Strange Sweet Sound

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/11815203.

| Rating: | Teen And Up Audiences |
| Archive Warning: | No Archive Warnings Apply |
| Category: | F/M, Gen, M/M |
| Fandom: | Le Fantôme de l'Opéra | Phantom of the Opera & Related Fandoms |
| Relationship: | Erik | Phantom of the Opera/The Persian, Christine Daaé & Erik | Phantom of the Opera, Raoul de Chagny/Christine Daaé |
| Character: | Christine Daaé, Erik | Phantom of the Opera, The Persian (Phantom of the Opera), Raoul de Chagny, Original Male Character(s), Original Female Character(s) |
| Additional Tags: | Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Historical References, Period Typical Attitudes, Period-Typical Racism, Period-Typical Homophobia, Period-Typical Sexism, Antisemitism, Period-Typical Classism, Historical Figures |
| Stats: | Published: 2017-08-15 Updated: 2019-03-25 Chapters: 40/? Words: 164945 |

Strange Sweet Sound

by madame_faust

Summary

In late 19th-century France, an unusual appearance might be the least of one's problems. A deformed man tries to make a name for himself as an artist. An impoverished immigrant girl simply wants to make a living. A nobleman with a family history mired in the slave trade attempts to move peacefully in society. Where else should they meet, but at the opera?

Notes

This is the germ of an idea - what if Erik, Christine, and Raoul had concerns BEYOND kidnapping and torture chambers? What if Erik was a nice Jewish boy from the countryside? What if Christine had an awkward sense of humor that emerged at strictly the most inconvenient times? What if Raoul was Alexandre Dumas without the literary aspirations? And so this happened.
Christine Daaé had known many moments in her life when she thought, with certainty, *I will not survive this.*

The earliest, in her memory, occurred on the day when they lay her poor Mama, shrouded and entombed in a pauper’s pine casket, to rest in a small, overgrown churchyard. She had clung to her Papa’s hand and wept, wept until she thought she had no more tears left. Yet, somehow, she had survived. Walked with leaden feet home to their cottage and watched as, one by one, their things were stolen, save two of her dresses and her doll and her father’s cherished violin. Their savings bought a cart, a mule, and a tent.

Poverty, misfortune, and bad weather and banished the cart, the mule, and the father ten years later. But, somehow, she had survived.

Christine had been eerily composed when she had auditioned for the Opera. After all, so much had gone wrong in her life, it was a miracle she faced the possibility of gaining such lofty employment. And hadn’t she faced so much worse?

But nevertheless, as Harmony and Poetry glittered down, casting their noble shadows over her face, Christine felt the same lurching in her stomach, the same feeling that the world was shifting under her feet and that if she did not breathe very quietly, and move very slowly (or not at all), the ground would split open and swallow all of her - from her churning stomach to her swimming head.

She’d won her position, a place in the chorus. She ought to be ecstatic, ought to feel as though she was walking on air, but she felt just the opposite; now that she had - finally! achieved stability, she could not help but feeling that at any time, it might be snatched away from her.

Which was why she was frozen, on this late summer day, staring up at the grandest building the city had seen since Notre Dame, unable to set a foot inside through rehearsals were starting soon and if she didn’t go in, she would be late and she would surely lose her place and if she lost her place she’d lose her salary and if she lost her salary, she’d lose -

*“Hors du chemin!”* a very loud, gruff voice ordered her, startling her out of a downward spiral of regret for losses she had not yet suffered. “Move! Out of the way, girl, out of the way!”

Turning abruptly, she saw she was being shooed off by a well-dressed gentleman brandishing a walking stick. Oh goodness gracious. She was right. She was being sent away. They’d made a mistake and had sent this man to chase her down the boulevard before she stepped foot inside and made any passers-by believe that *she*, this little Swede who came from nowhere and was nothing had been given a job by such a theatre.

Still rooted to the spot, the man with the walking stick bore down on her, coming so close that she stumbled back a step, certain he was going to swat at her ankles if he got any closer. And although she had resigned herself to being run off, Christine could not countenance being beaten off the property.

*“They’re wiring the entranceway,”* he informed her, though she’d asked for no explanation. He had a round, flushed red face and an enormous black mustache, which he tugged at with the hand that was not clutching his walking stick. “Stupid. Stupid! Just when we’re beginning rehearsals, everyone underfoot, mark me, it won’t be completed in time! Just glass and copper everywhere! *Everywhere!* To say nothing of the scaffolding, they’ll have ruts in the floor as deep as any cartwheels. But if you
must go in, go through the library! Go on!”

“Oui, monsieur,” Christine said meekly, scurrying out of the way. Enter through the library. But where was the library?

Simon Buquet had chased off no fewer than twelve chorus girls that morning; if he kept it up, he’d develop a reputation.

Lucky number thirteen - a tiny little miss with a pile of blonde curls kept tame beneath a cheap hat - looked left, looked right, then started off with a quick and lively step. Going the wrong way, unfortunately, but Erik admired her for making a decision - two of the girls he’d helped had burst into tears.

Joseph would be ashamed of his elder brother, he mused as he peeled himself out of the shadows and started striding up the street; he’d never discarded so many comely young women in his life. But Joseph Buquet was off with the other stagehands, gawping at the mechanics and their wires and black gloves (and possibly musing on the benefits of leaving their world of pulleys and curtains for the more glamorous work of being an electrician). It was why Erik was out on the road acting as chaperon in the first place - no stagehands meant no sets and he’d be damned if he was going to pick splinters out of his hands all night.

“He!” he called and stopped the girl in her tracks. Numbers Three and Seven had been affronted for they were nice girls, and nice girls were unaccustomed to men hailing them in the street. Number Nine (by far his favorite), had turned with an arched brow and a come-hither smile that faded only slightly when she got a good look at him. Number Thirteen’s shoulders went a bit stiff, but she turned and tilted her chin up under the brim of her cheap hat. Pretty eyes, he thought absently. Very blue.

“Forge M. Buquet,” Erik inclined his head back toward where the agitated little man was pacing back and forth, drumming his walking stick on the ground. “He’s only used to talking to the boxkeepers and concierge. And they all know where the library is. May I escort you, Mademoiselle Treize?”

Number Thirteen took him in - as he had previously noted, she was very small and he was very tall, so it took some doing. As was custom, she looked from eye to eye, not quite knowing which one she ought to pay attention to, unnerved by seeing both at once. She settled on the blue, as most people did.

“Pardon?” she asked, taking a hesitant half-step back. “Do you work for the Opéra?”

“Ah, oui,” he said with a grin and a bow. “I am the Opéra Guide. They hire me to stand on the streetcorner and escort wayward sopranos. It’s a dangerous city, Mam’zelle Treize.”

Her pale, pale cheeks flushed very, very red. It would have been charming if Numbers Ten through Twelve hadn’t reacted precisely the same way.

“Why do you call me that?” she asked, flustered.

“Because we have not been properly introduced,” Erik explained, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. “I could no more call you by your name than I could take your arm, escort you home, or ask you to marry me.”

Her red cheeks went terribly pale - just as Number Eleven’s had - but then she did something extraordinary and precisely like none of the previous girls. She laughed.
“My name is Christine Daaé,” she said forthrightly, with a grin that she quickly modified into a small smile, better suited for conversing with an unknown gentleman on a public street. “And, as you guessed, I don’t know where the library is.”

“Well,” Erik said, miming tipping his red beret as though it were a silk hat and extending his elbow. “My name is Erik. And I would be happy - and duty-bound, I might add, for this is what they pay me for - to show you.”

Christine paused for a mere moment before she took the arm of the man beside her - Erik. It was a trifle awkward; he was very tall.

That was the second thing she’d noticed about him, his height. The first was his voice - after all, she’d only turned round because she assumed that someone who sounded like that had to work for the opera. And the third and, in her mind, the most prominent, was that he was very, very ugly.

She’d seen unfortunates before, of course, but most of those had been beggars on the roadways, old ladies with gnarled hands and missing teeth, old campaigners without legs, starved and wasted children whose skin was covered in boils and dreadful plaques. In comparison, his ought to be an ordinary ugliness, sallow skin, a hawkish nose that might have been 'distinguished' on less gaunt face, bony wrists, and the most extraordinary long fingers she’d ever seen. But it was the eyes that tipped this man from being simply unfortunate into uncanny. One was a bright and glimmering brown so pale it looked like amber. The other was sickly blue, like a robin’s egg bleached in sunlight. Or the veins running under her wrist.

And then he’d gone into teasing her and she’d lost all sense of what she ought to do. Turn on her heel and stalk back in the other direction, since he was being impertinent? Strike him and run for some officer of the law?

The last seemed extreme; after all, he’d done nothing worse than make her feel uncomfortable, whereas the first man she met outside the building had chased her off with a stick. Her odds were improving; if the day was on an upward trajectory, perhaps the next man she met would say, ‘Good morning.’

So she hung on to his bony elbow, beneath the sleeve of his loose artist’s smock and allowed him to lead her round the side of the building, in the opposite direction of that which she’d come. He really did have the most extraordinary, deep voice, even if he didn't use it to do anything but make jokes. Was he a painter? A properties master? A sculptor?

“Don’t mind about this, you know,” he said conversationally, striding along so fast on his long legs that she had to scurry beside him to keep up. “This was meant to be the Emperor’s entrance. When we had an emperor, mind.”

“I don’t mind,” Christine said, a little too quickly; it did feel rather like being told to go round the back of the house to the kitchen, a feeling she was accustomed to, but disliked. “It’s only that I don’t know where anything is and that gentleman with the walking stick was...was...”

“Rude?” he supplied. “Ah, don’t mind Simon - you did him a world of kindness to call him a gentleman. Ah! Here we are.”

The Opera was a very grand building - so grand, in fact, that it was dizzying trying to tell one set of statues from another and Christine was quite sure that, without her Opéra Guide, she’d never have found the door, nor could she again.
“Thank you very much,” she said, letting go of his arm. Then, feeling suddenly cheeky, added, “I’d tip you, but I haven’t any ready money.”

“Very wise,” he replied gravely. “For you’ll be a poor prospect for a pick-pocket - ”

Just then the door banged loudly open and a harassed-looking man with a very white beard shouted, “Erik! Leave the chorus girls alone and get those men back to their work! You’d think we were installing an elephant in the foyer rather than a few - excuse me, mademoiselle, good morning.”

So the day was on an upward trajectory after all.

“Good morning, monsieur,” Christine bobbed quickly down in his direction - she might not have recognized the doors, but she did recognize the opera’s director, M. Vaucorbeil. “Merci, monsieur…”

“Erik,” he said, bowing again, touching his fingers to his cap.

“Nevermind him, please, mademoiselle,” Vaucorbeil interjected impatiently. “Mademoiselle...I apologize, I’ve forgotten your surname - you’re the Swede, aren’t you?”

The Swede. Well, she supposed she was.

“Daaé, monsieur,” she supplied quickly, not sure what else to say. Was her accent really so poor? The Professor and Mamma Valerius assured her when she was young that her French was quite good and no one at the conservatory had said a word about it - only that her Italian needed work. “Christine Daaé.”

“No, he’s being paid to escort chorus girls to the library entrance.”

It took Christine a moment, once she realized both of them were staring at her, to fully comprehend that she’d spoken that last sentence out loud.

Erik laughed and broke the silence, then M. Vaucorbeil favored her with a grim smile. “I would if I thought I could get away with paying him less. This way, Mademoiselle Daaé. You will be late for rehearsal.”
The Pearl Fishers

Chapter Notes

_The Pearl Fishers_ was not actually performed in Paris again until 1889 and it was performed at the Théâtre de la Gaîté. I just like the idea of Erik trying to sail a boat across the stage (for obvious reasons). And no, Erik is not the name his parents call him. And I straight-up decided to diverge from Nadir as the name for the Persian because one of the characters in the opera is called Nadir and I didn't want things to get confusing.

It had taken some doing to get the gentlemen back to work - especially because Erik had nothing in particular for them to work on. M. Vaucorbeil wanted to revive _The Pearl Fishers_ - not seen in Paris for almost thirty years - for the start of the season, which was all well and good, but the set was going to be...challenging.

_The Pearl Fishers_ was set on an island, after all, and while other theatres might have been content to throw a few Indian silks over some crates and paint a wooden tree to look like a palm before a blue backdrop, this was the Paris Opéra. And M. Vaucorbeil had ordered the sea.

Erik was under no illusions as to why he'd been hired as the chief scenic designer for the Opéra's last two seasons - in fact, it was illusions that had got him the job in the first place. He'd been trotting about the local theatres making ghosts rise from the crypt, plunging audiences into the bowels of darkest Hades or mimicking the rocking of an ancient ship come rising from the ocean depths (though for that particular production he'd only had to recreate the ship, not the sea). He'd been hired for magic and the unusual. His livelihood depended on it. And if M. Vaucorbeil wanted the sea, then the sea they would have...just as soon as he worked out a method for flooding the stage without soaking the orchestra.

"What if we built a tank?" Joseph Buquet had suggested, not once, not twice, but three times, before day's end.

"That will ruin the sight lines," Erik informed him once, twice, but the third time he mere clapped his hands and said, "Bravo, Joseph! A tank! Genius! And we'll only sell the boxes and the balcony, I'll just have the box office manager deduct the losses from your salary, shall I?"

At which the disgruntled stage hand muttered that it was only a suggestion before he buggered off to smoke or drink or watch the chorus run scales or whatever damned thing he did when he wasn't being a nuisance.

He didn't have to use real water, he supposed, but wouldn't that be novel? And wasn't that what he was being paid for? Novelty?

Perhaps water only for the storm; but there had to be something to simulate the sea. He'd done it before, with shining silks and a hoard of dancers who rolled and twisted about on the floor to imitate churning waves, but he had a feeling that might be a bit too avant-garde for this crowd. They wanted to feel spray on their faces (metaphorically) and smell salt and brine (perhaps literally). Perhaps he should soak the orchestra after all. Or have them all dress as crabs.

He had to do something; though Erik had not heard the music himself, he knew the reception for the
opera's initial run had been less than adoring. In fact, the press cuts from the day described the show has having neither fishers nor pearls. Hence his task in creating sea and storm.

"The music is good," M. Vaucorbeil had insisted to the production team, though none had questioned him when he announced their upcoming season. "Berlioz liked it."

"Well, if Berlioz liked it," M. Reyer, the orchestra conductor had muttered after their meeting broke up, "then I suppose we ought to perform it in repertory. No one comes to the Opera hoping to hear French, they can wander into any cabaret, spend half the money and enjoy thrice the dancing. The ballet comes in the first act! Half the audience won't have taken their seats! The patrons will murder us!"

Erik merely nodded along, letting M. Reyer blow himself out rather than add fuel to the fire. While the score remained unknown to him, he had skimmed through the libretto and it was...rather terrible. Though its exotic setting at least least itself well to capturing the audience's attention. And he was certain the ballet master would insert another dance, later in the show, to satisfy the patrons. All he had to do was provide them something to dance on.

Perhaps he would needle Dalir about it. No, scratch that, he was definitely going to spend the evening needling Dalir, he always did, but perhaps, it being so early in the production schedule, it could be about something else entirely.

The walk home had provided no great insight, which was unfortunate; he lived a good half-hour's journey from the Opera on foot and had some of his best ideas while walking, usually in the rain which pushed his daily trudge out to nearly an hour. The weather had been fine all week; that was probably the problem.

The flat he shared with Dalir was more of a studio dressed up to look like a flat. It had once been a grand house on a fashionable street, but now the street was gone to seed and the house had been chopped up into rooms, all of them going for far more than they were worth. They were in one of the finest apartments in the place, or so the landlord claimed. Because they had windows.

"They're taxing for them, in England. Paris will be next, mark me!" M. Diaz informed them. Though their landlord's family had been in France for generations now, he still thought his Spanish last name made him a man of the world. And he blamed the Siege for destroying the respectability of the neighborhood. M. Diaz claimed that it was because he was a republican, but really, Erik thought he just hated the Germans and, by extension, the English. The only reason Erik had been able to lease the place was because he informed M. Diaz that his was purely a professional nom de plume and not to worry, he hadn't a single relation in Germany - or Belgium, come to that.

Still, Dalir was likely his preferred tenant; he hadn't a prejudice against Persians, so far as Erik could tell. Though both of them agreed it was probably best for M. Diaz to go on thinking that all Persians were Catholics; he was a man of the world, after all, and it wouldn't do to correct him.

The lamb in the sitting room cum kitchen cum bedroom was burning low, but Erik could still see the glow from the windows. No electricity for them; M. Diaz likely would not wire the buildings he owned until he determined just what continent the Edison Electric Company hailed from.

"Let's say you're a patron at the Opéra," Erik began as he entered the flat, finding Dalir sitting on the edge of the bed with a boot in one hand and a tin that had once been full of shoe polish in the other. It was always best to ask him a hypothetical; it had been months since the question, 'Found any work today?' had been met with anything but pointed silence. "Which would you rather see - the waves of the ocean washing over the head of the harpist? Or sheets of rain beating down upon the lead soprano?"
"What is the lead soprano wearing?" Dalir asked, a smile turning up the corners of his lips. Erik was glad he'd shaved off that infernal mustache; he mightn't look fashionable, but he did look handsomer and one of them, at least, ought to look handsome. Once, he'd told Dalir he should make himself useful about the artist's hill or at a college and offer himself up as the figure model for Othello, but he'd turned him down flat. Such a pity too, with his broad shoulders, handsome face, thick hair...ah, but then, Erik might have been playing favorites.

"A veil," Erik said. "Likely something more. But -"

"Soak the soprano and leave the harpist be," Dalir declared definitively. "Having trouble with the fishermen?"

"The pearl fishers, if you please," Erik informed him in his most affronted tone. "Believe me, if all I had to do for this production was fill the stage with rotting fish, I'd be in heaven."

"So too would the smell be." Dalir put his boots down and looked up at Erik under a curling lock of black hair that was sliding very attractively over his forehead. "Speaking of fish, I might -"

"No," Erik said, shaking his head. "You won't."

_Might go to the docks._ No. Not for a moment. Not his Dalir. Despite his making a very good double for a Venetian war general, he was nothing of the kind. Oh, certainly, he could haul freight and lift cargo with the best of them, Erik was absolutely certain that he could. But he would not. There were too many accidents.

"You are too precious to me," Erik said because peppering him with endearments went a long way to shutting Dalir's mouth; he was even worse at taking compliments than Erik was. "I'll soak the soprano. We'll get by. The worst injury I want you coming home with is a sore stomach or burned fingertips. That's all you're permitted."

It was...sweet, if a bit authoritative. But Dalir supposed Erik had to be a bit of a dictator, in his youth; one did not come from such a family as his without being so. Still. 'All you're permitted.' It was as though he'd been taken prisoner. He _felt_ like a prisoner, most days. But that wasn't Erik's doing.

It wasn't his fault no bakery - even the most commercial - in Paris would hire him. He understood smaller, family operations. Those that had been in the business of bread and cakes for generations. His own family owned a moderately successful sweets shop which, he supposed, he could return to at any time for employment. But that would mean leaving Erik. And that he would not do. That was not to say he hadn't been offered _any_ positions. A few bakeries offered to pay a few pennies for regular cleaning. One even considered him for deliveries which he was still kicking himself for turning down; he'd thought it beneath him, but what seemed insulting three months ago now looked tremendously appealing.

Hence the docks. But then Erik became maudlin and dictatorial and all Dalir really wanted him to do was sit down so he could have a go at coaxing something passable out of their single burner and hotplate.

"You're still wearing your cap," Dalir pointed out as Erik still hovered just inside the doorway, looking at him far too keenly. Then _immediately_ wished he hadn't said a word about it. Erik turned to him with a wicked smile and advanced on him _singing._
"Alouette, gentil alouette, allouette je te ploumerai," he sang cheerfully, repetitively, every time Dalir pointed out that he'd not doffed his cap or taken off his coat, or otherwise tromped around the flat in muddy boots. If Erik wasn't the sole provider of their income, he'd be more insistent about him doing his fair share of the housekeeping, but as it was, he felt he ought to do the lion's share of the cleaning, simply because he had more hours of the day to do it.

"Je te ploumerai le tête, je te ploumerai la tête," Erik continued, whipping his hat off and tossing it (perfectly) onto the hook by the door where it caught and hung obediently. "Et la tête, et la tête, alouette. alouette, ah, ah, ah!"

"Stop," Dalir muttered, wiping a hand over his face and sinking into an armchair. "Please, no more."

But when had a politely voiced request ever compelled Erik to do anything? No, the fiend not continued to sing, he continued to advance, sitting astride Dalir's lap as he went on.

"Je te ploumerai lebec -"

"Erik."

"Je te ploumerai lebec."

"Erik!"

"Et lebec," he peeled his false nose off with a flourish and dropped it into the ashtray (the clean ashtray, but in any case!), and twined his fingers right around the back of Dalir's neck. "Et lebec, alouette, alouette, ah, ah, ah!"

By this point Dalir was laughing; he couldn't help it, though he found the song annoying and Erik himself absolutely incorrigible at the best of times; it didn't do to encourage him. "It's not funny," he said as seriously as he could. "No matter how many times you do it, it's never been funny."

"Ah," Erik said, still smiling at him wickedly. "But you laugh! Every time, you laugh."

And then he kissed him very sweetly. It almost made up for the song. Almost.

"You belong on the stage," Dalir muttered against Erik's mouth, not for the first time.

"And you belong in a boulangerie," Erik muttered back, not for the first time. "But, as it is I spend my days thinking about how to best get a soprano wet -"

"You'd better not," Dalir drew back with mock-outrage. "I sing bass."

"Oh, you shouldn't sing at all," Erik chuckled, planting a very light kiss on Dalir's nose. "You haven't any talent for it, you know. Come now, let's put that mouth of yours to better -"

And so he did.
“Aren’t they busy?” Raoul asked, walking at a quick march to keep up with Philippe. Honestly, he thought the Navy was disciplined, but nothing matched his elder brother when it came to the single-minded pursuit of pleasure. “Will they even let us in?”

Philippe laughed as if Raoul was being absurd, it was a sound he was well used to; being nearly fifteen years his elder meant that Raoul had been raised from earliest childhood with the notion that Philippe was always right, that Philippe knew more than he did, and that Philippe would always know more than he did.

But that did not mean Philippe was unkind; honestly, he was trying to do Raoul a favor. Recently returned from sea, he’d rescued him from an afternoon of sitting at home (or at his sisters’ homes) taking tea and taking calls.

“Rehearsals have only just begun, they’re not neck-deep in it,” Philippe said with a smile that showed his white, even teeth beneath the points of his immaculately waxed mustache. “And even if they were, they would not bar the door against their principle patrons, especially when we’re taking such a keen interest in the goings-on at the Opéra.”

Or a keen interest in the people of the Opéra, which Raoul thought, but did not say. Marie-Grace and Marie-Félicité thought Philippe’s interest in the Opéra girls was unbecoming. Félicité was particularly pointed about it, in her round-about way. When she was feeling strongly opposed to Philippe’s interest, she would boycott the Opéra altogether - at least, until they put a show on that she enjoyed. Like I Puritani.

Raoul was an unfortunate philistine, at least according to his brother. He had no particular favorites, either among the performances or among the cast. The ballets were always spectacular and the singing was impressive. Of course, he had been away, and tastes changed. Life at sea was not, perhaps, the best way to cultivate tastes in the arts, but it was possible that, having been metaphorically starved for culture, he might appreciate the performances more.

But they were not going to a performance. Raoul distinctly had the feeling that they were going to have themselves made much of. And as he’d just come from Félicité’s house, he’d not even a drop of liquor to shore himself up for the experience.

“Hors du chemin Oh! Oh! Monsieur le Comte, do forgive me!” a sweaty little man in last year’s suit practically tripped over himself apologizing for ordering such a man off the steps of the Opéra. “The entrance is a disaster, an utter disaster, would monsieur be more comfortable entering via the library?
I’m sure neither you nor your man want to pick through wires and cords - the new lights, you know.”

Philippe did not miss a beat. “Actually, my brother has a keen mechanical mind,” he said and the sweat on the little man’s brow beaded down into the large side-whiskers he sported. “We’d be happy to survey the installation of the new light fixtures, if we may.”

“Of course!” the sweating, whiskered man replied, glancing between Philippe and Raoul with a face on fire. This - this was what Raoul possibly dreaded the most. Not the initial insult. But the making-up for the initial insult. “Your brother. Of course! The vicomte. Of course! Come back from…”

“The navy,” Philippe said smoothly. Then, as proud as any father, launched into an exhaustive list of Raoul’s merits and accomplishments and rank. He talked so much that M. Whiskers did not have a chance to get another word in by the time they entered the darkened foyer.

For an Opéra that was being fitted out for new and better lights, it certainly was dark. M. Whiskers was right about one thing - it was dreadfully untidy.

“Where are those men?” he bellowed, all genteel pretence and obsequiousness fallen away at the disaster area before him. “Jean! Marc! Or Jean-Marc, whatever his name is -”

“Late luncheon, I think.”

A deep, resonant voice sounded all around them in such a way that, at first, Raoul could not pinpoint the source.

M. Whiskers drew himself up, turning so red that Raoul was briefly concerned he would give himself an ulcer before the day was through. Or an attack of apoplexy. “And you! Where are your men? What are you -”

“We were upon the stage; I could hear you shouting from the auditorium.”

A man appeared suddenly, trailing sawdust behind him. Extraordinarily tall and extraordinarily thin, he reminded Raoul unpleasantly of a photograph he’d once seen of a shipwreck victim. But this man was dry and his clothes were only covered in wood chips, not salt.

“Your electricians will be back,” the man said, then his thin lips twisted in a smile. “Or they won’t. They work on the orders of their own company, not the Opéra.”

“Vaucorbeil,” M. Whiskers grumbled. “All he cares about is music -”

“Not a bad quality for someone who runs an opera,” M. le Shipwreck offered, but somehow Raoul thought he was the only one who’d heard; despite the fact that the man was across the room from him, he felt as if the words had come from behind him and only in a whisper.

“- and the rest of us must keep the building standing. I am so dreadfully sorry, M. le Comte. M. le Vicomte! It seems you must be denied the experience of...of making mechanical inquiries. But only for today! I’ll speak to the manager, we can arrange, perhaps, a visit -”

“Oh, we were just stopping by,” Philippe said dismissively. “Are the rehearsals well under way?”

“Ah...yes!” M. Whiskers said, after a considerable pause. “Would you like to survey the dancers? The ballet master is with them at the moment, practicing a new number, you could be the first to see.”
Philippe nodded and smiled, inclining his head at Raoul, but then M. Whiskers continued, “And your mechanical brother could, perhaps, if he is so inclined, tour the stage. Erik here is designing an ingenious little device to simulate the sea! That must be doubly of interest to a navy man.”

The shipwrecked designer stiffened and this time his voice rang loud and clear all around them. “The very fact that Erik is designing means there is nothing, yet, to see. I’m sure M. le Vicomte would much rather look at the dancers.”

“Oh, no!” M. Whiskers said enthusiastically. “M. le Comte assures me that his brother loves nothing more than tinkering, as you do. I am sure you would be happy, Erik, as the opera is happy, to show M. le Vicomte anything he would wish to see.”

“If it’s not inconvenient,” Raoul interjected. He doffed his hat, running the rim through his hands; he was a terrible fidget when he got nervous, a trait Grace was forever scolding him for. Somehow he’d taken off his own gloves without noticing; they were balled up in his left hand.

M. le Shipwreck - Erik? - looked him over for a beat. Raoul was half-certain he was going to refuse. Then he said, “No. Not inconvenient in the slightest. Only I am sure M. le Vicomte will be disappointed as there is little to see. But, if you will, monsieur…”

He gestured for Raoul to follow and Philippe merely smiled and nodded him along, as though he was dropping a child off at school and would come round to fetch him at the lesson’s end.

“I would be delighted,” Raoul said politely. And followed Erik into the darkness.

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It was a useful mantra.


One Erik employed nearly daily.


Especially when faced with a task he found unpleasant. Like dragging the various toffs who’d come to look at the ballerinas through the backstage, as if they had an interest in opera and all its parts, not merely the pretty girls.

Philippe de Chagny, one of the Opéra’s most esteemed patrons was a regular visitor, though he’d long ago given up any pretence that he was interested in any of the component parts of the opera, save the dancing. Or the dancers. He had a new favorite every season and Erik wondered whether or not he’d come to pick her out today, the way ladies picked out new patterns for dresses.

The brother he’d not heard tell of. He knew there were sisters - indeed, one, Charité or Fraternité or whatever her name was amused them sometimes, writing letters to the management about costumes or content or other things that she and her ladies’ guild did not approve of. The letters were meant to be private, but somehow Erik always got his hands on them and kept the stagehands and performers in stitches doing dramatic performances.

But the brother. He was a mystery. Wearing quite a fashionable cut-away morning suit, abusing his chapeau, he held himself stiffly, with a bearing that would be called either military or awkward,
depending on how charitable one was feeling. Those restless brown fingers on fawn colored felt, though, they drew the eye.

“I can take you round the back way to the dancer’s salon,” Erik informed him, once they were out of earshot from Buquet. “If you’d prefer, monsieur.”

“Oh, no, really, I…” the Vicomte paused awkwardly, then smiled just as awkwardly. “I don’t want to interrupt anything. And if you really haven’t begun, then I feel much better about looking at the stage, for…you can’t interrupt nothing, can you?”

Immediately, at once, and without reservation, Erik decided he liked this Vicomte. At least he understood that the dancing girls were working. Which was more than could be said for some.

“Well, then, by all means,” Erik opened a door to the auditorium and gestured him grandly in.

The Vicomte hadn’t walked more than two steps when Joseph Buquet called out, “Not another one! Tell him to go away, Erik, there’s hardly enough work as it is for all the hands! Thank you, but no!”

M. le Vicomte paused halfway down the stairs and Erik was…well, not mortified. He supposed he was meant to be mortified. Simon, certainly, would have been mortified. But Erik was merely struck with a sense of wonder. Wonder that Joseph, though he had two working eyes, could not employ them properly. Honestly the cut of his suit! The quality of the material! His mutilated hat! Imagine not being able to tell a member of the quality, just because of the color of his face.

“This is the Vicomte de Chagny,” Erik announced, vaguely gesturing in the poor fellow’s general direction. “He wants to see the stage.”

“I really don’t…if it’s a bother - ”

“Come along, come along,” Erik said impatiently. He was seized by the impulse to take the Vicomte by the hand, but thought that would get him in a bit of trouble. Instead he simply strode along and let the Vicomte step lively after him.

Their auditorium was known for the shoddiness of the acoustics, but in that moment, Erik found them a bit too keen.

“The Vicomte? Did you know there was a Vicomte?”

“Is he the Comte’s son?”

“No, he’s far too old!”

“Anyway, he couldn’t be the Vicomte, could he? Bastards can’t…right? Is that right? Bastards don’t get titles?”

“How should I know? Do I look like a toff?”

“He sure as shit don’t.”

“Anyhow, he’s got to be the brother, you know that whole family’s blacks, the lot of them.”

“Not that black.”

“Take your luncheon,” Erik ordered them firmly.

“We’ve already had our - ” Joseph Buquet began, but he didn’t get any farther than that because Erik
rounded on him in a fit of pique.

“Get out!” he shouted, the auditorium filling with the sound. “I can’t think with all your chatter and if I can’t think, I can’t design, and if I can’t design, you won’t have any work, then it doesn’t matter just how many Vicomtes come trotting in looking for a job!”

Buquet just stared at him, looking staggered until René Ferrand, six and a half feet tall and built like a boulder, grabbed him by the back of the shirt and hauled him away.

“You’re going to owe him a cigar,” Edouard Paiva muttered to Erik as he passed.

“I’m aware,” Erik replied grimly. “Off you go. Like good boys.”

It appeared he was also going to owe M. le Vicomte a new hat as well. Poor fellow. Nervous disposition. “Do you want me to -”

“No, stay, do what you like,” Erik said, turning to the stage. “Get in the boat, tell me if it’s seaworthy.”

M. le Vicomte looked round at the rough-hewn hull poking out of the stage. He actually did approach the thing, which was only half a boat, really, no bottom. “It’s not in the least seaworthy.”

Erik laughed and shook his head. “Well. Wheels or runners? That’s the question of the hour. Do I ply Joseph Buquet - the fellow who’s so worried about his position - with cigars and have him haul the thing across the stage? Or do I leave it to the actors to give it a subtle push when they can be bothered to remember? These are the things that keep me up at night. These are the times that try men’s souls. Buquet still wants me to pry up the floor and make the whole show float. I mean, if the Romans could stage naval battles in the Colosseum, surely we can do no less for the Paris Opéra.”

“What opera are you rehearsing for?” the Vicomte asked.

“The Pearl Fishers,” Erik informed him.

“Never heard of it,” the Vicomte replied apologetically.

It was an action borne purely of impulse; if he'd really thought about it, he'd never have done it. Whether it was the young gentleman's obvious ill-ease, his desperate politeness, or something else entirely, Erik did not know. But he was compelled to reach out then, to clap him on the back in a friendly way. Just briefly, but surely a breach of etiquette. Oddly, that was the first time M. le Vicomte relaxed since he'd arrived. At least the pitch of his shoulders slanted down slightly. “Don’t worry, neither has anyone else. Come, follow me, we can hear a bit, if I’m not mistaking the time. They’re exercising the tenor.”

Through the maze of the backstage they went, beneath the catwalks and the dancer’s rehearsal room, into a small, spare room furnished with nothing more than a few chairs and a piano.

Anatole Garron and Fritz Dessler were hard at work (tenor and baritone respectively) working on their duet with Madame Parrino, one of the rehearsal pianist.

“Begin again, please, gentlemen,” she said patiently; Madame Parrino was one of the company’s particular favorites and with little surprise - she coaxed and cajoled, rather than shouted and scolded. Erik could probably stand to take a leaf from her book. The door was open and Erik made eye contact with her and waited until he received a small nod before he stepped quietly inside, gesturing for the Vicomte to follow him.
Raoul would never find his way out, of that he was absolutely certain. M. le Shipwreck stode about as though he owned the place, so fast on his grasshopper legs that Raoul was left not knowing quite which way was up. Only a tinkling piano nearby assured him that they were still very much in the opera proper.

No one really acknowledged them when they entered. The pianist had her eyes on the music, the gentlemen had their backs to him. M. le Shipwreck leaned casually against the wall, folding his arms to listen. Raoul copied his posture, though not his slouch; he was still too newly come to shore to permit himself a slouch.

“*Au fond du temple saint,*” the tenor sang, slowly, almost reverently. “*Paré de fleurs et d’ors, une femme apparaît.*”

“*Une femme apparaît!*” The deep voiced chap interrupted him.

Raoul craned his neck up to whisper as quietly as he could in M. le Shipwreck’s ear, “I thought all opera was Italian or German.”

M. le Shipwreck grinned at him, shook his head, and put a finger to his lips. Up close and in the better light of the small room, Raoul found it hard not to stare. He had rather wretched teeth. Pockmarked skin, the color of tobacco-stained fingers. And his eyes! Two different colors, which was decidedly unusual. And Raoul could not tell, but there seemed to be a thin, but deep scar running round the edge of his overlarge nose -

“Watch your phrasing, M. Anatole,” the pianist ceased playing to interrupt.

“Ha! You’d think, this being in your native tongue, Herr Garron, that you’d come to the words better than usual!” The deep-voiced man boasted and teased with a very thick accent.

“You’re too damned close and too damned loud - as usual!” M. Anatole grumbled. “Anyway, my German is a damned sight better than yours - ”

“That’s three damns!” The German fellow exclaimed. “And in the presence of a lady!”

M. le Shipwreck, took Raoul by the elbow and led him back into the hall. “They’ll be at it all day. But that was them - the pearl fishers themselves. Those are the two idiots I have to trust to shove the boat around. How do you like my odds?”

“If they can stop bickering, I’m certainly they’ll be up to the task,” Raoul said optimistically. He was about to inquire about the fellow’s name - he couldn’t go about calling him M. le Shipwreck - but the hall was suddenly flooded with dozens of people and the din they raised was interrupted only by the slamming of the rehearsal room door they’d just exited.

“Ooh, we’re being too loud!” a shrill young woman in a violently purple hat tittered.

“Well the *principles* are performing!” a short, squat girl in yellow declared. “Shh! Must be quiet!”

The crowd departed, last of all a little blonde girl, clutching a score to her chest. Her face was angled away from Raoul and he was about to press himself flat against the wall that she might pass (it was a rather narrow hall), but M. le Shipwreck call to her, “Mademoiselle Treize, we meet again! Are you a priestess or a virgin? Or - best of all - a virgin priestess?”
The young lady turned round and smiled up at him, “I’m not sure,” she confessed. “I might not know until I receive my costume - apparently the priestesses all have crowns or something like.”

“As well they should,” M. le Shipwreck nodded. “Well, we were just passing through - M. Garron and Herr Dessler are having a row. Just getting into character, I’m sure. Ah! May I detain you, a moment, mam’ selle, to ask you a question of tremendous importance?”

She smiled up at M. le Shipwreck, eyes flickering briefly to Raoul - whose mouth gaped open in a most untoward manner - and replied, “Certainly.”

“You are an actress,” he said to the young lady - Christine! It had to be Christine, she looked just like her, only a trifle taller and more womanly, but Raoul would be damned if it wasn’t the same girl!

“I hope to be,” she said, and blushed and, oh yes, he was absolutely certain. Should he say something? He ought to say something. Or should he refrain? Would she say something? Did she recognize him? Did she remember him? He flattered himself that, for whatever else one might have to say about him, he was memorable. But it had been...ten years. Ten years since his summer sojourn to his aunt’s. It was a long time for a short life. “But, for the sake of argument, let’s say that I am.”

“Bonne,” M. le Shipwreck said pleasantly. “So, as an actress, would you prefer to push your own prop boat about the stage - it would be on a track, no need to steer! Or would you rather a strapping young fellow dragged you here and there? This is not the strapping young fellow, by the bye, this is the Vicomte de Changy, I’m performing my duties and Guiding him about.”

Raoul, in an attempt to at least maintain the appearance of being a collected, dignified sort of person, inclined his head down in a stiff bow. “Mademoiselle.”

She gave a little bobbing curtsy, lowering her eyes to the floor and murmuring a quiet, “Monsieur.”

M. le Shipwreck looked between them with narrowed eyes. “Do you two know each other?”

“No!” Raoul and Christine shouted together. Then they glanced at each other and looked away quickly.

“I haven’t had the pleasure,” Raoul stammered.

“I don’t know where we would have met,” Christine rushed in, right on his heels.

“Alright, then” M. le Shipwreck said, in a tone that implied disbelief. “Well. The question stands, mam’ selle. What would you rather?”

Christine gathered herself and took a deep breath. “I suppose - for my own reasons. I would rather have another responsible for the boat. What if I went off course? What if it got stuck? It seems a great deal of responsibility, I’m sure I would botch the whole thing.”

“Never trust actors,” M. le Shipwreck mused aloud to himself. “Very well, mam’ selle, food for thought. Come along, M. le Vicomte. I’ll return you to your brother. Unless you’d rather make an extended good-bye to this young woman who you have never met before in your life. A claim I naturally have the utmost faith in.”

Luckily for the two of them, Christine took the initiative. “It was...nice to have met you, Monsieur le Vicomte.”

She extended her hand, palm down. It was an invitation. One Raoul had received before, but rarely so casually given. Could she possibly…
He gently took her gloved fingers in his hand and inclined his head to kiss her knuckles. “Likewise. A pleasure, Mademoiselle Daaé.”

To the side, M. le Shipwreck made a little noise in his throat, which he quickly turned into an unconvincing cough. “Yes, yes, have a lovely day, Mademoiselle Daaé.”

When they were well out of the rehearsal hall and out of sight of Christine Daaé, M. le Shipwreck reached out toward Raoul. He thought he meant to shake his hand, but he was reaching for his hat.

“May I?” he asked. “The poor thing is screaming for mercy.”

Raoul’s face got hot, but he handed the hat over without a murmur. M. le Shipwreck managed to unfold it into a semblance of a gentleman’s hat. His odd eyes never left Raoul’s face and Raoul found himself staring at the fellow’s left shoulder, horribly embarrassed. “I’m sorry, it seems a trifle awkward to admit. I didn’t quite catch your name. Erik…?”

“Oh, you caught it,” he replied, handing the hat back to him. “Erik does very well. The ballet dancers are down this hall. Must run, the hands will be back and need me to crack the whip. It was a pleasure, Monsieur.”

“Thank you,” Raoul said, jamming his hand back on his head and his gloves on his hands to prevent him wrinkling more of his clothes. “For taking the time.”

“As I said,” Erik bowed slightly. “The pleasure was mine. Terribly interesting afternoon. We’ll be seeing more of you, I trust? When the season opens? Or...perhaps sooner?”

Raoul was at a loss for words, but Erik did not give him the chance to reply. He winked, touched his hands to his cap, and walked off toward the stage, leaving Raoul to wait for Philippe. It occurred to him that it was not out of the realm of possibility that Christine might double back to find him. He was not sure precisely whether he wanted her to or not. But though his heart hammered in his chest, for now he was quite certain that she recognized him and remembered him - possibly fondly! - she never came.
A Sunday Stroll

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At Mass on Sunday, Christine forgot half the words to the Creed and said her Notre Père half in Swedish. She only just remembered to double back to ask the priest for a piece of Host to deliver to Mamma, though of course she knelt and lit a candle for her father. It was the only time when her mind was entirely on her prayers.

At least she would finally have some fodder for the Confessional. To spend all of the Lord's Day in the Lord's House in contemplation of a young man was certainly some kind of sin. If she'd wanted to let the Vicomte de Chagny possess her thoughts, she'd had all of Saturday for it. But still. She thought of him.

It was only that it had been such a shock, seeing him now, a man and not a little boy on the cusp of adolescence. He was so handsome! And, of course, why shouldn't he be? When he was twelve his jaw had not been so squarely cut as now, his hands not so large and warm, but his dark brown eyes were just the same - large, full of some kind of essential goodness -

And there she went again. As Christine stepped out of the church into the bright sunlight of the street, she knew she ought to collect herself before she was trodden on by a carriage horse. She'd never see Raoul - the Vicomte - Raoul again, if she was in hospital.

For he'd remembered her! She was so sure he had and she had been trying very hard to pretend they did not know one another. Both to spare her the embarrassment of greeting him too intimately if he did not recollect their acquaintance and to him the embarrassment of having to return a greeting that he felt too friendly, bordering on inappropriate if he did remember her and preferred to pretend he did not.

Really, their acquaintance had been very brief, only three months by the sea the summer that she was nine-going-on-ten and he just-turned-twelve. She was fortunate he'd taken a liking to her at all - there were precious few children of her own age, she recalled and many of them lived in the grand houses beyond the beach and would not give the time of day to a little ragamuffin girl with a faded ribbon in her hair and worn out walking boots.

But that same disapproval that meant the other little boys and girls were told not to play with 'that traveling man's daughter' also kept them distant from the little black boy in a sailor suit, searching for crabs by the water's edge.

Christine approached him quite boldly, the first afternoon she saw him. She did notice his dark skin and close-cut hair, so different from the combed-over curls of the other little boys she'd seen about. She noticed, but that was not the foremost thought in her mind. Not all all, the most important thing about this little boy on the beach was that he was alone. Nary a nurse or mother in sight to smile stiffly at her and lead her little charge away.

"What are you doing?" she asked, sounding more like a child of five than a near-lady of nine-going-on-ten. "May I help?"

He told her he was hunting for crabs - limules - big ugly fellows with long tails that they used to flip themselves over in the water. "It's dirty and not easy," he warned her. "You might not like it."
Christine only rolled up her sleeves and joined him in his search - the crabs were terribly ugly and at first she was afraid they would sting her, like scorpions or spiders, but the boy - Raoul - explained that they were harmless.

He liked having her tag along with him after that, she'd meet him by the sea and they would explore and play in the waves that crashed along the shore. He took great pleasure in explaining things to her - he was the youngest in his family, by many years, so he was forever having things explained to him - and she enjoyed listening. It being herself alone so much, it was wonderful to have a friend, even if it was only one.

At a street crossing, Christine shook her head to banish the memories - she really did have to pay closer attention to what was going on around her.

"Mademoiselle Treize!"

Especially if she was going to be hailed by a sobriquet. Erik from the Opera! Christine was surprised to see him on a public street - she was forever catching glimpses of him around the stage, flitting from place to place, room to room, always in a hurry, though she'd never seen him leaving or arriving. She half-thought he lived there.

But no, here he was in the daylight, strolling down the street in the companionship of a man nearly as dark-skinned as the Vicomte. Alas, the sight of him prompted more fodder for the confessional. Christine might not have read her catechism recently, but she was nearly sure that one was not meant to size up attractive young men while the Holy Savior was currently in a little tin box in her pocketbook. But, as she was already sinning, she had to admit to herself that this man (also like the Vicomte) was very handsome.

Square jawed, with a straight, proud nose and thick dark eyebrows, he formed quite a contrast with Erik, so tall and pale and pointy-chinned and...well, not handsome. This man was shorter and quite stocky, with broad shoulders that strained the arms of his jacket.

Perhaps that was what made them look rather complimentary. Erik, with his arms slightly too long for the sleeves of his coat and his friend in his too-tight jacket. Must have been their Sunday best, for they were wearing jackets, waistcoats, and the rest. Erik had even left his red beret at home presumably with his smock and wore a derby, like his friend, though both of their hats were a bit shabby around the brim.

"Bonjour!" Christine called and waved. There could be nothing wrong in this; the first time Erik Halloed her, they were strangers and thus it was a trifle indecorous to speak to him so casually out in the open. But now they knew each other, so she was sure it was alright to wait to greet them as the two gentlemen crossed the street to her and bid her good morning.

"This is the thirteenth chorus girl I rescued from Simon Buquet," Erik bragged to his friend. "Christine Daaé, she's come to work at the Garnier. Mademoiselle, this is Dalir - wait for it! - Mazandarani. But I'm sure he won't mind if you just call him Dalir, takes up less time."

She imagined it would - Mazandarani. What a name! It sounded as if Erik's friend would be quite at home in the world of their opera. She wondered where he was from.

