. Her husband. He was to play her husband! While he was still struggling with this notion, Christine's hand on his arm was secretly, inexorably, steering him around to the doorway. “Do excuse us, doctor.”

Swinburne was quicker off the mark than Erik would have believed possible. “Newlyweds! I had no idea. My warmest congratulations, Mademois—— uh, Madame; Monsieur.” He shook Erik's hand with apparent delight, yet Erik was instantly convinced that he had not believed a word of it. “Rather simplifies things with the draft, doesn't it? Why didn't you say so?”

“It was supposed to be secret,” Erik all but growled. Christine blushed so convincingly that Swinburne looked a little less sceptical, but Erik had had his fill of this ludicrous operetta. He put on his hat.

“Good day, Doctor.”

“I rather doubt it will be — but may I wish both of you the very best of luck. And perhaps you might still consider my offer, Monsieur Andersson.”

Erik made a noncommittal noise and, freeing his arm from Christine, succeeded in leading her out of the tent.

Outside all was in chaos: the first of the wagons bearing the wounded had arrived from the lines, and even in the frosty air the smell of blood was overpowering. Erik averted his eyes from the contorted shapes of tomorrow's corpses, seething with humiliation. Bad enough to have failed in his
own plan, but to be made a laughingstock by Christine’s incomprehensible way of extricating him was untenable.

“What was his offer?” Christine demanded, not looking at him, their arms still linked, posing as newlyweds as they negotiated the suddenly crowded paths.

He walked faster, forcing her to speed up alongside. “Never mind him, what the devil are you doing? You cannot pose as married, we will be discovered at once. What will you tell him when he learns the truth, as he surely will? That it was another little misunderstanding?”

“That we are married.”

“Married?” He dropped her arm and clenched his fists, unable to look at her lest she see the fury and agony of longing she woke in him. “You have rejected my suit; very well, but to mock it, to make of it nothing but a farce? To call me ‘darling’ in front of him… Why, Christine?”

“Erik.” Something in the way she spoke his name made him look at her. Her eyes shone and she reached forward and brushed a strand of his hair over his bandages. Even gloved, her touch was a soothing magic, calming him when he did not wish to be calm. “It is only the truth. Madame Giry and Raoul and Meg are waiting for us at the mairie. The licence you obtained is still valid today.”

“Today.” Erik found he was shaking. “I don't — no. You said no.”

“Married men are not being drafted.” Christine shrugged lightly, but the façade of her courage was paper-thin and she was biting her lip despite the cold. “It needn't change anything. We would just sign the papers.”

“Not change anything?” Erik was incredulous. “You would be my wife!”

Her eyes flashed. “Am I less than that now?”

“You — no, or maybe — Christine…” He was floundering, trying to find some thread of reason to hold onto. The idea of marriage, of Christine accepting him only to keep him from the National Guard was too bizarre to fit in the confines of his mind.

“This is wrong,” he said finally. “All wrong.” He had imagined it a hundred different ways, Christine in a flowing gown, Christine meeting him at the altar, lifting her veil… Or even just a subdued ceremony with only the two of them and a witness, Christine’s hand in his and her lips warm from their kiss. Not this false wedding.

“This is wrong,” he repeated more firmly, and stood straight before her, pulling himself up. He took a deep breath, glanced at the passing medics carrying a stretcher and hastily returned his gaze to Christine. “I will not join this danse macabre again; you needn't fear it. But there is the letter. Christine, I will need to disappear for a time — wait, what are you doing?”

Christine was working her ring over a knuckle turned red with cold. “Leaving you to your own devices.” She held up the gold band between her fingers. “Take it.”

“Christine…”

“Take it!”

He caught her hand instead and pulled her to him, shuddering with relief at the feel of her wrapped tightly in his arms. Until that moment he had not realised how badly he needed her, how afraid he had been of never holding her again. How long would it be before he could do this after he returned
into hiding?

“Let me go!” Christine twisted out of his grasp and whirled to him angrily. She showed him the ring. “You gave me this. Or do you deny it?” She did not wait for him to reply. “I came here because I want you beside me. Not skulking in shadows and fearing discovery, or selling your sanity in some freakshow. I want you to stand with me and to sing with me and be mine. That's all there is to it.” She took a shuddering breath. “And if that makes me yours also, then I accept. But I will not live my life watching the shadows, waiting for you to emerge, and then wondering when you may vanish again. Marry me, or take back your ring.”

Erik had an eerie sensation of watching himself from high above, as though he was seeing himself through the eyes of a guardian angel.

Christine was waiting. Her monster of a lover had no shame; he kept her waiting while his heart pumped blood around his veins over and over and his brain refused to acknowledge the enormity of what was happening. Around them, a river of human bodies eddied and flowed: some upright, some supine, some missing limbs or with faces horribly burnt, all with hands black with gunpowder. And in the midst of this river of death Christine stood her ground and waited. For him.

He was almost certain he managed to put the ring on her before his knees folded beneath him.
Lovers 'Mid the Rain and Hailstones

Chapter Notes

A/N: It's taken a while to get this into the form I wanted, but here we are at last. The title refers to Keats' sonnet, "A dream on reading Dante's episode of Paolo and Francesca" (which in turn refers to Dante's "Inferno" — isn't fanfic wonderful?). And in case anyone is wondering, this is certainly not the end of the story!

Chapter 67 — Lovers 'Mid the Rain and Hailstones

The whole of Montmartre seemed to crouch, tense as a cat at a mousehole, waiting to pounce on the first scrap of news. In the streets, every pair of eyes scanned the horizon, and every rooftop or barren spot that offered a view was packed with women and children watching the innocent-looking white clouds puff up over the northern forts with a sound like fireworks. With all her heart Meg yearned to be there among them, to see if she too might identify the Prussian batteries or at least catch a glimpse of the source of the smoke, but that was impossible. She had to support one half of the weight that Raoul de Chagny, grey-faced and shuddering with effort, could no longer bear himself. Her mother supported his other shoulder, and between them Raoul was trying his best to walk. On the steep frozen cobblestones of Montmartre his crutches had become nothing but an additional hazard, and after his second near-slip, Madame Giry had halted their ascent, wiping the perspiration from her bare forehead:

"Monsieur, let me take those bits of wood. There is no sense recounting the stations of the cross all the way to the mairie. Meg will help."

It was a mark of Raoul's state of exhaustion that he did not protest even for form's sake, but handed over the crutches and staggered obediently until Meg and Madame Giry could keep him upright between them.

"Forgive me," he had muttered to Meg as he raised his arm to lean on her shoulder, leaving her acutely embarrassed, less by the unfamiliar weight of his arm than by the shame of failure that was so obvious in his voice.

"It isn't far now," she said, trying to help, and realised too late that it had been exactly the wrong thing to say. Raoul nodded politely, but his shoulder stiffened, and Meg knew she had only reminded him of the purpose of their trek.

Christine Andersson. It just sounded wrong. Even if Christine meant what she said about not changing her life, she would be no less married. And what would that make the former Phantom — something like a brother-in-law? Now that was a disquieting thought.

At long last they reached the rue des Abbesses. The mairie squatted a little way ahead, on the
corner of the square. It was an imposing building, more Paris than Montmartre, with three storeys of tall windows and a portico with a set of heavy doors in the centre of the ground floor. The entrance was patrolled by locals in *Garde Nationale* greatcoats, armed with rifles slung across the shoulder. They stood talking on the steps, every now and again motioning in the direction of the fort.

Approaching them, Meg decided she had never felt so utterly out of place. A wedding on a day like today had to seem a tasteless joke, and these men did not look to be in the mood for entertainment. She peered over Raoul's shoulder toward her mother, wondering if she too felt ill at ease, but Madame Giry only handed the crutches to Raoul, freed herself carefully and went to the guards with a determined stride. Meg staggered a step, freed suddenly from her burden as Raoul stood.

"Monsieur Maréchal," Madame Giry greeted the nearest of the men, and Meg recognised Marie's father. "A pleasure to see you. How is your daughter?"

"Pleasure's mine, madame." Maréchal doffed his kepi, breathing out a white cloud that frosted his beard. "Doing well enough, the little scamp, now she's got the piano at the *Folies* to keep her out of trouble. Runs the place all on her own when that Ballard fellow is on duty." He spoke negligently but Meg heard the pride hiding behind his words at the chance to speak of Marie and the efforts she was making to keep the *Folies* open. "What brings you here? No more ration cards today I'm afraid, all gone by seven."

"Any news of the battle?"

"Not as I hear it." He blew his wind-reddened nose and then spotted Raoul and Meg standing behind Madame Giry. "Parbleu! Lieutenant de Chagny here — and little Giry as well! Now wait a minute, is it a permit you're after? Mademoiselle Daaé's not planning another performance for us, is she?"

The other guards were looking their way too now.

"A permit of sorts," Madame Giry replied with an equanimity that Meg envied. Her own heart was beating far too quickly even considering the climb. "May we come in out of the wind, gentlemen?"

"Ah, of course. Begging your pardon." Maréchal hurried to hold the door for them and raised his cap again as Madame Giry came through. Her mother had that effect on people. Meg exchanged a smile with him, feeling a little more relaxed.

In the foyer it was warmer and considerably quieter. Meg looked around curiously, having never before had cause to come inside. The interior was designed to be grand, with a high moulded ceiling supported by columns and a sweeping staircase, but it felt more functional than grand, and smelled comfortingly of tobacco and books. As Maréchal had warned them, the door in the corner marked "Ration Cards Here" was firmly shut and the line of chairs against the wall was empty of petitioners. In fact, there were only two other people in the entire foyer: a clerk at the desk across from the doorway who was writing something in a ledger, the tip of his tongue poking out in concentration, and the ancient housekeeper, Mère Pouillard, well known to all Montmartre for her eternal battles with the neighbourhood *gamins*. She was asleep in a chair at the foot of the stairs with her mop held before her like a staff of office. Judging from the state of the floor, that mop had not been applied to it for some time.

Raoul motioned for Madame Giry and Meg to wait and went ahead to the clerk's desk.

"Cards are all gone." The young man dipped his pen and did not bother to raise his eyes from his writing. "Come back in the morning."
"I need to speak to Jean Gandon, of Monsieur Clémenceau's office."

"Take a seat. Going to be a while today. Who shall I say is calling?"

"My name is Raoul de Chagny."

The clerk's head shot up at that and his eyes became round. "Chagny? Lieutenant de Chagny, from Sedan? The one who spoke at Erik Andersson's hearing?"

"Tell him it's urgent."

"Yes sir. That is, if he's in sir. Monsieur Clémenceau said not to send anyone up this morning, but... I'll go look now." He bolted up and attempted what Meg thought was supposed to be a salute, but it came out a bit silly without a kepi. Raoul simply looked at him until the clerk's face pinkened and he scampered off in search of Jean.

"Are you certain this is wise?" Madame Giry asked in a low voice when he had disappeared down a corridor. "If Gandon determines the reason for the urgency, he may prove more hindrance than help."

"He is with the mayor's office. Besides, he knows Andersson."

Madame Giry gave him a wry look. "In Monsieur Andersson's case, that may not be an advantage."

"Shh," Meg said, "someone's coming."