"Certainly - that is, if Monsieur Dalir doesn't mind," Christine replied, looking to the handsome gentleman for confirmation.

Dalir smiled at her and shrugged, "I don't mind - it isn't even a surname, as you French have surnames. Just the place where my family's from. Though, I must say, I don't see how Mazandarani
is such a mouthful. No one has any trouble with...Archambeault, for instance."

"You're right of course, we're horrible hypocrites," Erik agreed cheerfully. He looked down at Christine and inquired, "Where are you bound? Have you breakfasted?"

"Oh, no, I've just come from Mass," she explained, gesturing vaguely in the direction of the church.

"What a good girl, you are!" Erik exclaimed, clapping his hands together. "Going on your own, without any goading from Maman or Papa?"

"Ahem. Well...." Christine paused, her stomach doing that odd flip that had so troubled her that first morning at the Opera. Now, now. No harm done. How could he have known? Some of her interior trouble must have shown on her face. The lines on Erik's brow deepened and she quickly gathered herself enough to reply, "They say once you're in Heaven, you can see all, can't you? And I wouldn't want them to be disappointed in any case."

Dalir let out a breath and gave Erik a pointed look - it seemed as if he wanted to swat at him, but thought better of it. Erik had the good grace to look chagrined and he said, "A very good girl indeed. I'm so sorry for you."

"Thank you," she said automatically. Christine produced her little metal box with the Eucharist in it. Dalir and Erik stared at her and she found herself explaining, "My guardian - the woman I live with - she isn't well and can't make it to Mass so often as she would like. I bring her Communion on Sundays, the priest is very busy today, so..."

"I can imagine," Erik agreed. "Is it a task that must be performed immediately, or do you have time for breakfast? I'd hate to keep you from your task if the, ah...holiness is diminished by delay."

If the holiness is diminished by delay. Honestly, some days Dalir just wanted to shake him. This poor girl, no doubt she was going to turn on her heel and bid them a quick adieu (not that Erik would, of course).

But instead she laughed; it was the sort of astonished laugh of one hearing a filthy joke for the first time and understanding the punchline, but it was a laugh nevertheless.

"I don't think so," she giggled. "What a thing to say! Well...if you don't mind my coming, I would like to breakfast with you. Mamma - my guardian, she rises very late, it it isn't a long outing, I can dawdle, a bit."

Erik assured her that it wouldn't be long at all, that there was a little cafe nearby that was quick and cheap - and, oh, no, Mademoiselle, it was his treat, so put your purse away.

"I think you ought to call me Christine, really," she said as she thanked him for treating her. "If I'm to call you Erik and you Dalir."

She was sweet, Dalir thought - obviously she looked very sweet, all five feet of her, with her blonde, curly hair and her round face, like a doll's face. But looks, in his experience, counted for very little. But there was an artless charm about her that he liked - that he assumed Erik liked. And wasn't it just typical of him to pick up little sisters everywhere he went?

"If Mademoiselle insists," Erik bowed, all performative graciousness and nothing else. Dalir just smiled and said that he'd be happy to call her Christine, if she liked.
"The most Christian of all Christian names," he added, trying to be clever. Erik laughed, while Christine smiled politely; either she didn't understand the joke or thought it was a very bad one. In any case, they took their seats in the open air of the cafe, Dalir gallantly pulling out a chair for Christine to take, a bit of extra effort to make up for the bad pun.

Clare, the usual girl, redheaded and robust, appeared at once and greeted himself and Erik familiarly.

"And who is this?" she asked of Christine. "A sister?"

"Ha!" Erik exclaimed. "Tell me, which of us does she more resemble. No, this is a friend of mine from the Opéra, Mademoiselle Christine."

"How do you do?" Clare asked.

"How do you do?" Christine replied.

"Well, I don't know, I can't say I've seen you properly, by daylight," Clare rounded on Erik just as soon as she was done minding her manners. "This is a rare treat. Though I haven't seen you much by moonlight either, come to that. When will you and your fiddle be returning?"

"Soon, soon," Erik said, waving a hand languidly. "Very soon. But to business. For me, coffee. For Dalir, coffee. For Christine...coffee?"

"Tea," she said. "I have rehearsal tomorrow and I can't take coffee without milk, and milk is bad for the voice."

"Oh, are you a singer?" Clare asked. They might be there all day making small talk, so Dalir interjected.

"Is that baker of yours still alive?" he asked. When Clare answered in the affirmative, he groaned. This was the one place where he'd gotten, if not a foot in the door, at least a toe. They liked Erik to come round at night and play his violin to attract customers and because they liked Erik, they also liked him. Clare had assured him that as soon as their baker shuffled off his mortal coil, the position he vacated would be Dalir's. Last summer the man had gone on holiday and he'd enjoyed a long spell of employment. They thought he might retire, but alas, Honore returned right on schedule and it was back to contemplating life as a stevedore for Dalir.

"Careful," she warned him. "If he does croak, you might be suspected of wrongdoing since it's an event you anticipate so dearly. Anyway, to eat?"

"Pain au chocolat," Erik replied, pointing at himself. He pointed to Dalir and again said, "Pain au chocolat." Then pointed to Christine and said, "...pain au chocolat?"

"Toast," the girl said emphatically.

"I am paying," Erik reminded her.

"Toast," Christine smiled. Then added to Clare, "With jam, if you have it."

"Raspberry?" Clare asked.

"Please," Christine said.

Erik shrugged helplessly as Clare walked away to retrieve their breakfast. "Tea and toast. Have you traveled extensively in England, mademoiselle?"
"No, I've never been there," Christine shook her head. Then she turned to Dalir. "How did you come to be in Paris?"

A slow smile spread over Dalir's face, "I was born here."

Try as she might to suppress it, surprise flashed over Christine's face. "Oh! I'm sorry, I thought you said - Mazan...Marzipan..."

"Mazandaran," Dalir corrected gently, 'is the province my family comes from. In Persia. But I've never seen it. My grandfather was a servant for the Shah - not an important one, he made sweets - "

"Sweets are very important," Erik interjected.

" - but...apparently life at court was...not terribly conducive to promoting good health and general happiness," Dalir went on. The story was vague, but that was only because his mother and father did not like to tell it. Baba was only a small boy when they left, and he met Maman in France. Her family had come West in search of work and there wasn't much more to say. Dalir always thought that something was being left out in the telling of his father's story, but he could not imagine what. After all, what trouble could a confectioner possibly get into? "So they came here. They still live here, they run a sweets shop."

"You don't work with them?" Christine inquired. "It's only, I heard you ask that young lady about employment."

Dalir bit back a sigh of annoyance; it wasn't her fault, she didn't know. "I prefer a boulangerie - if one would have me, of course. Which none will at present. These Parisiens...they take their bread very seriously. Which is right. But I also take bread very seriously, but they take one look at me and assume that is not so."

"You're more Parisien then Persian," Erik offered unhelpfully.

"Sure, but do I look it?" Dalir asked ironically.

"Well, of course not," Erik said haughtily. "Your hat is out of fashion."

The coffee and tea arrived then, followed shortly by the sweets. Erik acted the gentleman and waited until Christine finished applying jam to her toast before he broke open his pain au chocolat and ruined the knife for everyone by spreading the lot with jam. Dalir's molars ached looking at him.

"If he could subsist on sweets and pickles he would," Dalir informed Christine. "I can't get him to eat anything else."

"Have you known each other long?" Christine asked.

The two surveyed each other casually, as if neither of them were quite sure how long it was they'd known each other. Lies, all lies; Dalir could pinpoint the day if he had to.

"Two years?" Erik asked questioningly.

"Two years, sure," Dalir nodded. It was nearly three. "We live together, you see. Split the rent. Well, when we can split."

Erik just shrugged as if he hadn't a care in the world. As if he didn't send all of his Opera checks back to Rouen. As if the only reason he played outside of cafes at night was for pleasure and not because that was the money he used to pay for his own expenses. "You owe me a great many
payments of pain du chocolat, that's all, since I would live on it, if I could. And how did you come to be in Paris, Christine? No, don't tell me! You preferred the weather."

She smiled weakly. "Happenstance. My guardian, Madame Valerius, she is very kind. So was her husband. They provided for my education, at the conservatory. I won a prize, you see, that was how I auditioned for the Opera. I was very lucky indeed."

"That's how Vaucorbeil operates," Erik nodded. "Prizewinners from the conservatory - tell me, not everyone in that chorus is a stranger to you, are they? Some old school chums among them?"

Christine hesitated, then nodded. "I knew a few. But...I made regular rounds to the conservatory, then home, these past few years. I've been living in Paris, but I've hardly seen it! Since I was hired on at the Opera, Madame Valerius has hired on a nurse - a woman to nurse her, rather, since I really can't run home in the middle of the day and once performances start, I'll come back quite late. This is the first real outing I've been on since I was sixteen!"

"Sacré bleu!" Erik exclaimed, clasping a hand to his brow. "Quelle horreur! And how old are you now? Eighteen?"

"Nineteen!" Christine told him, smiling despite herself. "Twenty soon. Very soon!"

"Well, we'll have to celebrate, eh, Dalir?" Erik nudged him. "Since the poor girl's had her nose to the grindstone all these three long years."

"Oh, definitely," Dalir grinned at her. "Perhaps coffee, with milk! As a treat."

"With cream," she insisted. They finished eating and Erik paid the bill. Dalir offered to see her home, but she assured them she could manage. "Thank you very much for a lovely surprise - it was a pleasure to meet you Monsieur - ah. Dalir."

He inclined his head and said the pleasure was all his. "I'll look forward to seeing more of you."

"Oh, yes, I hope so and...I hope you find a position very soon," Christine said earnestly. "I'm sure you're just as good a baker as can be found in Paris."

"I flatter myself I am," Dalir replied. She extended her hand to shake and she took it. She repeated the gesture with Erik who turned her hand down and kissed her knuckles.

"Unless that's a pleasure reserved for vicomtes and above," he said teasingly.

"There's nothing to tell!" she insisted, stomping on small foot like a child. "Oh, you are a very wicked man!"

Adopting a position of mock innocence - hands spread like Christ on the cross, Erik said, "I never claimed to be anything else. Good day, Christine, I'll see you tomorrow."

"I might not speak to you," she insisted, but the corners of her mouth were wrinkling; she was trying her very best not to smile. "Good day, Erik. Good day, Dalir."
They watched her weave through traffic and round a corner before Dalir asked Erik, "What on earth are you talking about?"

"That girl," he said, pointing down the street where Christine had gone. "Is very interesting. I want to find out all about her."

"She seems very sweet," Dalir said. "But I don't know what - "

"Oh, she is sweet," Erik agreed. "But there's something more. I don't know quite what. But I'll found it out. Anyway, shall we walk on? It's Sunday and we've nothing else to do."

That was quite true, and Dalir agreed. He stuck out his arm for Erik to take and his friend did so quite readily, though they were not of a height and it was a little uncomfortable. No one would think anything of it, really, no more than they would think anything of seeing a Persian in the company of a very ugly man to begin with. That was convenient, really; hide one oddity with another.

"You do realize that for the rest of our days, I'll be introducing you to everyone as Monsieur Marzipan, yes?" Erik asked him.

Dalir nodded, "I would expect nothing less."

Chapter End Notes

Who knew breakfast could be so fraught?
Anachronism! The song Erik sings is "La Complainte de la Butte" which was not written until 1955 by Jean Renoir and George van Parys, but it's a classic!

It was hot; the city was feeling one last burst of summer heat and, in Dalir’s mind, all the heat and humidity was concentrated in their flat.

He’d managed to create quite a little wall between himself and Erik. The lone quilt that graced the bed had been kicked all the way to the bottom, but even the thin little sheet they shared was too much for Dalir; he’d shoved it off and now it was wedged between the two of them. The lion’s share of the sheet was all Erik’s anyway, he’d bunched it up beneath his chin and slept away, contented (and temperate) as could be.

It hardly seemed fair; after all, wasn’t Persia hot? Shouldn’t Dalir be better suited to the climate? Some kind of inherited tolerance did not seem too much to ask, but alas, Erik always fared better in heat than he. Erik hardly seemed to perspire and, on nights like this, could bear the weight of blankets and slumber on while Dalir tossed and turned fitfully beside him.

Must have been a trade-off; Erik did get cold quickly, but that was easily remedied. An extra quilt (his mother sent him one a year, they had quite a collection), an extra pair of socks (ditto the socks) and the addition of Dalir’s solid (and warm) arms about him usually did the trick. Cold could be accounted for. But heat? There wasn’t a thing to be done for it; even if the windows were open, they could not benefit from the outside air if there was no breeze.

Dimly Dalir thought about taking to the streets for a walk, but decided he’d better not; Erik was sleeping on the outside of the bed and though he slept like a log most nights, even he could not sleep through Dalir’s stumbling and falling over him on his way out of bed.

Rather than try to soak up a bit of chill off the river, Dalir propped himself up on his arm and took to gazing down at Erik in mild annoyance, only slightly abated when he saw that Erik was, in fact, sweating, if only a little; his black curls were plastered down on his brow wetly.

Erik slept on his stomach and had a curious habit of wiggling off the pillow; oftentimes when Dalir woke in the middle of the night it was to the sensation of Erik dragging himself around, snatching a pillow off the floor, unable to remain comfortable with only his own bony forearms for a cushion. This, Dalir supposed, was a hold-over from when Erik used to travel, a period of his life he did not discuss overmuch.

That was why he could sleep anywhere; he used to do it propped up against a wagon wall or sitting up in a cart. Now his habit of stealing the blankets? That came of sharing a bed with his sisters when he was small and that was a time he was all too willing to expound upon. Dalir had heard countless stories of “the little girls,” as Erik called them, though at least one was married now. But of Erik’s days when he was much younger, touring France, doing magic tricks? Hardly anything.

He’d still been performing in that vein when they met, at a little guinguette in Montmartre. Dalir had been doing a delivery; trays of sholezard to be cut up and distributed for twice its worth. They
periodically engaged girls to engage in danse du ventre while the patrons ate, before Erik came in to play the piano and sing little ditties to get the patrons up and moving. At least that was what he was contracted for. Playing into the exotic theme, they occasionally (on a slow night) requested that Erik expand his repertoire and perform some legerdemain or read palms.

But it was mid-afternoon and there were no dancers, du ventre or otherwise, and Erik was biding his time plinking out tunes to entertain himself and the cooks. Dalir heard him before he saw him, which likely explained everything that happened afterward.

“La lune trop blême
Pose un diadème
Sur tes cheveux roux
La lune trop rousse
De gloire éclabousse
Ton jupon plein trou.

Erik had a beautiful voice. There was no other way to describe it - and Dalir was not musical, not in the slightest, but he found himself wandering off in search of the voice accompanying the faint tinkling of the keys. He’d never been drawn to music before and if pressed he could not have said what it was specifically that drew him then. It was only that the sound was beautiful and he wanted to find its source.

The source turned out to be a lanky fellow in a worn out checked shirt and waistcoat that was slightly too wide for him. He wore no tie or cravat at his throat. There was a half-empty bottle of wine on the piano in front of him. And he was wearing a mask.

Not a decorated mask. Not a costume mask. Just a white mask that covered his face from brow to lips, with the mouth exposed. Unruly curls fell over the brow of the thing. Restless spidery fingers flitted over the keys. And those thin, cracked lips poured forth the most beautiful sound - until he stopped to take a drink from the bottle on the piano.

The spell broke and Dalir suddenly remembered he had a job he was supposed to be doing, but Erik looked up and saw him.

“Kitchen’s downstairs,” he said, shoving the little stool he was perched on back from the piano with a shrill scrape. “Need a hand?”

He sauntered over, arms already outstretched in a way that seemed sure and confident (retrospectively, he was probably a little drunk) and Dalir - though he’d carried those trays for the guinette across town and up the damn hill, let Erik take them.

Dalir knew they’d talked on the way down to the kitchen - Erik complimented the sholezard, mentioned that it comprised his dinner more than once, and asked whether or not Dalir was Italian.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “Persian.”

“Ahh,” Erik said, in a wise and knowing tone. Again, it seemed very confident at the time, but Dalir was fairly sure that the tone was merely a result of consuming half a bottle of wine on his own with nothing else in his stomach. “And do you make it?”

Somehow, in a quarter of an hour, Dalir had related his own life story all while biting down a dozen questions. Who are you? How can anyone sing like that and work at a cabaret? Why are you wearing a mask?
The last question he actually worked up the nerve to ask aloud.

Erik smiled, not unkindly. “Because I am very ugly. So ugly people pay to see me and they wouldn’t pay if they could see me for free, would they? It’s like, ah, love-making, isn’t it? If it were the done thing to fuck whoever you wished, whenever you wished, wherever you wished, then the girls in the Rue de Moulins would not run such a brisk business. Neither would the boys, come to that.”

Only later would Dalir realize that Erik had been flirting with him; to be fair, at the time, he was unaccustomed to anyone flirting with him and Erik went about it in a particularly bizarre manner.

“So, I’d have to pay to see you, then?” Dalir replied, a bit awed that someone could be so very ugly that anyone would pay to see them. True now that Erik was standing, he could tell that he was oddly tall and oddly thin. But ugly enough to pay for? Ugly enough to wear a mask? It all seemed a little incredible.

“Afraid so,” Erik nodded, tilting his head back slightly so that the shadows were momentarily lifted from his strange eyes. “You should come back tonight - actually, if you paid me now, you might be disappointed. It’s all about setting the right, mood, you see. Darkness, candlelight, magic. Dancing girls to lighten the mood in case anyone faints. Ugly things are much more shocking surrounded by beauty.”

Dalir hardly heard a word after, come back tonight. He took Erik up on that offer, but that was not the first night he saw him. Business had been good, the patrons were more interested in dancing than magic tricks. So Erik played. Erik sang. And Dalir sat at a table, by himself, watching him until the sun lightened the sky blue and Erik insisted on walking him home.

“Will you be there again tonight?” Dalir asked, when they paused on the street outside his family’s store.

Erik replied that he would not; different night, different business, different instrument; the violin this time, and no singing.

“Where can I find you?” Dalir asked. It was unlike him. Up until that point the maddest thing he’d done in twenty years was apprentice himself to a breadmaker rather than definitely following his father’s footsteps and taking over the sweet shop. He did nothing spontaneously, he rarely acted on impulse.

Except in this; he followed a masked man around Paris for almost a month before he finally saw him. And it was nearly two months before he kissed him.

The sun was rising now, beginning to creep along the floor behind the open windows, infiltrating the room the way no breeze would. Dalir might take a walk by the river after all, once Erik was gone.

Grunting, Erik stretched, toes knocking against the footboard, arms hitting the headboard. “Mmm...did you sleep?”

“Not so well as you,” Dalir said, the slightest touch of annoyance coloring his words. “I’ll take a constitutional. Tire myself out.”

“Not by the docks,” Erik muttered, still half-asleep.

No, of course not, Dalir thought. You’d go back to the mask before you’d let me do that. It isn’t fair, Erik. Not to either of us.

“Not by the docks,” he confirmed. And kissed him awake.
It had been a very pleasant morning for Erik - wonderful way to wake up, with one’s lover’s mouth and hands all over one. Put an absolute spring in his step as he marched through the streets to the Garnier. He even diverted from his usual path, straight to work, to traipse through the dancer’s salon, arriving just as the petite rats were arriving for their rehearsals.

The youngest members of the ballet corps saw him first and, just as if it had been choreographed, they hurried right up to him, forming a neat little circle and effectively blocking his path.

At the front of the pack was a willowy girl with thick black hair and large black eyes - little Marguerite Giry, who loved Erik just as much as her mother hated him. Mme. Giry was superstitious in the extreme and did not like his habit of terrifying the little girls with ghost stories and fairy tales he’d collected over the years.

But people liked being scared - Erik practically built a career off of that, for a time. They liked being scared if they were absolutely positive they would not be hurt. And Erik would never hurt those little dancing girls, not for the world. Well they knew it too, for the clustered round again and again for stories, or something a little more novel.

"Magic tricks, Erik!" Meg demanded as imperiously as if she was a queen draped in diamonds, not a little dancer still in short skirts.

"Shall I make you disappear, petite Giry?" he asked in mock severity, raising an eyebrow. “For you are blocking my path.”

Pretending, as he always did, that he was far too busy to entertain them was part of the fun; it made them think they’d won something when he finally agreed to perform.

"Oh, please Erik!" And there was petite Jammes in longer skirts, but with the same excited expression and hands clasped before her, as if in prayer. "Just one! Before we go in to practice."

"Ah, but will you be able to concentrate, ma chérie?" Erik asked, raising an eyebrow. "Or will you be frightened out of your wits and unable to complete a single pliée without quivering? Some devoted Maman or other is concerned about your delicate constitutions, poor little children, to so be so overcome?"

A purposefully loud sigh hung in the air like a zephyr. La Sorelli had arrived.

Two seasons ago she had been known more elaborately as Giuseppina Sorelli, or more commonly as Gigi Sorelli. But that was before the corps’s last prima ballerina left them to have a baby and become a respectable woman. Now, she was La Sorelli. And she was stalled behind a gaggle of little girls and a set designer who really ought to have better things to do.

But she’d only been prima ballerina for a season; it hadn’t gone to her head just yet.

"They're frightened of everything and Jammes will never be still," La Sorelli informed Erik with a patient smile. "But do get it over with, in any case."

They were a gathering of about seven petite rats with Sorelli standing slightly aloof, like an indulgent school marm. The effect was really very charming. Would that M. Degas could see them now, in their gowns and skirts; Erik wondered whether he would find them half as inspiring.

"Very well, very well, gather round," he beckoned the girls closer, as he was well prepared; he
always kept a hollow egg on his person for just such occasions. "Who has a handkerchief?"

Seven handkerchiefs were soon pressed under his chin; he snatched them up and, seemingly as soon as he touched them, they disappeared. Not a soul moved; they knew better was to come. Erik cunningly drew them back out again - one, two, three, four, five, six, seven - ah! Stop. It wouldn't do to lose track.

Only now the handkerchiefs he drew out were brilliantly colored, red, blue, polka-dot, and striped. Some with lace, some without - one even embroidered 'MG' just because he knew it would please little Giry to see her initials.

The girls oohed and ahhed appreciatively, examined the handkerchiefs and pronounced them all, to a one, their own but transformed.

"Ah, but wait!" Erik stopped them as he usually did before they could scarper off with all his handkerchiefs. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, he twisted into a ball. One, two, three four, five, six, seven pairs of eyes watched, fixed (on entirely the wrong thing) as, with a flourish he flicked his wrists and the handkerchiefs bound themselves into a silky quilt (merci, Maman!), all stitched together.

A little freckled, red-haired thing whooped and clapped; that was new!

"Ah, but wait!"

Another flourish. Another flick. The quilt suddenly became one large white handkerchief - could they see 'MG' embroidered somewhere? Or did they only fancy they did? Erik shook it out before his rapt audience and one, two, three, four, five, six, seven handkerchiefs floated to the ground, ready to be snatched up and squabbled over by their owners.

"Oh, I'm sure that one's my own Sybelle!"

"No, Marie, it's mine, I know my own handkerchief!"

But La Sorelli clapped her hands, said enough was enough, they'd wasted plenty of M. Erik's time - not to mention their own. As the girls went scurrying off (belatedly calling thank-yous over their shoulders), she stepped up and produced a single franc from her purse.

"What, do you want me to turn it into a Napoleon?" Erik asked, shaking his head sadly. "Alas, ma chérie, it is a magic beyond my poor dark powers."

"You won't take a tip?" she asked, returning the coin to her purse since she already knew the answer.

"Not in this place where I receive a cheque," he replied lightly. "Look me up on the Rue de Rivoli sometime, after dark. I have a favorite corner. You can't miss me; I'm the ugliest girl there."

"Oh! Stop," she looked torn between laughter and horror. "Really, Erik, you've a steady job. I've never heard anyone cry poor with such volume or frequency as yourself."

The mocking smile with which he'd been surveying her vanished in a trice. "Mmm. Perhaps the tales of my great wealth have been exaggerated."

"A bachelor can live as grandly as a king," she countered primly. "Provided he's frugal. You haven't a wife secreted away, have you?"

She didn't mean anything by it. How could she? But regardless, Erik stiffened at the remark, jaw
tightening. Poor Dalir, striking out day after day to see if there was an opening at places that had already rejected him. Poor Dalir, beating out the rugs and wringing out the sheets for lack of anything better to do. Poor Dalir who was every day more desperate and every day more inclined to do something stupid, just because he was too proud and too in love to go back to his parents.

"No," Erik replied shortly. "No wife."

"Well," Sorelli said, as if that settled the matter. "There you are."

As she strode off to rehearsals, Erik kept his eyes on her back. "Quite right," his voice floated over to her right shoulder. "Here I am."

But when she turned back to look for him, he was gone.
Crashing of Waves

Chapter Notes

**Warning for: Colorism.** Misses Bell's Complexion Tonic was a real bleaching cream used to "whiten the skin tone" and fight acne in the 19th century, but similar creams were all over the market.

Apparently Erik made a decision regarding the set - to utterly destroy the auditorium. Or at least, shatter the chandelier. When Christine arrived at work she heard the sound of the stagehands at work, accompanied by the unmistakable sound of shattering glass.

Despite all her Sunday bluster about neither seeking him out nor speaking to him, Christine couldn't help but take a peek into one of the workrooms, just to get a glimpse of what he was doing.

Erik, along with a big, burly fellow and a smaller, darker man, were methodically breaking little blue, white, and green bowls and laying the pieces flat into small trays.

"You couldn't commission a glassblower?" the big man grumbled.

"I want to see if it will work before we spend money," Erik replied.

"This is the Garnier, Erik," the smaller man reminded him. "You're not working in some shit-hole music hall with twine and wax, there is a budget. Which you consistently - ah! Good morning, mademoiselle."

The two stage hands inclined their heads to Christine and doffed their hats. Erik paid her no such courtesy and merely grinned at her and exclaimed, "Aha! Christine! Fresh eyes! Come, come to the stage and see what I am doing! Do you have a minute?"

"I think I have a few," she agreed. The chorus was due to arrive at a certain time, but she'd discovered early on that they rarely began in a timely fashion - often someone, usually the choral director, was running very behind, having spent much of the morning working with the principles. They employed so many Italians and Germans that they were having a bit of trouble with the lyricism of the piece, being so unused to singing in French.

Despite M. Vaucorbeil's enthusiasm for having a resident Swede, the chorus master and the accompanist assured her that her French was excellent which brought her no small measure of satisfaction. Therefore she assumed she was justified in arriving a bit behind her time.

"Excellent!" Erik flew past her, taking her hand quite boldly and dragging her about. Christine was startled when she entered the auditorium - a whole section of the thrust had been painted white!

"Is it meant to be sand?" she asked Erik, who was fiddling about near the footlights.

"It is meant to be water," he told her excitedly. "At first I thought silks, but no, it would trip the dancers. Then I thought, 'Well, I could build an interlocking floor to sit above the stage and have the scenshifters flip a lever at regular intervals to simulate rippling tides, but no, it would trip the dancers and infuriate the men. But then I thought - what's the most beautiful thing about water?"
Christine was quiet a long while before she realized Erik was waiting for an answer.

She thought about it - the sea. She'd always loved it when she and her father performed by the seaside. The crashing of the waves and the smell of the salt soothed and excited her all at once. She remembered - of course she remembered! - that Raoul had to run into the waves that memorable year to rescue her scarf. The wind had whipped up and both his aunt and her father warned the two of them not to step a toe beyond the shoreline. A storm was coming and it was too dangerous to go into the water.

The waves had crashed gloriously into the shore, like the huge humped backs of whales, breaching the surface and coming down again in spray and foam. They'd dared each other to go closer, each one trying to chase the water back, being chased in turn as the water climbed up the shoreline. Christine's boots and been soaked; she'd dared too far.

Raoul - the little scamp! - actually laughed at her. She'd whipped around to shout at him that it was only because she was so brave and bold and if he wasn't such a baby, he'd have come farther when the wind picked her scarf up right off her shoulders and tossed it into the sea.

Christine let out a cry of dismay - it had been a gift! A fine gift from a professor and his wife who treated she and her father with such kindness, who talked of finding a position for him.

Oh, she was sure that she would be in tremendous trouble for losing it. Perhaps Professor and Madame would be so vexed that her father would lose his position - all on her account!

Raoul had continued to laugh at her, until he realized that she had begun to cry. In an instant he was off, rushing headlong into the water in his shoes and coat. At one point, a great big wave crashed right over his head and knocked him down. Christine ran in after him, caught his hand and half dragged him back to shore. But he had her scarf - they'd both gotten such a scolding for disobeying orders that they were told they could not play outside anymore until the storm passed. But Raoul had saved the scarf and Christine's father had gotten a position in a symphony.

But that was ten years past and Erik was patiently waiting beside her.

"Ah...oh, I don't know...the waves?"

A disappointed frown crossed his face. "I was hoping you would say the color..."

"Oh, the color, of course!" she hurriedly agreed. "I love when the sky is cloudy and the water is the color of iron! It's thrilling!"

Erik was silent for a long stretch. "Not all experiences are universal," he muttered to himself.

"I'm sorry, what was I supposed to say?" Christine asked, cringing a little inside. She as forever saying and thinking the wrong things!

"No, no, no," Erik shook his head. "You were not supposed to say anything, I asked you a question and you answered honestly. I prefer a blue sea, a classic sea, and that is what I am attempting to recreate. But water of course, is not blue - "

"Not outside of laundry day," Christine offered. That made Erik laugh and she felt rather better about disappointing him.

"Quite right," he agreed. "So, I must mimic the sun and the sky and I propose to do that with flame and glass - observe!"
With a flourish he produce a match and one of those trays he and his men had been crushing shards into. The effect was like a closely-laid mosaic of nothing in particular. Very blue, but with shades of green and yellow.

"This is the only finished one, it's a finicky process and I don't want to waste anyone's time if it doesn't work," Erik informed her. "But watch!"

He swiped the head of the match against the floor and held the flame behind the glass.

The effect was immediate, if a bit faint - Christine tried to imagine the footlamps ablaze and understood what he was doing. The flickering of the flame through the glass threw down ebbing and flowing bursts of colored light onto the white floor. Light that looked uncannily like water.

"Oh, that's so clever!" Christine exclaimed, applauding despite herself. "It looks perfect! And you won't have to worry about tripping the dancers!"

"Always the uppermost in my concern," Erik said, blowing out the light and tucking the frame under his arm. "You like it? You think it will suffice?"

"Oh yes," she nodded enthusiastically. "Very much! As I said, Erik, it's so clever."

He tweaked her nose as if she were a child, "Don't call me clever; it only encourages me. Now, run along - you're behind your time. And thank you!"

"You're very welcome!" Christine called over her shoulder as she scampered off to the rehearsal room.

It was quiet when she arrived - that was new. So too were the two men standing by the piano, dressed well...possibly a bit too well. They were both wearing toppers in the middle of the morning. Either they had some engagement planned for the evening and would have no time to change clothes, or they had not slept the night before.

"Mademoiselle, at last," M. Poligny nodded at her. "This will be brief - these gentlemen are M. Richard and M. Moncharmin. They are to act as managing directors for the Garnier."

"What about M. Vaucorbeil?" M. Jones, an English tenor, inquired, nervously. He, Christine remembered, had acquired his position as she had under M. Vaucorbeil, after winning a prize at the conservatory. She felt suddenly nervous; would new managers be pleased with his selections? Would there be changes? Cuts?

The tension in the room mounted; there was a quiet buzz echoing all around Christine, one she did not partake in. Her stomach dropped and she felt ill; was it all to end for her now? So soon?

"Quiet, please, quiet," M. Poligny hushed them. "Mssrs. Richard and Moncharmin are merely taking care of the business portion of running of the company. I doubt you'll see them very often - "

"Well," one of the Mssrs. Richard or Moncharmin interjected, "I have a keen interest in the artistic side of things. I've composed one or two fine little songs myself - "

"But it was my understanding," M. Poligny interrupted in his turn, "that M. Vaucorbeil is still our artistic director. And the final choice of artistic decisions will be his alone. Or am I mistaken?"

No one spoke now, everyone was on pins and needles, waiting for someone to give clarification. The new managers stared at M. Poligny as though he was being insolent and M. Poligny stared back, as though they had no business being there.
"The Comte de Changy personally recommended this change," the other manager said at last.

"Addition, rather," the musician-manager added.

"Quite," his partner agreed. "While he is the first to admit that M. Vaucorbeil has a musical ear, it is his wish - expressed wish - that the Opéra continue to be a shining star of the city, as it has been. As it will continue to be. And he merely wishes that M. Vaucorbeil have every opportunity to continue to concentrate on his art."

The musician-manager inclined his head toward the chorus, "I do apologize for taking up so much of your time. Pray, continue your work. We will take our leave - thank you, Monsieur, for your...kind introduction."

The two strangers departed and M. Poligny, not wishing to waste another second of his time immediately launched into scales and put the chorus through their paces mercilessly, not allowing anyone to take an extra breath, let alone gossip about the news that had just been dumped on all their heads, no warning, no explanation. Only when M. Jones looked at his pocketwatch and insisted they be given luncheon did he excuse them.

No one left the room, of course. Just as soon as the accompanist pushed her chair away from the keys the chorus launched into a cacophony of questions, speculations, and suppositions that left Christine's head swimming and explained precisely nothing.

Quietly, she rose from her chair and sidled out the door - not to eat anything, she couldn't bear the thought of eating - but to get away.

Her feet took her to the stage, but she paused when she realized it was in use.

At first, Christine thought that M. Garron and M. Dessler were rehearsing together when when she heard 'Au Fond du Temple Saint' emanating from the thrust. But if they were, they were going about it strangely; there was no twining of their voices, no overlap. She had no idea why they were chopping up the song so, unless they knew more than she did about these mysterious managers and could hardly get through their parts in their distress.

She peered beyond the curtains, through the wings. Odd that they would choose to rehearse together in private - she thought they didn't like each other. That only confirmed her suspicions that something terrible had happened and they must all...band together or sink or something equally dramatic and maudlin. Curious despite herself, Christine tip-toed as quietly as she could round the stage; lowly chorus girl though she might have been, perhaps the two leads could give her more information, once they were through.

Then she got a good look at the nearly empty stage. There was no Garron. No Dessler. There was only Erik.

Erik. With a huge broom dripping with white paint. He was wearing his smock, but his trousers were rolled to the knee and he’d removed his shoes and socks as he drew the broom down like an enormous paintbrush. He must have been satisfied with the morning’s experiment. He must have told his men to go ahead with the glass screens. He must have...but it hardly mattered sets and paint and glass. Because his voice!

He had perfect pitch. And range, he was singing the tenor part and the baritone part without strain, without going sharp, without...warming up! After drinking coffee!

That first day when she'd come to the opera, he'd hailed her and she turned because there was
something musical in the sound. But it was one thing to have a pleasant voice. It was another to sound like...well, like an angel.

Her father used to tell her stories when she was little and frightened of storms, or darkness, or other things children were usually afraid of. Unlike many parents, Papa did not attempt to dash away the dark with tales of the light. No, he merely tried to convince her that there were pleasant things in the dark. Fun things. Goblins offering bowls of cherries. Fairies that danced eternally in their groves. And, if you listen hard during a rainstorm, you can hear a tune on the wind.

Angels, he said. Angels with magnificent voices so strong and so powerful that they could only sing during a storm, lest the earth tremble too much with the force of it. And the most powerful and beautiful angel of all, he said, could only be heard in times of greatest despair. In a war. Or by a gravesite.

Christine must have gasped or made some sound to reveal herself because Erik stopped singing in the middle of a verse and turned around. He looked a trifle embarrassed at being observed, but he smiled at her when he saw that it was just Christine.

"Gets in your head, doesn't it?" he asked. He might have been talking about the weather.

"That was you," she said, breathlessly, sounding insane even to her own ears. "Those voices - that voice -"

"Careful!" Erik put a hand out to stop her. "Don't come any closer, you'll ruin your shoes."

Christine hadn't even realized she'd been advancing on him, trance-like. She stopped walking, but pointed an accusing finger and half-shouted, "That was you!"

"It was," Erik agreed, squinting at her. "Are you alright?"

"Erik," she said his name because frankly, she was out of words. "Erik!"

"Yes?" he said again, as if nothing extraordinary was happening. As if he hadn't a voice that came from heaven and she wasn't comporting herself like a loon; really it was terribly nice of him,

"But that...you...that was incredible!" she finally stammered out.

"Oh, not particularly, I don't think," Erik replied with a modest little chuckle. "Not when it's played so very often, M. Reyer is already sick of the tune repeating itself."

"Leitmotif," Christine said.

"Gesundheit," Erik replied. "Shouldn't you be eating lunch?"

"No, the song," she explained, "it becomes a leitmotif - when a composer uses a musical phrase like that to introduce or call to mind particular characters."

Erik bowed cordially, "As the lady says." And went back to his painting!

"But I didn't mean..." Christine bumbled on, trying to recapture his attention," it's not that you know the tune...your voice!"

"Fairly good, yes," Erik agreed easily. "I've always been told so."

Fairly good. Fairly good. Oh no. Christine was not going to let him get away with this. She had traveled, she'd heard music all around the world and just because the Opera paid decently, that did
not mean it boasted the greatest singers. She'd heard voices that made her weep for joy in church choirs in sleepy little hamlets and echoing out of the open windows of a pub. But Erik? He was something else entirely and he was painting the floor.

And chatting with her, as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening, "Did you see those two fatheads the patrons are foisting on us? I had to bat at them with my broom to keep them off the floor. They didn't give a damn about the stage, they were just cutting through to get to the dancers lounge. M. Degas will be furious, he won't be able to watch the girls bending over to tie their pointe shoes. I, on the other hand, am delighted. Do you see him much about?"

"Who?" Christine asked, like a sad owl.

"M. Degas," Erik replied. "Avoid him, if you do. His sketchbook and his oils. Don't let him paint you unless you come armed with your prayer beads; I heard he stiffed a girl when he found out she was a Protestant."

At this point, Christine did not care what she'd seen, only what she'd heard - but the managers! Erik knew something about the managers!

"What are they here for, those men?" she asked. "The managers? I thought we had a manager."

"And we still do," he said soothingly. "They're only here to make themselves a nuisance. Ask your beau M. le Vicomte about it. He probably knows more than I; his brother hired them."

_His not my beau!_ she nearly exclaimed.

*But what does it all mean?* she almost asked.

*But your voice!* she came close to shouting.

"That sounds like a very good idea," she said instead.

Philippe was wandering around the Opera in search of the new managers; he wanted to personally introduce them himself, but the morning got away from him. As a result, he was now running around inside the theatre trying to play catch-up while Raoul was idling about outside waiting for him - mercifully M. Buquet and his stick were absent.

The day was abominably hot, his pocket handkerchief was already soaked with sweat. Philippe said they would go to a cafe. Philippe said this would be the work of a moment. Philippe, bless him, was a liar.

Raoul was on the verge of seeking out a shady corner to hide in, when a startled voice from behind gasped, "You!"

Christine.

He dabbed at his face with his handkerchief, but now he was sweating for an entirely different reason.

"Good morning - er. Afternoon," he said. "Mademoiselle?"

The last came out weakly. It had been ten years after all and he was still unsure whether she would relish renewing the acquaintance. But then her face - she looked awfully pale, he hoped she wasn't ill...
fell when he greeted her so distantly.

Raoul walked up the steps until they were eye to eye. "Mademoiselle Daae," he tried again. Then, "Christine."

She smiled at him, just like sunshine. That was how he'd always remembered her; the half-wild little girl on the beach with the smile like the sun. He'd tumbled arse-over-head fetching a scarf for her. He'd saved the scarf, then she'd jumped in and saved him.

"It is you," she said warmly, hands fluttering as if she meant to take his sleeve, but thought she shouldn't. "What a...I'm so pleased to see you again, Raoul. Truly."

"I wasn't sure you would remember," Raoul admitted, handkerchief now a poor crumpled thing in his hand. "It was so long ago - "

"I wasn't sure you would remember," she laughed, clasping her hands in front of her. "I...oh, I haven't done a thing! Just...but you! You're in the navy! You must have been so many places, seen so much!"

"And you're at the opera!" he countered with a smile. "I probably haven't seen as many places as you - you get to travel to imaginary lands, after all!"

Her laughter was like the chiming of bells, so pure and sweet. "Not yet, but soon, I've only just begun! That reminds me...do you...do you have time to talk? Only for a few minutes, please?"

"Of course!" he said. "Do you have time for...coffee or tea?"

Tea they had, all very demur and proper at a little cafe a stone's throw from the Opera. Christine hardly touched hers, though, playing with her cup and tapping her toe nervously on the stone.

A cold chill crept down Raoul's spine, a contrast to the warm air and warmer drinks. Was this venue too public for her? Would she have preferred dining indoors? Was it his imagination, or were the people who passed staring at them?

It's only because you're handsome, Marie-Grace told him, whenever he confided that he thought people were looking at him strangely. Or because he was so much older than when last her friends had seen him. He'd been away so long. And anyway, he'd been so young when he'd gone to sea that he was little more than a boy and not much out in society anyway.

Her husband said they were only curious and made a tremendously bad joke about sun burning him all to charcoal that made Marie-Grace look at him very sharply indeed and insist he either find better ways of making conversation or absent himself from the room.

She had slipped a little vial into his hand after that visit, from her own dressing room. It's for ladies, she confided. But perhaps it will help.

The Misses Bell's Complexion Tonic. Marie-Grace was so fair that the family swore when she was a baby she had blonde hair. He'd need a little more than complexion tonic, he was sure, to be as light as Marie-Grace, he'd need a miracle. But he thanked her and said he would try it.

A dollop on the back of his hand did absolutely nothing to change the color - at least not to white. It burned and left a little red welt that faded after a few days into the same old brown he'd always known. At least it hadn't burned a hole in his hand.

"I have a question," Christine startled him out of his thoughts. She glanced up at him under the brim
of her hat, fingers stilling on her cup. "I hope it isn't forward."

"We can move inside, if you'd like," he said before she had a chance to ask. He'd half-risen with his cup when she reached out and put a restraining hand on his arm.

"What? No, no, this is fine," she said, gently pushing him back into his chair. Her arm drifted down his sleeve and came to rest lightly on his wrist. She was sitting on the edge of her seat looking at him very intently. "Your brother - Philippe. He has appointed new managers."

It wasn't a question.

"He has, yes," Raoul said, also sitting on the edge of his seat; now he could understand the stares. No doubt they looked as though they were negotiating government treaties over tiny cups of tea. The sight was probably a trifle absurd. "He told me that Vaucorbeil ought to concentrate on the music. That he isn't a businessman. Philippe...has definite opinions about things."

"M. Vaucorbeil will be in charge of the music," Christine paraphrased, looking questioningly into his eyes. "They won't...they aren't going to...to change the company, are they?"

"Change?" Raoul asked. "You mean the season?"

"I mean the singers," she blushed and took her hand away, staring at her cup as if trying to read the future.

"Oh!" Raoul exclaimed, suddenly divining her meaning. "No! No, no, nothing of the sort. Philippe...Philippe doesn't actually care about the singing - please don't be offended! I love the singing! I think the singing is very good, I'm sure you're excellent. I remember when we were small how well you sang - and how well your father played. Is he here with you, in Paris?"

The blush faded at once. Christine worried her lower lip with her teeth and shook her head, "He is buried in Brittany."

"Oh," Raoul said faintly. Oh, god. Poor Christine. An orphan - like himself, he supposed, but he had his brother and his sisters and most days he scarcely felt the deprivation of being denied his parents. But Christine, so far as he knew, had no one. "Oh, Christine, I'm so sorry."

"Three years now," she said to her teacup. "I mean to visit him soon. Just as soon as The Pearl Fishers is over. Before rehearsals for the next show begin. That was why I wanted to talk to you, you see."

"Well, you have nothing to worry about," Raoul said firmly. "Not a thing - M. Richard and M. Moncharmin are only there to aid M. Vaucorbeil, not replace him. Philippe wants to help the Opera - wants to keep it running! That's all he wants to do."

Christine looked up with a shaky smile and took a sip of her lukewarm tea. Some healthy color returned to her cheeks and Raoul sat back in his chair, watching her in wonder. Had all of the company been so worried? Philippe had been very cavalier about the whole thing; he thought Vaucorbeil was a bit too artistic, a bit too fond of new talent and native composers. He only wanted to support him with a bit of feet-on-the-earth common sense. It never occurred to Raoul that the performers could worry that their livelihood might be snatched away. He was sure it had not occurred to his brother either.

"Have you been alright?" Raoul asked her, peering down at her as if the closer he looked, the more he might see what had become of his dear friend through the passage of the years. He ought to have written. He ought to have tried to find her.
Christine nodded and then reached out and patted his arm again, "Don't look so worried; I've been perfectly alright. And yourself?"

Time flew and their tea cooled as they spent the rest of Christine's allotted lunchtime catching each other up on their lives. Raoul was so relieved to learn that she'd been taken in by the kindly professor and his wife, and pleased to know that she had thrived at the conservatory. She seemed tickled that he'd entered the navy.

"You're certainly very brave," she said, sitting back in her chair, tea gone, the little macarons he'd managed to persuade her to take naught but colorful crumbs before her. "Have you made any dramatic scarf-rescues?"

"Not as yet," he admitted. "Honestly, I have done very little. And a good thing too! For I did not have you to pull me out, should I find myself in trouble."

"Well, I'm here now," she said. The distant chiming of a church bell made her sit bolt upright. "Oh! But not for much longer! I have to run back, Raoul, but thank you so much for talking to me - and eating with me! And...oh, I have so much more to tell you!"

"Let me walk you back," he said, peeling a few franc notes out of his wallet and leaving them on the table. "When can I see you again?"

Christine came up beside him, wrapping her arm around his, artlessly, simply, trustingly. As though no time had passed. As though nothing had changed. As though no one was looking, or, if they were, that she did not care.

"Just come to the Opéra," she said, squeezing his forearm. "You can always find me at the Opéra."
Playing by Ear

Chapter Notes

This chapter was originally going to include a steamy section for Erik and Dalir, but it was getting too long, I'll be posting it as a separate chapter with appropriate ratings and warnings.