A door in the back of the foyer had swung open to readmit the young clerk, looking well pleased with himself. He gave Raoul another lopsided salute and stepped aside. Behind him, carrying an overflowing file of documents, came Jean Gandon. Meg had seen Jean often enough around Montmartre to know that he commanded a great deal of respect here, but it was difficult to credit it looking at him. His Garde Nationale uniform sat as casually on his frame as any civilian suit, and between his folding spectacles and the set of compasses in his pocket, there was nothing remotely military about his appearance. Still, she remembered how he had presided at Erik's hearing, and recalled too the way Henri had spoken of his role in last month's uprising. One did not need to look like a soldier to command an army.

When Gandon spotted their small company, he nearly dropped his file. "Lieutenant de Chagny! And the young artist and her mother. Now that's a surprise. Thank you, Léo," he nodded to dismiss the clerk, "you did well." He shook Raoul's hand and greeted Madame Giry and Meg warmly, looking between them for an indication of their purpose.

Raoul kept his voice low. "Guyon received more newspapers before the sortie, from London. The Illustrated News and The Times. He thought you may be interested."

Meg looked anxiously at Raoul, wondering if it was a ruse or whether Henri had truly been sharing information with Jean Gandon. He went to Gandon's club meetings occasionally, she knew that much, but she had not suspected him to be interested enough in their politics to furnish them with information. Her mother too was following this more closely than Meg would have liked.

Gandon's eyes lit up. "The Times? But they have a correspondent with Gambetta! What do they say then, is he truly sitting out in Fontainebleau waiting for us?"

Raoul cautioned him to discretion, with a warning glance first at the clerk who had returned to his desk and then at the sleeping housekeeper. "If there is somewhere we can talk, I would be glad to share what I know."
"Come right through."

Raoul hesitated. "A moment. There is another purpose to our visit; a personal matter. Madame Giry, do you have that document?"

At the sight of the bedraggled marriage licence and the two names on it, Gandon looked nonplussed. "Andersson! And the Daaé girl. We've not seen so much as a shadow of them at rue Fontenelle since she went to sing in the city. And they are to marry?"

"Yes, today. We are looking to arrange the paperwork for the ceremony before they arrive."

"Today? But... I've heard nothing about it. Does the mayor expect them?"

"No. It may be somewhat irregular," — Raoul carried on before Gandon could interrupt, "but the banns have been published for a month. There is no impediment. Madame Giry is Christine's guardian of course, and Mademoiselle Giry and I would be glad to witness. Everything is in order."

"Irregular is right." Gandon shook his head. "Lieutenant, with the greatest respect — I can't ask the mayor to leave his post for this, not during the sortie. Events are unfolding at such a rate that we may well have news by nightfall. The fate of Paris hangs in the balance."

"There is no need to distract the mayor. You have the necessary authorisation, do you not? It is a matter only of having the documents signed and witnessed; a quarter of an hour at most."

Gandon rubbed the bridge of his nose under his spectacles uncomfortably, leaving a smudge of ink. "Look, you and Guyon did all you could for us after the Hôtel de Ville, and I'd like to help, but I'd best try to understand. We have a hundred thousand men in the field. Isn't Andersson with them? Rumour was he'd enlisted with a freeshooter company — but then he'd be out there, knocking down a few Prussians instead of coming here." He stopped short. "There was a letter for him last week."

This cut too close for Meg's comfort, but at that moment her mother stepped in.

"Ah, the letter! Thank you for forwarding it." Madame Giry waved her hand at the marriage licence in a suggestion that it was in some way related to the content of Erik's letter. "It has meant the world to both of them to have their future decided. I hate to put you to any trouble, Monsieur Gandon, but it would be a weight off my mind if you agreed to officiate at the ceremony. These are difficult times and we are all anxious to have at least one piece of happy news. I'm sure you and Lieutenant de Chagny have a lot to discuss afterwards."

Gandon looked from the licence to Madame Giry. Reluctantly, he said, "Andersson did talk of marriage before the march on the Hôtel de Ville, but truth to tell, it was more in the way of raving. I thought he'd been at the absinthe. The way he and that girl carried on..." He cleared his throat self-consciously at Madame Giry's mild expression, and capitulated. "I'll see what I can do — but I must warn you, it may be impossible. They will need a notary and we are down to less than half the regular staff; everyone's been at the bastion since last night. Where on earth is Andersson stationed then, that he's able to leave his post today?"

"At the Variétés," Madame Giry said flatly. She met Gandon's surprised look with a quirk of her brows. "We all serve in our own way, Monsieur Gandon. Soldiers, revolutionaries," — she cast her eyes around the quiet room, — "clerks. Artists also."

Meg had to hide a small grin at this deft turnabout. A streak of scarlet appeared on Jean's forehead at the suggestion that his situation here at the mairie was in any way more pleasant than that of
rank soldiers crossing the freezing Marne.

He was about to speak again when the doors behind them opened. Instinctively, everyone turned as one — and saw the strangest wedding party Meg could have ever imagined.

Christine's arm was hooked through Erik's, but Meg was not sure which of them was guiding the other. Erik's coat, trousers and even gloves were covered in mud and wet on one side, as though he had fallen to his knees on the ground and then sat in a puddle for good measure. Christine, in contrast, wore her mother's best shawl as a mantle around her shoulders, and the dew in her curls glittered like diamonds. It would have been difficult for two people to look so different. And yet...

And yet they looked identically stunned, like two newcomers to the theatre seeing the curtain rise for the very first time. There was something at once poignant and ridiculous about them, and Meg did not know why but it made her heart squeeze into a hard lump in her chest.

They stopped just inside the doorway. A gust of wind and noise followed them from the street as the doors shut, and then there was only silence. Nobody spoke. The stillness spread around them like a rising lake, like a spell transfixing everyone from the clerk to Jean Gandon to Raoul.

It's the light, Meg thought, and the artist in her saw with a dispassionate eye what the friend could not identify. Daylight streaming through the uncurtained windows set their two figures alight, trembling and bright and clear, light that made the rest of the foyer recede into the a hastily sketched background.

It's only the light, she thought again, but in that moment's illusion they were floating, and she and her mother and Raoul and the rest were only the audience, earthbound, shielding their eyes against the sky.

"Meg?" Christine asked, and Meg jumped guiltily at being caught staring. She tried to sound nonchalant as she said:

"That was quick. You two look..."

"You look happy," Raoul said. He sounded hoarse.

Christine's answering smile was gentle and a little shy. She had started to disengage her arm from Erik's, but Meg saw the flash of panic in his face at the same time as Christine seemed to sense it, and Christine remained as she was, locked arm in arm with her groom.

As for her groom, he stood as motionless beside her as if he had walked into an ambush. Only his eyes behind the bandage moved wildly, scanning the room. He fixed at last on Jean Gandon and tightened his arm to pull Christine nearer.

"Andersson," said Gandon, taking in the scene with amazement. "And Christine Daaé. I hear congratulations are in order. You might have warned us about this, Louise won't be happy to be missing it. She's in a right old temper with you for taking off like that."

Erik stared at him. Slowly, he released Christine's arm. Meg noticed that the wedding ring Christine had been wearing gleamed around his little finger. "My... apologies." The words sounded foreign in his voice. "I see you are no longer at the ramparts."

Jean frowned. "I've been posted to the mayor as a deputy. The Committee took a vote on it. We're more organised now; you ought to come to a meeting."

Erik ignored the invitation, evidently hung up on the first part. "You are going to marry us." Meg
wondered if he had expected the Pope.

"If you wish it done today."

"I do," Erik said, and the challenge in his tone made it plain that he was ready for resistance.

"Madame Giry," Christine intervened, squeezing Erik's hand again without looking at him, "is everything ready?" Her thumb was rolling into his palm in a comforting rhythm, back and forth.

"Almost."

Madame Giry came toward them, her expression curiously tranquil. She looked them up and down in turn, and Meg was at once reminded of any number of such inspections before an opening night. Only instead of a stern admonition to Christine to mind her breathing or watch her timing, Madame Giry embraced her tightly, murmuring something as she smoothed her hair back into place. Then she turned to Erik and raised her hand to the level of her eyes — and continued upward to touch his cheek.

Erik jolted as if she had tried to unmask him, but Madame Giry caught his shoulder. "You live," she told him. "Never forget it."

In answer Erik laced his fingers into Christine's, and Meg found she could not bear to look anymore. Whatever Christine had said, this was more than a few signatures on a piece of paper, and far more than the right to stay away from the front. This was legal, binding, permanent, and terrifying.

And Christine was plunging into it with eyes wide open.

Christine was getting married.

Feeling suddenly like a little girl, Meg touched her mother's elbow and, when Madame Giry turned, put her arm around her waist.

"I didn't think it would be like this."

"Oh?" Her mother returned the embrace, but her eyes were on Erik and Christine as they turned to converse with Jean, and on Raoul who moved to the desk to dictate answers to the clerk's questions. Papers were being shuffled, ink refilled. It was starting.

"It doesn't feel real," Meg said. "Do you remember when she and Raoul returned from the Opéra in that boat… They were both soaked to the skin, Christine's teeth were chattering, her lips were purple and she had that white dress on… Dripping wet, but alive and safe," Meg felt her throat tighten. "It looked like a fairytale rescue. Magical. Like a happy end."

"Orpheus Triumphant?" her mother suggested with gentle irony. Meg tried not to feel hurt, but something of it must have conveyed itself, because Madame Giry turned to her and her eyes were very serious. "You question it, Meg. You think I should have done better by her, protected her better."

"I didn't say that."

"You think I should not have allowed this."

"Maman…"
"You're right." Madame Giry straightened her back slightly, a dancer showing nothing of the work behind the steps. "I ought to have restrained her dreams many years ago, and put a stop to their singing at once. As I ought to have done what was right, accepted the settlement from your father's family and raised you to live a quiet, safe life away from Paris. And I ought never to have hidden that boy." Then all of a sudden her tone lightened, and she gave a wistful smile. "It seems I am very bad at doing what ought to be done. But we are here now. And perhaps that is not so little. Perhaps, that is the way it ought to be."

Meg let her go and stayed silent for a time, thinking, while before her eyes the runaway spectacle of the wedding unfolded into reality.

It happened so fast in the end, and with little more ceremony than it would have taken to register for ration cards. The small meeting hall near the foyer was made ready by Mère Pouillard, woken up with difficulty for the occasion, and a table draped with what turned out to be the only available cloth, a tricolour stained with a cigarette burn. Around this their entire party assembled, with Gandon presiding and the young clerk Léo taking a record. Madame Giry was called upon to affirm her consent, and she along with Raoul gave their declarations. Madame Giry signed; Raoul signed. Names were copied into the official records; a decrepit notary was called down from his office to review the documents and Léo was sent to fetch the mayor's seal.

Christine and Erik stepped forward. The fingers of Christine's hand that Erik clasped had gone white from the pressure, but she did not seem to notice. If not for those clasped hands the two of them might have been soldiers standing at attention, looking straight ahead.

"I do," Christine said when the vows were read. Her voice was clear and pitched for music, but Meg only realised this after Erik added his own "I do", and the sound came in perfect, beautiful counterpoint.

How was it possible to shape a song from so few syllables, so few notes?

Their song danced briefly the air and in that moment Meg forgot every reason to be afraid for the future, forgot every terrible moment of their Opéra past, forgot everything except this one instant that broke her heart, and healed it, and made her ache for more.

When its echo faded, Erik tried to return the wedding ring onto Christine's finger. Even from where Meg stood she could see that their two hands trembled so violently that at first the ring would not go on. Finally it was accomplished. Christine pushed the band down past her knuckle and closed her hand on it. Erik let her go.