Afternoon rehearsal went much more smoothly than the morning - the Comte had gone round and smoothed all ruffled feathers, reassuring the company that no one was a greater admirer of their work than he, that the quality of talent of the Opera was never in question, etc., etc. Though, tellingly, the Comte made these assurances alone; M. Vaucorbeil was nowhere to be seen.

Christine sought Erik out at day’s end, since she was sure he would still be working - he was always working. And she was not disappointed; the rest of the stagehands were nowhere to be found, but there was Erik, puttering around the edge of the stage, experimenting with the placement of the shattered glass plates.

He wasn’t singing this time, which was a pity; Christine half-fancied she’d imagined the whole thing.

She walked just to the edge of the orchestra pit and peered up at him, unobserved, since he was concentrating so hard on his task that he did not seem to see her.

He was such a strange man, unlike anyone she’d ever known. Gregarious and friendly, even too familiar in his manners, but for all his conversation, he did not invite intimacy. He talked a lot, but she felt she hardly knew anything about him. She didn’t even know his last name!

“I talked to the Vicomte, as you suggested,” Christine informed him, as Erik rose from the ground to survey his handiwork. He’d replaced his shoes and socks, but his trousers were still rolled up; his socks were wildly colorful with a zig-zag pattern that looked homemade. They made Christine smile, but they also made her wonder: Who had knitted those socks? Surely not Erik himself...and if he lived with Dalir, he could not be married.

A thought flitted across her mind, cruel and unbidden, He’ll have trouble finding a girl to marry him, and she banished it at once, feeling quite ashamed of herself.

“You work quickly,” Erik said, but not to her; he was still looking at the lights. “Was he following that brother of his about, trying to douse the fire that he started in the first place?”

“Oh, no,” she shook her head. “We went to lunch together.”

Erik’s head snapped up and he exclaimed, “Aha! So you are acquainted with the Vicomte! For you are a good girl, and good girls do not take meals with strange men at cafes.”

“I had breakfast with two strange men just the other day,” Christine reminded him, teasing him, since he would not stop teasing her. “Or have you forgotten?”

Erik smiled, “Touché. I’ll drag the secret out of you someday, petite Christine. But he put your mind at ease, did he?”
She assured him that he had, that he was very kind, every inch a gentleman, “And now I know I shan’t be banished to Sweden to sing on sing on the streets, if Paris won’t have me.”

“Oh, hush,” Erik clucked his tongue. “You’d find a situation, even if it wasn’t here. Paris is fairly accommodating to all sorts of talent. You’d have better luck here than in the frozen North.”

“Is that what you did? You left Scandinavia to find better, warmer work in France?”

Christine asked her question all in a rush, as she often did when she needed to shore up her nerve to get an unpleasant task done; she talked so rapidly in the confessional that more than one priest had assigned her extra prayers because he missed half her sins. But she had a curious streak in her a mile wide. It had gotten her into trouble before, but try as she might, she could not quash it entirely.

“What?” Erik asked, cocking his head to the side. “I’m not from the North.”

And encounters like this were one of the primary reasons why Christine thought she ought to try harder to still her tongue and not ask so many questions - or make so many assumptions. Anyway, how many Frenchmen were named Erik?

“I am sorry,” Christine flushed a bit pink on the apples of her cheeks. “Your name...I thought - ”

“I take no offense,” he was quick to reassure her, crouching down on the edge of the stage so that she did not have to strain her neck staring up at him. “Why should I? I am tall enough to pass for Scandinavian, yes? But not blonde enough.”

He winked, drawing off his cap to wipe the sweat from his brow and Christine looked away awkwardly. She had no idea how old Erik was, nor was she impertinent enough to ask. He had a young man’s playful cynicism, but he treated her like a child. Christine decided he could not be more than ten years her senior at the most, but when he drew back his cap, she saw clearly that the hair on his head was receding, though it was all over dark and very curly.

“Not quite,” she chanced a careful smile and was rewarded with a quick grin. His teeth were not tobacco-stained, but neither were they very white; they were crooked, he had an overbite, and since Erik was favoring her with a particularly wide smile she spied a few gaps toward the back. Country teeth.

Erik crawled around the stage while she watched him work, tying off knots with swift efficiency. Had he been in the Navy, perhaps? But no; his skin looked as if he was not much used to strolling the boulevards, let alone going for months at a time upon the sea. Pockmarked; merely a bad complexion, or evidence of a childhood illness? He was so thin! But he seemed to be in robust health.

“Where do you think I come from, mam’selle?” Erik asked at last, settling back on his haunches with a smirk. He seemed to take delight in quizzing her, but Christine found she did not mind. Erik did not take anything particularly seriously, and she did not think she stood much chance of offending him.

Anyway, Christine was certain that no matter how she guessed she would guess wrong and so she spoke without giving the matter much thought, “Hmm...well, if you’re a Frenchman through and through - ”

“Much closer than assuming I was a Norseman,” he added.

“...ah, let me see now,” Christine struck a contemplative pose with her hand on her chin, then snapped her fingers and exclaimed, “Your father was a revolutionary and your mother a stage actress!”
“Wrong,” Erik smiled, closed-mouthed this time. “My father was a mason; my mother keeps house. So, you see, mam’selle, my roots are as bourgeois as they come. Petite bourgeois, but nevertheless…”

“And French,” she supplied, making her way closer to the lip of the stage.

“And French,” he nodded. “I won’t ask you to guess from where; I’d no intention of testing your geography today.”

“Paris?” Christine asked, then winced when his smile turned consoling. “Wrong again?”

“Would that your Monsieur le Vicomte could hear you,” Erik scolded. He draped himself over the edge of the stage and looked at her upside-down. He was so close she could have swatted him for being cheeky if she was of a mind to - and the impulse did rise within her, though she quashed that much more easily than her curiosity.

Truly, it was a little maddening of him to tease her so, when he knew that she knew nothing of the world beyond the Académie and the few blocks between the Opéra and Mamma Valerius’s quaint rooms. She’d known more of the world when she was younger, saw more of the world; perhaps she too had gone bourgeois.

“Le Parisien, moi?” Erik asked, placing a hand dramatically over his heart. “Quelle horreur! The accent is all wrong, you know.”

“Well, I don’t,” Christine huffed, some of her chagrin vanishing in the face of Erik’s relentless jokiness. “Not Parisian, not Scandinavian, are you human, Monsieur le Bourgeois?”

Erik stroked his own chin thoughtfully. “Well, now...perhaps...but I suppose I’ve dropped enough shocking revelations on you for one day. Human? Perhaps not, Rouennais will suffice.”

“An acrobat, at least,” she said; if she’d hung upside-down like that for as long as he’d done; she would have a pounding headache and a terrible bout of dizziness. “An acrobat from the provinces.”

“Close enough,” Erik said, sitting upright and hopping off the stage. “Ask the little ballerinas about me sometime - they think I’m a genie.”

“I think you’re infuriating,” Christine told him, but with a broad smile and a fond tone. Regardless of whether or not Erik would tell her anything of substance about himself, she liked him a great deal. Even if he was a slightly mad, bourgeois, provincial artist. She tried one last time, “Did you learn to sing in the provinces?”

“Ehhhhhh,” Erik waved a hand about, as if each side of his fingers was a set of scales. “Plus ou moins, ‘learn’ implies ‘lessons,’ and I only went to school to learn such things as one ordinarily does. Reading. Arithmetic.”

“So you’re self-taught,” Christine pressed.

“I wasn’t taught anything,” Erik clarified. Then shrugged, “I only sing. Occasionally I get paid - if you like to hear me so much, you ought to come out with me and Dalir tonight. If your guardian won’t mind you keeping company with strange men in stranger places - but not to worry. I won’t take you anywhere too scandalous and I can have you home before you turn into a pumpkin.”

“It was the carriage that turned into a pumpkin,” Christine said distractedly. “Not Cinderella herself…” This was a conundrum. Mamma, if she was informed that Christine was going to spend her evening with two bachelors, would likely say no. But...she rather wanted to go, especially if it meant more of Erik’s singing. And Mamma did say, now that there was a nurse, that Christine ought
to get out of the house more. Ought to have friends. She just didn’t specify that those friends had to be young ladies....

“What time?” she asked.

“Seven o’clock, Princesse Christinederella,” Erik informed her. “It’s a bit of a walk, this place, and I need to arrive by the time the fashionable people are take their supper.”

At precisely seven o’clock, Erik and Dalir met Christine on the street outside Mamma Valerius’s home and she assured them that they did not need to go upstairs and present themselves to her guardian.

“I may have given her the impression that you’re young ladies,” she said apologetically. “And if she saw you, she would be...surprised.”

Though Erik made the initial offer, he expected Christine would turn him down. Actually, he and Dalir had a little tiff on the walk over regarding just how decorous it was to be marching the little mademoiselle all around town, being neither relations, nor, in truth, terribly respectable people.

“What if it was one of your sisters?” Dalir asked as they approached the house and saw Christine standing all alone.

Erik stopped in his tracks and informed Dalir that if his sisters lived in Paris, he would take them round the city as often as he was able - and that if they found friends to do it for him, so much the better. “Especially Anna-Lise, she’s terribly bright, but runs the greatest risk of all of them of turning out boring.”

Dalir did not have sisters and so was unfortunately vulnerable to all the ghastly rumors that circulated about young ladies particular foibles and vulnerabilities. Anna-Lise would certainly benefit from getting her nose out of books and into other people’s lives. Erik didn’t even have a nose and he excelled at it. He could not accurately say she never left the house for that would be wholly untrue, but it was true that when she did leave, she always had a book with her, which could not possibly be healthy.

Lisette, well, she no sooner entered a room than she cast a critical eye all round, immediately saw what could be improved and set herself as the taskmaster for prompting improvement. She could not be goaded or cajoled into doing anything that she did not wish to do.

And while Mathilde was still rather young to go out on the town or even go out much in company without her parents, Erik was sure that when she was older, if any man, woman, or dog so much as looked at her the wrong way, she would take care of it. Possibly bite them, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

But supposing Christine did not have the brains, force of will, or jaw strength of the older girls - well, what of it? She was with himself and Dalir. Neither of them were the type to try to press their advantage with her and if another gentleman did? He would be made to answer for it, naturally.

In fact, Erik would go so far as to say she was better off with them than she was at home with an invalid - in addition to capable guardians, the conversation would be more stimulating. And there would be wine.

Yet Erik was not insensible to the personal biases of others. So he cleared his throat and loudly
exclaimed (in his best impression of petite Jammes), “Oh, what a lovely frock, Christine! How much did you pay for it? Ah, so little! We must go shopping together, sometime, truly! I always spent too much on my gowns, Maman says I really must practice thrift, but I won’t have this waist forever, will I?”

Christine had to clap her hands over her mouth to keep from giggling, but her shoulders shook tremendously at his little trick. Dalir was rather less impressed. He rolled his eyes and gave Erik’s elbow a tug.

“Come on,” he said. “You don’t want to be late.”

“Well, of course not,” Erik repeated in the same girlish tone. “I’m far too young to have a baby.”

His other arm was assailed by Christine’s hand giving him a hard swat. There, she was not so vulnerable after all, was she? “Hush! What sort of girls do you want her to think I’m going out with, anyway?”

“Ordinary ones, I should think,” Erik said, voice dropping down to its usual register. He offered Christine his arm gallantly, “Shall we?”

“Where are you taking me?” she asked, sliding her little gloved hand into the crook of his elbow. Right, not vulnerable, but a little too eager to trust, perhaps. Erik suddenly remembered that he had not told her exactly where they were going.

“Just a little bal-musette on the butte,” he told her. “Don’t worry, they serve meals.”

Christine glanced over her shoulder curiously at Dalir who was following them a half-step behind. “That’s Erik’s yardstick for respectability - if a hall serves food, he thinks it must be respectable. But this place is really alright, they get far too many members of the noblesse to be otherwise; they want to go slumming, but they don’t want to get too dirty.”

“Well, I washed my hands and face before I left, so they have nothing to fear,” Christine commented brightly.

“See, Dalir,” Erik said carelessly, patting Christine’s hand. “She’ll fit in just fine.”

“Well, of course,” Christine gave Erik’s arm a friendly little squeeze. “You might aspire to the bourgeois, Erik, but I am afraid I never could.”

Erik chuckled and Dalir looked at him, amused. “I might have exaggerated my background, mam’selle. Aspirations exist, after all, in the minds of those who hold them. I certainly think my people are middle class enough, but I’m not sure anyone else does.”

They might have, once upon a time, before Papa had to quit stonework and went from building cathedrals to ordinary houses. It was for the best - they all knew it was for the best, and it had been so long since his father traded a chisel for a lathe that it seemed hardly worth talking about. But Erik remembered. And had enough fancy in him to think at how things might have turned out very differently for him, if circumstances allowed. But that did not bear thinking on; it drove him to drink.

Dalir and Christine made small talk on their way to the music hall, all very cordial. Have you found a position yet? How do you like the Opéra? All topics he knew about, so he let his mind wander, just a little bit. Back to the village. Back to the house. He’d not been back since the beginning of the summer, for Lisette’s wedding...

“You told her you were from Rouen?” Dalir cut into Erik’s thoughts, clearly amused. “You certainly
did not hold back with your aspirations, did you?”

“Oh, Erik!” Christine swatted him again, making very free with her clean hands this evening. Yes, he’d match her up against any of the older girls, he was absolutely certain she’d hold her own. “Have you told me one true thing about you?”

_Had_ he? Come to think of it, he was not certain he had.

“Dalir is splitting hairs,” Erik insisted. “For the village is quite near Rouen. Spitting distance, I assure you.”

“On a clear day with a very stiff breeze, maybe,” Dalir said. “Or isn’t that what you’ve always told me?”

_Such_ Parisien that one; anything that wasn’t smack in the middle of the city was practically rural to him.

“Is it?” Erik asked airily. “Oh, I don’t know. I say a lot of things to a lot of people. Ah! And we’ve arrived.”

This was not the little cabaret where he’d met Dalir - they still ordered from his parents’ shop and on the off-chance that a cousin was doing deliveries now, Erik parted ways with them years ago. But it might as well have been. There was a kitchen and restaurant on the bottom with a bar and a floor for dancing on the roof-cum-balcony; there was even a hastily erected awning to protect the dancers from a light rainstorm. Flowers bloomed and ivy cascaded down the sides of the building - it really was quite picturesque and as if to prove the authenticity of the place, a few artists completed the scene, lounging around with charcoals and pastels, nursing cups of coffee that they never seemed to reach the bottom of.

The management was a trifle more businesslike here than at other cabarets; it was recently fashionable, so the waiters were expected to arrive in clean collars and the manager wore spats. Erik wore his best trousers (striped, second-hand, and three inches too short in the leg), his cleanest shirt, and his most favorite waistcoat (a trifle faded, but it did reach his waist). The maitre’d hustled him upstairs as soon as he arrived and practically shoved him in front of the piano.

“Play something, and quick,” he said urgently. “People are asking for the cheque.”

Erik flipped his hat off and placed it on the top of the upright piano; no sense in being coy about it, he was here for tips - La Sorelli would be proud. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dalir and Christine had been bundled to a nearby table and given a bottle of wine and three glasses. Dalir proved himself once again to be a gentleman and a delight and poured Erik a glass at once, setting it beside the hat.

He played something soft to start out with, a fragment of some larger work, he had no doubt, but if a pistol was put to his head he could neither rattle off the name of the composition or composer. That was the trouble with a mind like his, expansive, but unschooled; he had a terrible time remembering the particulars of a piece, save the notes. And most people, if asked, could not readily identify a tune through his usual methods of saying, ‘Oh, you know the song that goes da-da-da-da-da. Don’t you?’

But he could play. And he could sing. And, more to the point, he could earn _money_. Without masks or magic tricks. A little fragment of a sonata there, a little cabaret ditty there, something from _The Bartered Bride_ so people could polka. He took breaks to slip his wine and cast and eye over at Christine and Dalir; they were getting on like old chums, he’d even taken her on a few turns around the dance floor, leaving her flushed and happy. If this was her first _real_ night out, he hoped she was
enjoying herself.

Erik had been playing without looking down, eyes on Christine and Dalir (Dalir was looking at him as they danced and Erik thought next time he had a real night off, they’d go somewhere a little seedier, a little less respectable), and his mind was wandering.

The clinking of coins in his hat and a faintly accented voice by his right shoulder brought him back to reality. “Tips, monsieur?”

“Gigi Sorelli as I live and breathe,” Erik grinned, abruptly changing the tune to a scrap of a song he remembered from La Sylphide. “Go on, take something and buy yourself a drink on me.”

La Sorelli smiled at him demurely and shook her head. “No, thank you, I have...I’m here with somebody.”

Her eyes cut to the left and Erik, unable to do anything with subtlety, arched his head around her and saw the Comte de Chagny himself, sitting in a dark little corner, watching the dancers, but not participating.

“The Comte doesn’t polka?” Erik asked, switching deftly back to the tune he’d been playing before Sorelli arrived.

“We’re just...having a meal,” she said. Apparently she and he shared a similar scale for respectability. He thought a dance hall respectable if they served supper, she thought an evening with a gentleman was respectable if he bought her supper. “Did you see the little Swedish chorus girl here with that Eastern man?”

“I did,” Erik remarked with false gravity. “And I’m sure she saw you here with the Opéra’s principal patron. You ought to bid her good evening. It’s refreshing to know that, whatever alterations M. le Comte thinks would improve the Opéra, he is so invested in the dancers.”

Sorelli looked him square in the eye, her brown eyes narrowing. Erik looked back, with as guileless an expression as he could manage.

“Rumors are ugly things, my dear,” he said, dropping his eyes and looking down at the keys.

“Look who’s talking,” she said sharply. Erik only laughed and kept playing.

“I suppose I am the Opéra’s resident expert on ugliness,” he acknowledged. “Has M. le Comte explained his plans as succinctly to you as he did to the rest of the company, ‘Oh, you are the toast of Paris! Yes, all of you! From the squattest alto to the dirtiest concierge. With my money and my brains, I’ll elevate you all to the greatest heights –’”

“Stop!” she insisted, folding her arms in a manner unbecoming a ballerina. “He’ll hear you! Anyway, he isn’t at all like that. He’s very charming and he really cares about the Opéra. He thinks Vaucorbeil takes too many risks, hires too many unknowns. There won’t be an Opéra if no one comes to see it. You of all people should understand that, you’re not stupid.”

“Perhaps not, but when I go to an Opéra I merely want the performances to be good,” Erik said, taking a break from playing to sip some more wine. “If I go to Aida, I am going to Aida, not Aida-Starring-Barcelona’s-Shining-Star-La-Carlotta.”

“Well, then you would be going alone,” Sorelli said knowingly. “M. Philippe only wants to ensure that the business continues profitable. If it means adding a few more ballets or cutting longer songs, or...well, whatever it is he thinks these new managers would do, I say we trust him.”
La Sorelli, it seemed, was trusting him with more than her career; she trusted him with her very reputation. Philippe de Chagny had a new favorite every year and it seems that he'd found his latest girl in her. Erik only hoped that she would be careful.

“How many times have you been out with him that you know his heart so well?” he asked. “That you know his intentions are so pure.”

Sorelli glared at him, “I don’t have to tell you a thing, you aren’t my mother.”

Erik could just imagine the contents of her letters home, Dear Mama Darling, I’ve been made prima ballerina! I hope that pleases you, it means an increase in salary so I can send more to you and the little ones. Give all my love to Papa!

He could well imagine; his letters often contained much of the same. No mention of, As a matter of interest, Maman, I’ve been so successful that I haven’t had to display myself with a mask for over a year! No more fainting women or screaming children! This time they come for the talent, not for the shock! Or, possibly worse, Wouldn’t you know it, Maman, but I’m in love! You’ll have to meet him when next I visit; I think you’d like him very much.

Such thoughts actually made him feel rather a kinship with Signora Gigi - it wasn’t, he imagined, the sort of news she would share with her mother. I’ve become a rich man’s mistress! Just as you’ve always dreamed!

“Well, have a good evening,” he said gently. Sorelli looked at him suspiciously. “If he’s as good as you think he is, then none of us have anything to worry about. Do we?”

“I should say not,” she replied, looking a tiny bit uncertain and very, very young. She glanced over her shoulder at where the Comte was sitting. “I’ll see you at the Opéra, I suppose.”

“See you at the Opéra,” Erik acknowledged.

He’d been playing nearly two hours at that point and signaled to the manager that he needed a break. He tucked his hat under his arm (heavy, that was the rent accounted for), and strode off to find Dalir and Christine.

They were back at their little table, with a plate of meat and cheese laid out between them. “Compliments of the house,” Dalir shrugged and Erik sighed.

“Well, needs must,” he said, contenting himself with bread, cheese, and olives. Too bad about all that wasted meat, but he assumed Christine couldn’t eat the equivalent of three sausages on her own.

“Are you both vegetarians?” she asked, plucking a piece of salami off the plate with her bare hands and popping it in her mouth. “Dalir didn’t want any either.”

“No,” Erik shook his head, “but you don’t know what goes into these things. Or who, I should say.”

“I’m sure they’re alright,” she said. “They taste good anyway, are you sure you won’t have some?”

Erik told her to go ahead and eat the lot if it pleased her, which it seemed to. Perhaps he’d underestimated her sausage-eating abilities. “What did you think of the performance, Christine?”

“I think you’re not being paid enough,” she said, nodding to his hat. “I can’t understand it. Why you’re not in an orchestra or a symphony or something. Dalir told me that you’re even better with the violin than with the piano and I told him that if you were half as good at playing if you were at singing you ought to be a permanent fixture in the pit!”
“Well, you see, I don’t read music,” Erik explained in a devil-may-care sort of way, fixing himself more cheese and bread. “So that’s an impediment to performing in an orchestra, as I’m sure you understand.”

It was lucky that Christine had chewed and swallowed her meat; at that admission her mouth gaped open and she surely would have lost some of her supper if she hadn’t swallowed first. “You don’t? But you play so well - oh, forgive me, I of all people should know better - but you play by ear? Truly? You’ve never had a single lesson?”

“I’ve had...a few lessons,” Erik said carefully. “For piano. Well, organ. But I’m predominantly self-taught. I’ve got a good ear. Or so I’ve been told.”

There had been lessons, briefly. Young scamp that he was, he’d gone into the village church at night to bang away on the old organ. Papa had aided in the restoration of the stonework in the sanctuary and Erik (not that he was known as Erik, then) had been over every inch of the place. The priest - Père Mansart - had been indulgent (to his mother’s great relief) after finding him there one night. Encouraging, even. He showed Erik how to run scales, told him all about flats and sharps, declared he showed great promise as an organist.

“And we’ll see about getting you baptised,” the well-intentioned priest said at the conclusion of one of their infrequent lessons.

At the time Erik couldn’t have been more than seven. He’d gone to the village school for a little more than a year. He could hardly read more than a few sentences together. If he responded at all to that little suggestion, it ought to have been with a vague nod and a respectfully voiced, “Oui, Père.”

But Erik froze. Slowly, he raised his eyes to look at the priest. And shook his head. “No, thank you,” he said (respectfully enough, he thought). “I’d rather not.”

He’d not come back to the church for any more lessons after that. The priest hadn’t forbidden him, certainly not, but Erik privately felt that it wouldn’t be right. When his mother inquired, Erik perhaps overstated the matter.

“He said if I wanted more lessons, I had to be baptised.” he informed her, over a piece of bread and jam. “I told him, no thank you. May I have more jam, please?”

That had been the last they’d spoken about it, but Maman gave him double jam for his troubles. And the following summer, his parents saved much of the money Papa made restoring the sanctuary and bought him his own violin, so he supposed he’d done the right thing after all.

“Well, I’ve sat for far too long,” the Erik of the present rose abruptly, snatching the wine bottle and taking it back to the piano. “I’ll play something merry, shall I? Something for everyone to dance to.”

“But you’ve hardly eaten anything,” Christine pointed out, looking between the bottle in his hand and the plate of scarcely-touched meat and cheese anxiously. “You don’t want to be sick.”

“Ah, ma chérie,” Erik breezed back to the piano, “tonight I dine on music.”
Christine's prediction that Erik would become sick was unfulfilled though by the time they left the dance hall he was fairly drunk. He'd made a good bit of money and that put him in an affectionate mood rather than a melancholic one; it was always one or the other with Erik and there was no telling which would seize him when he was in drink.

Dalir took responsibility for seeing Christine to her door. She bade them both good-night, thanked them for the evening and took both of Erik's hands to urge him to go to bed, please, just as soon as he was home.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said, giving his hands a squeeze.

"You will!" Erik said brightly. "We work at the same place, after all."

Christine peeped around Erik's arm and gave Dalir a significant look. Take care of him.

Dalir nodded and put a hand on Erik's shoulder to tug him away, "Come on, say good night, there's a good fellow."

"Right, right, good-night," Erik said, giving Christine's right hand a kiss. "We don't want to turn into pumpkins."

She smiled at him affectionately and tugged his hands so that he leaned closer. Rising up on her toes she pressed a quick kiss to his forehead. "Good-night, Erik, sleep well. Good-night, Dalir."

"Good-night," Dalir said. He kept a hand on Erik's shoulder and they watched her until she disappeared behind the door of the house.

"Awwww," Erik turned to Dalir with a smile that bordered on sappy. "She kissed me! What a nice girl she is."

"Very nice," Dalir acknowledged, taking Erik's arm and leading him back in the direction of their flat. "And you're very drunk - do you want to find a food stall or - "

"No, no, no," Erik interrupted him. "Let's go home! Chaste kisses from chorus girls are all well and good, but I'd rather have you - especially since you got rid of that awful mustache!"

"Quiet," Dalir reminded him uselessly, since Erik could do nothing quietly. "And - ey! I thought that mustache was fashionable. I quite liked that mustache."

Erik flung an arm around Dalir's shoulder, slamming his bony hip into his side, "Oh, you poor, poor, deluded man. You were the only one! I always hated it. I wanted to find the right time to tell you."
"And this is the right time?" Dalir asked, amused despite himself. "Is that why you drank so much? You needed to shore up the nerve to tell me you hated my mustache?"

The grip around Dalir's shoulder's slackened; oh, no. The melancholy slip.

"Among other things," Erik said, quietly now and - this was a bad sign. "Did you see Sorelli there with the Comte?"

"The Italian girl? I might have," Dalir shrugged. He did not make himself much of a presence at the Opéra. He went to the occasional production, generally on Erik's recommendation or to see set pieces he was particularly proud of, but those were rare occasions. In the dark, at the cabarets and select dance halls he would follow him about, make conversation with the owners, the staff, other patrons. But the Opéra was different. It was stratified, almost sanctified, and world-renowned. There were consequences if Dalir made himself too much of a tagalong at the Opéra. Or at least, he feared there would be. So he stayed away.

It could be different, someday. Once Erik truly entrenched himself in the fabric of the place, but for now he was just a piece of the street come in to add some wild new ideas to thrill the audiences. On a very melancholy night Erik confessed that he was sure no one took him seriously - that he did not take himself seriously. Talented? He supposed. But untaught with nothing to recommend him but his work.

"You do good work, whatever you do," Dalir tried to reassure him, but it was pointless when he got like that.

"Good, perhaps. But not serious," was all Erik said.

There were no patrons for Erik, no recommendations either for he'd only been in Paris a few seasons and worked at so many theatres that none could claim a deep, intimate acquaintance and those few who knew things about Erik beyond the surface...well, they weren't details that would have gotten him a position at the Garnier.

Maybe in a few years. In a few years he might be someone, a genius eccentric whose oddities (appearance least among them) would be seen as an asset to the theatre rather than as something to be carefully reined in. Then it might not matter if he had a gentleman companion who hung around an awful lot. Eccentric bachelors. That wasn't too threatening, was it?

Dalir let go of Erik once they reached their front steps, fishing his key out of his pocket and urging him to be quiet and not wake up M. Diaz, who had rooms at the top of the building, but seemed to hear all goings-on at all hours.

Erik obliged him. He'd not had much to say after his first mention of Mademoiselle Sorelli. Dalir had no idea what passed between them, if anything, he'd only just seen her and had not marked her appearance much.

"Sorelli with the Comte," Erik said, sounding nearly sober as they stepped over the threshold. "Christine with the Vicomte. What does it all mean? I said I'd find it out, I mean to - "

"Well, don't tie yourself into knots on that account," Dalir said carelessly. "I found it all out when we were dancing."

"What?" Erik turned to him, astonished. "But I was going to wheedle it out of her! Bit by bit! I had - alright, I didn't have a plan, but I was going to concoct one. A brilliant one! How did you manage it?"
Dalir had begun undressing, but paused when he realized Erik hadn’t even unbuttoned his waistcoat. Well, why not help a friend in need? He crossed over to him and started undoing his buttons. "I asked her, 'So, how did you come to be acquainted with the Vicomte?' And she told me."

Erik allowed Dalir to take his waistcoat off and toss it over the armchair, waiting in patient silence for the rest. But Dalir did not give him the satisfaction; he unbuckled his braces and left them to dangle down about his hips before he went in on the loosely tied cravat and shirt.

"Daliiiiiiiiiiir," Erik whinged like a child. "Tell me!"

But Erik was down to his undershirt and Dalir thought he might as well get his own things off because it wouldn't do if only one of them was undressed, would it?

He half-turned away to remove his own shirt and toe out of his boots, but Erik came up behind him and wrapped his arms around him, tucking Dalir's head under his chin.

"Come along," he implored, murmuring into Dalir's hair. "This is hardly fair..."

His fingers fumbled with Dalir's buttons and he was not very carefully about tugging his shirt out of the waistband of his trousers. Drink made him clumsy in a way that was endearing. Erik was, by nature, fairly graceful, but here, now, he was practically gawky. Dalir found it endearing.

"Ask her yourself," Dalir turned in Erik's arm to face him, tilting his chin up expectantly, as if he would be kissed.

"Ask who?" Erik asked, eyes half-closed, hands teasing along his waist, fingers untying his flies slowly now, languidly.

"Christine," Dalir reminded him.

Erik's eyes lost focus, as he tried to remember what Christine had to do with anything. It was not hard to become used to them, after a while. One so light, the other seeming to emanate its own light. They sharpened on Dalir's face. "What does Christine have to do with it? I only thought you were wearing far too many clothes -"

"Let's remedy that, shall we?" Dalir said, doing his own quick work on Erik's trousers. Then he tapped on the end of the rubbery false nose he wore. "Don't forget."

It was a matter of sheer convenience, more than anything. If Erik neglected to remove it, more out of forgetting than embarrassed modestly regarding his face, it tended to get briefly lost, flying behind the bedframe, getting tangled in the sheets. It was honestly hilarious in the moment, but not the next morning when Erik was scrambling around trying to find it. He refused to go to work in the mask and refused to go to work entirely barefaced; and he could hardly go to Rouen to ask his father to sit for another cast in the thirty minutes he allotted himself to get ready.

So off went the nose, and the boots, and the socks and anything else that lay between them. Erik fell back onto the bed, gripping Dalir's forearms and tugging him down with him, pulling his face close so that he might cover it in kisses.

Dalir was not Erik's first lover. But he was the first person he could honestly say he was in love with. And he was his favorite.

Erik was an eager, if not particularly forceful bedmate. There was a hastiness in his hands and body that he'd been chided over by past lovers.
Slow down, slow down, we're not in a race!

Senses dulled a bit by drink, Dalir nevertheless was in sharp focus in their dark little flat. He was so beautiful, strong and solid with short, blunt fingers and a chest and arms covered over in hair, very much a masculine ideal. And he was in Erik's bed!

After two years that thought never failed to thrill him. Even if he'd had a face that could be called typical, Erik knew his body was hardly anyone's idea of ideal. Long and lean - bony and skinny - with elbows and knees all very sharp. But Dalir didn't seem to mind. He kissed and caressed his knobbly spine and the ridges of his ribs as if he did not notice, as if he was like anyone else, desirable, even. Perhaps he had a perverse inclination toward the bizarre, but if he did, Erik was not complaining.

For Dalir was, in contrast to himself, forceful. He mightn't mean to be, but he did push down at Erik's shoulders, pinning him to the mattress, scattering pillows and blankets as he went. He pressed kisses into the hollow of his collarbone, dragging tongue and teeth to his neck where he left little sucking marks in his wake.

"That's it," Erik rasped, voice very deep, eyes nearly closed. "Go on, then, go on."

Dalir's hand slipped down between his legs; Erik's right arm was free, but his left hand, his dominant hand, was still trapped by Dalir's grip. Not to worry, he could still get him off; he'd been taught at school to write only with his right hand and as a consequence the two were almost equally dexterous. He never thought he'd have to thank M. Blanchard for moments like this.

Despite the stupor the drink tended to put him in, he was able to rise admirably for all of Dalir's efforts and his lover was more than ready to be taken in hand in his turn. Erik forced his eyes open; this was what he liked, being able to look at him, watching his dark brows contract, his face flushed with heat and sweat.

"Faster," Dalir grunted and Erik was very happy to comply. "Damn it. Damn it, Erik."

It might have been nice if Dalir used his name, Erik thought, the one melancholy note in an otherwise splendid aria. But he had introduced himself as Erik. And by the time Dalir knew that he might have another name it was already habit.

But he was Erik in Paris. And Dalir was in Paris. And so he could be Erik for Dalir.

Pushing back against Dalir's hands, Erik rose up to kiss him, hard, lingering, on those lips he adored so. Dalir lost his grip and Erik's left hand rose up to weave itself into his hair - pulling him close, not wanting to let go.

They did not finish together, but Erik came off shortly after Dalir. He kissed him a long while after that, as Dalir got down on the bed beside him, half laying on top of him, Erik stroked his back, petted his hair and Dalir lay his head down on Erik's shoulder, breathing evening out in his sleep. That was another lovely thing about Dalir. After a bout of lovemaking, he fell asleep touching him, not asking for a pillow to bring some relief to his cheek on Erik's shoulder.

"You're a dear man," Erik told him, though he knew his words went unheard. "A dear, dear man. I love you very much, you know."

Dalir must not have been entirely asleep. He smiled against Erik's skin, shifted slightly and hugged him close with an arm about his waist. He murmured something too, but it was much to low to be made out clearly.
Fingers still stroked Dalir's hair, but slowly now, Erik was starting to nod off too.

*Did you see the little Swedish chorus girl with that Eastern man?*

Why, yes, Gigi, he had. But he wasn't too bothered; he was going home with the Eastern man, after all.

Eastern man. Hmm. He was at that.

Erik's fingers stopped their gentle rhythm and his eyes flew open, suddenly wide awake and feeling very alert. Aha. Aha! Eastern man. Oh, it was *perfect*.

"I've found a position for you," Erik whispered to Dalir, fingers lowering to trace a pattern on his arm. "No need to thank me."
A Nominal Fee

Chapter Notes

**Warning for: racism and tokenism.** All of the Persian segments resulted from me doing about fifteen minutes of searching through Google and Wikihow - so apologies for horrifying mistranslations.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

This plan of his, which seemed so dazzlingly perfect the night before, in the cold clear light of day appeared marginally less brilliant. But really, what was the worst that could happen? Impressarios told far grander lies than this to draw in an audience and make a little money.

It hardly mattered that Dalir was Persian and the setting was Ceylon; it would hardly matter to the managers anyway, for *Eastern was Eastern*. Why not take advantage? He only needed to get Dalir to agree.

Obviously, he might not. He might tell Erik his plans were stupid (or offensive) and, in fact, had Erik mentioned this little idea six months ago, it might have caused a row. But circumstances were different and every day Erik left the flat he was becoming more and more concerned that Dalir would not be back.

This morning, as they lay in bed together, he took time to study him, the way his dark eyelashes splayed against his cheek, the feel of his calloused hands against Erik’s own hip. Dalir was not a man designed for idleness. He was patient, kind, not a jealous sort. But it could not be easy for him to sit home and play wife. Someday he would do something about it. And every day he found no work to suit him was another day Erik would worry.

As Erik was a man of action - and, first and foremost, **ideas**, he would do something. Even something a tiny bit absurd.

Erik usually slept on the outside of the bed so that he could roll off the mattress in the morning without disturbing Dalir. What was the point of being miserably unemployed if you couldn't enjoy the benefit of having a lie-in? But this morning, he prodded him awake with one bony finger on the back of his neck.

"Get up!" he ordered. "We're going on an outing."

"It's Thursday," Dalir grumbled, shoving his head under the pillow. "What outing? Aren't you working?"

"We both are!" Erik replied triumphantly, pulling the sheets off poor Dalir's prone, half-sleeping body. It worked on his younger sisters and brother, it would work on him just as well. And so it did. The pillow fell by the wayside and Dalir glared at him. Well, annoyed and awake was better than happy and asleep. "You're to be my consultant. About the East."

Skeptical green eyes peered up at him from behind a curtain of messy black hair.

"Your consultant," Dalir repeated, taking a little longer than usual to catch on.
"My consultant, yes," Erik nodded, perfectly prepared to wait; he had been woken up abruptly and was not at his best in the morning.

"About the East," Dalir added, one of his eyebrows rising slowly.

"You're catching on."

There was no need for Dalir to ask any of the myriad questions Erik saw flitting over his face.

You know I've never been farther East than Riems?

Oh, yes.

Your play is about Hindus, isn't it?

As near as I can tell, yes.

Then what help am I to be?

But, fortunately, even sleepy and annoyed, Dalir was bright enough not to waste time with such frivolous queries, cutting right to the point.

"Will it pay?"

"Absolutely," Erik nodded. He'd make certain it did. He bent over the mattress and gave Dalir a quick peck before turned away to dress for the day, "I'll leave you to make your toilette."

They were at the Opera an hour later and met René at the side entrance.

"Morning, Erik," he said with a cordial nod to both of them. "Morning, Dalir."

Shit. René. He'd neglected to think of René.

René was an actual friend that Erik had brought over from a little chapel-turned-theatre that specialized in spectacle, melodrama, and gallons of fake blood. He was a hard worker, strong, easy-going and Erik personally found it great fun to have someone around who was taller than him. But he also knew them and, being scrupulously honest, was not his first choice for tricking the managers into paying for a fake "expert."

"René," Erik said, glancing around the street for passers-by. Seeing none, he seized the burly man’s sleeve and barked, "Come with me!"

Being well used to Erik's odd turns, René followed good-naturedly while Dalir hustled along close behind. A nearby alleyway made an excellent meeting space and Erik hastily explained his plan: Pass Dalir off as a world-traveling, terribly exotic-type who ought to be paid for lending an authentic eye to the production. He also outlined René's role in the execution of this plan: Say absolutely nothing.

"No luck on the brasserie front?" René asked sympathetically.

"Not yet," Dalir replied tightly.

René looked between him and Erik, but did not take long to think it over. He smiled broadly and agreed. "This sounds like fun, I'll keep my mouth shut - if they can afford to bring in two extra managers no one asked for, the Comte can damn well afford a design consultant, can't he?"
Erik clapped René on the back heartily, “Oh, you’re a good man. That’s why we keep you around.”

There was much hustle and bustle about the Garnier that day, the place was humming when the three of them finally stepped inside. The chorus would be trying on their costumes in the morning and the principles would be arriving for the main blocking rehearsals. On Erik’s end, the set was coming together nicely. The floor and main pieces had been commissioned weeks ago, which left Erik to concentrate on dressings and the damned boat - if there was one thing he would change from his original designs, it was the inclusion of the boat, but they could hardly be pearl fishers if there was nothing for them to fish in.

The larger set pieces were being rapidly assembled and painted, Edouard was overseeing the construction and assembly of the larger pieces - the costume department was particularly eager in that regard because they wanted to be sure the colors were complimentary.

Erik determined that deep blues and rough, oatmealy whites (which he assured everyone would look just like stone in the torchlight) would be the best background, with color splashed about, but primarily provided by the costumes the performers were wearing. Already an enormous, rusticated column, suggesting a ruined temple, was standing in the wings, waiting to be brought onstage.

“What do you think? Erik asked Dalir as they stood in the column’s shadow. “Twining vines? To suggest decay? The corruption of Zurga’s soul? The corruption of the church? Oh! You know what I could do? I could rig it so that during the storm, the whole thing cracks right down the center - like that tree in Jane Eyre. And all of Act Three is performed amid the rubble.”

Dalir smiled wryly at him. “Chetor?” he asked, fully intending to utter every Persian word he knew, just in case anyone was listening. He might not have had the flair for performance Erik did, but he could get by. “How do you propose to do that? Without killing the actors or tripping the ballerinas?”

And Erik was off. A few unseen ropes, cunningly placed levers and pulleys, artfully arranged false bricks scattered about during the act break.

“Edouard!” he called and M. Paiva came out of the wings at once, Jospeh Buquet following in his wake. “Take this column - it’s lovely, by the way, thank you - take this column and lay it down, I’m going to show you where I want it cut - ”

“Cut?” Buquet interrupted, horrified. “Cut? We just finished painting the fucking thing! With sand in the paint and all - which no one’s going to see from the fucking house, so that was a waste of time.”

Erik was unmoved, “And I thank you for your efforts, it looks perfect. Only now I would like it to perfectly fall apart. If you please.”

“You don’t pay my salary, you know, M. High-and-Mighty,” Buquet glowered. “So I’d like a bit less ’hop-to’ from now on - and who the fuck is this? How many other black bastards are you going to drag through the place, Erik? For you’ll not convince me that this man is a gentleman.”

To say that Erik did not have a temper would be untrue; he actually had a terrible temper. One he was fairly ashamed of. So he kept it tightly under wraps, it really took a great deal to rouse it. But when roused? Oh, it could be terrible.

For the barest instant, Erik did not truly see Joseph Buquet. He saw red.

_Breathe_, a voice in his mind that sounded like his father urged him. _If you strike him, you’ll lose your place._

“This is M. Mazandaran,” René spoke up, placing a restraining hand on Erik’s shoulder. “Erik
brought him in as a consultant on the Far East. You ought to show more respect, Buquet.”

Joseph Buquet merely looked between them, insolently. He widened his stance slightly and balled his hands into fists. The look in his eyes said challenge and oh, how Erik would have loved to take him up on it. But he wouldn’t give either of them the satisfaction. Not today. Not here.

“Precisely,” Erik said, easing out from under René’s hand. “I might not pay your salary, Buquet, but you work under me. And I daresay M. Vaucorbeil takes my word slightly more seriously than yours. And you wouldn’t have had to work so long the column in the first place if you spent more time with your hands on your work than on your flask. So take the fucking thing down. If you please.”

“Come on, Buquet,” Edouard urged. “Do as you’re told.”

Buquet spat on the stage, “Take it down yourself.”

He retreated to the wings, taking a cigar from behind his ear and lighting it as he went.

“Asshole,” Erik muttered, turning to Edouard, who shrugged.

“He’s been in a rotten mood for days,” he explained. “I can’t get a civil word out of him. The new managers have him rattled too - I think he’s worried they’ll find out he doesn’t get off his ass to do anything but drink and spy on the dancers. It’s not like Simon will hold sway with them, they don’t know him from Adam.”

“Well, maybe he shouldn’t have relied on his brother to get him a job - ” Erik began snippily, but Dalir cleared his throat slightly and gave him a pointed look. “Alright, alright, I’m a hypocrite. In my defense, you aren’t an asshole.”

“So, are you not…” Edouard began to ask Dalir, but he was interrupted by the arrival of Guillaume Salut, the Opera’s resident costume designer. He was looking well-rested and tanned, having recently returned from a seaside holiday. He left his sketches and instructions for the Opera’s army of seamstresses and tailors to get to work on the costumes in his absence and was probably the person most eager to see them in person.

“Clear the stage, please, men!” he ordered, casting his walking stick around like a magician’s wand. “Oh! Erik! Not you! I want to see how the little lighting trick you’ve devised looks, can someone dim the house lights? And light the footlights?”

Erik nodded and the men got-to, scattering where they needed to and adjusting the gas (the auditorium still was not wired, M. Vaucorbeil told them electricians to hold off until the production was finished) as Erik and René set up the frames before the footlights.

It would look better if the house was darker, but the light pooled along the floor admirably, washing over the feet and legs of the stagehands - if Erik could control the flicker and sway, he’d have preferred the effect really remain at ankle-height, but it couldn’t be helped; perhaps he could explain it as a metaphor, if anyone asked. That everyone was tossing on the tides.

Guillaume nodded his approval, tossing aside his hat, stick, and gloves onto an obliging chair in the orchestra section. He sat down and looked up at the stage ordering, “Bring in the chorus!” He got himself comfortable and seemed ready to settle in for a long sit, but alas, it was not to be.

Poor Christine - poor, dear, sweet Christine - was the first one trotted out in her priestess costume and the sight was enough to send the designer sitting bolt-upright in his chair. “What is that?” he squawked, in horror.
"Holy shit," Edouard muttered. And Erik had to agree, that basically summed up the costumes. Or, rather, what was left of the costumes. At the production meeting he’d seen the designs - harem trousers with long over-skirts for the women, full of beads and tassles, like ornate cushions, topped with little gauzy veils. But this…this…

Erik had seen aerialists in more demure ensembles. Christine was wearing only an elaborately beaded bodice. There was no skirt! Not really. Just hanging red and gold beads over a dancer’s thick white stockings.

She looked beyond embarrassed, timidly inching out onto the stage under the glare of the lights. He felt compelled to tell his men to turn round, but what would be the point? The costume was meant to be seen, after all.

"The managers just kept saying, 'Take it away, take it away,' when they looked at them - M. Moncharmin and M. Richard, I mean," Charles, the costume assistant said nervously. "I'm sorry, monsieur, I told him that wasn't the design, but they were accompanied by the Comte! M. Moncharmin said, perhaps, appliques could be added on the…at the back. If you need a bit more material."

"Oh!" Guillaume shouted, half-hysterical as he clambered onto the stage. "Magnifique! Ass tiaras! Wonderful. We'll all be given citations."

"If you need a moment, monsieur, to...consult," Christine ventured quietly. "Might I put my robe back on?"

“Oh, of course, you should my dear!” Guillaume exclaimed, rounding on Christine as though she was somehow to blame. “Otherwise you’ll catch a chill. Managers? What managers? Where is M. Vaucorbeil? What does the Comte know about costume? I was away for two weeks? How has everything gone to hell in two weeks?"

“How on earth - ah. Buquet. Of course, ran off to his big brother and big brother ran off to the managers, Erik thought. He’d put him in the flies for this production, let him raise and lower the backdrops, fill his hands with hemp splinters. That’d show him.

“M. Mazandarani,” Erik gestured to Dalir, not even breaking a sweat as his plan seemed about to topple around his ears before it had begun, “only just proved himself to be available.”

Though Erik had hoped to merely write off a salary of…say, fifty francs as a production expense, he had thought through what actions to take if they were found out or questioned: let him do all the talking while Dalir said as little as possible.
Dalir played his part perfectly. “Salâm,” he said with a short bow at the management.

Vaucorbeil’s beard twitched, though whether he was smiling or frowning was difficult to tell.

“Good morning,” Moncharmin said, distractedly. “Well. This is all very... I mean... do you generally work with a consultant M. Ast... M. Erik?”

“No,” Erik admitted, “but M. Mazandarani being such an illustrious personage, I thought his input could prove vital. He has traveled extensively, is the toast of all the... grandest salons in Paris.”

Moncharmin looked Dalir over, from the top of his unbrushed hat to the tips of his worn boots. “Is he?”

“He prefers to... adapt to his surroundings,” Erik acknowledged. “It doesn’t do to stand out too much when taking in the sights of the world. M. Mazandarani does not wish to be perceived as a total outsider. You understand.”

“Certainly good advice for a traveler,” Vaucorbeil said since Moncharmin was just gaping at Erik, but not speaking. “Though, forgive my immodesty - I consider myself rather... well-informed about goings-on in town and I have never heard of M. Mazandarani.”

“René had,” Edouard offered readily. “Introduced him to me - and there’s Mazandarani, the confectioner! Are you related?”

Of course, no one had counted on Edouard’s sweet tooth, or Dalir being asked a direct question.

“Faghat yek kam,” Dalir shook his head very slightly.

Christine, who had been standing unnoticed by all upstage, walked closer to Erik, beads swinging and clacking as she went, “I’m sure monsieur meant no offence,” she said, wide-eyed and artless, “but Persians don’t have surnames, as we do. Mazandarani... it refers to a province. Just a... a region in Persia. Like Burgundy!”

“And what do you know of this?” Moncharmin squinted at her.

“Oh!” Christine exclaimed, tracing a hand through the air as through conjuring truth. “My guardian - she is the wife of a music professor. The widow, I should say, but all of her acquaintance are very academically... involved and I can assure you that M. Mazandarani is very well known in such circles.”

“Yes,” Erik nodded. “He is. In fact, he was just commenting on the costumes - he has traveled extensively, as I said, in Persia and India. In fact! He was the Daroga of Punjab. For a time. Chief of Police. But, politics, being what they are... anyway. He has seen much of the world and assures me that these frocks would not pass muster in Ceylon.”


“He says,” Erik translated helpfully, “that Eastern women would cover their legs more. Especially since she’s a priestess. In those billowing trousers, yes?”

“Begee nagee,” Dalir nodded.

“He says yes,” Erik informed the managers.
Guillaume slapped himself in the head and cried out, “Oh! Yes! Yes, I’m so sorry I didn’t speak up sooner - Mazandarani, of course! I attended a salon at which this man spoke only a few weeks ago before I left on my holiday. Truly fascinating. Yes, monsieurs, his input will prove invaluable.”

That was three against two and whatever reservations the managers might have, Guillaume’s input seemed to put the a seal the situation.

“A nominal fee isn’t out of the question,” Vaucorbeil shrugged.

“Next time, M. Erik, please alert us before you hire someone,” Moncharmin sighed. “What if there had been insufficient funds? Then the gentleman would have come for nothing! Very well, Salut, see to the costumes - I can explain to the...well. We do want to have as authentic a production as possible, don’t we?”

“Definitely, monsieurs, thank you monsieurs,” Erik agreed. Moncharmin turned on his heel and left, but Vaucorbeil passed a critical eye over all of them.

“Let me know when the costumes are ready to be viewed, Salut,” Vaucorbeil said to Guillaume. “I want the cast assembled and ready to rehearse after luncheon and we’ve wasted a good deal of time this morning.”

Once the managers were gone, Erik picked Christine bodily off the floor and spun her around in glee. “Oh, you were wonderful, superb! First rate! The finest actress on the Paris stage.”

“Put her down, Erik!” Guillaume commanded. “I need to re-outfit the entire cast! Come, come, mademoiselle, I need to salvage all the cuttings left on the sewing room floor.”

Laughing, Christine hurried off behind Guillaume, waving farewell to the stagehands who stood around looking both stunned and deeply amused.

“I thought you were sunk, Erik, I really did,” René confided to him. “Good work - you too, Dalir. Do you really speak Persian?”

“That which you heard there was about the extent of it,” Dalir shrugged. “My grandparents spoke it primarily, my parents less, and I less than that. I’m out of practice.”

“I don’t know whether to congratulate you or strike you,” Edouard piped up. “I quite liked those costumes! Authenticity be damned I say, if I can see a bit of leg every night - ”

“Just pay for it, like the rest of the fellows in Paris, who spend their Saturday evenings watching the cancan girls,” René advised, clapping him on the shoulder. “Want to take that column down, Erik?”

The men (with Dalir’s aid since it felt wrong to accept a salary without doing any work), managed to lower it down so Erik could begin to devise how the whole thing might come apart and reassemble.

All the while Joseph Buquet did not appear; it made for a quicker and quieter work day and Erik was grateful he’d chosen to disappear.

Once, when everyone else broke for lunch and he remained behind, tinkering with hinges, he thought he heard a voice from the flies whisper, “Astruc.”

But when he looked up, he saw no one there.

Chapter End Notes
A few notes: Dalir says, in order: "How?" "Hi." "Only a little." "I don't know. One. Two. Three. I don't speak Persian very well." "More or less."

The bloody theatre where Erik met Rene is an indirect reference to the Grand Guignol, though they didn't shift to doing lots of horror stuff until later in the century. 'Guillaume Salut' is not a real person, but the butt tiaras are very real - at least in the slave girl costumes from the 'Hannibal' number they are.

The last name 'Astruc' is borrowed from actual 19th century theatre manager Gabriel Astruc and likely would have been a recognizably Jewish last name, which is one of the reasons Erik doesn't tend to use it. Not to give too much away, but he's got decent reasons to be paranoid.
Christine is here to kick ass and sing soprano - and rehearsal has been canceled for the day.

**Warning: For racism.**

Clearly being unclad below the waist just did something to Christine’s mind - or at least her sense of self-preservation. She was absolutely giddy when Erik swept her up and twirled her around (honestly she never would have expected him to manage it with those stick-thin arms of his), her heart pounding with the thrill of having gotten away with something. She even felt rather proud of herself as M. Guillaume hustled her back into the fitting room to be re-clad in a costume more befitting an ensemble member at the Opéra and less so an erotic imagining of a harem girl.

But as she was pinned and tucked into a pair of silky bloomers she felt herself coming down of the high of getting away into the valley of you might not have gotten away. The managers might have seen straight through their ruse and worse, been furious at them all for trying to deceive them.

What had possessed her? Hadn’t she been out of her head last week with the fear that the new managers might forfeit her place in the chorus? And now, on a whim, or a flight of fancy, she decided to stick her neck out - to lie - on behalf of two men who were strangers to her a month ago.

Erik and Dalir were ever providing fodder for the confessional. The poor priest - ‘And this week, Father, the gentleman I mentioned having impure imaginings over - no, the Persian man, not the Vicomte - well, I risked my livelihood to lie to the managers of my place of work on his behalf. I told them that this man, who I well know has never been outside of France in his life, was a world-traveling policeman-sage. And I involved poor Mamma Valerius too!’

She’d be lapping the Rosary the way dogs ran a track before Mass, of that she was absolutely certain. And was it worth it?

Christine stared at the striped paper on the dressing room wall. Blue and white. Like the set. She thought about Erik’s gleeful praise, calling her wonderful. Dalir’s thankful smile. They weren’t strangers any more, were they? She thought she could call them friends. And she’d always had so few friends.

“There!” Sophie’s voice startled her out of her wonderings. “You look quite as you should, my dear. Warmer, anyway.”

Sophie had been one of the Opera’s general seamstresses, but for the past three seasons she had been promoted to dresser for La Carlotta, the lead soprano for five years running. A handsome, plump woman, nearing forty, she ordinarily would have no reason to take notice of Christine, but for the fact that Guillaume had ordered all hands to work to restore his ruined costumes.

“Thank you very much,” Christine said, stepping carefully off the dressing stool (she was still covered in pins and had no desire to bleed all over the fabric). She stood before the mirror - marked improvement, she thought. The trousers (which did resemble a fanciful Bloomer suit, Christine rather
felt she ought to ride a bicycle in it) covered her legs completely, while the ‘skirt’ of tassles and beads was reduced only to cut a line down the front. Sleeves were attached to the bodice to cover the tops of her arms (also dutifully tassled) and once she was attired in a veil, she would look very exotic, she fancied. “You’ve done so much! And in so little time.”

“Don’t get too excited,” Sophie settled back on her haunches where she’d been kneeling on the floor. “I haven’t sewed it yet. But I’m glad for the alterations - I can’t imagine Guillaume’s reaction when he saw what the Comte wanted done to his costumes.”

“The Comte?” Christine asked, turning to look down at Sophie in surprise. “But Charles said it was the managers.”

Sophie snorted, “The Comte says ‘hop,’ and the managers ask, ‘How high?’ They are old acquaintances, M. Moncharmin and the Comte. M. Richard...oh, but I shouldn’t tell tales, should I? Anyway, the Comte supports to the Opéra to revel in beauty in the arts and he wants to see all the beauty he can. Understand?”

Embarrassed, Christine nodded, blushing scarlet as she did. “Is the Vicomte...I know the Vicomte is recently returned from his naval service, but does he - ”

Christine never got to finish her question. Without even a knock to announce themself, the door of the fitting room opened and La Carlotta herself arrived.

“My dear Sophie,” she said impatiently, paying Christine absolutely no heed. “Could you stop fiddling with the chorus girls and attend to me? I can’t manage the veil on my own and as I understand it, the chorus is to appear naked, so I don’t know what you’re doing in here.”

Sophie’s mouth made a very odd squirm, like a frown - or a laugh - forcibly averted. “Of course, mam’selle, straight away. I only need to unpin Mademoiselle Daaé.”

La Carlotta raised an eyebrow that very much communicated she doubted the necessity of unpinning Mademoiselle Daaé, but she was willing to grant an indulgence. She did make a show of opening a pocketwatch at her waist and checking the time, which Sophie studiously ignored. As Christine was removed from her costume, she glanced over to observe the great diva as inconspicuously as she could.

She would never have marked her appearance on the street. The greasepaint was scrubbed from her face and far from being clad in glamorous gowns or elaborate wigs, La Carlotta in person seemed to be ordinary in the extreme. Round, short, almost dumpy in her figure, she wore a neat shirtwaist and plain blue wool skirt. The only thing that distinguished her at all was her violently red hair, her great trademark. But in publicity images, it was always down, swirling and curling down her back and shoulders. Now it was pinned up, unornamented, save for a straw hat trimmed only with a polka-dot ribbon.

La Carlotta watched Sophie with great interest, but the dresser was unhurried in her movements, draping the bloomers over her arm and untangling the beads from the bodice before she hung both upon a movable storage rack. She even reached out to help Christine secure the final few buttons on her dress before she bid her good afternoon.

“Good afternoon,” Christine murmured back, eyes cutting between the diva and her dresser nervously. “Good afternoon, Mademoiselle, I’m sorry I’ve taken up...so much time.”

La Carlotta gave her the most cursory smile and said, “Can’t be helped, I suppose. Just toddle off, there’s a good little girl.”
“Good-bye, Christine,” Sophie called after her. “Oh! And thank you for saving the costumes! Not to mention the other thing you were so cunning about.”

Christine turned back, just outside the door to ask Sophie what she meant, but La Carlotta gave her a little shooing wave and shut the door in her face.

*That was strange*, Christine thought. Not to mention a little rude. But, when one was the prima donna, one could afford to be a little busque to the ‘good little girls’ of the chorus. After the age of thirteen or so, Christine bristled slightly at being called a ‘little girl.’ She might be short, but she was nineteen! Nearly twenty, as she reminded Erik.

Speaking of Erik, Christine was traipsing out to the stage to begin blocking rehearsals when she discovered that she was not wanted there either.

“The chorus has the afternoon off,” M. Poligny informed her distractedly. “This little set-back with the costumes has thrown the whole day off! The entire lot need to be refitted and re-sewn. M. Guillaume says he’s seen to you already, you’re free to go - but come promptly tomorrow, mademoiselle, we have much time to make up.”

“Oui, monsieur,” Christine replied meekly, gripped with sudden unease. The costumes were in pieces, the cast not yet come together, and she even saw that the enormous column was on the floor of the stage, as if it had been toppled. The whole production seemed to be grinding to a halt.

She lingered for a few minutes, looking for Erik or Dalir, but they were nowhere to be seen; everyone but her had a place to be, it seemed. A bit at loose ends, Christine left the Opéra and emerged onto the bustling street. What to do with a free day? There was likely a noontime Mass and she certainly had much to confess...but her feet took her in the opposite direction of the church and toward the second-hand shop. There was going to be a season-opening gala in a few short weeks and she thought a new dress would be just the thing to purchase with her earnings.

Well, a new-to-her dress. If she’d ever had a new-new dress, she had been too young to remember. But that was the wonderful thing about Paris! Women of means discarded their dresses so frequently, it was possible for a woman like herself to purchase a dress that was only one or two seasons old for a very reasonable price.

That was her decided destination when she heard the sound of running feet behind her. Christine stepped aside to allow whoever was in such a dreadful hurry to pass, but the footsteps came up short and a slightly breathless voice said her name.

“Raoul!” Christine exclaimed, smiling. “Imagine that! After ten years’ absence, now I can’t seem to turn round without seeing you.”

Raoul’s face fell and she was immediately conscious that she’d said something wrong. Always something wrong. “Oh. I don’t mean to make a nuisance of myself - ”

“You aren’t!” Christine reached out and took his hand since he suddenly looked ready to bolt. “I’m glad to see you! I only thought it was strange since I imagined you to be very busy during the day.”

Raoul laughed, which did a great deal to brighten up his expression. “Not really,” he admitted. “After having my days so regimented it seems that there is little to do here in Paris - I hardly know where to put myself if I’m not told. And…”

He swallowed whatever it was he was going to say, but pressed on, “You told me to find you at the Opéra. And if the Opéra is where you are, then the Opéra is where I would like to be.”
Her heart did little pitter-patter at his words. Raoul looked away from her shyly, eyes lowering almost demurely.

“I’m very glad to see you,” she said, taking his arm easily and happily. “I’m unoccupied myself today! I was given the afternoon off - there was some trouble with the costumes. I thought I would do some shopping and...you could accompany me, if that isn’t too dull.”

“Not at all,” he said with a rueful smile. “I’ve been to many dressmakers recently with Marie-Grace and Marie-Félicité, I feel I’ve become something of an expert - I could open a consulting firm on ladies’ dresses, shoes, and handbags. Where are you bound? The rue de la Paix? I was at Doucet’s shop with Félicité only last week - Grace prefers the Englishman.”

He might as well have been speaking Japanese - Christine knew the rue de la Paix, of course, it ended at the Opéra, but to shop there? Not in a thousand years.

“Ah...I was going a little further out,” she admitted. “If you don’t mind a walk…”

Raoul assured her that he did not and allowed her to lead him to a much less fashionable street with much less expensive shops.

They ducked inside a likely looking store that displayed a very handsome gown in a window - missing only a few beads from the bust, the lace was only pulling away from the hem very slightly, so Christine thought it was a likely prospect. To Raoul’s credit he neither flinched nor blanched and the two of them walked in, accompanied by little tinkling bells as the door swung open.

The shopkeeper, a bald gentleman with a large mustache smiled as Christine entered and bid her good-day. Raoul followed a few steps behind, having held the door for her. Christine’s eyes were on the dresses, so she missed the change in his expression, the narrowing of his eyes, the stiffness overcoming his posture. She did not hear him bid Raoul good-day.

Christine busied herself in the racks and Raoul stood idly by the door, watching her absently, but a box of military pins and ribbons caught his attention. The shopkeeper sidled up to him at once, peering around his shoulder.

“See something you like?” he asked, very businesslike.

“Just browsing,” Raoul said affably. “I’m a navy man, so -”

“I prefer not to have idlers in my shop,” the man said, his tone gone so sour that Christine looked up from her perusal of gowns. “Seems to me you ought to buy something or leave. Seems to me you’re paying a bit too much mind to the young lady.”

A terrible hardened look overcame Raoul’s face and the shopkeeper squared his shoulders as if he was bracing for a blow. Once again, Raoul’s gloves were balled into his fist; he carried no walking stick like other fashionable young men. Christine was not sure she had ever seen him with such.

“Out you get,” the man said. He did not speak loudly, but he talked to Raoul with such force it seemed he might as well have been shouting. “Or I’ll call the gendarmes! I’ll not have the likes of you frightening the customers, harassing the young ladies”

“Monsieur!” Christine exclaimed, leaping in since Raoul seemed disinclined to raise hand or voice to defend himself; perhaps it was not the absence of skirts that made her bold. Evidently fierceness was easily roused in her through force of affection. “You...that is absurd! This man is my friend, I asked him to accompany me into this shop. You are being abominably rude and if you believe you’re doing me any favors you are mistaken!”
Christine’s carefully maintained accent slipped very much on ‘abominably,’ and only became more pronounced afterward.

The man, who turned to her with a shocked, almost contrite expression suddenly soured on her as well. He folded his arms and said, “Well, mademoiselle, I don’t know what things are like in Germany, but I don’t like trouble in my shop. Either from métis bastards or foreign girls with big mouths!”

Before Christine could even begin to register what had happened - how in the space of five minutes the man had gone from smiles and ‘good-days’ to such language - Raoul had seized her by the hand and pulled her out onto the street. He was breathing very heavily, his hand within hers shook and they were halfway down the block before he slowed his frantic pace to something more like a walk.

“I - I’m not German,” Christine managed, finally. It seemed such a stupid thing to say.

Raoul laughed without humor. “No, you’re not - but his evaluation of me was spot on. Though I’m not a bastard, I don’t think. Ah, forgive me. I shouldn’t say such things in front of you.”

His hand was still holding tight to hers. Christine did not squirm or pull away, nor even indicate that he was rather squeezing her fingers, but Raoul let go abruptly.

“Let me walk you home,” he offered, quietly. Defeatedly.

“I don’t want to go home,” Christine said, finally. Her heart was racing as it had that morning, but she did not feel the same rush of glee, she felt...indignant. No, more than that, angry. For what had they done? What had Raoul done, save look at a few piece of old tin? And he was treated like a thief or worse. Despite feeling sick to her stomach, she continued, “Let's...let's go to lunch. We can go to the cafe you took me to last time. If you'd like, I'd like to.”

“As you wish,” Raoul murmured tightly, not really looking at her. He eased his arm out of Christine’s grip and walked a few paces ahead of her, hands behind his back, neck bowed slightly down.

Oh, no, this would not do. It was that man who ought to be skulking away, shamefaced. Not Raoul!

His mood had not improved when they got to the cafe. He specifically requested an indoor table, this time - a private dining room, though those were little used in the middle of the day. The server obliged them and soon they were sitting down at a table for six. It was a long and lonely expanse between them and just as soon as she was sat, Christine broke with all restaurant protocol and changed seats so that she was positioned right beside Raoul, who looked up when she sat down, a bewildered expression on his face. As if he’d forgotten she was there at all.

“Forgive me,” he said stiffly. He brought a hand up to rub his brow and close his eyes.

“You didn’t do anything wrong!” Christine insisted, her voice shrill even to her own ears. “I refuse to forgive you when you did nothing wrong! That man - he was just awful. I don’t know how you could bear it. I wanted to strike him, I really did.”

He lowered his hand and caught her eye, looking even more downtrodden. The bottom of Christine’s stomach dropped out and now more than ever she wished she had a little vice for her tongue. She wasn’t sure who would hold the key to loosen it. But clearly she ought not be given license to speak every thought that popped into her head. Not if it made Raoul look like he thought he’d disappointed her.

“Oh, Christine,” Raoul sighed, sounding very much older than twenty-two. “Believe me, if I’d struck
him it would have gone very badly for me. I...such things do not happen often. I’m only...I’m only
taken aback. Such things do not happen often.”

He said the last very quietly, almost to himself. Raoul’s elbow had come to rest of the table and his
forehead was in his hand, fingers still ghosted over his brow as though he was fighting a headache.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly. She did not know what else to say.

Raoul did not hear her. “I’ve been sheltered, perhaps too much...it’s only jarring. That’s all. To move
from circles where I’m very well known and...not too much remarked on, to...well. As I said. That
was an extreme case. And very rare.”

“But such things should not happen at all,” Christine lamented, knuckles going white where her
fingers were pressed together in her lap, to prevent her pounding on the table with her fist. It was so
futile to protest; such things should not happen, but such things did happen. And to Raoul. Raoul
and, she was sure, countless others.

Raoul practically read her thoughts.

“I have...much to be grateful for,” he said, like an automaton. Like he was quoting someone. “Many
do not have my advantages, I have rank, at least. And that was rare -”

“Yes, rare, you said,” Christine interrupted him. “But still. It was terrible.”

A fond smile ghosted over Raoul’s lips, “I am...unused to find someone so sympathetic or so warm
about the subject. I’m not laughing at you, I swear. It’s only...my brother and sisters are very - I’m
sorry, you’ve never met the girls have you?”

Christine admitted that she had not.

“They’re very fair,” Raoul replied. “As was my father - it’s - the - it’s from his family that the...cause
originated. Modern science says each successive generation ought to tend toward lightness...look like
Philippe and the girls, so they don’t see...they haven’t the experiences I’ve - I’m something of a
throw-back. According to the brightest minds, anyway - I’m sorry, I don’t want to bore you with -”

“I’m not bored,” Christine assured him. “Go on.”

“My great-grandfather,” Raoul sighed, drumming the fingers of his right hand on the tabletop
restlessly. “Was married to a young lady of birth and standing, but she hadn’t given him any
children, you see, and she died of a consumptive fever when she was still very young. His
mistress...”

He stopped and took a deep breath, closing his eyes as if conjuring her to his mind, this woman of
which he spoke. He opened his eyes and fidgeted uncomfortably, looking ready to apologize again
for speaking of so gauche a thing as a mistress, but Christine gave him an encouraging nod and bade
him continue.

“My father says she was his mistress, but I’ve seen the papers,” he smiled, but it was a pale, twisted
thing. “She was his slave. His property - he had land in the West Indies, as so many did. It was
where he made his fortune. And by the time the Countess died, she had borne him a son, this
woman. My great-grandmother.”

Christine wasn’t sure what to say and so she said nothing. She very much wanted to do something,
take his hand, perhaps, he looked so forlorn. But she only sat very still, fingers twisting together in
her lap to prevent reaching for her dear friend.
“I like to think…” Raoul began again, a far-away look in his eyes. “I like to imagine he cared for her, some little bit. But I think he was just practical. He had a son to inherit already, why take a chance on another young woman when there was one already in the wings?”

“He married her,” Christine offered quietly, unable to hold her tongue a moment longer. “I mean, he did marry her. And his son did inherit. Did he not?”

“So he did,” Raoul nodded, scrubbing a hand over his face absently. He glanced briefly down at his fingers and sighed. “Though his skin was black as pitch - they did not care so much about those things back then, at least. Rank meant more than color, or so my brother says. But now we are all modern and a man’s worth is said to be inherent in himself and his character. Which really is too bad for me, if you’ve read Herr Pruner’s work.”

Why must all the gentlemen of her acquaintance make her feel silly and ignorant? Oh, I’m not from the provinces’s mam’selle, how ridiculous of you not to notice! And now, Surely you’ve heard of some horrid German who writes extensively about the nature of man! It was honestly rather tedious, not to mention a bit insulting.

“I have not,” Christine replied firmly, drawing herself up a bit to at least maintain a posture of dignity. Well, if she was to be treated as a poor ignorant girl, why not play the part? “And pray keep quiet about it; botany bores me and anyway, I prefer plums.”

Raoul looked at her for a moment, mouth opening as if he meant to correct her - then he must have seen something in her eyes, either annoyance or subtle irony for he laughed out loud. The sound was welcome and loosed some rigidity from both their shoulders.

“I’m sorry, I go on,” Raoul said, fingers twitching as if now it was he who wanted to take her hand. “It’s so easy to fall into...well. No one lets me forget, it seems. No one but you.”

Christine did not know the Vicomte well enough to determine whether or not he was blushing, but the way he ducked his head and winced, a little, at his own forthrightness, made her think that perhaps he was.

“I think you’re very kind,” she said, at last, because she did not know what else to say. “And...I have so few friends, you know. So few people I really...know. And none from long ago, save yourself. And that is all I think of when I see you. My childhood friend.”

Abruptly, Raoul raised his head and his dark eyes met hers, suddenly and almost imploringly. The little knob in his throat bobbed up and down as he swallowed, a motion she only noticed because his cravat had slipped down and exposed the length of his neck. Now it was she who looked away quickly and she knew that her companion would have little trouble discerning her blush - her face felt as red as a tomato.

“I’m glad of that,” he said, a trifle hoarsely. “I’m so glad to re-make your acquaintance, Petite Lotte.”

This time, she did not hesitate. She took his right hand in her left and met his eyes with a sincere smile.

“You remember that too! Oh, so am I, Raoul, so am I,” she declared earnestly. If she had been nine years old, she would have kissed his cheek. She was sure she would. She was sure she had. But it was ten years gone and such childish would seem like something else now. So she only briefly squeezed his fingers and let go.

“I think we’ve been forgotten,” Raoul said lightly, peering around the curtain at the darkened cafe.
“My fault, requesting a dinner table in the middle of the day.”

Christine stood up suddenly and seized both his hands. He looked down at them, her fingers so small and pale, his decidedly not. And she not troubled about it in the slightest.

“Then come with me,” she said firmly. “Come with me - we’ll take tea with Mamma Valerius. She’ll be so pleased to see you and she gets very few visitors. I’m sure she remembers you. The little boy who rescued my scarf.”

“The little boy you pulled from the sea,” Raoul said, letting her tug him to his feet. Her eyes were shining so brightly, her face so bright and earnest. This time he squeezed her hands. “You haven’t changed a bit, have you?”

“Not in any way that’s likely to do me good,” Christine confirmed. She took his arm with all the bold friendliness in the world as they exited the cafe and walked onto the street. “Oh! Oh! The funniest thing happened this morning at the Opéra! You’ll laugh to hear it. At least I hope so. I’ll tell you on the way to Mamma’s, it is not a tea-time story, so I’ll have to be quick about it.

Hanging on his arm, Christine regaled her friend with a recounting of the morning’s trouble (leaving out all mention of his brother’s part in it). They were a block from the Opéra once he started smiling and he was in stitches by the time they approached the house when Christine announced that based on her academic credentials, a Paris-born baker was able to pass himself off as a world-weary policeman who was only too fit comment on women’s dress!

“It was the bead-skirt!” Christine announced triumphantly. “The bead skirt gave me courage!”

She was halfway up the stairs to the door, Raoul and she were eye-level as she made this declaration. Christine dropped his arm to fish around in her purse for the key, but he lay a gentle hand on her wrist.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” he said shaking his head. “I think you’re courageous all on your own.”

And there, on the steps, right before teatime, he leaned over and gave her the kiss on the cheek that she’d been so longing to give him.

Chapter End Notes

"The Englishman" Marie-Grace prefers is a reference to Charles Worth THE designer of the late 19th century. 'Doucet' is Jacques Doucet, another fashion designer, but French-born. "Métis" is a word which in this context means "mixed-race," though it has been used to refer specifically to people with First Nations heritage in Canada. The "Herr Pruner" Raoul refers to is Franz Ignaz Pruner who was an anthropologist who worked extensively in Egypt and had some feelings about the "influence" of Sub-Saharan African genetics. His study would have been slightly outdated by the time Raoul and Christine were having this conversation, but this way Christine can purposefully mishear the pronunciation of his name as "prunier" or "prune" so she could make a bad pun to cheer Raoul up.
Rehearsals resumed and all of the major scenes were blocked out in quick order. Christine found herself with a little more free time than she had enjoyed those first few weeks at the Opéra. Mornings were for the chorus and the ballet, afternoons for the soloists and principals. Raoul called on her at work at least three times a week to take her to luncheon or join her for tea with Mamma Valerius. As predicted, her guardian was too tickled to see little Raoul turned out to be quite a man and he spent many happy hours regaling them with tales of life at sea and, occasionally, with stories of tedious dinners he'd attended and the one or two little soirees his sisters hosted that he'd been a guest to.

One story that amused them very much was the tale of how he'd been seated to the left of the Grand Duchess of So-and-So who provided little in the way of conversation, so he felt the need to make up for it by chattering on and on to her during the soup course. She smiled and nodded, even laughed gently a few times. It was only afterward, when Marie-Grace pressed him on what on earth they'd been discussing did he realize she only spoke German!

A part of Christine had been worried that she and Raoul, despite how kind and charming he was, despite the fact that he laughed at her jokes, might not have very much in common at the end of the day. His world was split into two very different experiences - on the one hand, leisure and gaiety enjoyed by those of his station, on the other hand the arduous life of a sailor. But that was not the case at all. They conversed freely and easily with one another.

That was what struck her as being so remarkable - how easy it was to be with him. That fraught day at the dress shop (which she decided she would never return to and as such still had no gown for the gala) was an anomaly. She so enjoyed their time together, their conversations, simply enjoy comfortable silence, sipping tea on those not infrequent occasions when Mamma nodded off in the midst of a conversation and they were loathe to wake her and embarrass her. It was a cozy world to inhabit, just the three of them. With no one to trouble either of them about anything - certainly no rude shopkeepers. She should have known, really. Should have expected that it would all come to an end.

On the first day of the year when the mercury dropped below 'sweltering,' Sorelli wore a fox fur stole to the Opera. She arrived at quarter-to-nine in the morning. By eleven o'clock, not only were the ballerinas all a-twitter, but the chorus had something to say too.

"Ooh la-la," Célestine Bernard, one of the mezzos, muttered as the ballerinas cleared the stage to make way for the various priests, priestesses and virgins of the chorus. "Clearly I chose the wrong profession - ballet must pay very well."

"The dancer's lounge pays very well," Jeannette Millet, an alto, commented back so loudly that Sorelli must have heard her. The graceful line of her neck tensed, but she strode by, as composed as ever she was, into the wings. "What does she think wearing it here? She only means to show off.
Personally, I think it's disgraceful."

Jeanette turned round to see what support she could receive from her fellow chorus members and her eyes lighted on Christine. "Don't you think?"

Privately, Christine thought that Sorelli would do best not to flaunt her newly acquired luxury around the Opéra, if only to dissuade impertinent commentary...but she would not say so. Not even when prompted.

"Oh, I don't know," Christine shrugged casually. "She might be a little over-warm this afternoon, if the temperature rises."

"Ha! La Sorelli doesn't need to worry about the temperature rising, I don't think," M. Jones laughed suggestively. He nudged Christine in the arm and winked, but Christine merely shrugged as if the joke had gone completely over her head.

"Don't tease her about it," Célestine muttered as they took up their places on the stage. "For I hear she's taken up with the other one. Carriage rides in the Bois, oysters and champagne every night - though for the life of me, I don't understand it. Why her?"

"Well," Jeanette claimed, as if it was obvious. "Lesser performer for the lesser brother, of course. I don't understand it either - from her. I'd shudder if such a one touched me."

Célestine laughed harshly. "You could get over his looks after taking a glance at his pocketbook. Close your eyes and think of francs! Isn't that what Queen Victoria said?"

Ears burning, Christine could not take listening to any more of this, "I should think - " she began, but the rehearsal pianist struck up the melody and she was forced to concentrate on her singing and not on the awful gossip floating all around her.

It wasn't the gossip itself that troubled her - even at the conservatory, stories were swapped about who was enjoying the patronage of what noble family, which students were using practice rooms to put their mouths to use for activities that had nothing to do with music. The world of the Opéra was perhaps more prestigious, but in its own way it was just as small, just as insular. Like any little village, she supposed, where everyone knew everybody and demanded to know everyone's business as well.

Christine had no similar experiences in her childhood to compare this too, of course. She moved too frequently to put down roots anywhere, at least until her father found a permanent position. But that was only a few years by the sea, then she was off to Paris to begin her studies of music in full. She'd been commented on before, she'd had children warned away from her, this dirty little traveling girl. And after she lost her father, she was too downtrodden to make friends, too focused on fulfilling his wishes for her to break into those practice rooms herself. Even so, there was chatter.

Little Daaé, who was so serious and quiet. Little Daaé who was so withdrawn and melancholy. Little Daaé who talked to herself when she thought no one was about to hear her.

She was used to gossip, but she was not used to this level of vitriol or untruths! Yes, Sorelli had received a fur and it clearly had been purchased for her since she could never have afforded such finery on her own. It was clear where she'd gotten it - the Comte had not been the most discreet lover in the world. But as for her own self - oysters and champagne indeed. It was true that she and Raoul met often for lunch (which he paid for, admittedly), but she rarely took more than tea and a salad! He'd begun coming to the house weekly for visits with Mamma Valerius, but that was tinned biscuits and yet more tea!
True, they had gone for a walk in the park, but she had no idea how that had become common knowledge. Or where the tale of carriages had come from. And, honest girl that she was, Christine felt it necessary to clarify a few points at the act break.

"The Vicomte is a childhood friend," Christine said coolly to Jeanette and Célestine at the act break. "That is all."

Célestine winked and patted her shoulder, "Oh! Certainly. And Sorelli and the Comte were at finishing school together. Come now Christine, we're not stupid. I think you're a lucky girl, myself. The right connections...you could go far if the Vicomte leans on his brother a bit. You might get a named part next season, so long as he still fancies you."

"That is not - I would not - " Christine began, but Jeannette looked her up and down with the same sort of disdain one might show a slug dragging itself along the sidewalk after a rainstorm.

"I certainly would not," she interrupted her. "Honestly, Christine, I thought...well, all you ever talk about - when you do talk - is going to Mass, bringing your guardian her Eucharist. I thought you were a different sort of girl."

"I am - I don't know - "

"But to take up with the Vicomte," Jeanette continued. "Sorelli is bad enough, but she might be able to forget what he is!"

All thoughts of protest few out of Christine's head. It suddenly did not feel as imperative to stopper these rumors or clarify that the champagne was tea, the oysters were biscuits and that whatever passions they thought she'd excited in Raoul resulted in nothing more than holding-hands and chaste kisses on the cheek upon parting. He was a gentleman. A perfect gentleman.

Even Célestine looked uncomfortable with Jeanette's little speech. "Oh, really, that's taking it a bit far, don't you think?"

"Not far enough!" Jeanette exclaimed. "He's a - he's...it just isn't right Christine. Not for a girl like you to...submit yourself to him."

Submit. Like a dog. Like an animal.

"Jeanette," Christine said, voice trembling despite her best attempt to rein in her feelings. "Never speak to me again. Do you understand? Never."

"From the top of the act, please!" the rehearsal pianist piped up and thank God. Jeanette could hardly be expected to sing her part if she spent the better part of the afternoon bleeding from the mouth.

When the company broke for the day, Christine did not know what to do with herself. Her order to Jeanette had been taken up by much of the chorus - no one spoke to her and those who acknowledged her did so with nervous hurried glances, quickly broken when their eyes met hers. The Christine of a month ago would have despaired. For hadn't she wanted friends? But could she stomach such friends as these? Friends who talked about Raoul as if he were something less when Christine thought him one of the finest men she'd ever met?

She could hardly walk home - Mamma Valerius would know immediately that she was in a state and she couldn't bear the thought of troubling the kind old woman with her worries.

The principles had taken the stage and she could hear strains of Carlotta's aria about her bravery as a child, hiding a fugitive, as the pianist banged out the chorus part, silent now, since they had been
dismissed. Raoul said she had courage, but Christine thought he overstated things. It wasn't courage at all that made her speak up or challenge others - it was a passion borne more of fury than of bravery. And she could hardly think that was admirable.

The long corridors that led to the dressing rooms were quiet and Christine sought refuge there. The women's dressing room was a place she knew well, it ought to be empty without the ensemble about and all the costumers and dressers occupied in the sewing rooms. She peered inside around the slightly-open door and, to her satisfaction, found the place deserted. Shutting the door behind her with a click, Christine slid to the floor, alone with her anger, and began to weep.

Everything had been going marvelously as far as Erik was concerned. The costumes had been resolved, the set was coming along beautifully and just as soon as the lead actors went home for the day, he could test his Jane Eyre-inspired temple destruction. Even Joseph Buquet was biddable - surly and uncommunicative, but biddable.

Not to mention his bonus treat of having Dalir accompany him to work. Not every day, of course, but at least twice a week. He’d been offered a delivery post at one of the major baker’s who supplied several restaurants with their bread. Re-offered, rather, but beggars could not be choosers and so he was up and about at seven most mornings, to do his rounds. But he found time to pop into the Opéra now and again.

It was with a spring in his step that Erik strode down the corridors, biding his time until the stage was his again - that was the trouble with the week or two following the first dress. Everyone needed use of the stage for conflicting purposes, no sooner would the chorus leave than the principals had to be directed, and then they were gone and the orchestra came in to run the score and then it was eight o’clock and the place was shut down for the evening. Erik had to snatch little sessions of productivity where he could.

He’d not been doing or thinking much of anything as he walked toward the stage to check on the progress of rehearsals when he heard the unmistakeable sound of tears emanating from a nearby dressing room. He slowed, cocked his head, and listened closely.

A girl. Terribly upset from the sound of it.

Oh, it wasn’t any of his business. He shouldn’t make it his business. But he found himself knocking on the door, twisting the knob as he did and calling, “Everything alright in there, mam’selle?”

A loud snuffle was his only response, then a waveringly voiced, “Erik?”

Christine. Crying in a dressing room. Erik opened the door without thinking and almost walloped her with it - she’d been sitting very close by and had to scoot back on her bottom to let him in.

“Are you alright?” he asked, kneeling over her, searching her for some sign of illness or injury. He’d not seen much of her recently, they’d both been busy with work...and, according to rumor, she was much taken up with the Vicomte.

Erik had not paid heed to any of the nastier commentary and suppositions - Dalir told him ages ago that they’d known one another as children and were eager to renew the acquaintance - but if Monsieur de Chagny had pressed his advantage…

“I’m fine,” she said, wiping her face with a handkerchief that had already taken much abuse. “I’m just - I’m not sad. I’m...oh, you’ll laugh. I’m just furious, that’s all.”
Erik did not laugh. He shut the door behind him and joined her on the floor. “Want me to retrieve something for you to strike?” he asked, looking round the room. There was a likely-looking pillow on the chaise.

Christine snorted and shook her head, “Oh, I knew you’d find this very funny - ”

“I don’t!” he said earnestly, placing a hand over his heart. “Tears are a perfectly rational way to vent your spleen. I’m quite serious about it, my sisters find the exercise useful. So do I, come to that, much less bloody and painful than striking another person. Or a wall. Believe me, I know from experience.”

Christine sniffled again, then blew her nose noisily into her handkerchief. Her face was red and wet, the handkerchief a hopeless mess. Erik, always prepared, handed her one of his striped trick handkerchiefs, which served just as well to mop up a tearful face as it did to delight little ballerinas.

“You have a sister?” she asked, when she’d finished tidying herself up.

“I have five sisters,” Erik clarified. “So believe me, I’m more than familiar with the wrath of young ladies. I still have the tooth marks to prove it. I’ve got a brother, too, but he’s far less dangerous.”

She laughed, seemingly despite herself, “I always wanted a brother. Or a sister as well. Anyone, really. I was always...rather solitary.”

That renewed her tears and Erik was grateful he always carried no fewer than ten handkerchiefs at a time.

“It has some advantages,” he said absently. “If you won’t hit something, will you talk about it? Less direct, perhaps, but more useful, or so M. Charcot says. I could hypnotize you, if you like.”

“No, thank you,” Christine said, folding the handkerchief into smaller and smaller squares. “I’m...upset, not hysterical.”

“Too often the two are conflated,” Erik agreed. “But upset about…”

Watery blue eyes met Erik’s gaze. For a few seconds, she hesitated, seemingly not sure if she could trust him to understand. Erik sat by patiently, waiting, looking at her straight on in all his angular ugliness, but with an openness of expression that bade her go on. He was a friend, she seemed to remind herself. And the admission that he had six siblings apparently shook something loose in her opinion of him.

Christine took a breath to steady herself and licked her dry lips before she said, “It’s about Raoul - the Vicomte. Now don’t say anything, it isn’t what you think! It isn’t what they think, either!”

Erik did not say a word though his mind did jump to the conclusion that he’d not treated her well, in the way of young men who took up with younger actresses. But he held his tongue, as he was told and listened as Christine revealed all, from their summer on the coast, to their unexpected reunion, their quaint little teas and an encounter with a paranoiac in a second-hand store. And finally:

“They think I’m...like Sorelli,” Christine continued, face burning, and addressed her remarks to the floor. “Only worse. Because Raoul is...because he looks...it’s ridiculous. For Jeanette to talk about him like he’s some kind of beast when he’s just a man. Better than most men too, I think.”

“He certainly sounds singular,” Erik agreed. “A gentleman, yes. I’m sure all those girls, to a one, have done far more than take tea with old ladies with their callers, even St. Jeanette.”
“Then why?” she asked plaintively. “Why, when we have done nothing wrong or even unrespectable, would she say such things?”

“Oh...people are are not so civilized as they think, or respectable,” Erik replied evenly, shaking his head. “Poor Monsieur le Vicomte; if his circumstances were less favorable, he might have wound up in a cage too.”

Christine started and stared at him. Erik could have absolutely kicked himself. This was the trouble with inviting confidences; no sooner did he have something confided to him than he felt the urge to confide right back.

“What?” she asked, eyes bright with interest. “A cage? What cage? What are you talking about?”

“Ah….” he frantically tried to think of a way to turn the conversation around. Cage? You thought I said cage? Oh, no! I said...stage...ah, but that’s almost as bad. Weren’t we talking about the Vicomte? Not me. “I only meant...well, it’s the nature of man, I think. With the right prompting, most people could be led to believe any one of their fellow creatures is...something other than what they are. Look at us! We’re going to try and convince all of Paris that a pile of wooden boards is a great sea and that a Spaniard, a German, and a Frenchman are all Hindu islanders!”

“But...that’s performance,” Christine said, rising up on her knees to look at him more keenly. “You said...a cage.”

“Well, there’s the difference,” Erik shrugged uncomfortably, and now it was his turn to scoot back toward the door. “Subtle, to be sure. On stage, it’s all...magic and make-believe. But take away the lights and the trappings and respectability, that same...impulse, to believe the impossible can make monsters of men in the eyes of an audience. They’re all an audience, Christine, whether they’re dressed in finery or rags. Whether they applaud or…”

Whatever look he’d had in his eyes that prompted a confession from her, she’d evidently learned to copy. Christine’s hands hovered and the handkerchiefs dropped to the floor beside her. She wasn’t crying anymore, did not seem angry. Only intensely interested. “But, Erik, what do you mean?”

Keep it light, he ordered himself. Vague, but compelling enough to satisfy. Don’t frighten her.

“I...traveled with a man,” he said, and that was what he called it when he was made to speak of it. Traveling. As if his wretched companions of a decade ago shared a car with him on some train together once. “Advertized himself as an African Prince - a liar on both counts, he was from somewhere in the north of England, family of clothmakers, his name was Joe Turner.”

Christine’s pale brow creased and a small frown twisted her pink lips.

“Really, it was obvious,” Erik drawled, wishing there was a bottle handy - liquid courage never went amiss when discussing the past. “His teeth! Nubian skin, but English teeth, far too many of them and all cluttered together. Terrible.”

Christine smiled a tiny bit at that. “Were you friends?”

Friends. Friends. Yes, he supposed they were.

“He called me ‘froggie,’” Erik noted, pulling a face to make a joke of it, “which did not endear me to him too much. Stupid, really, there we were, a carnival, in France, mind you, who did he think he would be traveling with? Hercule - not his real name either, but I never got it out of him - Hercule told him that if he didn’t like it, he could row himself back across the Channel and take up with England’s freaks.”
Eyes widening, Christine sat back down on the floor completely, mouth dropping open before she quickly closed it again. “What...sort of...traveling was it that you did?”

It was really a very stupid question; entirely beneath her. Even as she asked it, she had to know the answer. Erik really felt compelled to reply, _Sales_. We _sold_ encyclopedias, and leave, but he thought he oughtn’t brush her off so. They were friends, weren’t they? And she’d just shared a confidence with him.

“Sideshow,” he _said_, more casually than he _felt_. “Such a success with human oddities we didn’t even need a bear or a little dog to draw the crowds. Anyway, the first two seasons we were - ah, I forgot, didn’t I? Amazing how I could forget. Joe didn’t have any arms. The Armless African. And here I was, making you think the most terrible thing about him was he _teeth_!”

Erik laughed hollowly, but Christine didn’t. She was looking at him with awful concern. She shouldn’t be. _This_ was one of the many reasons why he did _not_ like to talk about that time in his life. People either pitied him or scorned him and he had not patience for either.

“Not so respectable as the chorus of the Garnier,” he admitted. “But it paid. And what else was I to do? I was fifteen, we needed the money and an apprenticeship doesn’t _pay_.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me - ” she began, but Erik railroaded right over her.

“Yes, yes, I do,” he said quickly, feeling a bit frantic and panicked for all of his practiced nonchalance. “For I’ve begun it, haven’t I? And there’s no reason to stop now, for you’ll always wonder, won’t you?”

Christine did not say anything, but she didn’t have to; he knew it was true.

“It’s as I said, you dress someone up, stick a sign outside their...enclosure that says, ‘African Prince’ or ‘Living Corpse’ - that was me, by the bye, if you couldn’t _tell_ - and stand back and let the money roll in.”