"Congratulations," Jean pronounced into the silence. His voice was subdued, as though he too was unwilling to shatter the moment. "You are hereby wed in the eyes of the law. Citoyen Erik Andersson, Citoyenne Christine Andersson — your family book."

He took from the clerk a small card-bound booklet and opened it to the first page, where these two names had been inscribed. The ink was barely dry. Beneath that were spaces left for the future: for births, deaths, events large and not so large that would belong to them.

Erik did not touch it but looked helplessly at Christine, as though this, finally, was too much to bear. He was so pale that Meg felt a moment's horror that he meant to do something mad — she was certain that had there been a trapdoor, he would have grasped Christine by the waist and vanished with her.

But this was only a hall at the mairie, and there was no theatre magic to disguise him.
"Take it," Christine said. "It's ours."

Gently, she guided his hand to the little book. Jean dropped it into his palm, and that was that.

Something tapped against the floor. Meg raised her eyes. Across from her, Raoul moved on his crutches up to where Christine stood, and when he reached her, let the crutches fall. They crashed to the floor with a tremendous noise of wood against stone flagging, and he stood alone, uneasy but seemingly steady enough.

With a small cry, Christine flung her arms about him, and Raoul held onto her in turn. For a few moments they remained that way, swaying as though buffeted by the wind. When they separated, Raoul turned toward Erik and opened his hands in a gesture whose meaning was crystal clear: no crutches. In his expression was the most curious mixture of a challenge and, Meg thought, something like acceptance.

"Stay to the end." Erik spoke harshly, but it was more plea than command.

Raoul gave him a hard grin. "Don't worry. I shall." He bowed carefully first to Christine, then to Meg and Madame Giry. To Gandon, he said, "I'll be outside. Send for me when you're ready."

Then he turned and, limping heavily, walked unaided out of the hall.

Christine watched the door close behind him, and Meg caught the faintest movement of her lips. Thank you.

"Foolishness," Madame Giry sighed. "With such an injury—"

"I'll check on him." Meg stepped forward and collected the crutches. They were heavier than they looked and awkwardly long, but she found she did not mind going. The searing intimacy between Christine and Erik was too much to bear, and looking at them now was like gazing too long into the sky after long-vanished balloons.

She wanted the ground, and the city outside, and the bursting fireworks in the white sky that promised freedom.

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Such a strange day, Madame Giry thought, watching this young woman who was still so much a child struggle to sign her new name. It was a price Christine had chosen to pay, and not for one moment did Madame Giry think she regretted it, but she wondered if Erik understood what cherished ghosts she had to kill with every stroke of that pen. Gustave had left her too few pieces of himself to hold onto. His true legacy lay within her music, and perhaps Gustave of all people would have understood this match his daughter had found.

Or perhaps not. He might have turned away from it as he had been wont to do when grieving, turning inward to a place where the world was simpler. At such times he would play his Scandinavian songs, closing his eyes to the chill breeze from the sea, while his finely shaped calloused fingers danced along the strings. He had never spoken of his wife, Christine's mother, except through those spells of lost music, but Gustave had known what marriage was.

And she, who had promised to care for Christine and guide her, what did she know of marriage? That was a doorway through which she could not follow — and Christine did have a talent for finding those, Madame Giry thought ruefully.

Signature completed, Christine returned the pen to its stand and paused for a moment. Then her
thoughtful look changed to the faintest hint of a laugh, and Madame Giry realised with surprise that it was meant for Erik, who had stood over her as rigid as a guard.

"There," Christine told him under her breath as she passed the register back to Jean. "Now you are claimed, and signed for."

"As are you," Erik said just as quietly. "The world will judge it a poor bargain."

"The world is too busy fighting. But one day it must stop, and then," — Christine took a deep breath — "we shall have music. And they can judge it all they like."

No, Madame Giry decided, she knew nothing of marriage, but she did know something of this. All that Christine was becoming could not be confined by a name. Her own voice sounded in her, needed to be heard, and its call was stronger than that of all the bugles and drums. And Erik… Madame Giry sighed. Meg was right; this marriage was certainly no happy end, but who knew what lay ahead. For the moment at least, they were here. And that was a start.
Spiegel im Spiegel

Chapter Notes

A/N: I'm back! You didn't think that was the end, did you? A bit of background trivia: the grande sortie is in full swing here, and despite the hardship due to poor planning and freezing weather, some territory to the north had actually been won back; the French were holding a village called Epinay. Bonus trivia: The title refers to a famous minimalist piano piece by Arvo Pärt, and translates as "mirror(s) in the mirror".

Thank you so much for your reviews and for continuing to support this story. Every review, no matter how tiny, is cherished.

Chapter 68 — Spiegel im Spiegel

We shall have music, Christine had declared, but Erik could not bring himself to refute it. He was a married man! For better or worse, for richer or poorer, whether or not he had any right to such a rescue, Christine was now his wife. He carried in his pocket the proof of it, neither forged nor bought but genuine, signed by Christine herself and by Madame Giry and even by the Vicomte. Signed willingly, openly! It was real. He could hardly breathe for the air overfilling his lungs, and all the surgeons of the world and all the freakshows and wars and threats of conscription could not pierce his incredible lightness.

Through the ceremony and the interminable wait afterward for Chagny's return, Christine had stood beside him. His wife. Christine Andersson. She had signed that name, although her pen had stumbled over it, and now she was his and his alone and he wanted to sing.

No. He did not. He was married and safe, and he wanted nothing more, could want nothing more — he was filled to the brim with the fierce joy of having. Not wanting. Having.

News of their unexpected wedding had travelled through Montmartre at the speed of gossip, and by the time the two of them ventured out onto the steps of the mairie, a crowd of some few hundred had already gathered to gawp. Women and old men most of them, poor and ragged — surely not the audience his Christine deserved at her wedding, but she shone before them as though lit from within. Erik could not help stealing covert glances at her as he took her hand to lead her down the steps, marvelling at the soft curls that peeked out under her shawl, at the tip of her cold-reddened nose, at the plane of her shoulders made angular by her coat. Not a dream. He had never dared to dream such a thing.

Christine smiled at them all and thanked them, and Erik was gratified to see the admiration in their faces and hear the whispers as they entered the crowd. There was no pushing; people moved aside respectfully, slapping their children's hands for pointing, but doing the same when they thought they could no longer be seen. Our angel of music returned, they said, and look, look, the freeshooter too! You see, they nudged one another, what'd I tell you, didn't I say they're sending freeshooters through here and out to Épinay; mind my word the rest'll come through tonight.
One or two of the men held out their arms as Erik passed, and he found himself shaking strangers' hands and being slapped on the shoulder. "Sortie's going well, eh," they said, taking this triumphant procession for a prelude to a battle he knew nothing about. He clasped their callused hands and spoke some words or other, but all he could hear was Christine.

"How's it about a song then?" someone called from the back of the crowd, and other voices took up the cry: "Christine Daaé! A song for victory!"

She did not sing, but Erik's heart did. He could scarcely restrain it. It was a good thing Christine's arm was still linked with his, for he felt as if he might at any moment rise into the air — or break into song, and that would be worse by far. Music was absinthe in his blood trying to lure him back to madness, but he had a name and a wife and a place in the world. Music had no claim on him.

"No going back," he said to Christine, and she glanced behind, seeing the crowd closing on the steps of the mairie, turning the gathering into a rally.

"Let's go on," she agreed.

He hardly knew how long it took to reach the store in rue Fontenelle, blessedly free of Louise's presence, or how he managed to find his key and guide his bride — no, his wife, his wife! — inside and up the dimly lit stairs to what had been his room. She followed him unhesitatingly, never questioning that they had no home, no shelter, nothing but this. It seemed so funny that it made his eyes water: here he was, a homeless architect. Homeless, but married!

"First thing tomorrow I shall find us a place to live," he promised, putting his shoulder to the creaky old door to shove it open and flicking aside a stray sheet of Jean's signwriting out of the way as he locked it again behind Christine. The room was unchanged since he had last seen it: a jumble of compasses and paper on the table, an unmade bed, blotchy yellow wallpaper. The long absence had made its inadequacies all the more glaring.

"You shall have a proper house, I swear it, not this cell. Does it offend you?" He saw suddenly that it must, and an unpleasant panicky sensation began to build somewhere in his gullet. "Christine, you must tell me if it offends you and we will leave at once — right now, if you like."

Christine brushed his fretting aside. "Look," she said in wonder, spotting a small pail by the stove half-filled with — "coal! Coal, Erik. And it's so warm in here. Like summer."

She was right, Erik realised. The room had been heated; the pot-bellied stove by the wall still giving off a steady warmth. Coal, here? Impossible; it could not be found in the city at any price. He approached the stove cautiously. One of Louise's saucepans rested near the stovepipe, venting tendrils of steam from beneath its dented lid. Barley soup. For a moment he wondered if the Gandons could have taken in a new lodger in his absence or if this was some elaborate trap, but on top of the coal scuttle lay a scrawled note in Louise's uneven handwriting:

"For the newlyweds. Good for you. Finally a decent man under our roof. You get warm but don't dilly-dally too long; got to keep them Prussians running now. Louise."

Christine pushed her shawl back from her hair. Her cheeks were glowing pink with more than the warmth of the room. "A wedding present! She did hear our news then. I wonder where she is gone?"

Erik shrugged. "To steal more coal, like as not. What does it matter? She will return to question us, and this place will be the worse for it. Christine, we cannot stay here. We must not. You see that it is unsuitable; it was folly to bring you here at all. We are married now!" He tried to control his
breathing. The muscles in his calves were starting to twitch; he needed to pace. "I have certain duties, responsibilities, things that a husband must provide for his wife."

Christine put one cool finger to his lips. "Stop. No more."

"I don't understand."

"It can wait."

"What can wait?"

"Everything."

She cupped his half-face in both her hands and kissed him recklessly, and it was like the first time, like every time. The war whirled around them, the walls were groaning under the strain, but in the very centre of the maelstrom was Christine. The urgency of her kiss made his head spin; he was in the lake again and this was it — an awakening from some terrible masquerade into the reality of her bliss. She pulled him to her and nudged his mouth open and he felt, tasted, the truth of everything she offered. She wanted this; that was the most devastating discovery, she wanted this too, like him, like her, like this, together…

"Marry me," he begged, and she kissed him, and laughed, and laid her hand to his cheek as his mask unravelled forgotten onto the floor.

"But you're already married," she protested, before her voice softened again, "As, I think, am I…" She seemed scarcely to believe it herself.

"Let me see your ring, Christine."

She held it up obediently, and he grasped her ringed finger and drew it deep into his mouth. The gold band was smooth and hard, cooler on his tongue than her skin, it could not be denied. Christine gasped and let him release it, but the moment she was free she began to unbutton his coat with quick, determined fingers.

"Marry me," she said as though answering a challenge, and he had never felt more in love.

He lost all sense of time. Christine was with him in this madness as he stripped her bare of every shred of decency, plunging with her into a place where there were only the two of them, two notes in a single blazing chord. He was not gentle as he kissed her shoulder, her ribs, the curve of her belly, her hip; he knew it, but he wanted all that she was and some wild fury made him kiss right to the burning centre of her. She cried out as a bird calls, so beautiful a sound that he needed it again, over and over, discovering yet new ways to make her give voice to a need that he, only he, could fulfill.

There was daylight afterwards, filtering vaguely through dusty glass, and the cold draught from the window ruffling pages of newspaper on the table as the room around them slowly cooled. The last of the precious coals were burning down to embers, hissing and popping in the stove.