It had not been so very awful, at first. At first he just threw his voice and performed magic tricks. But suddenly the audiences thinned. The country was in trouble, deep financial trouble, and it was felt as far out as the provinces. Audiences weren’t willing to pay for a skinny magical or the old trick of serenading the fat lady. They wanted something more _unique_. Something _novel_. An animated cadaver rising from the grave, with a face so _terrible_, so hideous that it had to be covered with a mask. But you could see it! If you _dare_, if you _paid_, oh, you could _see_ it!

It did not matter, in the end, what talents he had with his voice or with his hands. They only wanted to see his face and his body. Amazing to think, but before... _before_ he hadn’t thought much about it. Oh, he knew he was ugly. He knew his face was abnormal - but until they put him in a mask, he’d never before thought that he was actually frightening.

“You wish to know why I did it, well, that’s why,” Erik said bitterly. “The money. I told you my father was a mason? _Was_, is right, he doesn’t do that anymore.”

“Your father is still alive?” Christine asked, perking up a little. “I’m sorry, I thought...when you told me he was a mason, I thought - ”

“You thought he had passed, no, he’s alive, enjoying excellent health,” Erik said dismissively, words pouring out like a flood he could do nothing to stem. “Now. The stone dust, it gets in the lungs. Ruins them. He had to stop, had to quit to save his life. But carpentry did not pay so well and I was
out of school - there were four of us children then. I was the only boy. And the only one of working age. There was no question of my going on to university - ”

“Why not?” Christine interrupted him. “You’re so...quick, so clever! Your music - ! Why not? If it was an issue of money, surely there could have been a scholarship, something!”

And so there had been. The parish sponsored the top pupil every year - the top pupil in the congregation. There were aid societies. The Christian Brothers of Jean-Baptiste de la Salle. The Brothers of Our Lady of Lourdes. The Marianists. They would pool funds and resources for worthy children. But, in their eyes, he was not a worthy child.

“They were not available to me,” he said, simply. “It was not possible. So I struck out on my own. And for a time...it truly was not very bad. Having something to send home...it was enough. Until it wasn’t.”

Erik’s voice faded and his eyes went very far-away. He remembered them all. Constanza, the Fat Lady, and her daughter Lucia. Joe. Hercule. The cretins. The dog-faced boy who played the Spanish guitar masterfully, but never during shows - then he had to put in fake teeth and grunt and growl, wearing such clothes as were required by the clergy.

“I was lucky, I had advantages” he said and meant it too. “In good health - ugly, yes, skinny, absolutely, but I have two arms. Two legs. A mind. I went home. I had a home to go to - there’s the difference. Between the fortunate and the unfortunate. Many of them simply had nowhere else to go.”

It was Joe who’d cut and run first. Back to England. He’d find something to do with himself. He joked that he’d steal some cuttings from the vineyards and set himself up as a grape-stomper. It was Joe who told him first, to get out. Get out before it destroyed him, this life.

“You’ve got folks as give a shit about you, Erik,” he said. “Don’t take that for granted, you understand? Not for a single second.”

Erik was looking in Christine’s direction, but not really seeing her. He was remembering the crowds, at first simply awed and appreciative, but later...well, they were feeling the squeeze of deprivation. It made them ornery. At times, hateful. He tried to remember that, it wasn’t anything to do with him, not really. Always, he tried to remember that, and yet...

“I had a home to go back to,” he repeated, quietly. “And the Vicomte has rank. Wealth. That is not nothing. But...when you talk about what people say of him...I have some understanding. Of what it is to be looked at and perceived as less than. Or inhuman.”

Erik swallowed, thickly, closing his eyes as he continued, “The very worst of it - for those who are unfortunate, who have no means of escape - is not to hear what people say. To be called an animal is one thing, if you have your pride, your dignity, you can still be offended. All of that righteous anger you spilled out in your tears. That’s...powerful. That’s good. The worst is when you do not have that. The worst is when you are called inhuman...and you start to believe it.”

“Oh, Erik,” she whispered, so quietly, so tearfully, that he stood up, abruptly. He’d the impression that if he did not, she might embrace him or cry over him, and he did not want that. Not over what he had been. What he’d been reduced to.

“Come along,” he said cajolingly, extending his hand. “This is all far too maudlin, even for the Opéra! Your Vicomte - and I will call him your Vicomte, for you’ve yet to convince me otherwise! - will be alright. He’s got his family. And his Christine who thinks he’s the grandest fellow she’s ever
“Only one of the grandest,” she said, letting him take her hand and pull her to his feet. “I’ve met some remarkable gentlemen, recently.”

Chapter End Notes

"Charcot" is a reference to Jean-Martin Charcot who was famous for curing hysterical patients (hysteria was a catch-all diagnosis for any number of mental illnesses and/or women having strong feelings) with hypnosis. Because Erik has nothing if he doesn't have pop culture references. Erik is probably the person LEAST qualified to be a therapist in that room, but he tries! If anyone would like to hear more about his homecoming from the traveling fair, I posted it here: http://madamefaust.tumblr.com/post/164762183627/coming-home-a-strange-sweet-sound-ficlet
Once again, Raoul found himself back at the Opera. Once again, he was absolutely sure he was not meant to be there. But Philippe had insisted.

“Do you have other pressing engagements?” he asked as they took their seats directly in front of the stage.

“You know I don’t,” Raoul grumbled, removing his hat and setting it upon his knee. “But, Philippe, doesn’t all this coming and going ruin the...effect? Of seeing the show in its entirety? With a proper audience.”

“You can’t see anything from those damned boxes, I always drop by for the dress rehearsals,” Philippe informed him. “I won’t hang over the edge, like those callow youths to improve the view.”

Raoul did not say anything, he hadn’t been to the Opera in years, but well he remembered the young men who came shuffling into their boxes in the middle of the third act, already drunk, and openly leering at the dancers. Philippe found it all incredibly vulgar. He preferred the affected propriety of the dancers’ lounge. It was much quieter and more respectable to look at the girls there. He’d taken Raoul along with him once, but he was too young and embarrassed to do more than stare at the tips of his shoes the entire time.

And now? Well, the object of his interest was not a dancer, so there was nothing for him there at all.

For he was falling in love with her - had been, ever since that day when he was brought through the Opera on the pretense of looking at the machinery. Despite his claims to the contrary, Christine had changed. She was less apt to tease him, but no less spirited. Just quieter - a little sadder, perhaps, but she had such spine to her, still. Raoul admired her so much, but more than that, he appreciated her. Appreciated her open affection and direct manners. Appreciated her honesty, her humor, the way she leaned on his arm when they walked, the smell of whatever perfume she used to anoint her wrists and hair...her plump round cheeks, her sparkling blue eyes...how could anyone know Christine and not be a little bit in love with her?

Naturally, he kept it to himself. He had kissed her, true, on the hand and cheek, but she had not pressed for anything further. As far as Raoul knew, she regarded him as a dear friend, perhaps with a brotherly affection. It broke his heart, a tiny bit, to know that was all that would ever be for them, but still he took tea with her. Met her for luncheon. Even went on brief sojourns to the park, strolling under the trees, feeding scraps of bread to passing greedy ducks. The more he saw her, the deeper his affection rooted itself in his heart. And so too deeper the cracks would go. But it was worth it, her fraternal affection. Thus far every afternoon of happiness was worth every nighttime pang of disappointment.

Mssrs. Moncharmin, Richard, and Vaucorbeil were also in attendance at the rehearsal. Moncharmin
and Richard sat on either side of the brothers, like bookends, but Vaucorbeil took his seat farther back in the auditorium, for the best possible view of the stage.

“M. Reyer, the musical director, our conductor,” Moncharmin explained to Raoul in hushed tones, “wants the lamps lit in the house, so unfortunately, you will not be viewing the show as it will be - I hope this does not disappoint the Vicomte too much.”

“Not at all,” Raoul assured him. “I thank you for allowing myself and my brother the privilege of watching the rehearsal.”

Moncharmin laughed, “Well, monsieur, without your brother’s aid and interest, there would be no performance! The pleasure is entirely ours, I assure you.”

The chorus filed in then, filling the stage with brightly-colored silks, clinking beads, and shimmering veils. It took a bit of doing to find Christine, she was off to the side and one of the smallest people up there, but her blonde hair shimmered under a little gold tiara. Raoul raised his hand in a small wave, but she did not seem to see him. Then again, she was working and ought not be distracted. Raoul folded his hands in his lap, a little embarrassed to have been so childish.

The set itself was very impressive, with huge towering columns, crawling with ivy, on either side of the set. Leafy palms created a canopy, but the shadows cast upon the floor were jagged, like a knife through the scene. The south seas had been ably recreated, with a lurid painted backdrop showing craggy cliffs against a light blue sky. And the stage itself was awash in eerie flickering blue light that pooled over the floor, mimicking the ocean uncannily.

“‘The sea - that’s very impressive,’” Raoul whispered to Moncharmin; though the music had not begun, he thought he’d better keep his voice down.

Moncharmin smiled thinly, “That’s Astruc’s work - the set designer. As odd a fellow as I’ve ever seen - as hideous a fellow as I’ve ever seen too, but he has his own peculiar genius. He brought in a consultant from Ceylon, foreign chap, doesn’t speak two words of French, but I suppose he can understand him. Turned out well, anyway.”

“Astruc?” Raoul asked, brows creasing, searching his memory for a face to put with the name. “I met a fellow named Erik - ”

“That’s the one,” Moncharmin confirmed. “Prefers to go by his Christian name - ah. Well. Such as it is. The only ‘Astrucs’ I’ve ever met, to a one, were Jews. I shouldn’t be surprised if he is, as well. What was your impression?”

“Of his religion?” Raoul asked.

“Of his race,” Moncharmin clarified, with a shrug. “One and the same with that lot, of course.”

What did one say to such an inquiry? Raoul had seen images of Jews in art, of course. Hook-nosed, red-haired Judases pressing a kiss against the cheek of the distressed Christ. Or more modern images of men with covered heads, long beards and furrowed brows hunched over holy books. Neither put him in the mind of the man he had met - Erik had been wearing a beret and he sported no beard. Just like any other artist.

Raoul racked his brain to recall if he’d ever encountered a Jew in the flesh and though he came up short, he reasoned that he must have. Paris was a big city and he’d traveled all over the country and beyond. It seemed impossible that he hadn’t met a single one...but, naturally, they had not mentioned it. No more than he informed new acquaintances of the dates of his Confirmation; why on earth
would he? What did it matter?

“I didn’t give it much thought,” he replied honestly.

“It doesn’t much matter,” Moncharmin nodded. “So long as he gets his work done and doesn’t cause trouble - I hoped I would have his sense of thrift to depend upon, but then he went and hired a consultant! Goes to show, you never really know about people, do you?”

His raised eyebrows and expectant expression demanded an answer, so Raoul said shortly, “No, I suppose you don’t,” and left it at that. Mercifully the music started up and there was no time left to talk.

The dancers came out straight away as the chorus sang. Throughout, Philippe kept up a running commentary with M. Richard, but Raoul listened only to the music. He caught a few snatches, “Oh, no, there will be another ballet, I assure you,” and, “Well, the consultant said,” but otherwise he was able to keep his mind on the music - especially since he understood the majority of the lyrics.

Raoul never understood the preoccupation for Italian and German composers - wasn’t it nicer when the audience could understand what was being sung? Philippe might accuse him of being a Philistine again, but if he got the chance, he would personally thank M. Vaucorbeil for his selection of season-opening performance.

The singing and the costumes were entrancing, but the set and properties also functioned as characters in their own right. Raoul was utterly charmed by the sight of the little boat - painted now, that boat that he had pronounced as being not fit to sail earlier in the month - gliding across the stage with the female lead in the prow. The transition from sea to shore was so smooth that he thought Erik must have put the thing on some kind of rail (well greased, too, it did not make a sound) and trusted the lead soprano to move it about. He had, as Raoul recalled, expressed his doubts about the men, but the boat stopped with nary a stutter. Quite the feat for the lady to perform while wearing a heavy veil!

All the actors performed their roles ably, without a hitch, until the end of the first act. The lead soprano, La Carlotta, had removed her veil and was performing an aria to the man she loved (invoking the protection of the gods, if Raoul understood correctly) and performing some...interesting hand motions that involved raising her arms and slashing the air. Perhaps it was an authentic Hindu form of worship? Moncharmin had mentioned a consultant...

At the aria’s conclusion, the men all clapped politely for La Carlotta, who curtsied in their direction. Moncharmin took it a step further; he put his fingers in his mouth and whistled his approval. Almost immediately, the counterweights holding the backdrop were released and a sandbag fell to the floor at top speed - inches from where La Carlotta stood. The woman screamed, and jumped back, glaring up into the flies.

At once, Vaucorbeil was on his feet and Raoul heard a voice from behind the curtain shouting - and what a shout it was; it filled the whole auditorium.

“Buquet! What the fuck do you think you’re doing up there!”

Richard leaned forward in his seat to scold Moncharmin - he couldn’t have looked more disgusted if his fellow manager had taken his trousers off and pissed all over the stage. “You don’t whistle, at the opera, Moncharmin! The Italians don’t like it!”

Vaucorbeil was clambering onto the stage now with a swiftness that was impressive in an older man,
rushing toward the sound of raised voices.

“Buquet! Get down here or I’ll drag you down myself and wring your fucking neck while I’m at it! What were you thinking?”

“I heard a whistle!”

“I don’t care if you heard the voice of a fucking angel from on high! That backdrop doesn’t go down until the beginning of the third act - which you’d know if you had anything at all between your ears! And not so fast - never that fast, you might have struck someone!”

“I’ll strike you, unless you mind your manners, you grotesque sack of horse shit!”

“Gentlemen!” Vaucorbeil interrupted, immediately assuming control. “Gentlemen, please! If you would continue this discussion, do so more quietly - our patrons are here and this is not how the staff of the Paris Opera comports itself. Erik, get your men under control - Buquet, get that backdrop raised and mind your cues. Mademoiselle, do you need a moment?”

Carlotta had a hand to her chest and was now staring off into the wings. At Vaucorbeil’s inquiry, she dropped her hand and nodded at once, a smooth smile gracing her red-painted lips. She was nothing if not a consummate professional. “Yes, of course. Shall we continue directly into the second act, monsieur?”

Vaucorbeil agreed that, of course, they should, if it was agreeable to all parties. The backdrop was raised, the sandbag removed, and rehearsal continued as smoothly as if there had been no interruption. At least, upon the stage.

“Nothing like a dress rehearsal, eh?” Philippe chuckled. “Poor Carlotta.”

“I do apologize,” M. Richard whispered urgently to the patrons, “about the crude language employed by our scene shifters. True, they...have not the benefits of breeding or education, but they will be informed that further outbursts are not to be tolerated!”

“It’s quite alright, monsieur,” Raoul assured him. “I was not offended. A bit of an off-moment for everyone, I should think.”

“I can assure you,” Philippe smiled, resting his hand upon Raoul’s shoulder briefly, “he’s heard far worse. Sailors, you know.”

“Your M. Erik would be at home aboard any ship of the line,” Raoul agreed. Richard smiled back at them and settled into his chair, seemingly relieved, but Moncharmin frowned mightily. As Carlotta prepared to sing again, Raoul settled back in his seat. Everyone seemed quite recovered, save for Moncharmin beside him, who was muttering quietly to himself.

“Never expected him to shoot off at the mouth like that. You’d think...well. One never really does know. I shall speak to Vaucorbeil...”

Christine ran around the wings at the act break, trying to find Erik. Never had she heard him speak to another person like that, with absolute outrage and fury. It made her tremble to the bone, she was astonished that Joseph Buquet could lash out with just as much anger. When Erik threatened to wring Buquet’s neck, she felt her own throat tighten with worry; Christine was amazed there hadn’t been an actual scuffle.
Which did not seem to fit Erik at all, not as she knew him. Kind, a little impetuous, but very good-hearted. Ever since their conversation in the dressing room, it was like a veil had been lifted between them. Christine was worried, when they parted that day, that Erik might be embarrassed or assume she thought lesser of him for working at a traveling fair.

It couldn’t be further from the truth. She and her father had attached themselves to several fairs at different times when she was a girl; a few included side shows. Papa always told her not to stare and not to be afraid. They were people only, down on their luck, as they were. Only they had not the ability or wits to employ themselves more typically. He reminded her that, in the eyes of most, a traveling violinist was no less an oddity than a one-eyed man who called himself Cyclops.

It sounded as though Erik had found himself in similar straits. He was a man now, but so lanky that she couldn’t imagine him when he was fifteen - imagine all of that angular height on a gawky near-child! He must have disappeared when he turned sideways. She thought it a noble thing he’d done, striking out on his own, sending his earnings to his family. When she was fifteen, she had Papa, the professor, and his wife. Christine did not know how she would have managed without them. Where she would have gotten the strength.

She sought him out now, every day when they went to work to talk, if they had time, or to simply say hello when they did not. There had not been a repeat of their night out - Erik told her he’d been playing his violin at establishments that did not serve meals and thus he could not take her there - but he and Dalir did meet her after church on Sunday for breakfast.

Erik and she had even gone shopping together! She asked him if he planned on attending the Gala and he confessed he hadn’t any evening clothes. Christine, with her usual optimism was sure they’d find something in the second-hand stores and in the open marketplaces. He’d only looked at her incredulously and bade her come close to him. Once she was standing directly before him, he took her wrists and had her set her hands at his sides.

“That is where my waist begins,” he said, like she was taking an introductory anatomy lesson. “And if mademoiselle will look down...ah, there. All the way down there, near to the ground, is where my legs end. You see the difficulty?”

Christine still insisted he might be surprised and Dalir left them to their own devices - he had work in the afternoon and did not particularly relish pouring over suits and dresses with them. Erik, as he predicted, came up short when it came to selecting a pair of trousers, but they did manage to find her a pretty white dress that only needed a large hole in the train patched and sewn shut before it could be worn. Christine declared that she would be happy to venture out with him every day after rehearsal, if she had to, in order to procure suitable clothing for him. Erik agreed, she suspected, only to please her.

Both Erik and Dalir had become very dear in her affections - not usurping Raoul in her heart (the affection she felt for him was of a different sort), but when she was out with them, enjoying their teasing, their petty arguments, it was rather like being given two brothers that she’d always wanted. Which was why she was so bent on finding Erik now - she was sure he needed someone to talk to, after what transpired on stage.

When she did find him, standing half in light and half in shadow in the wings, she was forced to hang back. Vaucorbeil was with him and reading him the riot act by the sound of it, and she didn’t want Erik to know she’d heard him being scolded. The boat, off its track, was tall enough to hide her so she crouched down behind it and listened.

“You cannot lose your temper like that!” the manager snapped in a loud whisper. “From another man, perhaps, but - ”
“You thought that was losing my temper?” Erik asked incredulously. “Do you see any blood on the floor? Did I raise a hand to the man? Then, let us be clear: I did not lose my temper. I merely reprimanded him.”

“By screaming obscenities!” Vaucorbeil countered, tugging at his beard in distress. “In front of the patrons. I know Buquet is trying -”

“He’s worse than that,” Erik interrupted him such impertinence that Christine wished to intervene. Oh, stop, Erik, do stop it! He has so much power over you! “He’s drunk, he’s lazy, he’s careless! What if your lead soprano had been brained a week before opening? And with no understudy in the part? I’m sure you would have done more than swear at him!”

Rather than blow up at this gall, Vaucorbeil merely looked thoughtful. “You work more closely with the men than our previous set designers. I think Buquet is unused to such a level of scrutiny.”

Erik did not say anything. Perhaps he’d heard Christine’s unspoken thought, for, as she hesitantly raised her eyes up to look over the edge of the boat, she saw his Adam’s apple visibly bobbed in his throat as if he was swallowing his words. “All part of my position. As you set out.”

The manager actually looked briefly ashamed. “Those were the terms you agreed to -”

“I am aware of that,” Erik said crisply. “And I do not object materially to the terms. Only to the...execution. By certain scene-shifters. Certain careless scene-shifters who I would prefer were removed from their duties. This is a very technical production. I would like Buquet reassigned to properties, if you please.”

Silence. Then:

“I’ll see what I can do,” Vaucorbeil said. He stuck out his hand and Erik took it, though he frowned down at his fingers after the manager left to re-take his seat in the house. He raised his hand and scrubbed his forehead, looking exhausted.

Christine was just about to rise from the boat, when she heard the shuffling of footsteps approaching. The wings were quite deserted - there was no Act II ballet and the chorus had precious little to do. Dalir emerged from the darkness a lay a hand on Erik’s arm.

Erik shook him off with unaccustomed roughness. “This fucking place,” he gritted out, all of the seething resentment that he held back during his talk with Vaucorbeil pouring out, like smoke through a flue. “I can’t - ”

Just what he could not do, he never said. Erik stalked away, Dalir following at his heels. Christine stepped silently from her hiding place, holding the beads of her costume in her hand to keep them from clattering as she hurried along behind them.

She had no idea where they had gone, the hall was empty when she stepped out of the wings, but she heard the quiet murmur of voices from a nearby cupboard and she followed the sound.

“If he wanted me to be a scene-shifter, he ought to have said. I know I’m just their freak of the season, but it should say that on the register. They hired a magician, not an artist.”

“I think you’re taking this too personally - have you been drinking?”

“Glass of wine. One.”

“If you didn’t pour it out of the bottle it doesn’t count as a glass.”
“I know the Prophet doesn’t approve, but my people believe wine goes with everything.”

“Not bad moods.”

“He’s been worse since Moncharmin turned up shouting ‘M. Astruc’ loud enough that half the city heard him! I told Vaucorbeil the men wouldn’t work under a Jew and he agreed, damn it! It was all fine, until Moncharmin opened his big mouth...to be just Erik. But Moncharmin doesn’t have an artistic bone in his body, everyone’s name must appear in two neat columns on a ledger - ”

“You’re not giving the men enough credit - it’s Buquet who’s the problem. Who else has been so intractable? Hmm. Ah, you can’t name more than one.”

“One is enough.”

“You don’t need to tell this to me - or do you think I don’t understand? I, who have to drag pastries around the city because these grand Parisiens don’t want dark Persian hands in their holy white flour?”

“I know, I know - but my position here...it’s neither one nor the other. I don’t have the salary or the control of a true resident designer, I’m the foreman! A foreman who won’t be listened to and no one’s going to say a word to Buquet because those bastards out there in their pressed suits and top hats think he’s right!”

The door was left open a crack and she eased it gently back, about to announce herself, but it seemed a bad time to interrupt - it seemed a worse time to listen at keyholes as well, but Christine couldn’t tear herself away from the door. Erik’s back was too her and Dalir was standing directly in front of him. She was entirely blocked from view. It seemed, for all intents and purposes, that they were utterly alone.

“You were right,” Dalir offered consolingly, once again laying his hand on Erik’s arm. This time, Erik let it remain.

“Of course I was,” Erik snapped, but recollected himself at once and patted Dalir’s hand affectionately. “I’m sorry. It isn’t you I’m angry at.”

Dalir squeezed his arm and for a long while they just looked at each other while Christine stood by, feeling more and more like a spy when she heard - she must have misheard - Erik say, “Kiss me.”

“What? Here?” Dalir asked. “Someone might - ”

“Here,” Erik confirmed. “Quickly. Nobody’s around. The door is shut. Please.”

Erik’s voice was very expressive. It had boomed around them all with rage at Joseph Buquet’s carelessness, simmered quietly with frustration at Vaucorbeil. Now it plead, heart-stoppingly painful. No wonder Dalir acquiesced. In spite of the risk. In spite of the fact that they were not alone.

Christine watched in wide-eyed astonishment as Dalir tilted his head back and Erik lowered his neck and then...! Their lips met and not at all in a brotherly fashion, one peck on each cheek. They kissed...well, they kissed like lovers did. They kissed in a way Christine had never been kissed and she tore her eyes away from them then, jumping backward and automatically slamming the door.

Before she could dash into the wings a cold, bony hand grabbed her wrist and whirled her around. Erik had caught her, was standing over her - oh, she was certain he’d be furious!

Christine cringed back, terrified of his reaction - if he’d threatened to strangle Buquet, what on earth
would he do to her? She shrank back, pulling away, but his grip was iron.

“I’m sorry!” she squeaked out, timid and shrill. “I’m so sorry! I only wanted to - I never dreamed - ”

“Christine.”

Erik said her name so softly, she could have sworn she imagined it. Slowly - slowly - she looked up at his face and what she saw reflected there was so much worse than anger. Erik looked utterly, abjectly, and totally terrified.

“What is going on back there?” she heard someone - M. Reyer, she thought - shouting from the stage at them.

Erik did not even move to reply. He was too busy staring down at Christine in abject fear, as if she had a knife to his throat.

“S-sorry, monsieur,” Christine apologized to the wings, her voice terribly weak. “I tripped over some...some cables. I’ll be more careful.”

“Hrmph,” was Reyer’s only response. The performance continued onstage, but backstage Christine and Erik remained, still as statues.

“What are you going to do?” he asked, finding his voice at last, but it was a pale imitation of itself. “Christine...I’ve no right to ask...but I beg you, please...”

The fear in his face, in his voice, was like a living breathing thing, winding around them both. It made her heart race, the same way it had when Erik had argued with Vaucorbeil and she was so worried he was making an irreparable mistake.

Evidently Vaucorbeil had patience for Erik’s stubbornness. But this? Very few employers would have patience for this.

The fear was there, the fear she understood - but there was something else too, beyond the fear in his face, the panic in his voice...a distance in his eyes. As if, without words, he was saying good-bye to her.

And, to the Christine of a month ago, he might have been. She would never have been so callous as to report his behavior to the managers, in fact she was sure she would not. But she might not have sought his company so freely as she once had. No more unexpected Sunday breakfasts. No more heart-to-hearts in the dressing rooms.

*Think of Sodom and Gomorrah,* echoed of the voice of the parish priest. *We live in sinful and indulgent times. The Lord loves His children, but despises their sin. Take care. Take care that the wickedness of this depraved city not claim you. For you are called to live within the world, but be not of the world.*

Christine always hated the Sundays when that priest delivered the homily. It had to be some kind of sin, to disagree with a priest, but she always thought he spoke too harshly about humanity’s so-called fallen. Was the Lord not their shepherd? And would he not leave the flock to find one lost sheep?

It had to come from learning her Bible from her father - their church attendance was spotty and irregular for most of her childhood, but he ensured she received her Eucharist and was Confirmed. Papa took special care to only read the kindest parts of the Gospel. Where Jesus took care of the infirm and despised. When the fallen woman washed His feet with her hair and tears. When he took the little children in His arms. When he Healed the servant the Roman soldier loved.
And, most of all, when He said, *Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the very least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me.*

Another voice, less holy and more impish also sounded in her mind, *Now you don’t have to fret about Erik finding a girl to marry!*

Her affection for Erik was not what it was for Raoul. But it was strong, regardless. She’d lied for him after all. Twice! Once for Dalir’s sake, but the first time for her own. Because she wanted to spend time with him, go out, make friends. And that had been entirely for her own pleasure. The Church did not approve of such things as she had seen in the cupboard, but neither did the Church approve of unmarried girls accompanying unmarried men to dancing halls. Whether they served food or not.

*Oh, no,* she thought, the matter very clear and simple in her mind. *No, Erik. Don’t worry. You have nothing to be afraid of. Not from me.*

Christine did not quite manage to smile at him - not when he was still looking at her with such pain, but she did say, “Have you found a suit yet? Or shall we have an outing? I haven’t any plans today.”

It was as if he hadn’t heard her. But then, his jaw relaxed. His eyebrows raised. And he let go of her wrist.

“You are...a remarkable woman, Christine Daae,” he breathed, his voice back to it’s usual wonderful cadance. “Remarkable.”

“Oh no,” she shook her head and smiled. “I just have great stamina for shopping, that’s all!”

She rose up on her toes expectantly and Erik inclined his head, all the while shaking it in disbelief as she kissed his cheek to prove that all was truly right between them.

“Remarkable,” he repeated. He looked down at her wrist and his eyebrows contracted in contrition, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be so rough with you.”

“No harm done,” Christine assured him, flexing her wrist, which did not hurt at all - he held her firmly, not harshly. “I’ll see you later?”

Erik hesitated slightly; the door of the cupboard was open behind them, but the room was clearly empty. Dalir must have fled.

“Yes,” he said, not looking at her. “Later.”
**Sins and Sinners**

Chapter Notes

Dalir worries, Erik gets a new suit, and Christine gets her Catholic on!

**Warning for: allusions to homophobia.**

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Erik arrived home, Dalir was sitting on the armchair and not the bed - it did not bode well. The armchair was his favorite place to smoke and when he was smoking, it meant he was thinking, and when he was thinking, it generally meant that they were about to have a difficult conversation.

“How did it go?” Dalir asked, looking up at Erik with worried eyes, ringed with dark circles, though Erik knew full well he’d enjoyed an excellent night’s sleep.

“She’s an angel,” Erik said, doffing his cap and dragging over one of their rickety “kitchen” chairs, that were always shoved in the corner along with the tiny table on which they took the rare home-cooked meal. “Christine. A delight. A wonderful girl.”

“No, I heard - before I left, I heard her go on as if nothing had happened,” Dalir said. He wasn’t looking at Erik, he was rolling a cigarette and his eyes were more focused on that task than necessary. “How was your shopping trip?”

“Oh, useless,” Erik said carelessly, sitting backwards on the chair with his arms folded over the back. “I told her it would be - but we spent a pleasant few hours. She found some lace that very nearly matched the train of her gown, she’ll look quite a picture on Wednesday evening. We can go out, if you like. No business, merely pleasure. I won’t even bring my - ”

“You ought to go with her,” Dalir said, pinching off the ends of his cigarette and fumbling in his pockets for a matchbook. “To the Gala. Guillaume could make you a suit, his father was a haberdasher, he could do it cheaply. He feels you’re single-handedly responsible for saving his designs and he owes you a favor. Sophie told me.”

The words Dalir was speaking were all words Erik knew, certainly. But the order in which he was saying them perplexed him. “Go to the Gala. With Christine. As...as what?”

“You ought to go with her,” Dalir said, pinching off the ends of his cigarette and fumbling in his pockets for a matchbook. “To the Gala. Guillaume could make you a suit, his father was a haberdasher, he could do it cheaply. He feels you’re single-handedly responsible for saving his designs and he owes you a favor. Sophie told me.”

Her escort, of course,” Dalir said, as if Erik was being dim. Then he proceeded so formally that Erik wanted to shove his hands over Dalir’s mouth to make him stop talking. “I’m very...it isn’t that I’m not grateful, Erik, that you stuck out your neck for me. To get me out of the house - ”

“That’s not what I - ”

“But...today was almost a disaster. For you,” Dalir looked at him pointedly. “For what did I have to fear? The show is ready, you don’t need your ‘consultant.’ But, if it wasn’t Christine? You might have lost everything. It’s not an acceptable risk.”

Acceptable risk. Dalir was forever going on about things like that, as if Erik could not take care of himself, as if his judgement was impaired. It would have been tremendously insulting if he didn’t know the only reason he nagged was because he cared about him.
But this? This was a farce! As ridiculous as pretending Dalir was a police chief. Escort Christine to the Gala indeed! What would that prove? That she had terrible taste in gentlemen callers, that’s what.

“But...go for a few hours, dance with her, dance with some of the other girls. Let them see you with her,” Dalir said, in a low monotone, while Erik was still trying to find his words. He’d thought this all out, clearly. Probably spent the whole afternoon conjuring up this plan. “You said yourself you worry about the men not respecting you. Can you imagine how much worse it would be if they really knew?”

The worst part was, the very worst, for Erik, who loved an argument, there was nothing else to say. His mind beat rapidly against the notion that he ought to...use Christine as some kind of shield from ruin and disapprobation. It sounded unfair to her - tremendously unfair. If he was going to escort her to the Gala, it ought to be because they both desired such a thing, equally. Not because she was doing him a favor out of pity or sheer goodness. The whole thing left a rotten taste on his tongue.

“She’d have to agree,” Erik pointed out the fly in the ointment.

Dalir raised his eyebrows and looked at him incredulously. “You think she’d object? I like Christine, but she doesn’t have a large circle of acquaintances. I doubt the Vicomte will accompany her.”

Standing abruptly, Erik paced the three feet between his chair and the dining room table, then back again. “And what? You sit here, wallowing in silence while I go out and play at respectability.”

“Of course not,” Dalir replied, humor in his voice for the first time since Erik walked in the door. “I’m not you. I’ll go out. Get a drink, amuse myself. I don’t have a reputation to maintain.”

Doubtless he hadn’t meant those words to sting, but they did. Like a dagger to the heart. Erik stopped his pacing and looked at Dalir, guilt writ large all over his face. “It isn’t - you gave everything up for me. All you do is give. And I take.”

Crushing the remains of his cigarette in the ash tray, Dalir shook his head and rose to look Erik in the eye. “Bullshit,” he said simply. “That’s not how it is at all. You ought to know it by now. I don’t regret - ”

“Whether you regret or not is immaterial,” Erik shook his head. “The point is...the point is you should not have anything to regret.”

For they found themselves in a similar situation a year ago. Almost to the day; uncanny how the past likes to sneak up and repeat itself. Only rather than a cupboard in the Opera house, it was the alleyway beside the Mazandarani sweets shop. And rather than sweet-faced Christine dispensing kisses and smiles, it was a cousin screaming at them from an upstairs window.

If it was only the shock of the scene, the impropriety, the sin, doubtless Dalir could have returned to his family and continued his life as usual. To believe that such conduct was the result of a drunken indiscretion, well, it would have appalled, but it could be overlooked. But Dalir was not a creature made for shame. He’d defended himself, defended Erik who stood like a ghost in the shadows, every muscle tensed, waiting to defend himself from the blows of a dozen angry family members.

Dalir said he would not give him up, despite his father’s bellowing and his mother’s tears and prayers. Furthermore, he said, as if it was something he’d been wanted to get off his chest for years - he didn’t want the business, wouldn’t marry a girl from the community if he and Erik did part ways.

And that was what did it. Not the act itself. Not the lies or the depravity. It was the fact that Dalir’s parents offered him a life, a comfortable life, an ideal life from their perspective. And he didn’t want
any of it.

As far as Erik knew, he hadn’t spoken to his family since that night they left. Erik never stopped blaming himself. If it wasn’t for him…

*If it wasn’t you, it would have been someone else,* Dalir informed him, when Erik’s self-flagelating hysterics became too much. *You’re no Don Juan, you know.*

But it was Erik that night. The night Dalir lost his steady pay, his home and took up lodging with him in this awful flat with nary a word of complaint. Erik tried to do right by him, to make his sacrifice worth it, in some small way. How could he, really? How could he ever compensate for all Dalir had given up for him?

By doing whatever he asked of him - when he really asked something of him, which was rare.

“Please, just ask her,” Dalir asked sincerely. “For my peace of mind.”

If there was a cosmic balance they could strike, Erik might not have agreed so quickly. The guilt might not have struck him so deeply if, in his heart, he believed that had their situation been reversed, had Erik’s family resided in Paris, and not miles away, he would have been equally brave and equally willing to have done with them all, for Dalir’s sake.

The scales would forever be tilted in Dalir’s favor; if Erik was pressed, really pressed, he could strongly suspected he would have acted every bit the coward.

“Allright,” Erik said, reaching out to take one of Dalir’s hands limply in his own. “I’ll ask. She might say no, of course - I don’t know if you were aware, but I’m not terribly good-looking. Most girls like to be seen on the arm of a handsome man.”

Dalir smiled finally, “That’s true. Most girls do. Lucky for you, I’m not most girls.”

They kissed then. Freely. In the darkness of their flat with the door locked and the shades drawn.

It was probably useless to go to Confession the morning before a grand party, but the rehearsal schedule demanded that she skip on Sunday. Ordinarily, Christine would duck into the confessional in the hour before the service began so that she might complete her penance, receive communion and still retain a state of grace sufficient to bring Mamma her host. As it was, she’d not taken the Eucharist for herself on Sunday and kept her gloves on all morning, even during breakfast, so that she would not profane the Lord’s Flesh before it touched Mamma’s tongue.

As was customary, she met Erik and Dalir outside the church and they proceeded to their usual cafe. This time, Erik had a proposal for her: would she be so kind as to accompany him to the Gala? He would fetch her from her flat, accompany her to the Opera, dance the first dance with her and then her evening would be hers to do as she pleased.

“It would be a personal favor...I understand if the Vicomte has already made overtures...” he trailed off, oddly indirect. It was not his custom, but she understood if he was still uncomfortable with her knowing what she did. That he did not trust her, entirely. It stung, but she understood; she’d never carried the burden of such a secret herself and could only imagine how it weighed on her.

“Oh, no,” she shook her head, blushing. “Raoul...he was not going to escort me. He was going to arrive at the Opera with his sisters and their husbands. I imagine there was not room for me in the
She’d laughed at that, but neither Erik nor Dalir shared in her mirth. It rang false in her own ears too. Oh! Not that she relished the notion of riding to the Opera in style, in a grand chaise and four bearing the de Chagny coat of arms. Not in her second-hand dress, certainly, she’d be horribly embarrassed and she couldn’t expect Raoul to come to her door, hire a hack, or walk. But it would have been nice, to accompany him. As it was, he swore he’d find her there and begged her to leave her dance card open for him.

Christine said she would - and, circumstances being what they were, she was certain Raoul would understand if she took the first dance with another man. It wasn’t as though he were escorting her, after all.

“I would be very happy to accompany you,” she told Erik with a smile that was entirely natural. “I’m so glad you found a suit!”

“Thank you,” he said, uncustomarily grave. “For, ah, both our sakes.”

He and Dalir shared a private little glance and Christine realized at once why Erik should like her to accompany him directly. Oh. Ah. Keeping up appearances. It was funny, how one gentleman could not accompany her to the Gala for fear of harming his reputation while the other required her presence to ensure his.

Another girl might have been insulted, but Christine was happy to help and looked forward to the night with anticipation - first the Gala, then the premiere of The Pearl Fishers! Her first real performance. A night of eating, drinking, and dancing was just the thing, she thought to ease out the jitters.

But she still thought she ought to take her time in the Confessional, even if she would be back again on Sunday, with a slew of new sins to beg forgiveness for.

The church was oddly full for a Wednesday afternoon and thus she was forced to wait. Christine slipped into a pew near the back entrance; she’d forgotten her usual lace veil and had to make due with the striped handkerchief that Erik had given her that day in the dressing room. Balanced precariously atop her head as it was, she hoped she wasn’t drawing too much attention to herself.

As was her custom, she knelt and removed her rosary from her pocket. She was halfway through the first decade, (she only ever prayed the Joyful Mysteries), when she felt someone settle in next to her, awfully close by for a fellow penitent.

Christine chanced a glance to her left and saw, with no small amount of astonishment that La Sorelli herself had come, hair pinned up under a black lace veil, a small wooden Rosary dangling from her white gloved hands. The stole had been left at home, she wore only a simple knitted shawl over her shoulders to ward off the chill in the stone church.

Christine turned her eyes to the altar and her mind to her prayers. Once she completed a decade, (she only ever prayed the Joyful Mysteries), when she felt someone settle in next to her, awfully close by for a fellow penitent.

Sorelli ended her prayers as well and sat back upon the bench, hands folded demurely in her lap. For a few minutes they sat in silence, watching the flow of people into the confessional, but then Sorelli broke the silence.
“It seems such a waste,” she whispered to Christine. “To confess to lust and vanity. I wonder why we’re here. Or do you not intend to sully your soul tonight?”

Christine smiled, a little shyly; she was not sure that she or Sorelli had ever spoken a word before. That night she saw her at the dance hall, she kept her attention fixed on the Comte and paid her absolutely no attention.

“There is a performance tomorrow,” she replied, tilting her head in a small shrug. “And my escort told me he would have me home promptly at midnight, lest either of us turn into pumpkins.”

Sorelli snorted, but turned the sound into a quiet cough. “The Vicomte is escorting you?”

Shaking her head, Christine replied that though she expected to see Raoul at some point in the evening, he was pointedly not her escort. Erik was going to take her, she said. Erik, the designer, as if he required further clarification.

Again Sorelli had to stop herself laughing, “Erik? My God, you really don’t care if people talk about you, do you?”

“I beg your pardon?” Christine asked, quietly as possible. No need to cause a scene in church. Then again, if she did, she could confess it away in a few minutes.

Sorelli glanced around, then scooted closer to Christine on the bench, like girlfriends sharing secrets. “It’s only...well. He’s very strange. And I’m not just talking about how he looks.”

Bristling slightly, Christine tilted her head up toward Sorelli’s ear and whispered, “He’s very kind! I’m happy to go with him - ”

“Oh, sure, he’s kind,” she said, waving her hand. “And...well, you have nothing to fear from him, I’m certain. But he’s strange. When he first came to the Opéra, I didn’t know what to think. All of the men come to see...to see the corps, you know. Almost all of them. And he would talk with the girls and at first I thought, aha, he’s just the same, but...he is not. It’s as if he doesn’t see women as women. It’s peculiar.”

Holding her tongue so that Sorelli did not think she was very ignorant, Christine wondered at her meaning. True, he’d called to her in the street the way another man might hail a cab the first day they met, but he’d tipped his at to her and offered his arm. Called her...well, to be fair, he’d called her Mademoiselle Treize for a time, but he only referred to her by her Christian name once she told him to and not before. He was polite, if informal, friendly, if a little...unpredictable in his moods. Hardly ungentlemanlike, never uncouth. Just how exactly did Sorelli expect a man to treat a woman.

“He speaks to me...like a friend,” Sorelli said at last. “As if he doesn’t see me. As if he doesn’t see me at all. It’s strange, is all I’m saying. Or does he treat you differently?”

Eyeing her up and down in way that made Christine feel awfully exposed, Sorelli seemed to be searching her over for a hidden secret. Unruly blonde hair, a round face, and a plain dress. Christine well knew what she looked like and was sure she seemed very much a frumpy little miss beside Sorelli, tall and blessed with a dancer’s elegance and no small amount of beauty.

“He treats me as a friend,” Christine replied firmly. “Exactly how I like to be treated.”

This time Sorelli did not stifle her laughter, it rang out in the quiet church rather loudly, and the remaining penitents turned round in their seats to glare at them. “Then you are both strange,” she said, shaking her head in wonder.

The curtain of the nearer confessional parted and Christine realized with a start that it was her turn to
enter. She slipped away from the pew, but turned back to speak her good-byes. “I’ll see you tonight, I
expect?”

Sorelli nodded, a little glumly. “You will. I have no escort, unlike you, L...well. I prefer not to be
treated as a friend. Friendship, with a man...no. I’ve never known anything like.”

In her veil, with her rosary, she looked very forlorn. Christine’s hand rose, to touch her shoulder,
impart some comfort that it looked like the ballerina needed, but Sorelli looked up at her and the
expression on her face prompted Christine’s hand to fall to her side.

“Go on,” she nodded toward the confessional. “Tell the priest your sins - I’m sure you will be done
and gone by the time I’m finished with him.”

Before she went, Christine bent low and whispered, “That is Père Le Thiez’s usual place. He is
much kinder than Père Bernard.”

Christine pocketed her rosary and drew the curtain firmly closed in the dark little stall that served as
the confessional. Her knees hit the wooden kneeler - she had no idea how men bore it without the
relief provided by a petticoat - and she recited her Act of Contrition dutifully.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned,” she said, raising her eyes to the little grate. It was meant to
provide anonymity on both sides, but she recognized the bald pate of Père Le Thiez in the light of the
single candle glowing on his side. “It has been...eleven days since my last confession.”

Despite her vow to ‘go forth and sin no more,’ many of Christine’s sins were repeats of those which
she recited every week: impure thoughts, acts of selfishness, neglect of her prayers. Père Le Thiez
listened with silent indulgence; she always had the sense that he was smiling behind the screen,
thinking it was sweet of her to take the trouble to come, but that she needn’t have bothered.

“I have also lied,” she added. “Several times. On behalf of a friend, but a lie is a lie, so...there you
are. I think that’s everything. And for all the sins I have forgotten, I ask the Lord’s mercy.”

“And so it shall be granted. Of course, all sins are wiped away with God’s grace,” Père Le Thiez
said, a sly note in his voice. “But, as a matter of interest, was this friend Monsieur le Persian or
Monsieur l’Éscharpe?”

“Neither,” Christine said firmly. “I...well. I do have...a question, Father, if you have the time.”

“All the time in the world, my dear,” Père Le Thiez said. “Between you, myself, and Him.”

Right, excellent. Christine tried to arrange her dress so that it folded under her knees, cushioning
them slightly against the wood; the conversation had to last as long as she could remain upon the
wood. “I know that we are called upon to admonish the sinner,” she said, recalling her Catechism
and the Spiritual Works of Mercy. “And I might have...I might...some friends who are in sin.”

“So do we all,” Père Le Thiez interrupted her, a definite smile coloring his tone. “Remember - priests
must confess themselves, as well as hear the confession of others. No one is without sin save Him
and His Blessed Mother.”

It had actually not occurred to Christine that priests went to confession themselves, but she nodded
along as if it was common knowledge. Whatever did a priest have to sin over? She’d read Notre-
Dame de Paris, of course, but that was only a book. Frollo existed no more in the real world than
did...well, D’Artagnan.

“Yes, of course,” she agreed. “Well. If I know of...that is...am I truly called to...admonish them?
That seems...ah. Daunting.”

The priest chuckled, “And so it is. We choose to walk a steep and narrow path to Heaven, after all. It is not for you to confess the sins of others, however. Have you encouraged your friends to seek Confession?”

_The men won’t work under a Jew._

_The Prophet doesn’t approve._

And that was the difficulty. If Erik and Dalir were sinning, did her definition of sin hold sway over them? In her innermost heart it seemed the most right to simply let them carry on. They weren’t harming anyone. They genuinely cared for one another. They were good men, she knew it as much as she knew anything. She knew it as surely as she knew that her dear Papa and Mama were themselves in Heaven, watching over her. Yet, by continuing on as if nothing was wrong, was she somehow doing Erik and Dalir a disservice? Cutting them off from Heaven?

“I don’t believe…” she began, unsure how to properly phrase it. They certainly weren’t Pagans. “I don’t believe they are Baptised.”

“Ah,” the priest sighed knowingly. “It is very good of you to be concerned for the souls of your friends, my dear. But without conversion there can be no confession. And conversion must be a deeply personal conviction. As personal as true contrition.”