They dozed, midway between sleep and caress. In the daylight ghosts dissolved to nothing, and for a little while he dreamed he was healed, and worthy, and whole.

The afternoon declined lazily towards an early wintery dusk. At some point they got up and found the food that was the remainder of this strange wedding gift, and ate together as travelling lovers at the edge of the world, sharing the single bowl and spoon that he had not taken with him when he had moved his things. Christine had found the empty jewellery pouch on the shelf then, and asked
after the ring, the ring that had been hers. He did not lie, he could not lie. He had forgotten how.

"The price of marriage," he admitted, dropping his gaze, and touched the plain circlet on her slender finger. "And this."

She touched it too, and looked for a long time at the empty pouch. Then she smiled and, removing her ring, replaced it and the pouch on the shelf. "That's that then," she said, and just like that, the heavy cloak of shame dropped from his shoulders and he could breathe again.

"Come back to bed," he said, and she did.

How quiet the afternoon seemed after the furore of the morning. Christine stretched herself into the warmth of the bed, from the tips of her fingers to her toes, and a shiver ran down her skin as her leg brushed against Erik's thigh. He moaned and half-stirred as his chest rose and fell in a sharp sob, but remained asleep, his eyes closed to slits, his head tilted back sharply in the last of the fading light. Careful not to disturb him, she shifted her weight to one side until she could sit up under the tent of his coat that he had drawn up around them.

Erik. Erik Andersson, architect… The Opera Ghost. How peculiar these words sounded in her mind, like something from her father's old tales.

Her husband.

Christine cringed inwardly at the new word and veered away from the matching one — wife — as he breathed beside her. In all their stolen moments together she had so rarely had the luxury of watching him sleep, and she took pleasure in it now: a secret pleasure because he did not know she watched him, and yet it was permitted to her as his… yes, wife. His wife.

Even in sleep, Erik's muscles were not fully relaxed but remained taut under his skin, making of his nakedness a movement, as if he struggled to remain exposed to her gaze. Afternoon light softened the contours of the marred side of his face into shadows where regular features could not quite be placed, deepening into the scarring around his ear and around the side of his head and neck. She yearned to touch him there, to trail her fingers down the tendon in his neck to his collarbone and his chest, between the parted curtain of his ribcage and down to his belly — human, all of him, no different from her — but she would not risk waking him now. There was a war outside the walls, but he was here with her, safe, asleep, not knowing she watched over him. It made her feel at peace.

Gradually she became aware that her mind was filling the silence with echoes of music. It took a moment to identify the slight, willowy stem of the melody she herself had created earlier that morning, growing through a thunderous orchestra. As though the recognition itself gave power to the music, it intensified until it became an ache too powerful to resist. With a sigh of regret, she wriggled out from under the warm coat-blanket, shrugged into her own coat, and quietly padded over to the work-table where Erik's paper and ink mingled with what must have been Jean's remaining signwriting instruments that had not been moved from here.

She tucked her bare legs under her on the chair, folding her coat-tails under her knees, then took a sheet of paper, ruled a stave across it, and set about trying to corral the wayward notes in her imagination into orderly rows that could become a song. Nothing more complex than a song, she decided; only a melody with a soaring vocal line floating above a velvety dark accompaniment of strings.
The room became cool, then cold. The light faded to blue, then violet, then silver grey. After a while her legs cramp up, and her stomach rumbled in the search for something more than the thin soup she and Erik had shared too long ago, and she had to stop.

It was evening, she realised as she set down the pen, nearer night than day now. How many hours ago had she and Erik stood in the mairie together? How long since she had seen him all alone in Doctor Swinburne's antiseptic tent? Behind her, the heavy shape of his coat was a dark hill on the bed.

Without knowing why she wanted it, Christine took down the jewellery pouch from the shelf over the table and shook her ring out of it into her palm. It was heavy for such a small object, and her finger felt strange without it. She slipped it on. It felt right, like home. She thought of Erik nipping her skin around it, the smooth heat of his mouth and the pressure drawing her skin to his, and it made her shudder with a thrill that she almost did not want to admit.

It was not so new, this marriage. This is what she had known and not known, a secret she had kept from herself because it was too precious to risk bringing out into the light. She had made a promise long ago, in the freezing water of the lake when she had kissed him for the first time and the shock of it had pierced her belly. It was a promise to a man who did not yet exist — who might never exist, strangled as he was by the murderous mask that had overgrown his soul like a scar — but whose face she held between her hands in that whirlwind of anger and stone, when she had pledged to become his wife.

No going back now; nor did she want to go back. There was no freedom like a promise fulfilled, and the lightness of her heart spilled out as the best music she had ever written.

She blew on the ink to set it and went to awaken her husband.

o o o

"Erik?"

"Hmm…" He stirred and opened his eyes to the agreeable spectacle of Christine kneeling next to him on the narrow bed, outlined in moonlight and unselfconscious as a nymph. She watched him come to himself, piecing together the day's events.

"It's evening." His voice came out sounding gravelly with disuse.

"Yes, past curfew. You have a bit of sleep in your eye." She raised her hand with the wedding ring to run her thumb along the edge of his eye socket, pausing ever so briefly where the flesh was warped. "Hold still."

His heart thundered and he did not know by what miracle he retained consciousness. His wife. He was in bed with his wife, who was casually removing a mote from his eye just as though nothing remarkable had happened.

"There," she said in satisfaction, and her voice hitched as her hand fluttered over his chest, and lower.

He was reasonably certain that he made sounds no husband should make when his new wife chooses to inspect him, but nothing they had done before had prepared him for this. Christine pushed the coat off him, exposing his legs, his feet. He had never felt so closely studied, or so utterly powerless to move. This was worse than a fairground. At least at the fairground he had been a freak. His teeth started to chatter.
Had she changed her mind? Did she regret too late making so great a sacrifice?

"Are you…" He had meant to say 'displeased', but what emerged was, "unhappy?"

Christine shook her head slowly, and her eyes were dark, darker than all their shared past. "I wrote something new. A song."

A small movement of her head made him look down and there in her hand was a sheet of his draughting paper. Across it, like a necklace of fiery jewels, twined a melody that he heard as clearly as though she had sung it for him.

He looked up at her when it ended and saw the rest of the song there, a question he could not acknowledge.

"For us," Christine muttered, just as he had known it was. She was biting her lip, making it puffy. "Sing with me, Erik."

He was a coward, because he kissed her instead, and sat up. The watch he finally located in the pocket of his discarded waistcoat was miraculously still going. "It's after eight! Christine, I have nothing here, not even a crust of bread."

"I do." Christine reached for her own coat and took off a layer of paper from what turned out to be a large chunk of the bread that he himself had fetched for her that very morning. It was lopsided and squashed and full of bran, but smelled savoury enough to rouse in him a frightful, animal hunger.

"We can't live like this," he said sharply. He hated it with a sudden blast of rage: this room, this poor man's grey bread, this gypsy life on the fringe of a roaring war. He was no longer hungry.

"You have it, Christine. I need to make some drawings."

She watched him pull on his shirt. "What drawings?"

"Plans. For a house."

He fastened his cravat and masked himself as best he could with the day's unclean bandage, shuddering at the touch of it on his skin. He crossed to the work table in two strides and swept the entire top clean with a swipe of his elbow. Sketches and instruments scattered noisily to the floor, leaving behind a bare ink-stained surface. He rescued an inkwell and pen, and grabbed a relatively clean sheet of the good paper he had not touched since Sedan.

"Erik."

Christine stood behind him; he felt her warmth but did not turn around. Pencil first, he decided, setting the pen to one side. "Eat, Christine. I need to work." He rummaged on the shelf for a pen-knife to sharpen the pencil.

"I hope Madame Giry and Meg got back all right. Raoul too."

Two storeys? Three would be better, more balanced. Three then. And a stables, they would need stables for their horses, and a garden room with tall narrow windows facing south — no, south-east, and a grand salon of course, and a library overlooking the garden…

A piece of bread appeared at the side of his drawing, but he took no notice of it. On paper, their proper residence was taking shape.
Chapter 69 — Their First Tomorrow

Christine did not return that afternoon, nor that evening. Madame Giry watched her daughter watching the clock as she went about her chores, jolting every time a distant cannon erupted, and did not have the heart to admit that she had expected as much. No, Christine would not be back tonight.

“Perhaps they were delayed by the crowds,” Meg suggested, looking up from the drawing she was half-heartedly inking at the dining table. It was a depiction of the morning’s chaos at the mairie, the crowd that had come for the spontaneous wedding and stayed to question the mayor and Jean Gandon and anyone who would speak of the battle. Meg’s pen had picked out a face here and there: worried, tense, desperate people jostling for attention, with hope written in every wild movement as they surrounded the portico. The mayor had come outside eventually to speak with them, flanked by Jean and the young Vicomte, and Madame Giry had judged the moment a good one to take Meg and return to the city.

Meg pushed the drawing from her. “Christine said she and Erik would go to see Louise Gandon, arrange the rent, and return. Something must have happened.”

“Something did happen. It was a wedding, my dear, peculiar as it was. Give them time.”

“Christine meant to come straight back, maman, all her things are still here. This morning she said nothing would change — please don't look at me like I'm six years old!” Meg flushed and gave an impatient shake of her head, “I know what a wedding night is. What goes on between women and men.”

Madame Giry lifted her brows silently.

“I know enough,” Meg insisted. “And it's not because of that. Even if it were, Christine did come back when—”

Madame Giry raised a forbidding hand a split second before Meg cut herself off, appalled at the near-betrayal of a confidence. “I know enough, Meg.”

They looked at one another in the echo of it, and in those moments all her own youth seemed to rise and fall before Madame Giry’s eyes: Jules, his paintings, the smell of oils, her last Giselle, the money from his family that she rejected in all her righteous, innocent fury; then Perros and the sea and the house of Madame Duchamp-Pierot…

“You were born such a tiny thing,” she said at last, to her daughter’s infinite confusion at the change of subject. “Seventeen years tomorrow. Let's get some sleep, my dear.”

She touched Meg’s hair in passing, and left her to clear up her drawing tools in peace.

In the night it began to snow. Fat silent flakes promenaded past the dark window, ghostly in the moon’s limelight, and Madame Giry spent longer than she cared to admit watching their grand choreography. Nature staged her white act in defiance of the edict that forbade public performances of dance, beautiful and mercilessly cold. By two in the morning the courtyard below was covered in a fine veil; by three, the snow had thickened to a blanket. A bitter night for those without fuel.
How were they faring in Montmartre in this cold, those two stubborn souls building a fantasy of peace while the rest of the world boiled around them? They had vanished in the crowd the moment they stepped outside the mairie, with no backward glance for those left behind. They were newlywed. If Christine thought marriage would change nothing, she was mistaken: what passed between lovers could only ever exist in the present, in the endless today. They had never before had their own tomorrow.

And if Christine did not yet recognise it, Erik would. He had coveted the role of a husband too long not to throw himself into it now, and God alone knew how he would interpret it. Was Christine truly ready for such a future, in the midst of a war? Was he?

Madame Giry took down Monsieur Duchamp's letter from the edge of the mirror on the dresser, where it had been waiting for her to work up the courage to pen a reply, and lit one of her few remaining candles. She wished there was somebody to whom she might have turned for reassurance, a woman with experience of marriage — but the only one she could have trusted with it was gone. Madame Duchamp-Pierot was dead, and there was nobody left between her and the unknown.

My dear Monsieur Duchamp, — she began,
I can find no words to your news, save that I...

I miss her. Marguerite the Elder, she had laughingly called herself when the infant Meg was first placed in her arms to make her acquaintance, and even then, the title fit. Marguerite Duchamp-Pierot was then a woman at the very height of her powers, several years widowed and supremely at ease within her domain. She must have been, Madame Giry calculated wryly, perhaps thirty-five years old. Ancient, by the reckoning of a silly young ballerina struck down with child at the dawn of her stardom, who was only beginning to realise the full depth of her fall. From the moment she had declared to Madame Pierot that she would raise the child herself, there could be no going back. A year’s absence from the stage, a year of sleepless nights and fevers and teething and vomit and perfect infant laughter, was an eternity at the Opéra. Her place in the footlights had been taken by others, and theirs by others still. To return there would have meant humbling herself before the very people whom she had previously commanded, to petition for a lowly place backstage. It would have meant killing her dreams and then living out the rest of her life among their ghosts, watching the curtain go up on all the roles she would never dance.

“Stay,” Madame Pierot had advised her then, with a benefactor’s generosity Madame Giry did not appreciate until years later. “What is there in the Opéra for you, or for the child? You are young, Agathe. In another year or so you will have quite regained your spirits, and little Meg will have grown sturdy enough to face the city coughs and smoke. Stay and keep us company. You know how my girls dote on the little one.”

And stay she did, month after month, because she had not the courage to imagine approaching her former home as a beggar. It was peaceful by the sea. She began to forget.

Later, she would wonder if anything might have been different had she returned at once with her infant daughter in tow, instead of lingering in that sleepy fragrant world of gardens and seaside walks until the first Paris headline in months gave her a start:

‘Tragic accident in cellars of the Opéra,’ it ran, in heavy black print. ‘Stagehand found dead.’

The man had drowned in the lake that fed the hydraulic machinery, tragically entangled in a broken line after he had wandered into a disused part of the cellars. The rope around his neck had by some ill fortune caught him as a noose and tightened as he struggled to free himself. An accident.
“I must leave,” she had told Madame Pierot, all her own fears forgotten in the memory of another rope, and Marguerite Pierot nodded and did not ask what had made up her mind. She simply accepted it as a decision made, not by a child but by a woman like herself.

Had she been a little wiser then, she would have recognised how priceless this gift was, coming from one she respected: the right to become her equal.

When she returned to Paris, she did not petition the management for anything. She simply informed them that she would be rehearsing the principals in the morning.

...Tomorrow Meg will be seventeen. She is an artist now, and growing more confident in it by the day. Had she but applied herself to ballet the way she does to art, what a dancer she would have made! But it is true, we do not choose our passions. It grieves me more than I can say that your sister can never see her work.

As to Christine: I find I must tell her news for her, for it may concern your business interests. She has requested my leave to permit her marriage to M. Andersson, of your atelier. Seeing them determined I have given my blessing, although you can well imagine my doubts at any marriage in the current situation. By the time you receive this, our sortie will one way or another be over. Would that it was over tomorrow.

She set her pen aside and flexed fingers gone stiff with cold. The letter was terse, but further effort was unlikely to improve it, and she had not the luxury of wrapping her grief in silence. It told the essentials. In any case the weight constraints of balloon post made long letters a thing of the past. Hunger, a constant dull companion, was becoming sharper and making a nuisance of itself. She ought to try to sleep; there was still an hour or more to wait before the morning bread queue.

On the way to Meg's room she peered into the dining room and the empty parlor. The apartment was quiet and oddly deserted. Meg, at least, was sound asleep in her own bed, her hair tousled about her face, her mouth slightly open, just as she had slept as a child. By her bedside lay her latest sketches alongside the three English papers her suitor had sent, with her own illustrations as grey-and-black oblongs in the moonlight. Seventeen. How much longer would she be content to remain here and keep her mother company?

Stay, she thought, knowing that when it came to it, she would have to let her go as well.

She ushered her thoughts away from Christine's absence. Even so, the night was restless and what few dreams she had were for the most part snatches of memories, passing too quickly to be deciphered. Once she thought she saw Gustave on the shore, embracing his violin to his shoulder as though bidding a lover farewell. Another time she saw Christine, emerging white and shivering wet from the Opéra cellars, and woke from that suffocating wave of guilt and relief. She went to check Christine's room after that, despising herself for her irrational hope, but of course her bed was empty.

All things considered, Madame Giry was just as glad to be up for the day before dawn, in time for the bakery opening.

Habit and stubborn hope made her buy enough bread for four. She spent the early hours in the queue for it, and the rest of the morning fighting her way back through the clogged thoroughfares that carried the endless procession of National Guards out toward the ramparts. By rights, Erik ought to have been one of them, if truly he intended to live in the world, and yet Madame Giry found she did not care to see it. He had fought enough. They had all fought enough.

Was it too much to ask that they might have peace again, and beauty, and white bread, and theatre with music that did not feature the Marseillaise? Was it too much to hope for a reprieve?
As the snowfall thinned gradually and the sky started to pale, a peculiar silence settled over the city. It took a moment to identify the cause, and surprise first slowed Madame Giry in her tracks, then made her walk faster, looking for an open news kiosk or a paper boy to confirm the evidence of her ears. It seemed impossible, and yet… The cannonade had stopped.

The forts that had thundered for over a week did not make a sound, even though it was now full daylight, nor did the Prussian batteries installed on the surrounding hills resume their daily fire. This silence, coming at first almost unnoticed, gradually crept into the awareness of everyone she passed, and the murmurs began to rise from every queue and along every boulevard: Why had they not resumed firing today? Was the sortie all over? Was it victory? Defeat?

Every paper boy she passed cried a different story, but it was evident they knew nothing. There had been no communiqué from the front, no news from the Governor at all, and yet the trickle of wounded men pouring in through the Vincennes gate was fast becoming a river. Madame Giry was forced to walk that way by the gathering crowds seeking news, and what she saw did not comfort her. Every carriage in the Avenue du Trône and the surrounding streets was draped in the white-and-red flags of the Red Cross. Around her, people ran up to the incoming soldiers, questioned them, importuned for news, but even the most highly ranked and least injured of the officers could tell them nothing of substance. Those who could talk indicated by gesture and cry that they had come from a battle that was still going on, somewhere near Brie or perhaps Champigny, through the first of the Prussian lines. One raised a rifle with the bayonet snapped clean off, drawing a ragged cheer from the crowd.

The sortie was going well, it seemed. And yet the forts remained silent.

Outside a closed draper’s shop, Madame Giry passed among a gaggle of new Garde Nationale recruits, men of every age and shape who milled around like geese left behind by their migrating flock, uncertain of their orders, smoking or slacking off. They were armed, and the newly minted battalion numbers on their kepis glinted as they watched her go. Among them were men who must have been shopkeepers, gentlemen, clerks, cab drivers, artists: all Paris in uniform. Well, almost all. There was a distinct lack of deformed architects.

When at last Madame Giry reached home, out of breath and caked in snow, Meg was still out on her own errands and there was no sign of Christine. Christine's clothes, hairbrush, even her music book were all exactly as she had left them, just as Meg had remarked.

No doubt Christine would return later. No doubt she and Erik were delayed by the crowds or the mystery of the silent forts. No doubt. And yet…

Madame Giry stayed only long enough to drop off her purchases, and within a quarter of an hour was back outside, battling her way through the still-gathering crowds up towards the heights of Montmartre. A preposterous quest, she chided herself, and much too late. Surely if she was going to do this sort of thing she ought to have followed Christine a year ago, mirrors be damned — but there was no use denying the anxiety that goaded her onward. She might no longer be Christine's guardian, but she had permitted this marriage amid chaos, and if anything had gone awry, the responsibility was hers.

At number 15, rue Fontenelle, the shutters were closed on every window. There were footprints in the snow all along the side passage, but none looked light or small enough to be Christine's. Gustave’s daughter, if she was within, had not left the house. Or had never come in.

Madame Giry considered the barred store-front, then pulled off a glove and rapped loudly on the shutter.
He needed food. Base as it was, this was no longer a whim for the body to triumph over but a signal of danger such as could not be denied, and it forced Erik to stop work and reacquaint himself with his surroundings.

The bare plaster walls were unexpected. He frowned. What had become of his room’s yellowed wallpaper and the bed and — ah.

Slowly it came back to him. He raised his head to look over the wide work table. He was in the outbuilding, the same one he had helped Jean to convert into a signwriting workshop, where he had come in search of a place to continue working by moonlight while Christine still slept. The shed was unheated, and had been left cluttered and dusty as any abandoned workshop, now that Jean was busy politicking at the mairie. But the work table was pristine, and upon it rested a drawing: a cutaway view of a residence so perfect that even in the uncertain pre-dawn light its beauty made him catch his breath. Three storeys, a verandah, a library overlooking the garden, and beneath all this, in the corner, his signature in red chalk: Andersson. Even the tiny, precisely drawn chairs in the sitting-room were positioned just so.

It was perfect — no, not perfect, ideal. Ideal like Oppenord’s plan for the never-built Opera of Mount Olympus that had hung in Monsieur Duchamp's office, like the flawless portraits of Christine he had once drawn, like the smooth surface of the Opera Ghost’s mask. Erik crossed his arms, trying to contain the tremor that shook him, then dug his fingers into his shoulders. It was more than hunger and cold: it was fury, a helpless fury he could do nothing about.

This house did not exist. It could not exist. Not in this besieged city, not now. Not ever, or at any rate not as his residence or Christine’s. A house like this required land, and an income the likes of which he could not command, and freedom.

These things were cold facts. He had to fight the shadows in his mind that insisted it was not so, that with a small effort of will he could conjure a better world for himself and Christine, that he could find some other mask or identity that would come with the things he needed to make their marriage perfect and then they could live in peace, and then, and then…

He went out into the yard and scooped handfuls of snow in his bare hands, packing it into snowballs until the skin of his palms turned red and numb. Then he kicked open the door of the shed, dragged out the beautiful drawing, and nailed it to the door.

There was something intensely satisfying about unleashing the snowstorm to pound the wretched paper into pulp, and the exercise warmed him and dulled his hunger pangs. Even his hands, the same hands that put the gold ring on Christine’s finger — a ring he had never earned — those same hands felt at home obliterating it. When the snowballs proved insufficient, he tore down the paper in long ragged strips, ripped them across once, twice, then brought out the hammer again and drove more nails into the scraps that were left hanging.

He did not know how long it took before the drawing was entirely gone. Its destruction seemed like a single moment that went on and on until, spent, it faded into silence.

It was full daylight now, and the snow had stopped falling. The crooked nails driven here and there into the door made it a ghastly sight, and Erik forced himself to return into the shed to find the pliers, and one by one pried out the nails. Then he tidied up the worst of the papier-mache that should have been his house and Christine’s. It was gone; so beautiful and dead and gone.

He leaned his elbows against the hole-riddled wood of the door, put his head in his hands, and
closed his eyes. Behind his eyelids glowed the afterimage of the drawing, superimposed on the memory of his burning opera house. He felt very tired.

And into that tiredness seeped music, like blood dissolving in the waters of the lake. He was too weak to hold it back. It was born of the same melody that Christine had shown him at the piano when she had changed his Marseillaise to a song of peace, but grown stronger, more vital, pulsing with purpose. From a quiet contemplative air it had turned into a song of action.