There might have been a message in there for her: a truly contrite sinner would not come back with the same list of sins, week after week. But Christine chose not to hear it.

“They are very good...people,” Christine said, faltering on the word ‘men,’ lest Père come to the wrong conclusion. “Very good. They’re kind and generous and - ”

“Are they...in violation of man’s laws?” the priest asked delicately. “Or God’s?”

Carnal knowledge between men was not illegal in France - this Christine knew well. Père Bernard often bemoaned the fact of a Sunday. “No, they’ve done nothing…” wrong “...against the law.”

“Then it is very much there own affair,” the priest said and this time it was Christine’s turn to smile behind the screen; she hoped it was too dark for him to see her. “Love them, as a Christian ought to love their neighbor. And remember: _How wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye?_”

“Oh, I will, I surely will,” Christine brightened up considerably. “Thank you, mon Père! Thank you very much!”

She got her aching knees off the wooden beam and hurried out, flinging the curtain aside in her glee and haste.

“Your penance!” Père Le Thiez called after her. But Christine was already skipping out of the church. She had a party to get ready for, after all, and Erik was coming to get her at seven.

Sorelli was no longer in her pew. Christine slowed slightly as she passed the pew, supposing she had not taken her advice and waited for the other priest, but something on the bench caught her eye. A bent older gentleman walking with a cane emerged from the second confessional. Not only was Sorelli no longer in the church, she’d left her rosary beads behind.

Christine slipped into the pew and pocketed them. She would return them to her at rehearsal - she’d
look quite the zealot if she brought rosary beads to a party! It was just a wonder that Sorelli forgot them in the first place.

Chapter End Notes

I hope to flesh out the situation with Dalir's family MUCH more thoroughly in future chapters, or maybe a side-fic (it's not as 'OMG MY KID IS GAY!' as Erik thinks it is). Speaking of side-fic, here's a little story of Erik's mom being neighborly and Erik being tremendously helpful: http://madamefaust.tumblr.com/post/164899305882/easy-to-get-used-to-a-strange-sweet-sound-ficlet
At seven by the church bells, Erik arrived at Christine's flat. He saw her head poking out of a second-floor window and he waved at her. She shouted down, "I'll let you in - come up! Mamma wants to meet you!"

True to her word, she arrived at the door, looking perfectly sweet and charming. The gown she'd purchased had been altered to fit tolerably well, the lace mended, and her hair was pinned up with a little golden comb at the back to add some interest. Erik bowed low and tipped his borrowed hat to her.
"Your skeleton in evening clothes," he said, gesturing to himself in a devil-may-care way. Guillaume made him a suit. It fit. And that was the absolute best that could be said about it.

"Oh, come now, you look very nice," Christine lied ably. She took his hand and tugged him inside. "Come along, I told Mamma it couldn't be a long visit, but she wants to say good evening."

"And ensure I'm the proper sort of gentleman to escort her little Christine," Erik added, walking up the well-lit entranceway to the first floor parlor. "How disappointed she will be."

Christine turned and put a finger to her lips, exasperated. "None of that! Goodness, if you're going to be dour all night, I'll go find myself another fellow to take me home!"

"Perish the thought!" Erik exclaimed, hand over his heart. Christine just gave him another pointed look and opened the door. The parlor was a homely little room, furnished with plush carpets, worn, but serviceable furniture and blazing lamps on every wall. Mamma Valerius was a wizened looking white-haired old woman who likely tended toward plumpness when she was healthy, but there was a drawn look about her that bespoke a bout of illness. She was sitting in a chair near the fire with a rug over her legs and a shawl round her shoulders, though the night was not cold. Christine went to her side at once, sitting on the little footstool by her feet, clasping her wrinkled hands in an endearing way.

"I'm going now, Granny," she said as the lady look past her to Erik standing by the door. "I'll be home before midnight and Madame Gaudin will be up to see if you need anything in an hour -"

But Madame did not appear to be listening; she peered over Christine’s shoulder to look at Erik in a wondering way.

"That isn't Raoul," Madame Valerius said, her venerable brow creasing in confusion.

Christine rose and took Erik's hand, tugging him closer, "Oh, no, I told you, I was going to meet Raoul tonight, but Erik will be accompanying me to the party. And seeing me home. I've told you about Erik - he designed the set! Right down the rising and falling of the sea, you said he sounded ever so clever."
Madame Valerius seemed to be trying to remember the conversation, but fell short. Nevertheless, she smiled up at Erik and extended her hand to him. "Good evening, young man."

"Good evening, madame," he said, taking her hand and kissing her dry, thin fingers very carefully. If he'd thought Christine a delightful girl before, his admiration for her increased ten-fold; he had always been close to his father's mother and Christine's tenderness with this old lady was quite touching to behold. It also prompted a bout of homesickness, which he quashed extremely quickly. "Christine has told me a great deal about you, it's a privilege to meet such a fine lady in person."

"Oh," she chuckled, a dusty sound, but she blushed like a schoolgirl. "Christine might have said you were clever, but not that you were so charming! You are an artist, monsieur?"

"I try to be," he said, attempting to straighten up, but she caught his hand in hers and stared as though she meant to tell the future from it.

"A musician?" she guessed. "Such long fingers! It's a crime if you don't play, an absolute crime."

"Oh, he does, Mamma," Christine gushed, pleased they were getting on. "He plays the piano, the violin - and he sings very well!"

The older lady released his hands then and said, if he was so talented, he must come by the house of an evening and entertain them all. "My husband's piano is sadly neglected - and these old fingers haven't been able to play in years. Christine indulges me, sometimes, but it would be nice to hear...a maestro have a go of it."

"She means I don't play well," Christine clarified, all smiles.

Erik smiled back and said, if the ladies asked, he would be happy to come by some time in the future and play for them.

"I've reams of music here - anything you could imagine, from all over the world!" Madame informed him proudly. "I'll pick out one or two pieces that I haven't heard in a while, does that sound agreeable?"

It sounded very agreeable, but also impossible - Erik very much doubted the likelihood that Madame's favorites were represented in his personal musical catalogue. Still, what was the harm of indulging her? Erik was under no delusions that she would remember the conversation come morning. It was a simple thing to agree. "Absolutely. Name the day, Madame, and I am yours."

"Ah, but tonight you are Christine's," she rightly pointed out, gesturing to the mantle clock. "Go on, I've kept you long enough. It was very nice to make your acquaintance, Erik."

They said their good-byes and Christine squeezed his arm appreciatively when they were out on the street. "Thank you - I think it makes her forgetful, being confined so much to the house, so little variation. It was very kind of you to say you would come see her, it gives her something to look forward to."

"My pleasure," he said, patting her hand. "Especially since you are doing me such a great favor tonight -"

"Not at all!" she exclaimed. "There's something a little...wanting about going to a party by one's lonesome. At least, I think so. This is my first real party, you know. I'm nearly giddy!"

She seemed actually giddy, squeezing his arm again, an enormous smile on her face though they'd not even arrived yet. It was honestly adorable and made Erik feel like the whole evening was
something less than a farce. Well, if Christine wanted a proper party, he would give it to her.

"Come along, mademoiselle," he said grandly, strolling down the boulevard as if they were any other couple out for a night on the town. "Your ball awaits!"

Christine giggled and trotted along with him, scooping up the hem of her skirt to keep it off the street. It was not a very long walk from her flat to the Opéra, but no sooner had they approached the entrance than they were approached by - who else? Simon Buquet, dressed to the nines, but wearing the same peeved expression he always did.

"Employees are to enter through the Rue Scribe entrance," he informed them officiously, blocking their access to the gate where carriages were lined up like sentries. "We’re announcing the after-dinner guests as they arrive - "

"And we require no introduction," Erik finished for him. "No matter, my darling, no matter - this suits my plans perfectly."

It troubled him, to see Christine’s slightly crestfallen expression, to know that the spark of the evening had been dimmed for her. It was hardly fair - and at her first party too! Perhaps she was not quite destined to be Cinderella this evening, but that did not mean Erik could not craft a little storybook caper for her to take part in.

Escorting her around the corner, he lowered his voice and said, "I prefer to maintain my anonymity - for I am a count in disguise! I come to this Gala in pursuit of my mortal enemy!"

The light came back in her eyes and she giggled appreciatively, "Ooh, are you Edmond Dantes?"

"Ah, no, but his woeful tale does bear a striking similarity to my own tragic past," Erik said, closing his eyes and sighing as if all the world's problems were his to bear. "I was overthrown by my rival - jailed and set in exile - "

"For your fortune!" Christine inserted as they made their way, without either pomp or recognition, to the door, which they opened for themselves and left his hat and her wrap in a little cast-off costume rack that served as a coat room for the staff.

"Of course, he seized control of my fortune, my land," Erik acknowledged, turning down the lace on the sleeves of her gown that was rucked up by the removal of her wrap. "But what stung me the most! To the heart! Was his seduction of my lady love - "

"May I be the lady love?" she asked excitedly, eager for a part in this little game, as he was sure she would be.

"Oh, yes," Erik said, grinning. "But the question is, how did you come to be here with me? How did I woo you away from my rival? Have I disguised myself, performed a counter-seduction? Or - "

"Oh, no!" Christine exclaimed, turning round to face him. She actually looked insulted. "I would never be so stupid! Or unfaithful! I had my dowry stolen away from me by an unscrupulous family steward. All I had to recommend me to your favor were my looks and charms, but you never minded, for you loved me! When you were sent away, I pined for you, and though your rival pursued me endlessly and even now believes me his betrothed - my family sold me in marriage - my heart was yours alone! I recognized you instantly when first you came back, though you fooled the whole world and together we will unmask your rival for the blackguard he is and expose him to the world for a scoundrel tonight!"

The girl certainly had a lively and active imagination! If her career at the Opera came to naught, she
would find new life as a published author, of that he was absolutely certain. Erik applauded her little speech and Christine gave a curtsy of thanks. "Fidelio is your favorite opera, isn't it?"

"It might be," she acknowledged. "But isn't it more fun if it takes place at a party and not a prison?"

"More fun for Florestan and Lenore, probably," Erik agreed. "Very well, my brave little countess - are you prepared for what is to come?"

"Oh, yes!" Christine said, taking up Erik's arm again. "I'm not afraid! I'll defend you to the last! There's a dagger concealed in my comb and everything!"

Erik laughed and together they walked into the not-as-bright-as-one-would-hope glow of the new electric lights (candelabras had been placed in strategic corners of the room to contribute to the illumination). The management was blessed in that that Garnier itself seemed constantly decorated for a party. One could not look anywhere around the grand staircase without finding some carving or architectural marvel to ensnare the gaze. Someday Erik was going to bring his father down from the country to look at it all and give his two cents. Someday, when Papa had the time and he had the money.

Despite the built-in grandeur, care had been taken with decorations. The grand staircase was covered in hothouse blossoms and there were tables set up on all levels, some covered in glasses of champagne, some overflowing with cakes and pastries. The whole winking, blinking glamorous spectacle seemed to glare down at him, Go away, country boy! You're not wanted here! Go back to your dingy little cabarets. But, Erik reminded himself, tonight he was not a street fiddler playing for coins and pretending to be an artist. Tonight he was a disguised nobleman, escorting his lady love to an elaborately planned revenge plot. Perhaps he and his pretend rival would duel on the staircase! During the operatic showcase.

The showcase was meant to provide an entertaining interlude to round out the evening, with selections from the upcoming season performed by the principles while the ballerinas danced in the auditorium proper. Surely Carlotta would forgive him if he dove before her, sword in hand, right in the middle of her rendering of "Porgi amor, qualche ristoro," bellowing En garde! at some game fellow who was happy to play along. It would liven things up, anyway.

"Champagne?" he asked Christine. "Not too much - we want our wits about us for the inevitable confrontation."

Christine nodded solemnly, "Just a small glass - so that we look properly attired for the scene and no one suspects our true purpose."

The scene was yet rather meagre - most of the guests appeared to have entered through the same side door they had, a scattering of members of the chorus, a few principle vocalists milling about with husbands, wives, and paramours. Everyone dressed in their best, holding plates of food and flutes of champagne, chattering and admiring the decorations. There had been a dinner given prior to the Gala proper - that was for patrons and season ticket-holders, so the rest of them had to content themselves with pastries and liquor (a task they were taking up with admirable gusto).

"Very well," Erik said, inclining his head down by Christine's ear. "Keep an eye out for spies! I'll attempt to liberate us some champagne without attracting notice."

With all the seriousness in the world, Christine nodded and put a finger to her lips. Then she winked and Erik thought to himself that was he a different sort of man, he could imagine fancying her quite a bit.
While Erik was "liberating" the champagne, Christine meandered over to the petit fours in a would-be-casual way. It was all for show, of course; she was absolutely thrilled that the dinner hadn't ended yet so she got her pick of the lot.

There hundreds of them, easily, all her favorite flavors: vanilla, chocolate, raspberry, pistachio, rosewater...she'd never seen such a spread of confections in her life, outside of a patisserie! She had helped herself to two cakes - raspberry and vanilla - before she remembered Erik's sweet tooth and added considerably to her pile. The plates were small, but no matter, Christine simply stacked them like logs for structural stability; no doubt Erik would be pleased at her ingenuity in cake gathering.

Once she had a little pastry fortress, Christine raised her head to look about for Erik - it shouldn’t be hard to spot him at all, he was so conspicuous in the near empty room - but as she’d been selecting her treats, the dinner guests started descending the stairs, suddenly making the room a lot more crowded. A few wafted over to the patisserie table, but none of them took up a plate.

“You can always tell the employees from the guests,” a grand lady laughed as she walked by. “They’re the only ones eating!”

She was accompanied by a younger girl and a gentleman who laughed in turn and both of them set their eyes directly on Christine and her petit fours. The impulse to set the cakes down and walk away was strong. But not as strong as her defiance, or her love of cake. Christine maintained eye contact and slowly, deliberately, crammed an entire petit four into her mouth. It was raspberry. And it was delicious.

The girl’s mouth fell open and the lady gave her a look of disdain that was no different than the expression she’d had on her face before Christine had sampled the cakes. For Christine, it was rather better; before she’d been embarrassed and was not eating dessert, now she was embarrassed, but she was eating, which ameliorated the sting of finding oneself an object of minor scorn.

More for me, she thought as they edged away from her, the way one might try to avoid a particularly deranged-looking beggar on a street corner.

“How are the cakes?” a warm, smiling voice asked behind her.

The defiant elation she was feeling faded, just a little, as she turned round and beheld Raoul, her mouth still full. But there appeared to be no scorn in his eyes, he only looked deeply amused.

“Excellent,” Christine informed him, once she swallowed. She wordlessly held up her plate as she swallowed and he plucked the vanilla from the tray - and ate it whole, just as she did. “How was the dinner?”

“Served à la russe,” he said, a pained expression coming over his face. “I was at the end of the table - no sooner was the soup or the duck placed before me than it was taken away again. I’m starving.”

“Well, I’ve plenty of cakes,” she said, cheerfully. “A regular Bastille of cakes! Have as many as you like.”

“We’ll have to eat them all quickly - the dancing is due to start up soon, right on the heels of dinner, so everyone gets indigestion,” Raoul rolled his eyes. “But if you’re not engaged - ”

“Ah! Monsieur le Vicomte!”

Erik was back with drinks, he handed Christine her glass and then plucked the pistachio petit four off
the plate, devouring it whole; they had to be careful. If too many people saw them, they might start a
trend. “If I’d known supper was getting out so quickly, I’d have brought champagne for the
gentleman. Good evening, monsieur, how was the meal?”

“Quick,” Raoul said, looking between Christine and Erik in confusion, as if not understanding how
the two could be standing in the same place at the same time.

“Not engineered to your liking?” Erik asked, favoring Raoul with wry smile. Apparently it was
meant to be some sort of joke, but it went over Christine’s head and did not seem to land on the
Vicomte for he did not say anything in reply. A strange tension had erupted between them, which
Christine valiantly attempted to ward off.

“Erik is planning a grand confrontation,” she confided to Raoul with a silly smile and raised
eyebrows. “Right in the middle of the performances! Either involving sword or poison.”


"Ah," Raoul said, his tone light, but his face still perplexed. "So...you came tonight with M. Erik?"

"Erik alone is perfectly alright," Erik told Raoul, flapping away all talk of ‘monsieur’ with his long,
restless fingers. "Her guardian was perfectly appalled, you know. ‘Where is the Vicomte?’ she cried,
aghast! ‘I was expecting a carriage with no fewer than six white horses wearing plumed tiaras!' I
absconded with her at once, out a second floor window, before the lady could summon her butler to
grapple with me."

Although they were having a lovely time pretending, Raoul did not seem in a mood to humor them
and Erik’s continuation of the ruse only appeared to put him more out of sorts. Christine did not have
a free hand to give Erik’s arm a smack, but she gave him a
look
that she hoped conveyed the
sentiment. "No, of course not! She was pleased with you, I could tell. Raoul was just telling me the
dancing was going to commence soon - "

Erik, in an impressive feat, drained his champagne flute as if it was water and deposited it on the
dessert table. "There. I'm ready."

Christine laughed, but Raoul didn't - well, Erik had a peculiar sense of humor and so did she.
Usually Raoul laughed at her jokes, but not tonight. Perhaps it was because he was still hungry. "I
can't eat cakes that fast!"

"Well, ask the Vicomte to guard them," Erik replied, as though the solution were obvious. "Unless
he's engaged for the first dance."

"He is not," Raoul said, a little stiffly. "Excuse me, I must find my party. I'll...I expect I'll see you
later, Christine. Good evening, monsieur."

And he left them with a tight bow, attaching himself to a small group that consisted of his brother
Philippe, two fashionably dressed ladies who had to be the sisters whose names both started with
Marie, and two other gentlemen she did not know. Husbands? It hardly mattered; she would never
be introduced. Christine looked after him, a little stung that he would leave so abruptly. That was not
at all like him. Well, not when they were alone. Perhaps things were different when other people
were about.

"That's odd," she murmured, not as hungry for sweets as she had been. A glance up at Erik’s face
told her he was not inclined to give out sympathy; on the contrary, he looked deeply tickled by
something; maybe it was the result of drinking all that champagne so quickly. Christine took a large
gulp from her own glass, in hopes that it would have the same effect on her - she'd so been looking forward to the Gala and it would do her no good to sour on the evening when it had only just begun.

Quite a crush was assembled, pouring into the upper floors, spilling onto the staircase. The gentlemen were unfortunately uniform in their dress, but the ladies were squeezed into the most colorful assortment of gowns, combs, and jewels Christine had ever seen outside the costume room. She allowed herself to be dazzled by them all - but she did note that the lady who spoke before seemed to be correct - only her fellow employees availed themselves of the cakes. Everyone was equally apt to go for the champagne.

She sipped her glass slowly, waiting for the music to start; she was reminded of her conversation with Sorelli at the church. She searched in vain for the ballerina, but did not see her; there were too many people now to pick one out of the crowd.

Simon Buquet appeared and proved himself an absolutely wretched master of ceremonies, but he did shout over the noise of the room that the dancing would commence in the grand foyer - and would the patrons and ticket-holders please come to the fore, if they were interested in joining in the dancing.

The rest of the rabble remained on the staircase so that they foyer did not become too cluttered - a small string quartet had been provided for so that they were not entirely bereft of music. Funny; even if Raoul had wanted that first dance, they would not have been permitted to take it together. Unless holding the arm of a patron was enough to grant her entry into the foyer. The little band struck up a waltz, which she and Erik executed with a moderate level of skill. They must have looked quite amusing together; with his height and her utter lack thereof, she was reminded of dancing with her father. The recollection was not at all an unpleasant one.

"I hope you don't find me too short a partner," she said, self-consciously. "I'll take care not to step on your toes."

Erik shook his head and smiled down at her hand which was perched on his upper arm, the shoulder being too far to reach comfortably. "Let me remind you, I have five sisters and I've danced with all of them - including the youngest who is all of ten and, believe it or not, shorter than you."

He looked down at her so fondly that Christine was sure he was not really seeing her. Instead, perhaps, his odd eyes were looking at a skinny little dark-haired girl instead. Christine wondered if any of his sisters had eyes as he did.

"Tell me about your sisters," she urged him, for she knew nothing at all about his family save for the fact that they existed. That they lived outside Rouen. During their Sunday morning breakfasts, Christine talked a great deal about her childhood, her father, her life at the conservatory, though privately she thought none of it terribly interesting. Dalir spoke a little about his own family, but always in the past tense and somewhat infrequently; Christine assumed that many of them had passed on. But Erik? Not a word.

If she thought asking him directly would get him to unbutton his lips, she was sorely mistaken. Erik got a contemplative look upon his face, considered the question, and then shot off a pack of lies in her ears.

"The ten-year-old is an assassin," he said, smirking. "Small, as I said, so she can come and go nearly unnoticed. It was she who broke my shackles and removed me from the prison in which I was sure to end my days - "

"No, no," she shook her head. "Not stories, I'd rather not play that game right now. Tell me
something true about all of them. And your little brother!"

The smirk turned into a frown and his brow wrinkled in much the way Raoul’s had when he saw he come to the party in Erik’s company. Confusion. As if he wasn’t sure what she was asking - or why she was asking.

"Are you sure you want to get me started?" he asked her cautiously. "There are six children, remember, and this dance isn't likely to last above five minutes."

"One thing, please," Christine insisted. "I haven't...anyone at all. And I like to listen to stories about others' families. Just...their names, their ages. And one true thing."

A little pathetic, admittedly, but it did the trick. Erik regarded her with a soft smile and said, "Very well - stop me once I've bored you. Let me see, Lisette is the eldest girl, she's twenty-five and...when she was learning to dance she would always lead. I never got the chance to lead a dance until my next sister - Anna-Lise, she is twenty-three - was old enough to walk. Anna-Lise speaks only French, but she can read in French, English, and German, she's very bright."

"That's two," Christine said, keeping score - now that she’d got him going, she wanted him to fulfill the terms. "You have four more to get through before the song is finished."

Just why Erik should seem so shy about talking of his family she could not imagine. After his confession about his traveling days, she'd have thought he'd love nothing more than to talk of pleasant things. She had no reason to believe that his relationship with his family was in any way strained - it was the home that they provided for him which drew him away from the fair, after all! But it was like pulling teeth to get him to say a word.

"Next is Mathilde, she is going on fifteen," he continued after a pause. "She's another budding genius, but her interests are squarely in the sciences, I've never known her to pick up a novel. Marthe is twelve, very sweet. She is not a genius and shows no interest in becoming one, all her talent is devoted to cakes, both cooking and eating - actually, I'm sure you'd like her. Emilie is ten, is not (to my knowledge) an assassin, but she likes being out of doors and getting into scrapes, so that might be her intended career. Claude is the last one, he's nine soon and functions largely as Emilie's lackey and sometimes-servant. Also a very sweet boy without a spark of genius in him. There. That's the lot."

And not too soon either; the song concluded and Erik led Christine away from the impromptu dance floor. Lucky for her, her pastries remained exactly where she left them, untouched.

"And there's you," she said, a bit of her appetite coming back - this time she did not shovel an entire cake into her mouth, seeing as there was no one about to appall or impress.

"Yes," Erik said, sipping a new glass of champagne and not gulping it down. "Me."

"You must miss them very much," Christine said, running her finger around the little rim on the bottom of her plate.

Erik stared down into the bubbles in his champagne. He didn't speak a word, just twirled the stem round in his long fingers and nodded silently. God, what an evening! A half-hour in to the party and she'd somehow insulted Raoul and managed to get Erik to stop talking. Christine set her plate of remaining cakes aside - just the chocolate, which she was sure Erik would have sampled, only he seemed much more interested in drinking than eating - and took his free hand.

"Dance another with me?" she asked. "Since you have a singular talent for dancing gracefully with
small girls?"

"Ha!" Erik exclaimed, his melancholy gone in the snap of a finger. "I suppose I am good for something - if you like, Christine. If you'd like."

She did, very much. All the other dancers seemed set in their coupleings and she had admittedly made few friends at the Opera - Erik and Raoul chief among them, and they both pursued her acquaintance rather than the other way around, at least at first. Perhaps she came across as unsociable, speaking only when first addressed and not very much at that. It was an annoying trait that she was all too well aware of, her habit of being outspoken and pert with strangers or very good friends, but not much for conversations with mere acquaintances. Christine would devote herself to remedying the deficiency, she told herself. Soon.

If she and Erik were not an elegant couple, at least they were enjoying themselves. The conversation flowed freely once Christine furtively glanced around and asked Erik if he'd spotted his rival yet. Together the two of them finished the next waltz and a minuet, inventing various identities and backstories for other guests who, unbeknownst to them, were now characters in their little drama. After a break for more pastry and champagne, they were refreshed enough to begin their plot anew, but the performances began and much of the room left to go into the auditorium to watch the dancers. A few patrons and subscribers did come back in to where they remained, to watch the singers. For the first time Christine noticed La Carlotta in the crowd - she was wearing a crimson gown, deeper red than her hair, which was elaborately pinned up and adorned with ostrich plumes.

Beside her, Erik snickered at in Carlotta's general direction as she passed - the prima donna gave him a very dirty look and Christine shrank back, mortified for him. Erik looked totally unruffled.

The announcement that the singing was to commence brought Raoul to the room and he came to her side, his previous stiffness all but gone. He smiled warmly at her and Erik moved aside slightly so that Raoul could take his place between the two of them.

"How was the foyer?" Erik asked him.

"Hot," Raoul replied; indeed, he was perspiring slightly around the temple and dabbed at his brow and upper lip with his handkerchief. "I'd...like to take the next in here, with you, Christine. If neither you nor your escort objects."

"Oh, I'd be happy to!" Christine said, smiling up at Raoul, happy that whatever troubled him earlier was gone away.

Raoul looked at Erik in silent expectation.

"By all means," Erik said, making a little gesture as if urging them to come together. "If Christine wants to dance with you, who am I to object?"

The singing interlude was very brief, only about half an hour, but that seemed to be about all the guests were prepared to take. They applauded politely at the conclusion of the presentation and the quartet quickly took up their instruments to commence another round of dancing before the evening threatened to become dull. To Christine’s great surprise, while she got into place with Raoul, she saw Erik make a beeline for Carlotta and ask her hand for the next dance - to her absolute shock, Carlotta accepted.

“So…” Raoul began delicately once the dancing began - the quartet played nothing but waltzes and Christine found herself longing for that rooftop dance hall and Erik’s piano - “Erik is your - ”
“Friend,” she replied promptly, looking at Raoul and not peering distractedly over his shoulder to observe Erik and Carlotta. “He’s been enormously kind to me since I arrived - if it wasn’t for him I mightn’t have found my way in at all. Simon Buquet wouldn’t let me come in the front. It’s rather a theme with him.”

Raoul clearly did not understand and Christine would be embarrassed to explain so they just danced in silence for a minute. They were much better matched partners and so Christine concentrated on relishing the feeling of being in his arms. Never had Raoul moved behold hand-holding and cheek-kissing. This was as near to him as she had been since they renewed their acquaintance.

“Is the dancing in the foyer any livelier?” she asked.

He shrugged, “I stood up with my sisters, so not for me. The company...left something to be desired.”

The smile he gave seemed to be a private one, small, but sincere, particularly crafted for her and she thrilled a little to see it. At once the evening became enchanting again, despite the insipid music, despite the side-entrance. She did not even think of Erik’s amusing little caper. This was enough, to dance with a handsome man she particularly admired amid the beauty of the Opera House.

“Are you coming to opening night?” she asked.

The special smile only deepened.

“I wouldn’t miss it,” Raoul told her. “Would you like to go out for supper after? Would your guardian object? Or do you have...other plans?”

It was his turn to glance at Erik and Carlotta, but Christine captured his attention with a shake of her head, “As long as we’re not too late, I’d love to go to supper with you.”

They enjoyed the rest of the dance in companionable silence. Toward the end, Christine chanced to come a bit closer, resting her head on his chest - she heart the thumping of Raoul’s heart through his shirt, and his arms encircled her more tightly. Bliss. Until -

“Aha! There you are, my darling, I quite lost you!”

A beautiful woman, with clear, honey-colored skin that reflected the candlelight gorgeously approached. Her thin eyebrows rose toward the elegant fringe at her brow at finding her brother so occupied and Christine straightened up, putting a respectable distance between them. The woman was wearing a dress in a lush cream, trimmed with white beads, sparkling in the candlelight. A sister - one of the Maries, but Christine did not know which.

“I told you I was - no matter,” Raoul said, keeping Christine’s hand in his. “Christine, this is Marie-Grace, my - ”

“Charmed, charmed,” Marie-Grace glanced briefly over at Christine, but did not look at her for very long, nor did she extend her hand. “Raoul, darling, I must steal you away from your partner, I’m afraid. You are much in demand in the foyer and I can’t make excuses for you all night! It’s so tiresome.”

The two hardly had the chance to say good-bye to one another, so swiftly did Marie-Grace turn and hurry away from them, keen for Raoul to follow.

“Tomorrow night,” he promised, pressing a kiss to Christine’s hand. “I’ll fetch you after the performance.”
“I’ll be waiting,” she promised, squeezing his hand briefly before letting him go back to his sister and the promise of other partners.

At least they had one dance.

Rather tired of the party, Christine withdrew to lean against a column; no chairs had been provided for them and she was weary of standing. She searched the crowd for Erik, of a mind to ask him to take her home and she was not long to wait for him; he appeared to be wrapping up an extended conversation with Carlotta.

“Leaving so soon?” he asked her. “It’s scarcely ten-thirty!”

“Oh, you know,” she replied with an archness that seemed unsuited to either her dramatic stage persona or the no-nonsense woman Christine had seen in the dressing room. “I’ve got other obligations. A cat that wants tending.”

Erik laughed out loud and extended a hand for her to shake as if they were performing a business transaction. “Oh, of course. Enjoy your evening mademoiselle. And tell Sophie I said bon soir.”

Carlotta said she would and they parted amiably as old friends. If Christine was in a better mood, she would have asked about how they knew one another, but she was not in a cheerful mood.

“Where is your young fellow, then?” Erik asked, looking around for Raoul.

She shrugged, inelegantly. “I don’t know. Gone back to his family - his sister came and took him away.”

“Ah,” Erik said knowingly. “What would you like to do now? Cause a scene? Or go home? We’ve still time, I promised to have you back at the stroke of midnight.”

“We might as well go,” Christine replied with a sigh. “I ought to rest before the performance. Get a good night’s sleep. Anyway, by the time you’ve walked me home, you’ll be back quite late. When are you coming in tomorrow?”

“I’m not coming to the theatre at all - my work is done, it’s all in the hands of the scene-shifters,” Erik informed her. “So it’s all one to me.”

Crestfallen, Christine looked up at him. “You mean you aren’t going to watch the performance?”

Erik shook his head, “I’ve seen it! A hundred times, backwards and forwards -”

“But rehearsals aren’t the same!” she insisted. “And...I’m in it.”

The last was delivered plaintively and Christine was appalled to hear a bratty little tone enter her voice. Erik did not appear to mark it; probably came of having so many children in the family, acts of whining self-indulgence did not phase him.

“I won’t hear you!” he pointed out, laughingly. Christine’s face twisted and she looked away from him, chin wobbling quite unacceptably. She hoped he didn’t notice, but clearly he did, for he took her hands and crouched down to look her in the face. “I never watch the performances - as it happens, I’m going home to visit that gaggle of children you were so interested in hearing about an hour ago. I’ll be waiting for my train when the curtain rises, it’s cheaper to go overnight.”

That made sense. But stil...
“Couldn’t you wait until Friday?” she asked, regarding him balefully.

Erik hesitated, but shook his head, “No. I couldn’t. But, Christine, I promise you that once you’ve got a named part, I’ll stay for the opening night. How about that?”

“Hmm,” she made a skeptical little noise. “You’ll have quite a long wait.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” he said patiently. Then his expression turned thoughtful. “You know - I’ve never heard you sing?”

She thought about it...and realized he was right. Not outside of the chorus, anyway, where one voice could not be discerned from another. “I’ll have to sing for you when you return.”

“You could,” he nodded. “Or...I could abscond with the fair lady and we could have a song now? What do you think? Or are you in the mood for another waltz?”

Christine said she did not need to dance another waltz, “But Mamma Valerius is probably in bed, I’d hate to disturb her - ”

“We needn’t disturb anyone,” Erik said, taking hold of her hand. “Come along.”

Together they left the party, the glittering spectacle of it all, and walked along increasingly darkened corridors toward the rehearsal rooms. The doors were unlocked - who would steal a piano? - and Erik ducked into a nearby workroom to retrieve a lamp.

He returned a minute later and provided some illumination to the dark little room. Erik sat down at the bench and set the lamp on top of the upright piano. The whole room was a little ghostly and their activities felt a little forbidden, here, away from everyone else, when the rest of the theatre was asleep.

“What would you like to sing? Nothing too impressive - you need to be ready for tomorrow.”

Christine thought back to her audition songs. She’d selected two, one comedic, one dramatic. “Do you know Così fan tutte?”

Erik shook his head, “Not that one.”

They went back and forth like that for a while - those songs she’d practiced he did not know how to play, those songs he knew how to play she’d never sung before. Finally they came round to The Pearl Fishers.

“What about that aria the girl sings about when she was little and hid the prisoner?” he asked. “I think you could do that justice.”

“So long as Joseph Buquet stays far away from me with his sandbags,” she laughed and Erik grimaced, exaggerated, but he played a few introductory bars and she sang for him.

“J’étais encore enfant... un soir... je me rappelle...
Un homme, un fugitif, implorant mon secours,
Vint chercher un refuge en notre humble chaumière ;
Et je promis, le cœur ému par sa prière,
De le cacher à tous, de protéger ses jours.
Bientôt une horde farouche
Accourt, la menace à la bouche...”
In this cozy room, just the two of them, Christine supposed she ought to feel self-conscious, but this was how it had been for most of her childhood - she and her father alone, singing to keep their spirits up. It was in front of crowds of strangers that she was the most uncomfortable. Erik...he made her feel very comfortable. Quite at home.

“That was lovely,” he said appreciatively when she was finished. “Thank you...you’ve got a very fine voice, Christine. I’ll be watching you perform soon, I’m sure. I’m only sorry you were only able to show it off on a song we’re likely both half-sick of.”

If anything, Erik seemed to be the more embarrassed of the two. She thought of his sweet promise to play for Mamma Valerius and hoped the lady selected songs with which he was familiar. Unless...

“Do you...would you,” she began again, not sure how to phrase her offer in a way that would not be insulting. “Do you think you’d...would you like me to teach you to read music? You’re so quick and clever, I’m sure it would be easy for you! If you wanted to learn.”

“I wouldn’t want to trouble you,” he demurred, but Christine shook her head and took a place next to him on the bench.

“It wouldn’t be any trouble, I’d be happy to,” she insisted. “But only if...if you wanted. When you come back from your visit.”

Erik looked down at her, the lamplight casting his face in stark relief at this angle. The poor fellow, he was simply...not good-looking. Not at all. The irregularities in his skin were more noticeable when she sat close to him. And he seemed to have some odd rash or something between his eyes, right at the bridge of his nose.

“I’ll think about it,” he promised, angling his face slightly away from her. “Let’s see if we can find a duet in common, eh?”

They sang together for a while and talked of music. Some of the bliss she’d felt in Raoul’s arms came back - not as viscerally, but more peacefully. It didn’t matter about side-entrances or fine ladies, or the fact that she’d been escorted to the Gala by the ugliest man she’d ever met. The music was beautiful, Erik’s voice was transcendent and, though it was in very different circumstances than she’d first imagined, Christine had a thoroughly wonderful evening.

Eventually Erik said they really ought to be getting back and Christine agreed that it was probably time. But when they left the rehearsal rooms and walked into the Opera proper, it did not get any brighter - in fact, the place was deserted!

“How long were we in there?” Christine asked wonderingly. The grand staircase was deserted, the champagne flutes drained, and the scraps and detritus of a party well-enjoyed laying about ready to be cleaned. A clock chimed - one o’clock in the morning.

Erik and Christine looked at each other and, at the same instant, burst into laughter.

“Oh, no!” she cried, hands over her face. “We’ve been locked in!”

“I’m sorry!” Erik managed between bouts of laughing. “I’ve neglected my promises! You’ve become a pumpkin after all!”

That only made Christine laugh louder and the whole deserted place rang with it.

“What are we going to do?” Christine asked. “We can’t stay here all night!”
“Well, we could,” Erik tapped his chin consideringly, “but we won’t. How do you feel about shimmying out a window?”

It sounded perfectly absurd, but what other choice did they have? Fortunately for Christine (and her gown), Erik found a long window, only a few feet from the sidewalk that was cracked open and wide enough for Christine to descend without fearing for her garment, or her bones.

“We’ve had to quit the house under cover of darkness, in absolute secrecy,” she commented as Erik slid out, closing the window as far as he could behind her. “Whatever have we done?”

“Caused a scandal, of course,” he said, taking off his jacket and draping it round her shoulders. Hat and wrap were abandoned by the Rue Scribe entrance and though he did not exude much heat, she was grateful for his thoughtfulness. “I confronted my rival, we had a duel - I won, naturally, and left him bleeding on the dance floor. Then I absconded with you and we made our escape.”

“Ah, of course,” Christine nodded knowingly. “Funny how I missed that.”

“You were dancing with the Vicomte,” Erik said. “He provided an excellent cover - he was in on the plan all along, of course. That was why he went away with his sister, you know. He could not risk detection.”

That was definitely untrue, but she appreciated the little lie. He was trying to cheer her up and Christine again resolved to believe that Erik was a deeply good sort of person; she was lucky he found her. She was lucky she found him.

He walked her to the door and waited while she fumbled for her key. Christine opened the door and bid him good-night.

“Thank you for a wonderful evening,” she said sincerely. “Duels, and abductions, and all.”

Erik smiled and patted her hair, “I’m glad you enjoyed yourself - perhaps next time you will be required to make use of your dagger.”

Her comb had come askew and he plucked it from her hair. Christine took it in her hand and looked up at his eyes - both of them, together. The oddness of them didn’t bother her in the slightest. “Bon voyage. How long...how long do you expect to be away?”

“A fortnight, at least, perhaps longer,” Erik shrugged.

“Well...” Christine paused, not sure how to proceed without sounding selfish. Or jealous. “Don’t stay away too long. Or I’ll be apt to miss you.”

“We wouldn’t want that,” Erik replied. He bent down and kissed her cheek, retrieving his jacket as he did so. “Good-night, petite citrouille.”

“Good-night, Erik.”

Chapter End Notes

Yep, Erik called her 'little pumpkin.' And someone is getting music lessons! Just not the traditional someone.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

This was originally going to be one LONG chapter, but I thought it needed some space - or Erik and Lisette need some space. Time to meet the family!

The train ride back to town had been singularly uneventful. The mask was a necessity, though the addition of a hat pulled low over the brow and a scarf over the nose helped mitigate odd looks that otherwise would have been his to bear. The false nose was being faithfully guarded by Dalir in Paris -Dalir who had not accompanied Erik to the train station; they said their good-byes in the flat.

"Two or three weeks, this time?" Dalir asked. He always asked how long Erik expected he'd be away; perhaps because he liked to be certain that Erik was coming back.

"Probably closer to three," Erik replied. "It depends on whether or not I stay for the holidays - I might, I might not. The Opera doesn't care when I return."

It was true; he was contracted only as a builder for *The Marriage of Figaro* - so long as he was back by the time *The Pearl Fishers* ended, his absence would not be marked. Well, not by anyone at the Opera. Their flat was so small, Dalir could not help hovering as Erik packed a satchel - an extra pair of trousers, a few shirts, his least-fine waistcoat and trinkets from the city for the children. And the mask, of course. He did not leave the nose in the ashtray, it hadn't been cleaned recently, but he left it all the same. It wouldn't do to take the thing and forget leave it in the country, he'd have to take the whole trip over again to fetch it.

With his hat pulled low and a scarf over the lower half of his face, he managed to get past the ticket-taker, the conductor, and the porter without a fuss. It remained firmly in place - stifling, uncomfortable, obscuring his vision - until he was just out of Rouen proper. The village of Saint-Martin-de-Boscherville was a little more than five miles past the city limits; rather a long walk without the aid of an obliging farmer or artisan eqiupit with a cart who might be willing to give a traveler a ride for a small fee. It was mid-morning, too late for early treks to the city, to early for the return trip back. No matter; Erik had walked it before and he would walk it again.

Less force upon the legs, but Erik did not mind the exertion, it gave him time to prepare. To shake of Erik of the city - with his cynicism and pretensions of bohemianism - and to sink back into the role he always played when he was home. Dutiful son, playful elder brother, helpful neighbor. The two men were by no means polar opposites, but he did try to keep them separate in his mind. He was Erik in the city. But once he left the city, Erik disappeared and he was Isaac Astruc, the village boy with the strange face and stranger mind, once again.

It was why Dalir had learned his true name only after a long while of having made his acquaintance. Why he was so reluctant to speak overmuch of his family to Christine. He'd struck a bargain with himself - he long ago realized he would never be a truly respectable person, a truly ordinary person. There was too much working against him, both his face and his proclivities...and, no, not just his tastes in the bedroom, though that factored in tremendously.

He'd tried to have done with Erik for good, once. When he traveled this road before (though he'd
hitched a ride with a farmer then, unbeknownst to the farmer). Nearly nineteen, sick of pretending to rise from the crypt to shock and horrify. He apprenticed for his father and for almost seven years built ordinary houses for him. He was contented, if not happy. He had his family, his friends...same faces, same routine, a smattering of music, the occasional project with required a bit of imagination. But he wanted more. That was his problem, even more than his appearance: an overabundance of ambition. Beyond his sphere, his station. And so, to Paris. Once again Erik, the unusual, the illusionist, the worldly-wise. Erik was the greatest illusion he ever conjured.

To maintain the illusion (for Erik did things that Isaac could not, and vice versa) he was Erik in town, Isaac in the country. It worked for going on five years now. So long as he kept that thin, but fragile line intact, so long as he preserved the separation, it would hold. It had to.

"Morning Isaac! Back for a visit?" a roundish matron asked, puttering round her yard and spreading feed for the chickens.

Ah, no, madame! Erik might have exclaimed, half in jest, half in scorn. I am a spectre stalking abroad! Come not near me! Do not approach me!

"Yes, Madame d'Amboise," Isaac said respectfully, touching his hat like his mother wished he would. "How are you? Your husband? Your grandchildren?"

All well, he learned. All twelve of them. He nodded pleasantly, smiled occasionally, and 'hmmed,' at appropriate intervals. The only time he perked up and listened was when she told him that Anna-Lise, recently given charge of the older pupils at the school, was a credit to the family, and the eldest of the grandchildren was very fond of her.

"Happy to hear it, madame," he said, then excused himself for he had to be on his way. She kept him by another five minutes, talking about how he really ought to be going, how funny that she saw him and caught him up before he'd even spoken to his own mother. Again, he 'hmmed' and nodded, tuning her out until the words, 'I hope to see you again before you go,' met his ears. He said he would seek her out personally and bid her (and all the family) good day.

"And you can tell your mother, from me!" Madame d'Amboise called after he'd already begun walking down the lane. "That I don't care a fig for what all that young priest up at the church says! You tell her from me that I said they ought to teach manners at the seminary!"

"Yes, Madame, I surely will!" he called, instantly forgetting.

A sloping hill led into the village proper and Isaac paused, considering whether going the long-way around might save him time, but he decided to brave the crowds. Best to get a bit of practice being Isaac again before he saw the family. He had been absent from home for five months months - Maman had either begged, bribed, or threatened a rabbi to come out for Lisette's wedding immediately after Pesach so that he would not have to make two journeys back-to-back from Paris. (And probably due in no small part to the fact that the house would still be tremendously clean for visitors to marvel at.) His previous homecoming was the going topic of conversation for everyone who hailed him:

"Isaac! Good to have you back! We haven't seen you since the wedding!"

"Where's my cancan girl, Isaac? Didn't you promise to bring me back one? You ought to have taken one to your sister's wedding!"

"Isaac, how long has it been? Your sister's wedding? No, not so long ago as that, surely!"
Yes, it had been that long! Imagine! An age! And how are you and yours? The rhythms of country life would come back soon enough and he would not feel so prickly, but the first few days of being back in town always required an adjustment period - ah! For beautiful, degenerate, cluttered Paris, where no one gave a fuck about anybody else!

No one kept him by as long as Madame D'Amboise and soon he was approaching the house: cream colored plaster with nary a chip, shutters and bright and blue as if the house was recently painted, all topped with a slate roof, one of his father's insisted-upon improvements to the place, along with the low stone wall. There had been a little fence when his parents moved in, but with Papa's craft, they replaced it with something long-lasting. The iron gate swung open, the latch silent and without a spot of rust to mar it's surface. Papa took pride in appearance of the house and Maman took pride in its upkeep, no need to worry about anything going to seed while they were in residence.

The yard was quiet - he'd sent word ahead to expect him, but there were no eager eyes peeping out of the curtains followed immediately by a chastisement from Maman to come away from the windows, lest the neighbors think them strange. Isaac actually knocked at the door, which was not his habit; he was a little concerned no one was home.

The concern was unfounded for the door was flung open almost as soon as his hand dropped from the knocker. Mathilde, as her custom, was the first to the door; she always hurled it open with a force that left dents in the plaster more than once; when she shut it, the mezuzah shook. Isaac raised a hand to it, both to reverently touch it and to make sure that it stayed in its place upon the doorpost. She tilted her chin up and looked at him expectantly; she'd not changed a bit since last he saw her, unruly black hair bound back with a blue ribbon, dress covered with an apron to keep it clean while she hiked around the hills, searching for specimens to stab and dissect. She was not very tall and tended toward stockiness, like their father, but her eyes were the same as his; one blue, one brown, both alarming shades of those colors.

"Oh. Isaac's home," Mathilde called over her shoulder, as casually as she might announce that the milkman had arrived. She was holding herself very still and properly, with a studied carelessness typical of adolescents of all stripes. No hugs. No kisses. Not even a smile.

"Well," Isaac drew himself up importantly, casting his shadow dramatically over the doorjamb. "If that's all the welcome, I'm entitled to, I can just turn on my heel and go right back to Paris!"