*Build the house,* the music urged.

“I cannot.” Erik spoke the denial aloud, but not even the sound of his voice could silence the music. “I cannot!”

*Build it. Be an architect again.* The music grew more complex, dragging him unwilling after it, teasing him with the suggestion of a new theme before turning abruptly in another direction so that he had no choice but to follow where it led. It speeded up, becoming frenetic, a cancan rhythm that demanded an answering wildness from him. Erik Andersson, architect! And why not, he thought crazily, dizzy in the whirlpool of the music, why the devil not? The courthouse in Sedan was just one project, just one building in the provinces, it was gone and good riddance, but a house — not the perfect one he had sketched, but a real house that Christine would love, their house where they would live as husband and wife — this was the true test of his skill. If he completed it to prove himself a husband in more than mere words, Christine would be his forever. She would be proud to call herself his wife.

He had vowed to provide for her, and provide he would. There had to be a way to build their house. He only had to find it.

The music reached a crescendo and burst into a violent chord that struck a sob from his throat and reverberated painfully through his head. Erik pressed his hands to his temples. His fingers met a strip of the linen mask, a reminder of what and where he was — then it was over. The music released him and the world went blissfully quiet. He breathed.

Behind him, the back door of the house gave a sharp squeal. The noise in the centre of that silence sliced razors into his headache. If it was Louise Gandon, he thought, God help her: coal or no coal, he was in no mood for her tirades or her politics.

He turned towards the sound, head pounding, and felt all the air leaving his lungs. It was not Louise. “Ahhh…”

Christine stood at the open door wrapped in her coat and shawl, ready for the day, cold and red-nosed and impossibly lovely. Her hands were bare, the wedding band gleamed on her finger, and the doorway framing her might have been an open mirror, waiting for him. The rest was all whiteness, glittering snow.

“You must be freezing.” She looked at him and spoke so softly that Erik wondered how she had guessed that sound would pain him. “You've been out here all night. Will you come in?”

He felt he was still not quite himself; the music had unnerved him. He gazed at Christine, at this incredible woman who had taken him for her husband, and could find no words.

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“Madame Giry has come.” Christine did not seem to notice the state of the shed door behind him, nor the confetti of torn paper at his feet. “We should go home. It's Meg’s birthday today, she is expecting us.”
At this, Erik found his voice. “Yes. We must go home. And we will, as soon as we have a home to go to.” He stood taller before her. “I have promised it, Christine, and it will be done. You have your husband’s word.”

Christine huddled closer into her shawl, looking perturbed, and he wanted nothing so much as to take her in his arms and kiss her, kiss the line from between her brows and drop kisses like promises on her lips — but this was not a matter of more promises, this was the start of their life together and it had to be done right.

“Go with Madame Giry,” he told her, raising the collar of his coat against the cold as he ducked back into the shed for his gloves and hat. To his relief both were on the table, and he congratulated himself on having had at least that much forethought. “I shall be back in the evening, with news of our house.”

Christine made no move to return. “What house? The drawings you started…” She tried not to look at the torn paper, but a flicker of her gaze have her away. “Erik, you know these plans cannot be.”

“I'm through with plans.” He adjusted his gloves and flicked a hand contemptuously at the remnants of the drawing scattered in the snow. “I am no longer planning. I'm doing.”

“That is hardly a comfort.” Christine took a step nearer to him, letting the door fall shut behind her. Her voice, already quiet, became a whisper, and Erik had to come nearer to hear. “I know Doctor Swinburne made you some offer yesterday at the ambulance. Please say you are not going back there.” One corner of her mouth lifted wryly, but there was no humour in her eyes. “I cannot marry you every time you have a notion like this.”

“Swinburne?” Erik said, taken aback. “He has nothing to do with it. His offer was only a surgeon’s greed, no more. This is simple, Christine: we must have somewhere to live. We cannot stay here.”

“I have already paid Louise the rent. She was here at dawn with some of the others from the Committee; there is a whole caravan of wounded come in from the sortie that they are housing in the empty house at the end of the street.”

Erik caught his breath at the first part, “You paid her?”

“Oh course.” Christine looked affronted, “I am not without income, you know, I was paid for the last three concerts at the Variétés. It isn't all charity galas.”

“You paid her! To live here, in this dump.”

“It is hardly that. Besides, we need not spend all our time here, when Madame Giry and Meg have need of us.”

Erik felt a familiar heat rise to his neck, shame. He forced himself to remain very still. “You would have us live like gypsies.” The word came out as a hiss.

“I would have us live as we have been living. What is so wrong with that?”

An ugly laugh was building in Erik's chest. “You would pretend this marriage did not exist.”

As if on cue, the door opened behind Christine and Madame Giry stepped through. She set one hand soothingly on Christine's shoulder and surveyed the state of the shed door, noting the raw holes left by the nails.

“Good morning, monsieur. Christine assured me the ferocious banging I heard earlier was only
some repairs."

“Home improvement,” Erik said grudgingly, with a glance toward Christine. She seemed as agitated as he felt, and for some obscure reason that was a relief.

“I am glad it is not the start of a new musical tradition,” said Madame Giry. “I was hoping you would join us today.”

Erik touched his hat brim. “You will have to excuse me, madame. I have urgent errands in the city.”

Madame Giry’s expression turned grave and she lowered her hand from Christine's shoulder. “It is a shambles in the city, with the wounded coming in from Champigny. And something more is amiss. You have noticed the forts are silent?”

Erik listened. She was right, he realised, the storm seemed to have passed entirely, and the Prussian guns were equally mute. He was no expert in the manifestations and rules of war, but logic said it was impossible for any army to have neutralised all Prussian artillery simultaneously.

“There is talk of a ceasefire,” Christine voiced his suspicion.

“That is possible,” said Madame Giry. “But the papers are going wild with every sort of rumour, and there has been no word from the the governor.”

“Louise Gandon said deserters from the lines have been talking of it in Belleville today. They say it's only a day’s quiet, to remove the wounded. That must be why there are so many.”

“And tomorrow it all begins again.” Erik went to Christine and took the tips of her bare hand in his, the only intimacy a man in his position could permit himself. It was both not enough and too much; it made him long to seize her by the waist and embrace her and warm her skin with the heat of his mouth.

“Let's go home,” Christine said under her breath, for his ears only.

“Madame Andersson,” he addressed her formally, and saw Christine flinch. He released her hand to retreat to a decorous distance, bowed slightly, and sketched a small bow toward Madame Giry as well. “I regret I am unable to join you this morning. Please convey my best wishes to Mademoiselle Giry. Ceasefire or not, I must go into Paris to make my enquiries.”

Christine pinned him with her gaze. To Madame Giry she said, her eyes never leaving him, “Madame, would you give us a moment? I will follow you shortly.”

As soon as Madame Giry retreated, Christine turned from the door towards him, and before Erik could react, thumbed his mask aside. “Look at me!” She bunched the linen in her fist as Erik gasped at the freezing air. “I need to know what you intend. You say this has nothing to do with Doctor Swinburne's offer, yet you will not say what he wanted of you.”

Erik grasped her wrist, hard. “I tell you this has nothing to do with him. Have faith in your husband, Christine.”

Christine held him by the bandage for a moment longer, then let go. Her fingertips skimmed his ridged flesh, with a tenderness she seemed unable to halt. “Then tell me where you go today.”

“Soon,” he promised, acutely aware of his bare face under her touch. He had to step back, beyond her reach, lest he lose this battle.
“Very well,” Christine said in a voice suddenly quite level. “This evening before curfew then, at the apartment. Don't be late.”

With that, she turned back through the doorway and Erik watched the door being shut and locked.

He had a few hours to justify her trust. He hoped it would be enough.

o o o

Her birthday brought not one but two surprises. For one thing, there was the absence of noise. For the first time in days the guns did not resume their pounding with first light, and the morning dawned perfectly quiet. Nobody on the snowy boulevards seemed to know why the batteries had stopped firing, although plenty of theories were advanced. In the queue at the butcher’s Meg heard them all, from the patriotic (the Prussians had turned tail in the night) to the mystical (the Lord took mercy upon wayward Paris and stayed His hand) to the outright revolutionary (Prussian workers rising up against their masters had demanded a withdrawal). All equally desperate, Meg thought, and equally unlikely, but the silence remained. Perhaps the snow was the answer, and the freezing air that seemed to bite her throat as she breathed — but why such things should stop the voices of the heavy guns atop the forts was a mystery to her. Henri Guyon would probably know the answer, but he and his regiment were somewhere deep in enemy territory by now, and all Meg could hope for was that the guns’ silence was a good sign.

Perhaps it meant the troops had advanced beyond the reach of the forts. But that was the one theory that nobody dared to voice. After too many disappointments, hope was too fragile to speak aloud.

When Meg returned home, empty-handed for the rations of horse-meat had again been depleted before all the ration cards could be filled, she discovered her mother was already home and the second surprise waiting for her in the parlor.

Christine stood up from the piano and beamed at her, just as if yesterday had never happened. “Happy birthday.”

“You're back!”

Meg flung her shoes aside and ran to envelop this near-sister of hers in what was an embarrassingly tight embrace, given she had only been gone a day and a night. Still, it was such a relief to see her here, to know she was fine after that crazy wedding. Christine wrapped her arms around her just as fiercely. Meg sniffed; the fur on Christine’s coat collar was tickling her nose.

“Oof,” Christine gasped, catching her breath as Meg finally loosened her hold. “If I knew I'd get such a welcome I'd have brought a proper present. Here.”

From the top of the piano she removed a sheet of music and passed it to Meg. “It's a duet really, but it doesn't sound too bad as a solo. I could sing it for you later, if you like. Happy birthday.”

“This is new,” Meg said, turning the sheet over. The melody twined under her gaze, at once powerful and oddly tender. “You wrote this? It's yours. It must be. Christine, it's so beautiful…”

Christine smiled, but something in her eyes, a too-familiar shadow, made Meg pause.

“Erik didn't come with you,” she noted after a moment. “You wanted to sing it with him.” There was no need to make it a question, the answer was plain in Christine’s face.

“You see?” Christine said easily. “It is as I said. Nothing needs to change.”
“But you mean to live with him. You will go back there.”

“Not for a while. Come on,” Christine said, turning cheerful again, “let’s see if we can get the stove going. I brought some food.”

This turned out to be a kind of thick broth with the consistency and smell of glue, but when served with the fresh bread Madame Giry brought out, it proved a surprisingly filling meal. They dipped their bread in the bowls, and laughed, and had some wine. Her mother told them stories of Meg’s childhood escapades, only a little faded by the years that had passed, and of their first months in Perros-Guirec. Christine was called upon to perform the song she had brought — quietly, to avoid unwelcome attention from the neighbours — and it was every bit as lovely as Meg had anticipated. She could not see how it could be improved upon as a duet; it was perfect as it was.

Replete for the first time in days, at home and free from the ceaseless noise of battle, Meg thought it was quite possibly the most peaceful birthday she had ever enjoyed. Even much later, when right on curfew there came the knock on the door and Christine hurried to open it, Erik’s arrival could not disturb that peace. He was both stranger and family now, and the sounds of Christine’s voice and his entwined together had somehow become part of her home.
The ceasefire that had followed Christine's wedding lasted barely a day. In the days after it, with the final battles of the grande sortie growing ever more desperate and still no sign of Gambetta's army of relief, Raoul found it unbearable to sit idle in Guyon’s empty apartment while Paris fought for her life. He had vowed to protect it. He had vowed to protect Christine too, yet here he was. Every morning he prowled the beleaguered city — alone, since Andersson, married man that he now was, no longer cared to show up for their dawn walks — pushing a little further every time, trying to determine whether his leg was strong enough to be put to service at last. The snow on the boulevards had been slicked down to ice by hundreds of feet and ambulance wagons, but he only exchanged his crutches for a cane tipped with a steel spike and kept walking.

The atmosphere in Paris was suffocating. Nobody dared to breathe the word “surrender” and yet it hung in the freezing fog, unspeakable and shameful. The English newspapers delivered to him in Guyon's absence by careful, nameless men, openly declared the outcome of the war a foregone conclusion and now, for the first time, voiced sympathy for “poor, brave France”, speaking just as one did of the dead. But France yet lived.

Three days after the sortie resumed, Raoul dressed carefully in his uniform, left the cane behind and presented himself at the War Office. His officer’s epaulettes drew a few looks from those in the more common uniforms of the National Guard, but they might as well have been a sham: the ageing officer who met him flatly refused his demand to return to active duty and advised, not unkindly, that he had best return home to concentrate on his recovery. Raoul returned to the apartment, fuming with indignation and unable to ignore the gnawing ache in his leg.

“They have the right of it,” said Maurice, Guyon's manservant, serving Raoul slices of the roast rabbit he had bought from some enterprising acquaintance who was making a fortune breeding the animals in a cellar. “It is no use you getting yourself killed, Monsieur le Vicomte, it is enough that the young master has gone to put himself in the firing line. Here; you must keep up your strength.”

“What for?” Raoul wanted to demand, “what is the use of my strength?” — but that would have only been childish and ungrateful. He was only too conscious of how little this meal resembled the sparse tables of the majority of the Parisian population, including perhaps even Christine and her new husband, and of how much effort it would have taken Maurice and the cook to prepare it, and how they relied on it for their own meals. He could no more cast aside their work than he could sling his chassepôt over his shoulder and march at the Prussians. So he thanked the servants dutifully, and ate, and felt ten times the traitor with every bite.

That evening another of Guyon's English papers arrived, with a headline that warned in fat black letters that bombardment of the city was imminent unless Paris surrendered. Raoul was about to lock it in Guyon's desk with all the others, when he happened to glance at the next article, and stopped. A balloon letter, intended for Gambetta in Orléans and detailing the dispositions of the troops for the Paris sortie and the plans for their advance, had landed instead in far Norway. He turned the page in dismay. The rest of the story spoke brightly of the way the letter was going to be delivered to its recipient over land and sea — but what good would it do, with the troops already
committed and the Prussians aware of their every move? By the time news reached Gambetta all
the way from Norway, it would be of precisely no use whatsoever.

Still, he could not bring himself to discard the paper. In the morning, he took up his clawed cane
and returned to the mairie in Montmartre.

It was gratifying to be received there, at least, as a friend. As he had expected, both the mayor and
Jean Gandon took a keen interest in this development, so he stayed to translate for them the English
text, then went to stand outside in the snow for as long as he could endure the cold, smoking with
the men of the local battalion. Here he was Lieutenant de Chagny, an army officer and a trusted
friend of Henri Guyon and of Christine Daaé, a survivor of Bazeilles and Sedan, and his words
carried weight. The tobacco smelled foul and the language was hardly better, but after Guyon's
empty apartment it was a breath of fresh air.

“It's not over yet,” his companions said between clouds of lilac smoke. “Think we can still turn it
around, Chagny, without Gambetta?”

Raoul too exhaled smoke. “We must.”

He returned from Montmartre late in the afternoon, frozen to numbness and sore but hardly limping
at all. In the grey twilight, the canvas of the Red Cross flags, which flapped above every other
doorway amid the ammunition wagons and uniforms, seemed a shadow of what the men were
facing beyond the walls. He envied those men. They might be camped out on rock-hard frozen
mud with no fire, with little to eat, ready each day to face the entire Prussian Guard ranged against
them — but they were where they belonged, and they knew that what they did there mattered. If
they failed and the Prussians were allowed to bombard the city as they had done in Sedan, then
nobody was safe. Not he, not Andersson, not even Christine. Raoul thought of the ruins of
Bazeilles, of the shattered doors and windows puffing out hot ashes into the rising smoke. This
could not be the fate of Paris. It could not be.

At the entrance to Guyon's apartment building he paused but did not go inside. All he needed was
proof, incontrovertible proof of his recovery. But how was he to get it?

If there was one good thing to come out of Andersson's mad rush for the ambulance, it was that it
now gave Raoul an idea.

He swung around to the stables and saddled and mounted Guyon's sole remaining horse. Then,
leaving Maurice gaping in the doorway, he dug his heels into its flanks and left the gate and the
street and the quartier behind, heading north-west, up towards what used to be the Avenue
l'Impératrice. The War Office would not turn away a commissioned officer from his duty when his
physician declared him fit for service, just as the National Guard would not accept a man whom a
physician had signed off as unfit. All he needed was a signature.

The horse whinnied, pleased to be moving, and Raoul grinned. Riding as an officer felt good, even
when the horse barely trotted on the ice, snorting and slipping, even when his own muscles
crammed in protest after weeks of near-inactivity. On the wider span of the boulevard he urged it to
a canter, weaving between caissons and donkey-carts, and soon enough the tented roofs of the
American Ambulance appeared in the distance, rising like an army camp out of the evening mist.

He arrived at the ambulance with a good hour to spare before curfew. After promising the bright-
eyed lad at the stables a respectable sum to brush down the horse and keep it safe from horsemeat
butchers, he dropped stiffly from the saddle and wended his way between the tents in search of
Doctor Swinburne. The ride had roused his hip to a new hum of pain; he made himself walk faster, trying to make his stride look effortless, hoping he could keep this up long enough. A few pairs of curious eyes followed him, and once or twice he heard his name murmured alongside Christine’s by the nurses and nuns who recognised him, but the ambulance was teeming with new wounded being taken down from wagons onto an endless stream of stretchers, and as he was plainly in a hurry and needed no assistance, nobody took the trouble to question him.

He had almost reached the surgeon’s tent when the path between the bare trees was unexpectedly barred.

“Raoul de Chagny,” said a clear voice.

Raoul looked up in surprise. The speaker was a tall, severe-looking young woman in a black coat, with a Red Cross satchel slung like a rifle belt across her shoulders and a peaked hat that hid her hair and shaded her eyes. Raoul had seen her many times from afar during his convalescence, accompanying Doctor Swinburne or issuing commands to the other American ladies who tended the wounded, but this was the first time he could recall having spoken with her. She stood directly in his way, blocking the approach to Swinburne’s tent.

He tried not to look like a guilty schoolboy being caught at some mischief. “Good evening.”

“Monsieur le Vicomte, this a strange place for an evening parade.”

Raoul blinked, startled. He had expected the accented reprimand of an American socialite, but she was unmistakably French, and spoke with the easy, faintly amused tone of the same Parisian society that not so long ago had been his own circle. He looked at her more closely. Beneath the brim of her hat, her dark, regular features seemed vaguely familiar: did he recognise her from someplace else, before the war, from among the wider circle of his acquaintances? He frowned, trying to place her.

“Geneviève de Montfort,” she helped him out, with a tight-lipped smile at his hesitation. “We met some six years ago at my engagement to Captain Edmonds.”

“Of course,” he apologised hurriedly, “I should have known you at once, Madame Edmonds.”

She flinched, and it belatedly occurred to him that she could not be pleased to be reminded of the scandal occasioned by her marriage, which several years earlier had entertained the entire Parisian scene. A daughter of such a family, he recalled his mother saying, engaged to an American! One might imagine she was an impoverished widow courting money. Think of it! He had in fact thought of it as little as possible, not being overly interested in other people's affairs, but now the memory inevitably put him in mind of Christine. Scandals such as the two of them had endured made marriage to an American seem child's play. And yet, from what little he could recall, Geneviève had carried herself with dignity throughout that ordeal, and appeared to have come out of it unharmed.

For a fleeting moment he wondered whether he and Christine might have weathered their own storm eventually too, had she chosen to remain beside him, but that thought was only a wisp. Christine's choice was made: she had been born for music, born to fly. And he... He could just about walk.

“You have made an impressive recovery,” Madame Edmonds remarked, with a nurse’s unerring eye for the injury she evidently remembered. “Unless of course,” — she raised her brows pointedly, “you are concealing what must be considerable pain.”
His hip chose that particular moment to cramp violently. Raoul half-hopped onto his good leg, feeling as irritated as if she had made him the unwitting victim of a society joke. He resisted the impulse to knead his hand into the contorted muscle, and instead gestured toward the surgeon’s tent behind her, determined not to betray the pain:

“I need to speak with Doctor Swinburne. Is he within?”

Geneviève glanced over her shoulder. “You have come at a busy time, Monsieur le Vicomte. We had six men arrive this past hour alone and more will be coming now that it's dark.”

“I can wait.”

“I don’t doubt it — but that would not serve your purpose.” She seemed to be finding some humour in this situation that Raoul could not understand.

“I don’t recall explaining my purpose.”

“Let me see: you arrived here splendid in full uniform, and are determined to demonstrate that that leg you are favouring is causing you no discomfort. What other purpose could there be if not to convince Doctor Swinburne of your recovery?”

Raoul stood his ground. “There is nothing dishonourable in that.”

“Except vanity.”

“Vanity?” he echoed, flabbergasted. “Madame, it is not for myself that I ask it. I am seeking to return to active duty. Doctor Swinburne treated my wound; he can approve it. Could you help me see him?”

“Would you really be able to wait?” she countered. “An hour or more, past curfew, standing here in the snow?”

Raoul was silent. She knew full well that he was in pain; he saw no need to confirm it.

The seconds stretched.

“The sortie is over,” Geneviève said at last, and for the first time she sounded tired and deflated. “I expect it will be made official in the morning, then at least the wounded can be brought in without all this skulking around in the dark and stretchers arriving in the middle of the night.”

“There have been many then?”

“Yes,” she said shortly. Then she tugged the sash of her satchel more comfortably over her shoulder, and visibly composed herself. “It is much too late to get to the front now. The retreat has been going on since this afternoon.”

Raoul found this did not surprise him as it should have, and yet her confirmation filled him with new dread: if the sortie had failed, the bombardment the English papers predicted could not be far off. He took a deep breath and held it, before slowly letting it out.

“In that case, my duty remains unchanged. If the losses are as heavy as you say, it is even more urgent that I take my post. More battles will be coming.”
Geneviève nodded reluctantly to this train of thought. The dark shadows under her eyes gave the lie to her calm nurse’s attitude.

“Doctor Swinburne may well like to see you,” she sighed. “It will do him good to see at least one young man who is not out of his wits with laudanum and still has possession of all his limbs.”

“Most of them, at any rate.” Raoul tapped his bad hip. He was pleased to see this raise a slight smile from her, and it was a relief to think that in the midst of this chloroform-soaked horror, human warmth could still exist.

“Most of your limbs perhaps. Your wits I am less certain about. You are too young to be so eager to die, Raoul,” — and at this familiarity Raoul bristled until he realised something had caught her attention. A blanket-covered stretcher that was being carried over the snow toward them, from which only the polished toe of one boot protruded. The shape on the stretcher did not move.