"Maman said not to mow you down," Mathilde informed him, not giving an inch. "I believe Claude and the little girls are actually tied to the stove. With rope."

"Ah, well, in that case I forgive you," Isaac nodded, placing a hand atop her head and moving his third-youngest sister aside so he could pass over the threshold. From his jacket pocket, he produced a little cardboard box - he'd not bothered to have it wrapped, Mathilde was not the sort to appreciate the effort. "Here you are, for being such a good girl and not mowing me over."

All of her mature air fled as she tore into the box he'd given her, smile finally cracking that solemn little face as she exclaimed, "Oooh, Isaac! It's terribly pretty, thank you! Only..."

Mathilde played with the tiny hinge on the single charm he'd purchased for the bracelet - a glass front little circle that was currently empty.

"Put whatever you like," he informed her. "A preserved moth, the scale from a talking fish, a lock of hair from some beau or other - "

"A moth will do nicely," she nodded and scurried off upstairs to nick one from her collection of
treasures; dissection was her new chosen hobby and, when last he'd glanced them over, the illustrations she rendered of various flora and fauna were coming along well.

Isaac looked round the sitting room, but there was no one else there among the faded upholstery or multitude of porcelain knick-nacks (his mother loved porcelain knick-nacks, so he'd gotten two more to add to her collection). The little children were chained to the stove. Anna-Lise would still be teaching at the school. And Lisette was married; as the neighborhood constantly reminded him. The kitchen door opened and Maman joined him in the sitting room, drying her hands on a tea towel.

"Don't just stand there," she said, opening her arms. "Where's my kiss?"

If Isaac had to be compared, in appearance, to anyone in his family (and for their sakes he hoped the comparison was only rarely made) he supposed he took after his mother - in the smallest possible way, mind. Myriam Astruc (Marie, to the neighbors) was tall - not freakishly so. Thin - not unattractively so - and possessed of an abundance of dark hair, still mostly black at fifty years of age - and reined in under a snood. But her features were well-formed and even pretty. Yet his face was practically a caricature of hers, an exaggeratedly prominent brow, pointy chin and cheekbones that were better suited for a memento mori than a human face.

Not for the first time, he wondered how she managed it, to treat him no differently than she treated the other children. Isaac never asked to hear the story of what happened the night he was born, not even when he was very small. He was sure he was subconsciously afraid of what sort of answer he'd get.

But whatever horror Maman might have felt when she first beheld her eldest child was long gone away and forgotten. Isaac bent down to embrace and kiss her, and she squeezed him back for all she was worth, leaving smacking kisses upon both his miserable cheeks. "Have you eaten? I've just tidied up after breakfast and the bread's not ready to come out of the oven, but I could boil some eggs or -"

"I've eaten," he said. It was entirely true - he'd eaten with Dalir before he left Paris. Yesterday. "When is Anna-Lise due back?"

"Not much before sundown - she's been late coming home these past weeks, I expect from tidying up at the school," Maman informed him, paused halfway up the stairs in the explaining. "The children take ages to get settled after the summer's over - and then, just when they're accustomed, they take time off again. So if you'd be so good as to make yourself useful this afternoon, I'd appreciate it. I can't count on Mathilde, she's all thumbs in the kitchen and I worry Marthe will drop the roast. Oh! And Isaac - if you so much as think about moving the lid on the casserole, I will personally murder you."

"I wasn't thinking of that at all," Isaac lied; Saturday's casserole was hands-down, the best part of Shabbos since, in order to be properly observant, one had to refrain from the playing of musical instruments. It drove him absolutely mad as a child and more than once he'd plucked the strings on his violin when he thought no one could hear, just to be obstinate. Now he was above such childish peevishness, but the promise of the casserole never let him down.

"Very well, Maman!" he raised his voice, the sound ringing through the whole house in a way that he knew vexed her enormously. "Release the dogs, I'm unafraid!"

"Hush, Isaac!" she scolded him, just as he expected. "The neighbors will think we're strange!"

Whatever the neighbors thought it was too late; the gauntlet had been thrown. The door to the
kitchen burst open with a bang and, just as he anticipated, out came Emilie, Marthe, and Claude. Three pairs of arms encircled him, tight as any trap, but Isaac was not entirely smothered. As the family's very own pet oddity, he towered above them all, so his neck was spared a tremendous strangling; it was only his ribs that were crushed in the onslaught.

The children only got prettier the further along the line they went - which was why, Isaac was sure, his parents had so many of him. Poor Lisette; she managed to escape his fate of being born with an unnaturally ugly face, but she was not what anyone would call beautiful. Another caricature with poor Maman, with pointed chin, but Lisette also had a pointed nose to go along with it - her enemies at school called her 'the witch,' a nickname regretfully taken up by their children. Not regretful in the sense that it caused Lisette any heartache (she never minded about malicious teasing), but regretful in that while Isaac had been able to get away with brawls among their parents for his sister's honor, he doubted very much he'd be granted the same indulgence if he kicked a five-year-old down the street.

Anne-Lise had a better looking face than her sister, though where Lisette was small and sturdy, she was all bones and angles, like him, in addition to having his eyes. That, combined with her unfortunate squint (only slightly abated since Isaac's first real paycheck managed to get her a pair of eyeglasses) worked to counter her pert little nose and admirably heart-shaped face.

Mathilde was in that middling place where all fifteen-year-old girls suffered the most - would she lose the puppy roundness of her face and mature into beauty? Or lose the puppy roundness of her face and mature into Lisette? No one but Mathilde was really on pins and needles about it, but he thought that even if she didn't turn out to be pretty, her menagerie of pinned butterflies would be.

Marthe, all of twelve, had dimples that no one had any idea the origin of and glossy black curls that arranged themselves into ringlets with only a bit of trying on her part. Emilie was soft and cheerful-looking in the way of most ten-year-olds. And Claude - well! Claude, if luck was on his side, might actually turn out to be handsome. Like Isaac, Anna-Lise and Mathilde, Claude too had inherited their father's odd eyes, but perhaps they might turn out fetching on him, rather than unsettling.

But, however they turned out, Isaac craned his neck down and bent double to press kisses on the tops of all their heads, as if he was grateful to be pawed at and squeezed. The door to the kitchen closed quietly - leaving the kitchen door ajar was another of Maman's little pet peeves, but she did not retreat inside. She didn't even look too harshly on Isaac, for all the disruption he'd caused - he'd arrived early enough in the day to suit her after all.

"I said, I believe I said, quite specifically, Maman - the dogs," Isaac said, over the heads of his youngest siblings. "Whycer you would you send out these children instead?"

"The dogs are in the yard where they belong," she told him impatiently. "And, Isaac, if I see a single muddy pawprint or stray hair on a bed of all places -"

"I know, I know," Isaac said, extricating a hand from the crush to wave it about dismissively. "You'll chase me out, you'll put me in the streets -"

"Oh, don't be so dramatic," she rolled her eyes and mimed swatting him with her tea towel. Drama was best reserved for threats over getting the heat out of the casserole dish. "I'll only make you sleep in the kennel, since you seem to think that's what your bedroom ought to be."

"I'll bring you a blanket when she does, Isaac," Marthe piped up from where she was squishing her face into his stomach.

"Thank you," he patted her head fondly. "You always were a sweet girl. But! Have off, you leeches,
I've brought gifts!

Maman shook her head disapprovingly, but before she had the opportunity to go on about how he really shouldn't have, he should save his money - or, if he wouldn't, donate it to a charitable cause, Isaac anticipated her, "Ah, you won't say that, Maman, when you see yours!"

New ribbons for hair or hat for Marthe, a new doll for Emilie, and (despite his mother's groan of disapproval) a shiny pocket-knife for Claude.

"He is nine years old!" Maman threw her hands into the air as if asking for deliverance from above.

"Exactly! Nine years old," Isaac agreed. "Perfect age for a knife."

"He's still only eight," Emilie corrected them, though she didn't bother looking up from her new toy - she was busy stroking her curly hair and fingering the lace on her dress. "I was properly nine when I got a pocketknife."

"I'm nine soon!" Claude insisted, quite rightly. "May I have the knife, Maman? Please? I'll be ever so careful!"

Maman folded her arms and looked down on him. "At least one of my sons thought to ask whether or not he might have a knife. Which proves that he might be responsible enough for a knife. Hand it over, Isaac, before you hurt yourself."

"Ouch!" Isaac shouted, bringing a look of concern even to his mother's face before she realized he was having them on, a scant second later.

"You best have brought me something wonderful," she said threateningly. "Seeing as you're determined to drive me out of my mind in five minutes of being here - quickly now, I've got to pull the bread from the oven and you've got to help me put in the meat."

From his sack, Isaac produced two carefully wrapped porcelain figurines of a man and woman in the dress of the Ancien Regime - he'd told Christine his family was hopelessly bourgeois - and, predictably, she was delighted.

"Alright, come back down so I can kiss you," she said, craning her neck - she'd never be so gauche as to rise up on her toes for her own child - and Isaac obligingly bent down to kiss her cheek again. She smiled briefly at him, fondly, then looked to the other children and snapped her fingers expectantly. It was to business - Maman could not run a household, successfully raise seven children to non-barbarian status, and get dinner on the table every Friday by sundown if she was not disciplined. Like a clap of thunder announcing the presence of an ancient god, that little cracking of her thumb and middle finger set everyone upon their tasks, including Isaac who wrestled the beef into the oven with admirable skill, not at all diminished for his five months. Absence.

"Good, that's done," Maman said, wisely positioning herself between him and the bread. She'd once thought they had a mouse infestation before she realized that Isaac, when he was small, would sneak little pinches of bread from underneath all day, unnoticed, until she sliced it for supper. "Go along and see Lisette - she and David are dining with us, so I'm sure she'll welcome the company. And...you haven't seen the house!"

"Yes, I have," Isaac reminded her. "Papa had me mend the brickwork around the fire before they moved in - "

"You haven't seen it since she decorated it the way she likes," Maman insisted, taking his arm and dragging him to the back door. "I'll put your things in your room. Shoo!"
And just like that - after five months of being away - Isaac was back on the road. If he had a nose, he would have sniffed.

Rather than heading directly to his sister's as his mother asked, he stopped to give his best to the dogs - Samson and Fleur (he named Samson, Anna-Lise named Fleur), the shepherds, arguably there to guard the house, actually there to eat, wag their tails, and sleep. They'd be just as likely to lick a burglar as actually bite one.

"Isaac!" Maman shouted out the kitchen window, breaking her own rule about bellowing in the house. "Your sister's! Leave the dogs!"

Erik would have done as he pleased - devil-may-care Erik who was not bothered by anything, until he was and, oh, wouldn't that go badly for you? But Isaac had been raised to be the kind of boy who obeyed his mother - especially when she was rousing the neighbor's suspicions about exactly how strange the family was, shouting at each other from open windows. Then again, Isaac was also the kind of son who never missed an opportunity to tease his mother when he knew no harm would come by it.

"Are you certain I shouldn't change? Wash?" he asked, brushing the dog's hair off his shirt ineffectively. 'I'd not want to offend the delicacy of the lady's decorations - "

"I'm counting to ten, Isaac!" Maman was shaking a ladle at him now, like he was seven years old all over again. "One! Two! Three!"

In thirty years, Isaac was sure Maman never got past 'three' with any of her children.

Lisette's home was a short walk away, further down the lane. The gate was wood, freshly painted and there were little windowboxes of flowers that had not been there the last time he saw the place. And the shutters! Oh, how sweet - she'd made David cut cunning little hearts into them to increase their charm and the amount of rain they'd let in when closed.

For a girl who could claim no beauty of her own, Lisette certainly liked to surround herself with beautiful things. She made lace and did it extremely well, she also embroidered and was something of an amateur painter, though she confined her craft to sprucing up the shutters and painting chipped or scalded wooden bowls or spoons she found in charity bins to make them more attractive. Isaac meandered past the gate and up the short walk to the house - the cottage, really, it was half the size of his parent's home, only two large downstairs rooms with a little loft above. He had no expectation of meeting his brother-in-law, which was for the best. It wasn't that David was a bad man, he certainly was not. He was kind, gentle, hardworking...and dim. In Isaac's estimation unforgivably so.

Handsome, in his own way, a thickly-built carpenter, who had been at school with Lisette when they were small and always thought she hung the moon.

Some of those girls who encouraged their children to call her 'witch,' were shocked when they announced their engagement. He was too good for her, they said. Too good-looking, anyway. For who would marry a girl who looked like that? Privately, Isaac was in their corner, at least inasmuch as he did not understand the match. For why would his talented, intelligent sister attach herself to an amiable oaf? But Papa told him that if he was as smart as he thought he was, he'd keep his mouth shut on the matter and wish them joy. Isaac pointed out that, in order to wish them joy, he'd have to open his mouth. He erred on the side of keeping it shut.

Tapping the mezuzah on entry, he knocked and opened the door at the same time - the Astruc family habit that led to more than one hilarious and mortifying holiday recollection - and called, "Lisette! I was ordered to visit you!"
She emerged from the bedroom-cum-dining room with a broom in hand and an annoyed expression on her face. Once she'd married she'd taken to wearing her hair up, like their mother, and the severity of the hair style only enhanced her apparent displeasure.

"I'm not finished," she said, then pointed to a nearby chair with the broom handle. "Sit."

"I'm not a dog," Isaac complained as he complied and sat in the chair she'd indicated.

"You smell like one!" she tossed airily over her shoulder as she went about her cleaning. Lisette was fastidious, but not cruel, she emerged from the bedroom a few minutes later and came forward to embrace him while he was still sitting down. "How are you?"

"Fine," he replied, giving her a squeeze, then rising so she could not long enjoy the illusion of being taller than him. "How's your stupid husband?"

If any...cheerfulness or warm expression flitted over her countenance, it was gone in a trice. Lisette's thin lips further flattened into non-existence and she folded her arms. "Isaac, that isn't kind or funny."

"But was accurate," he grinned at her, then took her face in his hands and kissed both her cheeks. "What's happened to your humor?"

"It's a curious affliction," she said sorrowfully, her face still squished between his hands. "I only can bring myself to laugh at jokes that are actually <i>funny.</i>"

"You poor girl," he shook his head and released her face, glancing around the kitchen/parlor where her own casserole was bubbling away on the stove. At least, he thought it was. He really ought to check. Under the pretense of admiring the room, he sidled closer to the stove, "This is very nice - "

"If you touch the casserole, you lose the hand," Lisette warned him. "I know all your tricks. Honestly - oh, never mind, you don't care."

A note of genuine frustration entered her voice, which was very odd. This was how they'd always been, as far back as Isaac could remember. Since Lisette learned to talk, anyway. He'd turn up, she'd feign being terribly put-out to have her big brother around, they'd have a merry argument over trifles, then amuse themselves to no end having arguments about their arguments. But something in the air was...different. Strained. And it put him out of sorts.

"Care?" he asked, narrowing his eyes at her. "What do you mean?"

"How long do you mean to visit, this time?" Lisette asked, sharply. "Are you staying for the holidays before you go?"

It was like being on the receiving end of the Inquisition. "I don't know," he shrugged. "I hadn't thought much about it. Why?"

"You should," Lisette said, forcefully, looking him square in the eyes. Hers were brown, like their mother's and twice as keen. Isaac couldn't help feel like he'd come into the play in the middle of the act - had Lisette rehearsed a fight between the two of them, playing both parts? Because she was acting as if they'd rowed, but in her last letter, she'd been the same as ever - she told him he was wrong about everything, but that she loved him in spite of his idiocy. "It isn't fair to Maman and Papa, this...these comings and goings."

If so, this was the first he was hearing about it.

"So, you'd rather I stayed in Paris then?" he asked, disbelieving. "You would prefer I didn't come at
all?"

Lisette's eyes widened. "No! Of course, not, how could you hear that? But, Isaac...you are thirty years old - "

"Not yet," he muttered darkly.

" - it's time to...stop. Stop playing about in the city and come home. Maman and Papa won't be able to manage the house forever. It's...it's silly. It's all very silly. Childish. And irresponsible."

Isaac stared at her, stunned. Childish. Oh yes. Tremendously childish. Why, when he was a little boy, he'd just fantasized about living in a one-room flat with a rat-infested privy in the back alley! Absolutely dreamed of the day when he was paid a pittance to do hours of artistic design work and put in a great deal of labor to be spat at by the men charged with working under him! Oh, and the very best part? Worrying that at any time, through force or circumstance, the one good thing, the one love he had in Paris would leave him. Or be taken from him.

No. No, that was Erik talking. And Erik had no place in the country. He was Isaac in the country.

"If I'd known I was putting you out," he grit his teeth and tried to reply with some measure of calm. "I would have timed my visits more thoughtfully."

Lisette was getting upset now, he could tell, her shoulders were starting to hitch and her chin was screwed up. "You are deliberately misunderstanding me. I don't want you to stay away, not at all! And I'm not saying that you need to quit this city today or even this year! But Isaac, you must understand, you have to consider the future! You can't just...act selfishly - "

"I?" he asked incredulously. "Selfish? I have been working myself to the bone since I was fifteen for all of you! Or did you not get any of the money I sent back - "

"Stop!" she held up a hand as though halting an advance, but he hadn't moved toward her at all; he was rather inclined to run out the door. He did not come home to be harangued, after all. "You think money makes up for it? You...ran away! Maman and Papa...no one asked you to go! I was eleven years old, remember? Then, overnight, I was the eldest child, responsible for the little ones - Anna-Lise cried every night for a week after you disappeared! The money was nothing, we didn't care about the money, we cared about you!"

Evidently this had been troubling her for some time - just why it was all coming out now, he couldn't fathom.

"Ran away?" Isaac asked, incredulous. "Ran away? That's the - "

She doesn't know, his mind reminded him, hastily, as ever working more slowly than his mouth and his fists. She was never meant to know.

For they had talked about it, his mother and father and him. All very civilized. At the dinner table. After the baby had been put down and the little girls had gone to sleep.

They might not have cared about the money, but they did need the money. For the girls' schooling. For the house. The food - for Mémère, whose health was in decline. Missing her funeral was one of his greatest regrets; but the money he sent home helped pay for it. They never asked for specifics, his parents. Good people they were, they liked to imagine that what he actually did at the fair was what he said he intended to do: play the violin, sing, perform magic tricks. Those things he did in town to amuse friends and neighbors might actually earn money in places where he was a stranger. And they did. But nothing earned as much as the mask did.
It was as he'd told Christine - aha, there he was, thinking of Christine, thinking of Erik when he was not supposed to be - but he'd meant every word. In Saint Martin, he was an ugly man without a nose. What was so noteworthy about that? Imagine, a Barker, shouting, *Come come, madames and monsieurs! Behold! A very ugly man!* And then to have him walk down the street, in ordinary clothes, in sunlight? A few might recoil, but the rest? Laugh, or groan and demand their money back. For a very ugly man is still only a man. Men could be seen anywhere, for free! People paid to see monsters.

He'd rather taken to the role, in fact. That first version of Erik, rough, unrefined - that boy who was so startled by his father waking him abruptly after he was newly arrived home that he *struck him*. That was not something Isaac Astruc would have done. So he separated them, in his mind: Isaac the son, the brother. Erik the freak. And he was determined the family would only ever know Isaac.


"Nonsense," Lisette shook her head. "You do it for yourself! You...run away, have a gay time in Italy, Provence, come home - remember those years when you were home? Those were good years! We were so happy! And then...I suppose it wasn't enough for you. We weren't enough. For you went off to Paris. To...feed your muse or whatever foolish thing you said. And for a boy of twenty-five, I understand, but you've had five years of fun! Just...come home. Settle down! Find a nice girl to marry!"

The laughter sounded all around them, cold and mocking. Isaac couldn't stop himself. It was so absurd. All so perfectly absurd. And wrong - he did not *talk* about Paris here! Lisette was breaking all the rules. If she wasn't careful, she might find herself wandering into uncharted territory. Mercy's sake, she might meet *Erik* and that would not do. Not at all. She would *hate* Erik.

"It seems your husband's rubbing off on you," Isaac said, moving for the first time - away from his sister and towards the door. "For that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. I couldn't! I...I couldn't."

But she blocked him, moving with a swiftness that took him off-guard. Lisette stood before him, arms folded, chin tilted up stubbornly. She had something to say and he was not going to leave until she was done, damn the consequences. It was a resolve he admired under ordinary circumstances, but these circumstances were not ordinary.

"Of course you could!" she insisted, her face softening slightly. "No one cares about the way you look! Not here! I imagine they care more in Paris, or why would you craft a false nose? Anyway, girls marry ugly men all the time. Men marry ugly *women*, occasionally! You're just being stubborn! I can't understand why you'd rather fiddle among strangers than work an honest job among the people who love you! What's in Paris anyway, that keeps you going back?"

*His name is Dalir.*

Isaac swallowed, hard. "You don't understand."

"So *tell* me!" she ordered - never pleaded, not Lisette. "Why can't you just...do what everyone else does? Why can't you just be like everyone else? If you took a wife, lived here, we wouldn't have to worry about you!"

"Lisette - "

"Children!" she added suddenly. "You've always liked children, you were always so good with them - better than me! That's for certain. Oh, Isaac, you'd be a wonderful father and if you married - "
"Lisette."

"- ours could be friends! And the family could be together always," she was half talking to herself now, but he couldn't bear it. "Not split up! It isn't right that we're split up. I don't care, if there's a girl you like in Paris, you could bring her home! A girl from the Opéra!"

"Lisette!" he seized her arms and bid her, "Stop! Please! Stop. When I say I can't, I mean I can't!"

"You mean you won't!" she insisted, brow creased. "You won't even think of it!"

"Lisette." Oh. No. He'd never planned for this. Never planned to have some of Erik turn up - but wearing Isaac's open expression, his gentle hands on his sister's arms, his soft voice asking her - begging her - to stop. Blood rushed in his ears. He'd not been so afraid since Christine slammed that door shut two weeks ago. Yet that feeling was panic, frantic, blurred. Lisette's face was in sharp focus before him, her eyes - their mother's eyes - all he could see. "If I had the face of...Adonis and the temperament of one of M. Fournier's old mules - had I never picked up a pen or a bow, or any of it...I would never. I could never marry one of the local girls."

She was ready to scoff again. "Oh, Isaac, really - "

"Never, Lisette," he applied the slightest amount of pressure to her arms and looked her square in the eyes. "Never."

His sister looked at him, wonderingly at first, then with comprehension. Awful comprehension. Her own hands drifted up to rest lightly upon his wrists. It seemed like she was going to lunge forward and embrace him, but, no she was not coming closer - she was moving away. Isaac blinked and Lisette - for the first time in their lives, Lisette could not look at him.

She eased out from under his hands, turned away, arms wrapped tightly around her middle. "Go home. Go home, Isaac."

Where was home? What did she expect that to mean? "Lisette - "

"No!" she held up a hand and the arm that had been reaching for her dropped to his side. "Just...go and help Maman with supper. Tell her I'll be along soon. Just...go, Isaac. Go away."

Isaac did not say another word, he couldn't have if he tried. Tears burned at his eyes and his throat closed, but whether he was going to cry or about to be sick, he did not know. All he did was obey. Because Isaac Astruc was a polite young man. Isaac Astruc did not frighten people. Isaac Astruc did not horrify people. And he was desperately trying to hold on to him.

Chapter End Notes

Upcoming! Awkward Shabbos dinner! But the nice thing about a day of rest is it gives you plenty of time to think about how to fix your relationship with your brother whose heart you just broke!
Opening night had gone remarkably well! No flying sandbags, no sour notes, the boat even worked perfectly! Christine worried she might be too tired after the performance to accept Raoul’s invitation to supper, but she was practically buzzing with energy after she took her curtain call - yes, she was one of dozens and no, there wasn’t anyone in the audience applauding especially for her, but she felt such a thrill, such a triumph!

“It’s a wonderful thing,” she gushed to Raoul once the makeup was scrubbed from her face, the tiara set aside and her street clothes back on, “to perform, to make people happy! All kinds of people out there watching you and you might not know any of them or...what troubles or joys they have in their lives, but you’ve made them happy, diverted them, taken to another place!”

He chuckled and smiled at her and said that she performed well and she certainly made him happy, so he supposed she must be right!

They ate at a small bistro, in a private dining room, just the two of them. There was a solitary violinist in the restaurant proper, serenading the diners. It made Christine think of Erik, of how Dalir said he was better on the violin than the piano and how she’d never heard him play it before. It was the one less-than-perfect thought she had all evening; she wished Erik and Dalir had come to the Opéra. Then she sent a quick prayer to Heaven that Erik was enjoying his visit with his family and thought no more about it. Not until the next day when Raoul called on her directly after breakfast.

“You told me that Madame Valerius does not generally look at the newspapers,” he said, after he apologized for barging in on them unexpectedly. “But I thought you might like to have a review - a memento of your first performance.”

It was so sweet that he would think of her, Christine gave him an impulsive hug and led him inside. Madame was still abed, but she sat down with Raoul in the parlor and let him read the article aloud to her.

“The winds of the tropics fluttered through the Garnier like the wings of a thousand exotic birds,’” he said. Then frowned and interjected, “Well...was it more like wings or birds? That isn’t very well-worded - ”

Christine made an ‘ahem!’ noise in the back of her throat and Raoul apologized, reading on, “Ah, let me see…’The splendor of the scenery was unmatched - indeed, the sea seemed to teem with life upon the very stage, the rising and falling of the waves well-matched with Bizet’s somewhat tedious...
score -’ I can’t tell if that’s meant to be a compliment or not. Oh! No, it is, for they go on, ‘The artistic hand behind the scenery is to be commended, especially for the cunning collapse of the temple walls at the top of the third act, which was useful for waking those members of the audience who had fallen into a stupor.’ Hmm. I have the sense that the review is not overly fond of the piece…”

“I agree,” Christine nodded. “But the performances…”

“Right! Just what I wanted to tell you about,” he continued, “‘La Carlotta gave a powerful and regal performance as the queen of the island,’ ah, I think that’s an error, anyway, ‘and is a joy to watch. M. Garron and M. Dessler were interchangeable rivals for her affections, in good voice, though the rivalry was more believable than the affections. The addition of a second ballet might have pleased the late arrivals to the theatre who missed the first, but for true music connoisseurs it was an exercise in repetition. The entire plot of the show might have been condensed into one solitary act with nothing lost. The chorus decorated the scenes prettily in authentic costumes, and capable vocal performances.”

“That’s…fairly good,” Christine shrugged. Not the glowing commendations she might have dreamed of, but it was unlikely he was going to say, ‘In particular, a small blonde-haired soprano caught the ear and eye of every audience member and there was a rush to the managers’ office with cries to create a great star of this unknown talent.’

Raoul concluded, “I advise audience members to save themselves a wasted hour by planning their night at the Opéra strategically: arrive either one hour late, or quit the place entirely during the second act break. If I had the night to do over again, I would employ the latter strategy in order to enjoy the effects of the rainstorm and destruction of the temple. In his eagerness to promote French opera, M. Vaucorbeil has erred once again in his selection for a season-opener, but the talent at his disposal manages to supply for the deficiencies of their score.’ I’m sorry, I thought it read a little better when I woke this morning.”

“That’s alright,” Christine reassured Raoul. “I’ll clip it out and save it anyway! Maybe just the part about the chorus and the sets - I’ll see if I can’t get a copy for Erik. I wish I knew exactly where he was going, I’m sure his parents would like to see him so roundly praised.”

“Erik’s gone away?” Raoul asked, eyebrow raising. “Where?”

“Some little village near Rouen, to visit his family,” she replied. “He won’t tell me exactly where - it’s as if he doesn’t like to speak of his family, though I believe they’re close. I can more information from his - ah. His…particular friend.”

The phrase ‘particular friend’ seemed to pique Raoul’s interest.

“He has a paramour?” he asked, incredulity making his voice squeak up an octave on the last syllable. Then he recovered himself, blinked and cleared his throat. “I’m sorry. He has a paramour? Or…forgive me, you only said a friend. But. Ah. As a matter of…are his affections engaged?”

Christine was not entirely certain how to go about answering that - or why Raoul should be so intensely interested. “Ah…he does,” she said finally; she could be honest without being garrulous.

“Really?” he asked, his voice all skepticism. He looked a little frustrated with himself and tried again. “Really?”

“Yes,” Christine nodded.
“And...you know her?”

“...we’ve met,” she said slowly. Rapidly, Christine ran through various ways of saying, ‘I went to a dance hall with them!’ without saying that she accompanied them to a dance hall since she was not sure what Raoul would think of such an admission. His brother Philippe did not indulge in any dancing that night and he was with a dancer. Perhaps Raoul did not approve of public dancing - or perhaps he would not approve of her dancing in public. Sauce for the gander was not necessarily sauce for the goose, after all.

Explaining herself proved unnecessary - Raoul’s whole face lit up and he smiled brilliantly. “That’s good! I’m sure she’s a very understanding kind of person.”

“Mmmm,” was all Christine had to say to that, but she nodded - was Dalir understanding? Probably in some aspect of his life - he was patient and surely ‘patience’ and ‘understanding’ could be considered similar virtues. So it was not a lie.

“I’ll have to purchase a scrapbook,” Christine mused aloud, deftly changing the topic of conversation from Erik to...anything else. “I used to press flowers between the pages of my Bible, but I think pasting anything atop them would be irreligious.”

“Let me buy one for you!” Raoul said, springing up and holding out his hand, as though he intended to run off to a stationary store immediately. “A gift for your debut.”

Christine shook her head laughing, “You’ve given me so much! You bought me supper last night, wasn’t that my opening night gift?”

But Raoul insisted, “I want to get you something you’ll have forever. Something permanent. I’m sure you’ll have many more reviews to paste in the future - hopefully with more unadulterated praise.”

“If you must,” Christine said, privately feeling a little uneasy. Raoul had treated her to many meals and now he was buying her a gift on top of it all. Were the other girls in the chorus? Was he treating her - really treating her? Like Sorelli? The thought made her uncomfortable; she thought they were friends - as she told Sorelli, she preferred to be approached as a friend. And friends did things for one another equally.

The first uncomfortable thought brought out a slew of other unwelcome recollections - the gossip of Jeanette and the others, the side-entrance arrival to the Gala, Raoul being whisked away from her by his sister because others (more important than Christine, was the implication) required his attention. Raoul had been to Mamma Valerius’s home frequently, chatting and recollecting for hours - he invited himself this morning. But she had never gone to the de Chagny townhouse, nor did she suppose she would ever be invited.

“We could go now, if you’re not otherwise engaged,” Raoul said, so eagerly and he was looking at her so earnestly and sweetly - oh, how could she harbor any doubts about him when he was such a dear?

When they danced...oh, when they danced! If dancing with Erik was like dancing with a beloved family member, dancing with Raoul was like something else entirely. Nothing like she imagined dancing with a brother would be - with jokes and silly teasing the whole time. Fun, but...when Raoul had held her close her stomach flipped over in excitement and her heart began to race. She liked him so much and while she certainly had known and admired handsome men before, there was something different about Raoul. Not the color of his skin, it was more than that.

He made her feel warm and comfortable, but at the same time dizzy with excitement when she saw
him. Christine was a devotee of novels and fairy tales, but when they described a man and a woman falling in love, it was something so sudden, so like lightning! (Was that from *Romeo and Juliet*? Not the best comparison.) A great thrust of emotion and laughter and tears and heart-rending feeling. An end-of-the-world passion!

That had not been her feeling when she saw Raoul - honestly, it still wasn’t - she’d felt only great shock to see him again, then immediate horror that a renewal of their acquaintance might be distasteful to him, then immediate pleasure when he remembered her and wished to rekindle their friendship. She delighted in his company and she assumed he felt much the same. Sustained mutual affection was not really love. Was it?

All those thoughts, worries, and contradictions drifted away when she looked into his eyes. He had such depth in those eyes, such tender affection.

“I want to see Mamma Valerius rise and get ready for the day, fix her a meal,” she said. “But perhaps later this morning? Or this afternoon, you could...come back? I’m sure you’ve something else you could fill your time with.”

But Raoul sat back down in his usual chair and smiled at her, “I don’t. Tell me about the performance - did anything go amiss backstage? Did the stagehands have any rows?”

Christine chatted at length about the backstage intricacies of the performance - one of the little ballerinas did become overwhelmed when she peeped through the curtains and saw the great crowd, Meg Giry actually pointed a finger in her face and shouted at her that she was not allowed to faint - and he listened with great attention and good humor.

When Mamma called for Christine to come help her dress, she went at once and found him still sitting when the two of them came down. He rose immediately and helped Mamma to her chair, greeted her and told her how well she was looking.

Raoul was so lovely and attentive, even fixed Mamma a cup of coffee in the kitchen - milky and sweet - that Christine’s stomach flipped again, watching him, just as it had when they were dancing.

*Maybe love isn’t always a conflation, she mused. *Think of Elizabeth and Darcy! Maybe it’s a little spark that lights a great fire…*

Then again, Elizabeth did only begin to love Darcy after she saw his home, which Christine was not likely to see. A great big house in the country...it brought her thoughts back to Erik. And she wondered how his visit was getting on.

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Isaac was not sick - he did not become sick and that probably had everything to do with the fact that he hadn’t eaten in half a day. His head spun, his stomach was churning and he wanted nothing more than to run and hide himself away somewhere - the apple tree in the back garden was his preferred hiding place in childhood, but he was much too large a figure to successfully secret himself away there for hours now.

There was no question in his mind that Lisette would...betray him, though the word seemed an odd one to apply to his sister. In any case, it wasn’t as if he’d stood in her kitchen shouting, *I like to fuck men, alright! So stop trying to play matchmaker unless you have a stocky, green-eyed man with a bare upper lip hiding away with your wool petticoats!*

But he might as well have! Lisette was brilliant and though she was not a city girl, she was not an
ignorant bumpkin either. She had to have understood what he said. She’d understood, he’d seen the
dawning horror in her eyes. And she threw him out of the house.

Work! He could pretend he’d gotten a cable from the Opéra! Needed immediately, the whole stage
had just collapsed, but they had a weekend’s worth of performances to get through. No, there was
absolutely no one else they could call; all of the hammers in Paris vanished under mysterious
circumstances, but through luck and happenstance he had the only hammer left and it was up to him
to save the season!

No. Only Claude would believe him and Claude was gullible.

This was bad. This was nightmarish. This was Erik opening his veins and bleeding all over town.

If she’d just stopped, if she’d just said her piece and hadn’t kept on him...but she wouldn’t, Lisette
was like a dog with a bone when she got an idea in her head and she just wouldn’t let it go. He’d
never actually won an argument with Lisette, he just told some awful joke to either make her laugh
and forget it, or someone else told them to shut their mouths, they were ruining supper for everyone.

They had always disagreed, but never been at odds. Nearly five years younger than him, Lisette was
always more level-headed, more responsible. What their parents excused in him as an ‘artistic
temperament’ she thought was sheer flightiness. So while they often argued, they rarely fought, but
this? This might go beyond a fight.

Isaac hopped the stone wall and entered the house directly into Mémère’s room - no matter that it had
been given over to him ten years ago, that little add-on to the house would always be his
grandmother’s domain in his mind. The little bureau still had one of her shawls, knitted by her own
hand in the bottom, and he never thought to move it to give his clothes more room. It would be like
ripping the wings off of the Victory. A desecration.

Maman had unpacked his clothes and laid them across the bed, in a not so subtle bid to encourage
him to change and dress for dinner.

She said she was coming for dinner, Isaac reminded himself. She expects to see you at dinner. So
perhaps she hasn’t written you out of her life.

So he washed, put on new clothes - then lay on the bed and adopted a posture of despair. Just
because he was not fleeing for the countryside did not mean he was going to set the table and pretend
nothing had happened.

It was not as bad as it could have been, he reminded himself. Think of Dalir…

Well he remembered that miserable night. The cousin’s shout of horror upon discovering them - had
Dalir pulled him in for the kiss? Had he been the one to start? He didn’t remember clearly, just the
aftermath - every light in the house went on and Dalir’s father was on the scene first, in his slippers
and nightcap, shouting at his son in a mix of Persian and French, so that only half the conversation
was understandable.

The mother stood in the doorway and alternated between shouting and crying, the cousins were there
too, and aunts and uncles, all looking between himself and Dalir as if not sure which one to set upon
first and string them up in the town square.

But the worst was Dalir’s father, because he did not look angry at his son’s rejection of them. He
was angry, but it was deeper than that. He looked betrayed. As if he’d suddenly learned Dalir wasn’t
his son at all, but some imitator. It made Isaac think of his own father and the guilt welled up in him
again.

It was different with his family, Dalir insisted, later. He and his father had never been close - his father was tight-lipped, a quiet man, hard-working, but not given to displays of affection, physical, verbal, or otherwise.

Isaac couldn’t fathom it; he assumed all fathers - all good fathers, who lived at home, claimed their children, and provided for them - were rather like his own: jovial, given to indulging their children, free with hugs, kisses, and praise. But evidently not. Obviously he’d heard of actively terrible fathers who committed acts of violence against their spouses and offspring, or ran away, or gambled their paychecks into nothing. But he’d never encountered a neutral father before, the idea discomfited him deeply.

The door from the kitchen opened as a knock tapped against the wood.

“Maman said you were sleeping,” Papa said as he stood over the bed. “But I said, Isaac, asleep in a bed in the middle of the day? Never!”

“I am in the bed,” Isaac pointed out, smiling weakly. “But not asleep.”

Bram Astruc and his son had exactly one feature in common: their eyes. Otherwise one would be hard-pressed to find any similarities between father and son. Though his hair and beard were liberally peppered with grey, his hair was thick, light brown, very easy to manage. Not a tall man, he was strongly made with forearms bigger around than Isaac’s neck. Actually - Erik and his father did share one more common feature: the false nose was based on a cast Isaac made of his father’s own face.

Maman shook her head when she saw the end product, declare that it did not suit him, it was too large for his features. On Papa it was noble, on Isaac...well, it did not enhance. But, one could not be sure that, had Isaac been born with a more conventional face, that might have been his nose anyway, nevermind how it suited him.

Bram was handsome and strong, his son was...not. But as far as Isaac knew, his father never held it against him. He sat down on the edge of the bed and lay a hand on his head, bending to kiss his brow. “Everything alright, petit? I told Maman that I didn’t think you were resting, but I wanted a lie-down when I heard your sister’s news!”

“News?” Isaac asked. “What news?”

Papa laughed like he was trying to be funny, and ruffled his hair like Isaac was five years old. “Why about the baby! Maman said she had an awful time of it, keeping the little ones off you until Lisette could tell you herself! She was worried they’d let the cat out of the bag before you heard - Maman wanted her to send a letter, but Lisette insisted she had to tell you herself.”

The baby. Lisette had to tell him about the baby. What baby? Who was having a -

In a flash, it all became clear. Settle down. Maman and Papa getting on in years. “Ours will be friends!”

Clearly, Papa thought Isaac was being contemplative or thoughtful because he nodded, despite the fact that his son hadn’t said anything. “I know! The time just...goes. But then she is twenty-five, I don’t see it myself, but when I think about it, we had the both of you by the time Maman and I were Lisette’s age. And I think we did alright, eh? She’s got five years more experience of the world than we had when you were born, that’s an advantage.”

“Mmm,” Isaac muttered, rubbing his eyes irritably. “Let’s just hope she doesn’t have the same nasty
shock you and Maman had when I was born.”

Papa knocked him on the arm, “All first babies are shocks to their parents, no matter what they look like, it’s what I’ve always insisted! First you’re shocked that they’re here - and that they never leave!”

Stay, Lisette insisted. Don’t go back to Paris. Find a wife. Settle. Keep me company, help me, was that what she’d been trying to say? That sick feeling came back and, in the back of his mind, he thought Maman would be pleased that the cassoulet was going to remain undisturbed.

Speaking of Maman…

“Up you get,” Papa said, giving him an encouraging shove of the sort that he employed to get him up and ready for school when he was small. “The table’s laid, we’re only waiting for Lisette and David - you’ve also neglected to give Anna-Lise her present. She doesn’t mind, but Emilie thinks a great injustice has been performed.”

“Can’t have that,” Isaac muttered, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and rising abruptly, stretching the kinks out of his back. His knuckles brushed the ceiling and Papa shook his head; it was dismaying in the extreme when Isaac came back from traveling a whole six inches taller than his father. Rather ruined his delusion that Isaac would remain five years old into perpetuity.

That and the act of violence Isaac committed against his person; luckily, Papa was forgiving and assumed it was because he’d roused him from a bad dream only.

Nevermind, he’d recivilized himself and he would continue to play the part of good son and brother. He tucked in his shirt, settled his braces over his shoulder and put on his waistcoat and jacket - even a collar, tie, and cuffs (for Maman and G-d, if one could separate the two). Once he was presentable, he followed Papa into the dining room where the table was laid and everyone else had already taken their places - including Lisette and David, the former of whom did not raise her eyes to make eye contact when he came in.

David did not notice his wife’s unaccustomed shyness, rising and throwing his arms around Isaac in a bone-crushing embrace.

“Go on, go on, give me your congratulations!” he beamed. “Oncle Isaac!”

Lisette turned white and then looked up at him, her face more a rictus of horror than it had been when he’d told her Never. But Isaac smiled at David and managed a moderately enthusiastic, “Congratulations!”

Then, gathering his courage, playing at normal for the family’s sake, he walked over to Lisette’s chair, placed a hand on it and brushed his lips against her cheek for a kiss. “And you as well. Again.”

She met his eyes and one of her hands rose, to touch the one he let linger on the chair, but he moved away before she quite managed to catch him.

“And!” he said, louder, for effect, “for Tante Anna-Lise!”

It was a copy of Fleurs du Mal, a work he knew she’d borrowed from the lending library countless times, but did not own herself in her small collection.

“It’s very wicked,” he said in a stage whisper. “Don’t let little Mathilde get her hands on it!”
“Let me see!” Mathilde shouted, lunging across the table, nearly overturning the roast as she snatched it out of Anna-Lises’s hands. With great disappointment she handed it back. “Oh, I’ve read it already.”

“Isaac!” Maman exclaimed, in a stern tone. “You ought to have left it!”

Then she gestured toward the window where the sun was sinking down over the horizon.

“It’s still very orange,” Isaac argued. “Anyway, I haven’t taken my seat yet and, really, you can’t get started until everyone is seated -”

Maman bid him sit down because other people were hungry. Isaac did, taking the empty chair between Anna-Lise and Marthe. Anna-Lise smiled at him and tucked the book under her chair. It was a relief, really, to be sitting at the table even though Lisette as there and brought with her the memories of all that passed between them that afternoon; for a few blissful minutes, at least, none of that mattered.

Sabbath dinner was locked into his childhood memories as his first experience of magic - or his first idea of what magic ought to be. The world itself seemed to hush and time itself stood still as Maman gently wafted her hands over the candles, covered her face and spoke the blessing. The room seemed both immensely large and painfully small, at once both an intimate gathering of family and occasionally guests, but also enormous. Though the Jewish population of Normandy was so small that they did not have a proper synagogue at which to worship (the closest was a glorified attic in Rouen and was too far to walk for regular services) they were also connected to millions of other people scattered all over the earth by this ceremony, this ritual. Millions of ladies’ faces glowed with a divine light, as his mother’s did. Millions of ladies recited the same prayers; sometimes Isaac fancied he could hear them, like a beautiful chorus.

It reminded him of the first opera he ever saw, in a largish city in Northern Italy. Constanza’s knees were too bad to permit her to travel, but she gave himself, Joe, and Lucia money to go to town where they were performing a piece of Verdi’s called Nabucco.

They had to stand the whole time, in the back of the theatre, and Isaac was not optimistic about how the evening would turn out - especially when Lucia read the playbill and informed him that the story concerned itself with Jewish slaves. There was no standing theatre in Saint Martin, but some traveling shows came through, mostly Shakespeare. Isaac had attended frequently with his parents, but he remembered one incident - he couldn’t have been much older than five - that was an unmitigated disaster. He’d gone alone with Papa, was given a little bag of sweets to enjoy during the performance, which promised to be a long one. The Merchant of Venice.

Isaac did not have time to become bored enough to eat a single sweet; Shylock the money-lender appeared, grotesque, hunch-backed, sporting an enormous red beard and great big false nose that practically touched his chin. The actor limped around the stage, speaking in a strange accent, gutteral, like he was hacking the words out from deep in his throat, spitting all over the stage. At first, the crowd recoiled in disgust. Then, gradually, they started to laugh.

Papa picked him up, like a baby, but Isaac did not protest as he carried him out of the little auditorium, leaving his sweets behind; he’d never seen his father look so angry and he wracked his brain as they went home, wondering what he’d done wrong.

They were on the street when Papa set him on his feet. He knelt down, took Isaac by both shoulders and said, “There are many people in this world who, in ignorance or stupidity or worse think they can tell you what a Jew is. You don’t listen to them, understand, petit? Don’t ever let anyone else tell
you who you are."

Isaac hadn’t understood at the time, but he remembered his father’s words, and most of all the look on his face: fury. Fury and wounded pride.

Even before the curtain rose, he was sure he would hate Nabucco. He was ready for all of it, the greedy, beady-eyed wretches speaking with an odd dialect, wearing stage makeup designed to make them appear like goblins. He wondered whether or not it would be worth it to storm out and waste Constanza’s money - but the opera began and all those things he feared never came to pass.

The actors were wearing robes, it was not a lavish production, the set was a bare stage and painted backdrop, but not a one spoke with an odd inflection and - incredible! - the Jews, though victims throughout, triumphed in the end. And when he heard ‘Va pensiero,’ he shocked both his companions by openly weeping. He even took the mask off, unseen in the dark, to wipe his face. He didn’t speak a word of Italian, but he understood the song: they wanted to go home.

It was a transformative experience. Magical. Not the same magic of his mother’s table, or his legardemain, but magic all the same. No wonder he couldn’t resist the lure of the stage. Not when it could do that, with sets and costumes and music.

The present imposed upon his memories with a sudden force - Papa was reciting blessings for the children and, just like that night at the opera when he was sixteen, Isaac felt unbidden tears, pricking at his eyes. He took a steadying breath. Some of the magic had gone out of the night; he felt like an underprepared actor, meant to be in a scene that he hadn’t memorized the lines for.