One of the stretcher-bearers asked Geneviève something, removing his cigarette; she gave a brisk shake of her head and pointed him to a covered wagon just visible in the dark, before turning back to Raoul. With an unpleasant twinge, Raoul realised it was a mortuary wagon.

“Wait here then, since you are determined. I will speak with Doctor Swinburne. But if you happen not to be here when I return…” She shrugged a shoulder, seeming momentarily only a young Parisienne at a soiree, making an offhand suggestion. “You must realise nobody will think any less of you. You have done enough.”

“I will be here.”

“Yes. I believe you will be.” Geneviève’s face betrayed nothing, but there was reluctant approval in her tone. “Well, then. I shall be back shortly.” She pulled off a glove to rub warmth into her hand, then replaced it quickly to wave him to one side of the path.

There was no wedding band on her finger.

She met his surprised gaze squarely, making no attempt to deny what he had seen, then spun around and headed to the surgeon’s tent.

Raoul stepped out of the way as she had directed, looking after her in confusion as she vanished through the doorway. Had her American captain abandoned her? Or — and the notion gave him an unanticipated jolt — had she abandoned him?

He could not help but think of Christine again, of Christine who had never worn his ring but was now wearing Andersson’s, of her cold shivering fingers at her wedding as she held out her hand to be banded. He might have thought her a captured bird then, ringed, were it not for Andersson’s wild eyes and fearful look and identically shaking hands. Their joining had reminded him only too forcefully of the cursed lake under the Opéra, of Christine moving slowly towards that same man — of her mouth, her hands, her body screaming the words that Raoul could not bear to hear, and which she herself could not admit. He had thought for the briefest moment that he had glimpsed a ring on her finger then, the ring that the Phantom had stolen from her, yet afterwards in the boat her hands had been bare. She had looked at him for a long time, waiting, but he had never asked.

And as Geneviève emerged again from the tent, a lone figure heading rapidly back toward him, Raoul realised with a mixture of horror and longing that she too had intended for him to see that she wore no ring.
It was no accident. Yet he could not fathom what her admission meant.

“You may go in,” she said, using the familiar tu, and although she seemed to leave a pause for it, Raoul did not raise an objection. He felt wrong-footed and awkward under her scrutiny. Her eyes trained on him were disconcertingly frank and very dark; Raoul had the strangest feeling that she was looking for something, or someone, who was not him.

“Do not keep Doctor Swinburne long, please; he will need to see the new arrivals.”

“I am in your debt.” Raoul gave a slight bow, tried to walk, and faltered. His feet seemed to have become solid ice, and when he tried again to move, his leg throbbed menacingly.

Geneviève saw it.

“Permit me,” she said. Raoul barely saw her arm move. With a quick, shocking movement, she compressed his muscle just below the wound. Her fingers were like minute pincers, precise and too strong, and the contact was so brief he barely blinked, but whatever she did seemed to release the cramp. The pain uncoiled.

Raoul tried to catch his breath.

“It will buy you some time,” she advised, “but not much. Take care of yourself.”

“My thanks,” he said, and on an impulse added, “...Geneviève.”

He made for the surgeon’s tent as hastily as his leg permitted, and did not dare turn to see her response to being thus addressed, but he had the distinct impression that it had pleased her.

As it happened, his hip did not pain him for hours afterward, but that was the only gain he was able to make. The interview with the surgeon was brief and frustrating; Swinburne hardly looked up from his books except to commend Raoul on his diligence in exercising the wasted muscle and to agree, grudgingly, that he would consider his request if he could demonstrate his walking on more than this single occasion. To Raoul’s desperate question of how many more demonstrations were required, Swinburne only shrugged as if it hardly mattered.

“Two weeks,” he said, and Raoul struggled not to voice his dismay. “Come and see Mrs Edmonds every morning for two weeks and you will have convinced me. Incidentally,” — and here for the first time Swinburne seemed to give Raoul his full attention — “what has become of your friend the singer? The husband of Christine Daaé?”

Raoul sighed inwardly; no doubt Andersson would be gratified to know that once again he had managed to intrigue. “He is well.”

“Tell me,” Swinburne said thoughtfully, “does he complain of his injuries?”

Raoul almost asked just what these injuries were supposed to be, before realising that the surgeon meant what lay under the bandages. “Not to me,” he said tightly. It smarted that Andersson’s plight was of greater interest to Swinburne than Raoul's request. “Monsieur Andersson has little to complain of these days.”

Doctor Swinburne turned the page of his book. “Remind him when you see him that I hope he has considered my offer.”

Raoul shrugged noncommittally. “When I see him.”
He brooded on the useless interview long after he had returned to the apartment, and it was only on the cusp of morning that the surgeon’s parting words struck him first as strange, and then as disturbing.

What offer was this? Was it possible that Andersson had been right after all; that no doctor could withstand the lure of examining a freak? What else could a man like Doctor Swinburne — a man of good character with an entire ambulance depending on him, but still a medical doctor, with a doctor’s curiosity — hope to gain from Andersson?

The more Raoul thought of it, the less he liked the sound of it. He wondered if Christine knew.

Erik spread out the pile of drawings in front of him upon the dusty mahogany top of Monsieur Duchamp’s desk, sat heavily in the architect’s armchair and stared at this uninspiring trove that was all the reward for his efforts.

Three days of breathing dust and cobwebs and fashioning endless wire contraptions to open the many, many locks on the cabinets that contained the drawings and plans in various stages of completion — and this is all he had come up with.

It was a selection of six apartments from the long list of those Duchamp’s atelier had agreed to build or remodel, one of which had been Erik’s own project and the rest of his former colleagues. Erik had no idea what had become of the owners who had commissioned these, save the one important thing they had in common: they had all departed from Paris before the city was sealed off, leaving it to the mercy of the Prussians. It was evident to him that they had no real interest in defending their property — one could not call it ‘home’, since the owners cared so little for its continued existence — and therefore, their apartments could and should be put to better use.

He chose one at random and leafed through the plan. There was little to it: a new internal wall to partition a bedchamber to create a nursery, and a servants’ entrance to be added to the master suite; hardly a few weeks of work in peacetime, and none of it at all necessary. As it stood, the apartment ought to be eminently liveable in its present state, if not perhaps as spacious or comfortable as Christine deserved.

He slipped the drawings back into their binder, and tapped the edge of it on the table, thinking. All Paris was deathly still in the midst of the sortie’s ignominious failure, but Erik could see no reason that should affect his plans. He was not planning to build, only to live as quietly as the most exemplary of citizens. Opening the sealed apartment would present no immediate problems; what worried him was the complicated task of protecting himself and Christine from any prying neighbours who had not left the city and might question their arrival. Much would depend on the exact location of the chosen apartment; the building; the street; the quartier. What he needed was somewhere well-screened and quiet.

There was only one thing to do: he would have to visit each address in turn until he found one that offered both comfort and privacy for him and his wife.

“My wife,” he said aloud, revelling in the sound of it. Impossible as it was, he wished he could have brought Christine here with him, to pore over these plans together and together to find the perfect home…

Neither perfect nor home, he halted himself, but in the circumstances it was the best he could do. Besides, it was better by far than living in the hovel in Montmartre or fitting themselves into the overcrowded home of Madame Giry. Later, he could build their perfect home brick by brick; later,
when the war was over. Whether this would be in France or Prussia, or somewhere else entirely, he
could not have cared less. Christine must have a place for her music; he watched daily and with
growing unease how tired she was of the patriotic arias that were her repertoire at the Variétés, and
how her voice seemed to fade a little more with every performance. He begged her to take up her
book again, but each time she would look him in the eye and say only:

“When you tell me where you go.”

“I am your husband,” he reminded her gently, “my duty is to protect my wife. In good time,
Christine.”

She did not press the matter, but neither would she touch her music book. Erik saw the sympathetic
glances from Madame Giry and had the uncomfortable feeling that he was failing at some hidden
part of his new role, but what was he to do? He could hardly drag Christine along on his lock-
picking expeditions. Until he had a threshold over which he could carry his wife, there was nothing
for it but to persevere.

The task of investigating the apartments consumed him for several days. The caravans of wagons
bearing wounded men arriving from the front made the process more complicated; he had to avoid
clogged thoroughfares and posses of National Guards trying to corral anxious citizens away from
the wagons. The forts fired furiously through the daylight hours, and Erik was forced to reject two
promising apartments outright because their proximity to the Neuilly fort made the windows rattle
and the paintings sway alarmingly on the walls. A third was deemed impossible because a
homegrown ambulance had been opened on the floor below it, flooding the stairwell with the
stench of carbolic and diseased flesh. Erik gagged before he had even reached the building, and
fled from it all the way back to the Variétés, where he was to meet Christine.

They walked together back to the Girys’ apartment; Christine holding her skirts up over the snow,
Erik chafing at this indginity. There was nothing to be done: the carriage they had used had been
requisitioned from the undertaker and the horse taken for its tough, sinewy meat, and there was no
conveyance left in Paris that could be repurposed for their use. He tried to reassure Christine that it
was only temporary, but she only huddled deeper into her coat and shook her head.

“We are losing the war,” she said quietly. “So many wounded, Erik. Look at them.”

He did not need to look; he could scarcely escape their bloodied faces in his dreams. Every night he
gagged himself as tightly as he dared, much to Christine’s dismay, but still he woke every hour in a
cold sweat and would keep shaking until another wave of exhausted sleep overwhelmed him.
Sometimes he woke to find Christine lying beside him with eyes open, watching him silently, and
he wondered what he had done in his sleep to awaken her. Once, she had put her hand over his
gagged mouth, as if to soothe his wordless moans from him, and rolled to lay herself atop him, her
slight body pressing him down into her narrow bed. He had slept like that, somehow comforted,
and had woken in the morning feeling better than he had in days. But still, the dreams would not
leave him alone. The sooner he could find a proper residence for the two of them, a place of their
own where they could wait out the rest of this miserable siege, the better.

He redoubled his efforts and the following day thought he had finally struck gold. The apartment
he was looking at had been locked up before the siege had even begun, when the owners had
fortuitously set off on a journey to Morocco. Erik had seen the couple; they had visited Monsieur
Duchamp several times before their departure, together, husband and wife. He was not certain what
they were: artists, collectors of foreign artefacts or curios, or lovers of strange climates and Moorish
palaces, nor did it really matter. What mattered was that their apartment was old and beautiful in its
own way, a bit shabby but full of strange gilded pipes and rugs and peculiar musical instruments
that Erik did not recognise. They occupied an entire top floor of a rickety apartment block not far from the Seine, off the Boulevard Saint Michel. The lower floors were likewise sealed off, and the building formed an eerily silent quadrangle surrounded on all sides by narrow cobbled lanes. The artists’ apartment had no windows facing the street, and in addition had its own door that led from the kitchen down to a stairwell that wound into a spacious cellar beneath the building.

The door to the cellar had been heavily padlocked. Erik opened it carefully, pocketed the wire-key, and descended the many corkscrew turns to what had been intended as kitchen storage for potatoes and wine. It was not well stocked, but there were some supplies: a bag of dry pulses, a little sugar, potatoes, coffee, wine: not a hoard by any means, but enough that he was cheered by the sight of it. Most importantly, there was coal. He and Christine did not need much; it would do until … Erik reined in his thoughts before they could return to the disintegrating sortie and the fate of the city.

One way or another the war would end, he reminded himself. His job was to ensure that he and Christine survived it.

He was halfway up the winding stairs to the kitchen when he heard voices upstairs. He stopped motionless, and listened.

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