Beside him, Anna-Lise nudged him, trying to get a look at his face, her expression concerned. Behave yourself, he reminded himself. He blinked the tears away and managed a smile for her. She looked away, not appearing to find his performance convincing.

The blessing over the wine could not come soon enough. But Isaac got through it and quickly everyone was eating and drinking. He managed an entire glass of wine, once that was consumed he was able to pick over his supper which, he noted distantly, was delicious. The food he ever ate with any enthusiasm (apart from pain au chocolat) came from his mother’s kitchen.

There was no further discussion about David and Lisette’s news - it was considered bad luck in their household to make too great a fuss about expecting a child (the first time David met Isaac, he joked that maybe the reason his face turned out poorly was because his parents were too chatty about expecting a beautiful son; he apologized after Lisette shouted at him, but ever since Isaac had thought him boorish). Anyway, his parents had seven; one was positively underwhelming. But the topic of babies was in the air because all the little ones started prodding their parents for childhood stories, first about little Lisette and then (because little Lisette and big Lisette were both awfully similar and too rational to have any truly grand capers to their name) about little Isaac.

“Oh, no,” Isaac groaned. “Let’s not tell any little Isaac stories. They’re always either about my having been very naughty or my having been very ill.”

“Tell the story about the time Isaac was brought home by the priest!” Claude piped up like the nasty little traitor he was.

“Ooh, because he’d broke a window to get into the church!” Emilie added.

“That is not - that is not what happened,” Isaac insisted. “It was...it wasn’t that bad.”

“Ha!” Maman laughed. “Oh, no, not bad at all - only I woke up at one o’clock in the morning,
having just gotten a colicky baby to sleep, to find the parish priest, and my eldest son on the
doorstep! All while I assumed he was in bed!”

The story had been told about a thousand times, but the children never tired of hearing it and Maman
never tired of telling it - how she had just gotten Anna-Lise to sleep and she was so looking forward
to bed and she was comfortable and drifting off and having wonderful dreams when suddenly there
was a knock on the door.

Père Mansart stood there, having just gotten in from a trip to visit family, and who did he have in his
grasp, but Isaac! Six-and-a-half year old Isaac. The same child she’d ordered to bed five hours
before; he was wearing his nightshirt and slippers when the priest found him. Père Mansart said the
little fellow had developed a fascination with the church’s organ and that he was welcome to come
and play any time during daylight hours, when he could be supervised.

It was mortifying at the time, but now everyone thought it tremendously funny. All but Isaac who
avoided the church for a few days afterward, not out of a sense of shame, but because his bottom
was still too sore to sit down upon the organ’s bench.

“I still don’t understand how you got out,” Papa shook his head. “And with all the doors still
locked.”

“I climbed down the tree,” Isaac told him, abolishing a twenty year old silence; it was hardly the
biggest secret he’d let out of the bag tonight and the wine loosed his tongue. “You know, the one the
branches had to be trimmed back from because they kept tapping on the windows.”

“That was years later - you helped me trim them,” Papa reminded him. “You couldn’t have...when
you were six! How did you reach?”

“I jumped,” he shrugged, quaffing more wine.

Maman made a kind of choking sound. “You are very fortunate that I’ve only just found this out,”
she informed him. “And that you sleep beside the kitchen now - otherwise it’d be bars on the
windows for you! Honestly, Isaac, did you not think of the danger?”

“Clearly not,” he replied succinctly. “Otherwise I wouldn’t have done it - I wouldn’t do it now.”

“But you’d have an easier time getting into the tree now,” Emilie replied reasonably. “So perhaps
you ought to. Only I don’t think you should break any more of Père Mansarts windows.”

“I didn’t break the window!” Isaac protested, as he always did. “I told you, Papa and the men were
fixing the sanctuary, I wiggled in through some loose stonework, I hardly disturbed anything - ”

“Except the neighbor’s sleep,” Anna-Lise pointed out.

“Oh, you’re one to talk,” Isaac pointed out. “I wasn’t the one who had colic - ”

“No, you were the one who turned blue the first time you had a cold!” Maman exclaimed.
“Frightened me so much!”

“It wasn’t as bad as the time he had the measles,” Papa began and Isaac put his face in his hands.
From naughtiness to illness. Right on schedule.

Lisette and David excused themselves early; uncharacteristically, she’d not chimed in on any of
the little Isaac stories, as she was wont to do, but she did give him his customary kiss when they parted.
She even squeezed his shoulder, which was not customary, but he had no idea what she did it.
He helped clear the table, stumbling around in the dark kitchen. Ordinarily, Henri Vincent stopped by after dinner to see if the stove needed re-lighting or to ask if they would like a lamp left burning before they went to bed, but he had not appeared.

No matter, Isaac wanted to go straight to bed - he was still not convinced it wouldn't be better for him to go straight to Paris. The wine helped; dulled his thoughts enough that they flitted around like butterflies in his mind, too many and too fragile to catch and keep and he wasn't dextrous enough to pin them, like Mathilde and her butterflies.

Isaac fell on the bed, having only taken his boots off. Drifting off, he thought he heard Verdi playing, somewhere, quietly, as he fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

The Astruc family section just gets longer and longer (probably because there are so damn many of them!) I even have an entire Anna-Lise section ready to go (oh yeah, the girl who literally got two lines of dialogue this chapter!) but I worry that I'm meandering. I just love domestic stuff so much. And one little addition: a side-fic for anyone who's curious about Erik and his father's little "act of violence" after Erik came home (Erik was WAY more traumatized than Papa, Bram was just upset that he was so freaking tall) http://madamefaust.tumblr.com/post/165235604992/coming-home-ii-a-strange-sweet-sound-ficlet
Those Unsent Letters

Chapter Notes

There isn't going to be a traditional 'unmasking' in this fic, but I thought it needed one anyway! So: Erik/Dalir flashback time it is!

Warning for: discussion of antisemitism.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Paris without Erik was not a Paris entirely devoid of charm or excitement, but it was a Paris without Erik and so some of the life of the city was drained away, as far as Dalir was concerned.

He’d never regarded himself as a particularly sentimental fellow, nor a romantic (either small ‘r’ or capital ‘R’). He didn’t go in for poetry, only occasionally read novels and while he liked to dance, he didn’t have a ear for music. While touring the museums, he could appreciate whether or not the subject of a painting was beautiful, but he had no ability to assess the skill of the artist who made it so, and his opinion was the same about architecture - one flying buttress looked very like another, after all.

It was different when he was with Erik, Erik could talk your ear off about any number of subjects. It ought to have been annoying, but for Dalir, it enhanced an outing (generally, but if he went on too long, a kiss went a long way toward shutting him up). But he did not have Erik now and the color of the world dimmed slightly.

He didn’t shut himself up in the flat like a recluse, he wasn’t made that way. He made his deliveries, earned his salary, went out occasionally at night to those haunts where being Erik’s lover got him in the doors and sometimes a round of drinks and conversations with those employees and guests he was friendly with. He and René even spent an evening at a biergarten together, splitting a plate of schnitzel (René at the meat and Dalir the noodles). He wasn’t bereft, but he wasn’t having much fun either.

When he made his way toward Christine Daaé’s little church, he wondered whether or not she would join him for breakfast without Erik - the two of them were far better friends, at least they spent more time together - but she grinned when she saw him and hastened her pace.

“Good morning!” she said cheerfully, opening her arms for a friendly embrace. “I wasn’t sure you’d come to meet me, with Erik out of town, how are you?”

“Fine,” Dalir answered honestly, marveling over what a singular girl she was. Erik certainly knew how to choose his friends; not every little girl, straight from the conservatory would stumble upon two men, locked in a reckless embrace and only ask whether or not her shopping trip was going forward as planned. “Breakfast?”

Christine agreed and took his arm as they walked down the street to their usual cafe. Clare was there and frowned a their approach.

“Where’s Erik?” she rudely asked, looking at Dalir as though he’d done something wrong.

“He’s gone to the country to visit family,” Dalir explained, not particularly liking her tone. Clare’s
skepticism increased at that; as though he told her Erik was off to the North Pole to catch a polar bear. “Coffee and tea, please - as usual?”

Christine nodded, “Only I’m paying. And don’t say a word! You and Erik have been very kind to me, but I can’t have...I’d like to pay.”

Dalir sensed there was a little more to Christine’s insistence than a swell of generosity, but he chose not to comment; he was not as close a friend as Erik was to her and though she tolerated impertinence from Erik well enough, he might not be treated to the same favor.

He asked her about the Opéra - having seen the show in rehearsals, he had little desire to pay for a seat - and she told him that the production was going very well, from her perspective.

“If you were to make that leap of imagination, you’d be surprised just how well it’s going,” she informed him, brightly. “It wasn’t...altogether complimentary, the reviewer was not fond of the opera, but he had lovely things to say about the set! I saved the clipping so I can show it to Erik when he comes back. I meant to get another copy so that he might send it to his parents, but I wasn’t able to.”

“I can’t even imagine Erik having parents,” Clare interjected, arriving with their meal. “I thought he was one of those lonely artist types, you know? I thought having a family was too bourgeois for him!”

“You can be an artist and visit your parents,” Dalir pointed out.

“No a proper one!” Clare insisted, but there was another table that required her attention so she could not remain and debate the matter.

“I think it’s lovely,” Christine said, after she left. “That he sees his family so often. I think, if you’re fortunate enough to have family living nearby, that you ought to visit as much as you can. Don’t you agree?”

Dalir took a long sip of his coffee to put off having to speak. “I don’t know how to reply,” he said finally. “You’ll think me very neglectful. My parents don’t live half a mile from here and I haven’t spoken to them in a year.”

“Oh!” Christine turned all over red and her hands flew to her face. “Oh! In general...in general. I was speaking in general and not...in particular. Obviously there are many reasons why one might not speak to one’s family, many good reasons - which you don’t have to tell me!”

She looked so distressed that Dalir reached out and patted her knee - earning him a suspicious look from Clare, which he ignored.

“No, I don’t mind...actually, you might well guess,” he said, frowning as he remembered that stupid night, so long ago in time, but still fresh in his mind. “For you happened upon a similar...scene as they did, but you were much nicer about it.”

What a lot of fuss! Dalir’s blood still boiled when he remembered Hamid shrieking from the upstairs window that Dalir was fucking a man in the street. The little rat was prone to lies, always had been, but that was going above and beyond his usual fibs.

Of course the whole house woke up. Of course everyone had to rush onto the street to do - what, exactly? Nothing except wake the neighborhood with shouts and wails about how disgusting he was, what a little shit he was, how he never cared about his family, what would all of his deceased relatives think?
Dalir couldn’t be bothered to think of his deceased relatives when his living relatives were being so damned loud.

And, of course, Baba had to chime in with every single slight Dalir had ever paid him in the whole of his life: his ingratitude, his disrespect, his breaking his parents’ hearts!

It might have meant more if he hadn’t given him the exact same speech when he announced he’d gotten an apprenticeship at a bakery. To Dalir’s father, breaking with the family business and fucking a man in the street amounted to rather the same thing on the scale of things that made Dalir a bad son.

“Oh,” Christine said, her burning face turned down to look at her fidgeting hands. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s what Erik said,” Dalir sighed. Poor Erik! To his day, he thought the whole sorry mess was his fault - no matter how many times Dalir told him that it was just a straw stacked on the back of an overburdened camel. “If it wasn’t…that, it would have been something else. From my perspective...better to cut ties over something - someone - important.”

Christine smiled at that and looked back up at him. “However did you find each other?”

What a funny girl she was. Asking such a simple question, as though they were just like other people. He was sure most girls - even the most tolerant and understanding - would have avoided the topic entirely, content to forget what it was they knew. But not Christine! Yes, Erik did have exquisite taste.

“I rather dogged him,” Dalir confessed. “Followed him about - I heard him playing the piano and singing at a bistro I was making a delivery to.”

“Oh,” Christine said, with deep comprehension. “You heard him sing.”

Dalir smiled; unlike her, he didn’t have a musical bone in his body, but even in his ignorance, he knew Erik was extraordinary.

“He had me fooled, like Clare,” he continued. “I thought him some very grand artistic type and never imagined he’d take any particular notice of me or want me for a...friend. But he didn’t seem bothered. He didn’t act as though it was odd, for me to pop up all over the place. He just chatted with me and teased me as if he’d known me for years, he seemed quite at ease.”

Christine laughed at that and replied that was exactly how Erik had treated her when she first met him. “I thought he was cheeky, but I liked him.”

“Me too,” Dalir agreed. “He’s not to everyone’s taste, but I’ve noticed that what friends he has are very loyal - René quit his job at this little theatre where he and Erik met so he could follow him to the Opéra. No guarantee of employment, but he liked him and that was that. Erik’s loyal in his turn...a little absurdly so, but that’s his way.”

Loyal and generous, but it was not easy to become his intimate friend. Talking of him this way, it was so easy to get lost in the memories. Dalir played the part of tag-along for a month before Erik actually told him anything true about himself, anything that mattered. And that was only after he first saw his face.

The first day they met, Dalir asked about it. And Erik told him that he wore it because he was tremendously ugly, which Dalir disbelieved at first, assuming the mask was just a bit of theatricality.

For Erik always wore the mask when he performed. To be fair, the features that he could make out did not suggest a face that was classically handsome. A sliver of pale brow above a long, narrow
face with a very pointy chin and lips that were practically non-existent. So perhaps he was not good-looking, but Dalir still thought of the mask as an artistic statement in those early days, some kind of what is an individual? question that might be asked by a group of intellectuals at one o’clock in the morning while they were taking turns at the absinthe spoon. But he started to suspect that Erik had been entirely honest with him from the first for he never took it off.

Not when it was hot at sticky and he was visibly sweating. Not when they went to dinner together and he had to cut his food into small pieces or tilt his head all the way back to sip his wine to avoid staining it. No artist was that dedicated. Nor could an ordinary sort of ugliness require that level of care. And so Dalir assumed that it actually covered something, an injury or an accident of birth.

But after that first morning, he never asked about it again. It seemed rude and honestly? He’d ceased to notice it, for the most part. Erik himself was what fascinated him, his humor, his endless pools of talent - oh, yes, in addition to being a musician, he was a designer! An artist! A magician! And all of twenty-seven years old. All Dalir managed to accomplish in the same amount of time was learning to make bread.

Erik was somewhat astonishing to behold, but Dalir only ever beheld him. He talked about his work. He talked about his tastes. But about himself? Nothing. Never had Dalir met someone who could talk and talk, yet reveal so little about himself. He’d been abroad - Italy and Germany, mostly, some years before and he had a vague sense that he’d performed in some capacity. He was not from Paris originally and might have apprenticed as a carpenter, but again, that was unclear.

By contrast, Dalir felt his life was an open book. Erik knew the names of his family members, how they lived, where they lived, what they did, heard all about the petty squabbles, the more serious fights, everyone’s little lives for Dalir had nothing else to talk about when they met. He had no grand adventures and little taste. He offered Erik nothing but companionship and how companionable could they be when so much of Erik’s life was a mystery?

When the mask came off, it seemed like an entire wall came down between them, but first the mask had to come off. Dalir asked Erik why - for it was Erik who brought up removing it - and he explained that he’d come to see Dalir as a friend. And he’d never hidden himself from a friend before.

They had been walking by the river on an autumn night, having left a cabaret just as the chahut dancers came on to fling their skirts around and show their asses to the paying customers. Erik’s portion in the festivities were over and neither he nor Dalir had any desire to watch the dancers.

“We could have stayed for the show, if you wanted,” Erik said, breath misting on the chill air.

Dalir shook his head, “The ladies on our block hang their underthings on the lines outside their windows to dry them, I’ve seen enough drawers to last me a lifetime.”

Erik laughed and tucked his hands into his pockets - they did not touch much, in those days, but the few times their fingers brushed, Dalir noticed that Erik’s were always cold. He was wearing just a thin jacket, having no overcoat to ward off the chill. His thin neck was exposed as well, so Dalir unwrapped the scarf round his own neck and handed it over; he had a little more padding than Erik did to keep the cold from his bones.

“Thank you,” Erik said, a strange quiver in his voice, like he was touched by the gesture, though Dalir didn’t think it was anything extraordinary, just a small kindness due a friend. Once it was wrapped around his neck, Erik stopped his long strides and stood by the banks of the river; it was a quiet stretch and almost picturesque; the weather had turned cold enough that no stink rose from the water. “So. You’ve had your fill of ladies’ negligee - ”
“I’d hardly call it negligee - ”

“But...you haven’t seen me. Aren’t you...curious?”

Dalir looked up at him, trying to read his expression; he fancied it was a talent he’d recently developed. The twist in his mouth was nothing like a smile, he realized. His eyes were fixed on him intently and his long fingers played with the ends of the scarf so much that Dalir worried he might unravel the thing in his...nervousness. Erik was nervous.

“Not...really,” Dalir confessed. He wouldn’t say he was curious, he didn’t want to see Erik’s face of out some detached scientific interest. His only interest in Erik’s face was the fact that it was Erik’s face. And he would have liked to really see his friend. “But, if you’d like to show me, I’d be happy to see it. Or should I pay a fee?”

That nervous little twitch of the mouth became more strained. Erik rubbed the brow of the mask like it really was a part of his skin.

“I’ve been led to believe that I deserve one,” he said ruefully, with a helpless shrug. “It is my face after all. The only one I’ve ever had, but...yes. I’ve been told it’s...noteworthy.”

“By...who? Your family?” Dalir asked, and Erik’s eyes went wide, his mouth parted, he was alarmed that he’d offended him accidentally, but then he swallowed and shook his head. No, never by them.

Erik went oddly quiet, his gaze drifting down the stare at the road, gone shy all of a sudden. Dalir took the initiative and fished around in his pockets until he found a copper coin. He reached out to Erik’s chest and pushed his jacket aside so that he could place the little coin into the upper pocket of his waistcoat. And then, unnecessarily smoothed the label down where he’d mussed it slightly.

“There you are,” Dalir said finally, shoving his hands in his own pockets, not because he was cold, but because he didn’t trust them not to wander further. “Your fee. I hope I get my money’s worth.”

Erik met his eyes - he almost smiled. And, after a quick glance left and right to be sure they were alone, he untied the mask and slipped it off his face.

Dalir had no idea what his own expression looked like - he hoped it didn’t look too shocked - but he was certainly taken aback. He was expecting there to be a nose, after all. Which he did not think was an unreasonable assumption.

But that was not to be - a detached part of his mind observed that this must be a deformity present at birth. Whatever the cause, it was apparent Erik had not been burned, not been mauled or injured in some battle, this was simply...his face.

And what a face. It followed the contours of the mask generally, but his cheeks were more gaunt that he previously supposed them to be. Everything about the face was sharp and bony, from the ridge of his brow, which protruded more than Dalir thought was typical, to his cheekbones which might not have seemed so very odd was his face not so thin and drawn. The skin itself lacked much in the way of padding, and it was thin - calloused and sore along the cheeks and brow, where the mask rubbed against it. It was very pale, in those days before the false nose, when he never went about uncovered in daylight; lacking that odd, yellowish hue it sometimes acquired from sunlight.

And the absence of a nose which was the most disturbing thing - like his face had been trying for one and given up halfway, there was a little snubbed bit of flesh, which might be useful if Erik ever needed glasses someday, but the rest was just...gone. A black hole with a ridge of flesh and bone
down the middle. Like a skeleton’s face - if Erik closed his eyes and stood very still, in the shadows created by the streetlights, he might have been a standing corpse.

But his eyes were open and his fingers twisted the mask nervously. The motion drew Dalir’s eyes and he let out a breath.

“...I was expecting a nose,” Dalir admitted, his voice a little shaky. He looked up again, forced himself to. Erik’s eyebrows - meant to be thick and black, but worn away in patches from the pressure of the mask - contracted. And Dalir’s only thought was how much easier it would be now, to see what he was thinking.

“Most people are,” Erik agreed, quietly, then he frowned when he saw Dalir’s hand coming toward him. He stiffened - did he think Dalir was going to strike him?

But Dalir was only retrieving his coin from Erik’s pocket. The eyebrows drew down - yes, he really had the most expressive eyebrows Dalir had ever seen - and he looked confused; how funny that Dalir should now understand what Erik was thinking, but Erik should not know what Dalir was thinking.

He resolved to put Erik’s mind at ease, “You’re not the most conventional-looking fellow I’ve ever seen, but I don’t think I ought to pay. If I give you money every time I see you now, I’ll be selling the shirt off my back inside a week.”

The eyebrows raised and then he smiled. It didn’t make his face look any more handsome, but he did look relieved and that was just as good as far as Dalir was concerned.

But all that was in the past and he’d not relate that portion of the tale to Christine. What would it profit her to know?

Instead, he told her what came after - they spent more time together, got to know each other. One night, Erik asked if Dalir might like to come with him somewhere a little more...eccentric than the usual haunts.

“It’s a dancing hall that serves many different people,” Dalir said slowly, raising his eyebrows to encourage Christine to hear what he was not saying. “But the purpose is...specific. Geared toward men and women with certain preferences. Singular preferences.”

Her brow furrowed, then cleared. “Ah! I think I understand.”

Dalir nodded, “I’d...been to some myself, but not that one. It was owned by two women who kept a very respectable place - they still do. Anyway, once we got in, it was like any other dance hall. There’s just some additional negotiating over who will lead.”

Christine smiled like they were sharing a secret, “Erik told me his sister always insisted on leading…”

Chuckling, Dalir shrugged, “It’s a lesson that serves him well. Sometimes.”

She settled back into her chair and they breakfasted amiably, he asked a few questions about the Gala, since Erik had been in too much of a hurry the day he left to give him details. He was deeply amused to learn that they left the party half-way through and amused themselves playing the piano and singing, only to find themselves locked in.

“We need to have another night out, when Erik comes back,” Christine insisted as they left the cafe. “Perhaps...perhaps Raoul might accompany us. If we don’t go anywhere too eccentric.”
Dalir agreed that they should and told her he’d never spoken to a Vicomte before, so that would be something different. He walked her home and waited until she was inside the house before he went back to his own diggings. Christine and her Vicomte. He wondered if the gentleman would agree to such a scheme - after all, whatever residual fondness he might feel for Christine, they were no longer ten and twelve anymore. Privately, he thought that if the Vicomte’s feelings were what they should be, he ought to have told his sister to mind her own business at the Gala and danced as much as he chose with Christine.

*She’s such a sweet girl,* he thought with a final glance at the house. *Such a good girl. She does not deserve to have her heart broken.*

The usual Sunday routine was that, after their breakfast, they would walk around, usually find themselves at a park or a museum, assuming one dared the disapprobation of the Church and remained open. But Erik wasn’t here and the usual routine didn’t satisfy. Dalir found himself back in the flat - he wasn’t so dizzy-headed over Erik’s absence that the place seemed *larger,* but it was emptier.

If they were ordinary lovers, Dalir might have written him a letter. *Breakfasted with Christine, she told me about your evening, the city is dull without you.* But they were not ordinary. If Dalir was whimsical, he might write it anyway, sign it with a girl’s name, something painfully French, but he was not whimsical by nature. He left that to Erik.

He’d only be gone another week or so - two if he stayed for the holidays, which Dalir had every expectation that he would.

Lying down on the bed, he instead sent a thought out into the universe, the ending of the letter he would never write.

*Hope you’re enjoying yourself. Don’t stay away too long. I might start to miss you.*

Absence was meant to make the heart fonder for a place left behind, but as ever when he was in the country, Isaac only became more comfortable with the place. He breakfasted with the family, walked the little ones to school, paid social calls in the neighborhood - sampled, in short, that ordinary life that Lisette was so fond of.

As to the matter of Lisette, they had not reconciled since their spat that first evening. When all the family was together - which was often - they spoke around one another, through other people. Kissed upon meeting, kissed upon parting, but did not really converse. If anyone else in the family noticed something was off, they did not comment - it was only Isaac and Lisette being difficult with one another and it would pass.

He actually wound up spending far more time in David’s company than his sister’s, due to his habit of accompanying his father to his work when he was in town, though that too was altered.

“Come later in the afternoon - the foreman never stays the whole day through,” Papa told him. “It’ll be easier to avoid him, I think.”

Naturally he asked why, but Papa only shrugged and said that M. Laurent had recently given up gambling and rediscovered his faith - better for his pocketbook and his wife’s sakes, but a little tedious for the men. David elaborated the following Saturday afternoon when they were waiting in the sitting room for sunset so Isaac could play his violin.
“He started griping about our taking too many Saturdays off - we’ve always done before, no complaining since we’ll work Sundays,” he explained.

“Oh, don’t start,” Lisette sighed, referring to Isaac without actually talking to him in this tenuous truce they had. “You’ll only upset him.”

“Well, he asked and it’s common enough knowledge,” David retorted, turning back to his brother-in-law. “Then he got it in his head that our employment was up for debate - you know, step a toe out of line and I’ll look up some edict from a thousand years ago that says Jews can’t work in the trades in Normandy. I think he’s full of a lot of hot air, but...eh. I just keep my head down and get my work done.”

“It’s all we can do,” Papa interjected. “It’s that new priest who’s taken over the parish while Père Mansart is away, caring for his mother. He’s got all sorts of ideas about hastening the end times - ‘until the conversion of the Jews’ and all that. Making the world perfect for the second coming.”

“No one in town much minds him,” Anna-Lise added, since some of Isaac’s fury must have shown all over his face. “And those who do...well, they weren’t all that pleasant to begin with.”

There was a world of difference between unpleasant and outright hostile. Isaac had seen the change when he worked for the fair that last year. Sure, there were towns that thought those such as himself ought not put themselves on display - or ought not have been born. And they made their displeasure known by not putting their money toward such entertainment, perhaps writing strongly worded letters to the mayor. But, when times were lean or people were frightened or angry, they made their displeasure known in other ways. More than once he’d been attacked, punched in the face, kicked or spat upon, simply because a man didn’t like the look of him. Didn’t like him coming to town, taking their money when real men, who worked real jobs hardly made enough to keep soul and body together. What right did Isaac have to exist when these men struggled so?

“And there’s nothing you can do about it from Paris anyway,” Lisette said, addressing him directly for the first time in days. “So don’t worry about it. That wretched man will leave and it’ll all come to nothing.”

“And don’t worry about any of us converting,” David grinned. “If that’s what they talk about at their services - hellfire and bothering your neighbors and don’t drink, don’t swear, don’t fool around with…”

He trailed off when he realized the eyes of the little ones were all on him.

“Ah,” David cleared his throat. “Anyway. I’d rather not join up.”

“Is it properly dark yet?” Claude asked, bored of the adults’ talk, peering out the sitting room curtains. “If Shabbos is over, Isaac can play his violin!”

Maman closed her eyes and sighed, deeply. “It’s not a punishment, Claude, it’s a gift! You’re not meant to watch the sky, waiting for it to be over!”

But religious idealism, though perfectly well and good, was no match for a child impatient for their elder brother to play his song.

“But I want to hear the Claude song!” he said. “It’s the best one!”

Isaac had composed little ditties in his head for all the children. Never written down, his brother and sisters could only hear them when he was come to town with his violin, which he was not permitted to tune until the sky was, as Claude said, ‘properly dark.’
“Isaac’s played the Claude song,” Marthe reminded him, patiently. “Over and over. All week.”

“Yes, but not since Thursday,” Claude complained. “I want to hear it again!”

Without a glance outside, Isaac picked up his bow and applied the rosin. It kept his hands busy so that his mind would not be occupied with thoughts that would do his family no good or credit. Like taking a little walk to the rectory under cover of darkness and giving the good father a piece of his mind.

It happened quite suddenly; he happened to raise his head to find Lisette staring at him. No words had to pass between them, he perfectly understood the look in her eyes *don’t do anything rash.*

And so he would not. Because his sister asked.

“I’ll play the Claude song,” Isaac promised. “But...I think I’ve neglected the Lisette song.”

Claude groaned and threw himself backward onto the rug, a parody of suffering, but everyone ignored him. The Lisette song was one of the first he’d ‘composed’ (was it composing if you didn’t write it down?), a relatively simple barcarole. It was one of the only times he’d ever seen Lisette genuinely *flattered;* it was one thing to give a compliment, and another entirely to write a song for someone.

She watched him the whole time, face impassive at first, but slowly becoming more and more filled with emotions. Her chin screwed up as if she was trying not to cry and when Isaac finished, David turned toward her with a smile and said, “Beautiful.”

“Excuse me,” she stood suddenly and hastened from the room.

Everyone turned to look after her and Anna-Lise got up to follow her - from the sound it appeared she’d gone straight into the back garden.

Well. All but one watched her go.

“Oh, now she’s gone, you can play the Claude song,” Claude said brightly, sitting up in expectation. Isaac stared after Lisette a beat longer, but obliged his brother.

It was only after the Claude song, the Emilie song, the Marthe song, *and* the Mathilde song that he could excuse himself from the sitting room. Lisette and Anna-Lise still were not returned.

He heard them before he saw them; the night was mild and Maman left one of the windows in the kitchen open. The house was entirely dark, since no one had been able to light the lamps yet.

“But if you’ll only tell me what’s the matter,” he head Anna-Lise saying, “then I might be able to sort it! You and Isaac row all the time, I don’t see what could possibly have happened -”

“It’s my fault!” Lisette exclaimed, sounding more upset than Isaac ever heard her. “I’ve done something terrible - I’ve *been* terrible.”

“But how?” Anna-Lise asked, some of her patience draining from her voice. “You haven’t told me anything!”

Silence. Then:

“Anna-Lise. Has someone ever told you something - something *important* - something...and you just...had the worst possible response? An unforgivable response?”
“Ah…” Anna-Lise paused, apparently wracking her brain. “No. I can’t say that I have.”

“Well, I did. Isaac told me - he said...oh! I shouldn’t have needled him so much. Oh, I can’t tell you, it isn’t for me to tell! It wasn’t for me to pry it out of him either, but I did! He’ll never forgive me.”

“This isn’t like you,” there was a rustling of fabric, Anna-Lise had moved closer to Lisette, probably. “I’m sure whatever it was, it wasn’t as bad as you think. Isaac loves you - he played your song!”

“Exactly! But what did he mean? Was it an olive branch? Or did he play it to say, ‘Good-bye, Lisette, I never want to speak to you again?’”

“...I don’t think it was that.”

Lisette let out a growl of frustration and Isaac inched closer to the window. She was sitting on the bench by the kitchen garden where Maman usually shelled peas. Anna-Lise was behind her with an arm around her shoulders.

“He was trying to tell me something important,” Lisette muttered. “And I botched it! I wouldn’t hear him. I sent him away.”

“Come, can’t you tell me a little?” Anna-Lise pressed. “I promise, once it’s out, it won’t seem that bad.”

“Isaac won’t settle - he can’t - ” Lisette began, then stopped, face still hidden in her hands. “I was...badgering him. About how he ought to come home and...do what everyone does. Find a wife. But he can’t. Never, he said. He’d never marry a girl.”

“He’d never - ” Anna-Lise started, confused, then she paused. Her mouth parted a little and she seemed to find some hidden insight. “Oh. Well...of course not. Of course not, not...Isaac. And he told that...that there would never be a girl for him. That he wouldn’t ever fancy a girl - ”

“That’s what I said!” Lisette snapped, head rising. “And I told him to get out of my house!”

“You might apologize,” Anna-Lise suggested. Sweet girl; she thought any conflict could be worked out with clear heads and kind words. “Tell him that you’re sorry you were abrupt with him, that you...wish you’d responded differently and you love him very much - ”

Lisette looked at her sister as though she’d lost her mind. “I can’t say that! That sounds like nothing I would say, it’s something you would say if you ever caused offense to anyone, which you never have! If I said that to him he would know you’d told me to.”

Anna-Lise sighed lightly, “But does it matter if you mean it?”

Lisette had no reply to make.

“You still love him, don’t - ”

“Of course I do!”

“And...you don’t really - you didn’t really want to send him away, did you?”

“No,” Lisette replied firmly. “I was only...taken aback. I’m not so even-tempered as you are. I thought - oh, I don’t know what I thought! I imagined things, nice things. Things that can’t happen.”

Isaac was about to reveal himself, to walk in, all smiles as though he’d rushed from the sitting room, insisting they come back inside because Anna-Lise hadn’t had her composition yet and it was getting
“I don’t want him to be lonely,” Lisette said softly. “I worry about him, all alone in that huge city. He never...he never talks about anyone when he writes to us. He only ever asks after us. What if he doesn’t have anyone? What if he’s just alone with his work and our letters?”

“I can’t answer that,” Anna-Lise said honestly. “You have to ask him yourself - come. Let’s go back inside. It’s getting late and you ought to see him before you go home.”

That was his cue - but Isaac was glued to the spot.

*Move!* he ordered himself. *Move!*

But he was still lurking by the open window when Lisette and Anna-Lise come back in - and jumped a mile when they saw him standing in the blackness of the house.

“What do you mean, frightening us like that!” Lisette shouted, smacking his arm with no small amount of force. “Honestly, Isaac you...you...how long were you standing there?”

“Long enough,” he said, looking down at her very seriously. “I don’t...there’s nothing to forgive, Lisette. I was never angry. And I certainly wasn’t playing you a good-bye song, I’d never do that.”

“Never,” she repeated, the significance of the word not lost on her.

“Never,” he echoed. Somewhere in the exchange, Anna-Lise sidled off to the sitting room, leaving them alone. “I’m...I really am sorry to disappoint you.”

“Oh!” she threw her hands up and shook her head. “I’ve been disappointed before. Just...oh, just come here, won’t you? You’re too absurdly tall, it’s just awful when I want to kiss you.”

He obliged her and bent down. She hugged him firmly over his shoulders and kissed his cheek, crushing him tight to her.

“I love you very much,” she whispered into his ear. “You great, tall, disappointing *idiot*.”

Isaac hugged her back and kissed her hair - aha! *There* was his sister, finally. When they went back into the sitting room, Papa looked up and laughed. “There you are! We were about to sent someone to fetch you. Go on - I think Anna-Lise is owed a song, then it’s off to bed, for the little ones!”

“I’ll play you a song,” Isaac agreed. He licked his lips and paused - would he be courting trouble? He’d had quite enough of Erik visiting Saint Martin over the past week. But...Lisette could not be the only one to wonder whether or not he was too much on his own in Paris. And he never wanted to worry them. “But afterward...did I tell you all about a Gala at the Opéra I attended? In evening dress! And I was locked in and had to escape out an open window?”

“No!” Claude shouted, whipping around and exclaiming to his parents, “I can’t *possibly* go to sleep until I’ve heard!”

“Neither can I!” Emilie insisted.

“Where did you get evening clothes?” Mathilde asked.

“What is a Gala?” David inquired.
“Was it like a ball?” Marthe chimed in.

“Why are you forever escaping out of windows?” Maman asked despairingly.

Lisette laughed, “Play the song, Isaac. Quick as you can - sorry, Anna! But I want to hear this story as much as anyone and it is very late.”

Isaac grinned and looked at his father who shrugged helplessly. “Go on, make them happy.”

And he did.

Chapter End Notes

We're going to fast-forward through the High Holy Days - it's back to Paris in the next chapter (but don't worry, if you like Erik's family, they'll be back!) And to give some perspective on the new priest in town, the guy is a jerk, but not a radical - it wasn't until the Second Vatican Council (1962) that the Catholic Church officially stopped blaming Jews for the Crucifixion and omitted the prayer for Jewish conversion from the Good Friday liturgy. The 'end times' thing is a little more obscure, but basically the notion is the Second Coming will be preceeded by the conversion of all Jewish people to Christianity, Erik's dad is actually misquoting the poem 'To His Coy Mistress' where Marvell uses it to basically mean 'until the end of time.'

Oh! And a link to another Tumblr ficlet, wherein Erik is 'recivilized': http://madamefaust.tumblr.com/post/165306572327/settling-in-a-strange-sweet-sound-ficlet
Learning a Lesson

Chapter Notes

Erik might be physically back in Paris, but his mind is elsewhere. 
**Warning for: trauma-induced flashbacks.**

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The remainder of the trip had gone by with all the usual comfort and amiability - he even stopped by the school to give the children an "opera lesson" which consisted of his performing a few songs and then, at the children's insistence, many magic tricks to amuse them. He remained through the Day of Atonement (even making the journey into Rouen on an empty stomach along with David, Anna-Lise, Claude, and his father to attend services), but left shortly thereafter; *The Pearl Fishers* was closing and as soon as the stage was cleared of the sands of Ceylon, it would have to be rebuilt into the Spanish mansion of Count Almaviva.

Once he was on the train, Erik started to think about the setbuilding, which should be relatively straightforward - M. Isidorov who had been contracted to design the set itself envisioned the whole production having the look of an enormous dollhouse, to reflect both Almaviva's seeing the people in his life as playthings and Figaro's ultimate manipulation of the players. When Isidorov learned that Erik had experience as a builder of homes, he was overjoyed; for the set was to be an enormous three-level affair and would require a sure hand to make sure it stood up to regular use.

The building would be sound, but the ornamentation frothy - the initial mock-ups looked like nothing so much as a big, ornate cake, frothy, light, colorful and covered in fripperies. Like a patisserie exploded.

But that was for tomorrow. Tonight...tonight he would be seeing Dalir again. And what a sweet reunion that would be.

It was quite late when he got in; the flat was dark and when Erik entered and he heard Dalir's steady breathing; fast asleep.

Two options presented themselves to him. He could put his bag down, and his violin case - quietly, endeavoring not to make a sound - and go to sleep causing the least among of disruption possible. That would be the kind, thoughtful, perhaps most sane thing to do. Or he could slip into bed, plant kisses to Dalir's neck and rouse him with a hopefully pleasurable surprise. That would be the sort of sly thing he'd relish.

But he did neither for there was still too much *Isaac* in him to be either courteous or sinful - he leaped onto the bed, landed on Dalir and shouted, "I'm back!"

"AGGGGH!" was Dalir's immediate response. He pulled the sheet up over his head as though the blankets would ward off an attack. Then he lowered it and gave Erik a hard shove, enough to push him off, but not quite enough to land him on the floor. "Why would you do that? Why would you ever do that?"

"Did you miss me?" Erik ask flopping on top of Dalir, pressing his masked face close to Dalir's cheek, undeterred.
"If I ever did, I can't recall," Dalir grumbled, but he shifted a bit and let Erik lay down on top of him, head against Dalir’s chest, ankles dangling off the edge of the bed. One of Dalir's hands ghosted up and untied the strings of the mask. It fell off and he removed it, tossing it onto the armchair. Erik snuggled down against him, wrapped his right arm around Dalir's waist, squeezing him tight. "How was...everyone?"

"Fine," Erik sighed into his warm skin. Three weeks of sleeping alone was its own kind of agony - especially since Maman was adamant he couldn't use the dogs as footwarmers. Once the heat coming off the kitchen fireplace wore away, he'd nearly frozen. "Lisette's expecting a child."

"Oh!" Dalir stiffened a little, more horrified than excited. Erik understood - he was his parents' only and so the prospect of having a child that he was in any small way responsible for never occurred to him. "That means you'll be an uncle."

"Mmm," Erik confirmed, eyes drifting shut. He lifted himself slightly up so that he could untangle the blanket and drape it over the two of them. There, much better. "Generally, that's how such things go."

"How does it...how do you feel about it?"

Feel? No way in particular. People got married, they had children - he was already an uncle in jest to his friends' Lucien and Estelle's little ones - Michel, the elder boy, delighted in using the title 'Oncle Isaac' when he visited the school. It elevated his status for the day, to be the pretended relation of Mademoiselle Anna-Lise's curious brother, who had a face like a skeleton’s and lived in Paris. For the children of the school, the fact that he lived in Paris was much more interesting than his face.

Then again, Michel was only the offspring of a friend and not a blood relation. Lisette and David’s child...that would be different. It was a vaguely pleasant thing to think of. The child was likely to be well-loved and looked after, which was all any child could want in this world. And of course, he wished for good health to mother and baby, all the usual platitudes. Hardly seemed worth sharing with Dalir.

To be honest, there was one concern niggling the back of his mind, though he kept it to himself. Lisette took after Maman, after all. And David was an ordinary kind of handsome. So there was really nothing to worry about.

"I feel perfectly well," Erik replied after a pause. "I'm not the one who's expecting the child, after all."

"Mmm," Dalir, despite the rude awakening, was already half asleep. "Good wishes, and everything."

"Thank you," Erik said, feeling more tired by the minute himself. After some wiggling, he toed his boots off and let them fall to the floor. He let his braces slip off his shoulders and he himself got under the blankets.

"One thing of interest - Clare's baker is packing himself off to warmer climes again," Dalir mentioned, turning his head and murmuring into Erik's hair. "So I've got a position for the foreseeable future."

"Good," Erik said, turning his face up; Dalir's mouth worked it's way lower, first to brow, then to cheek, then to mouth. "Mmm. I ought to go away more often, if you're stuck with such good luck when I venture abroad."

"No, don't," Dalir sighed into his mouth. "Balance and all. I might have luck, but I don't have you."
"That sounds like a song," Erik told him, eyes drifting closed; damn late nights and long train journeys, he'd have liked to finish what they started.

"Write it for me later," Dalir smiled, falling back to sleep. Erik was not long to drift off after him, but his rest was not destined to be of long duration.

The chains were a new addition. They weren’t really fastened, not the ones around his wrists, nor the one around his neck. He could get out easily, it was just another trick. Just another magic trick.

“Approach, gentlemen - ladies, keep back, keep back! I could never forgive myself if something were to happen to you! And the children! Oh, did I not say this was a sight too shocking for the little ones! But you did not listen! Well you shall see! You shall see!”

Erik lay completely still, in a cage with a set of bars that opened, like a ramp, allowing the very curious to approach and look him over closely. Those who paid extra were permitted to touch him. He practiced breathing shallowly and not flinching as hands were pressed against his mouth, fingers drove into his sides and pinched his arms and legs. It would all be over soon. And he did not have to say a word.

The floor of the cage was covered in earth, like he was freshly dug up in his rotted clothes and dumped there. There had been some conversation about including a coffin or a headstone, but that might be a little too theatrical. This was better - easier to recreate - and there was a gritty, raw, perverseness to the scene that repelled and attracted in turns. All Erik had to do was be still. A particularly warm, clammy hand squeezed his upper arm, tugging, like they expected the skin to fall off. He’d have a bruise.

Wilhelm added this component recently - audiences wanted to know at once whether he was real, or just a cunningly made marionette. The confusion began after Wilhelm had his head shaved, giving him the look of a broken automaton. Erik was resistant, at first - though he was not vain about his hair, it was his only normal feature and he rather liked it, but Wilhelm claimed no one would believe in a corpse with a full head of hair. At least he wouldn’t have lice, Erik consoled himself when the razor was put to him. That was a real concern, given that he would be lying in filth half the night.

It wasn’t always like this. His performance used to be a more complicated spectacle, full of music and illusions. The mask only came off at the end, a button on the scene, a little shock to the audience. It was more fun for him, but not as profitable for the fair. Hence the dirt. The razor. The jabbing fingers.

Just breathe, not too deeply, and it would be over soon. Wilhelm was going to give the cue line any minute. Any minute.

“Ah! I have misjudged the hour! For behold - the corpse rises!”

A twitching in the limbs. A languid motion of stretching fingers. Then he would open his eyes, move the arms, let the shoulderblades really stick out, arch the back so that his spine rippled -

A blow to the face caught him off-guard. One of the higher paying customers got spooked. It happened. He’d been punched, kicked, spat on, by skittish spectators, overcome by the scene, but this was unusual - this fellow was becoming hysterical.

“No! No! I felt it, but it cannot be real! It cannot be alive!

Erik tensed, brought his hands up to ward off the blows, but otherwise did not move. Wilhelm begged him please - unpleasant though it may be - don’t come out of character too soon. And for
heaven’s sake, don’t fight back! They would get a reputation. Just...take it. He was a strong lad, they could patch him up later. And he’d buy him a drink to make up for it. Give him some bonus money - hadn’t he just learned Maman and Papa had a new baby girl? Wouldn’t he like to send them something extra for her?

But this was too much. People were getting agitated, coming forward, some shouting that the show was being ruined - another, louder voice saying, stop, stop, can’t you see he’s only a man? That voice was drowned out by cries of encouragement. Was he bleeding? Could they smell it?

Kick the corpse! Spite the Reaper! It can’t be a man, look at it!

Someone grabbed the chains round his neck - why wouldn’t they come off? They were designed to fall away at the slightest pressure, but they were choking him, he couldn’t breathe, oh, stop. Stop, please, stop, nothing was worth this, no money was worth this, his parents would be horrified to see him, to know this was how he made his living -

“Erik! Erik!”

"Just stay still, Erik, I know it’s hard when they get rowdy, but we always turn such a profit! And you know how things are. Not so good as they used to be. But it’ll pass. These tough times, they will pass."

“Wake up! Erik!”

The tangled sheets fell away from his neck - were wrenched off and Erik sat up, sweating and gasping. Dalir was beside him, staring at him, hands hovering inches away. “What was that?”

Where the hell was he? Erik blinked and looked around - not in the country. Not on the road. In his flat. With Dalir. Erik raised a hand, mercifully free of clamps and chains and touched Dalir’s face very softly. The limb was trembling, he noted, distantly. Oh, no, that wouldn’t do - bakers had to rise notoriously early, he was disrupting the poor fellow’s sleep. How was Dalir to rest when Erik was a shaking, shivering wreck beside him.

“Sorry,” he said hoarsely. He stumbled out of bed, toward the armchair. “Go back to sleep.”

“Erik - ”

“Go back to sleep!” Why was he shouting? It was the middle of the night, there were other people in the building, why was he shouting? “Sorry. Go back to sleep.”

Where had that come from? Why should he dream of the fair now - the worst of the fair? When he hadn’t dreamed of it in years.

The answers would not come, but sleep did - sitting up, facing the windows. He could not read in the darkness of the flat, could not play when all was meant to be silence. What was there to do, but sleep?

When Erik woke, neck aching and back stiff, Dalir was gone, but he’d thrown the quilt from the foot of the bed over him before he left. Thoughtful. Thoughtful.

He scrubbed for the day, dressed himself and then - he really was in a daze - had his hand on the doorknob before he remembered that he had to don the false nose.

Too long in the country, he thought as he applied the adhesive. You’ve become complacent. Comfortable. That’s dangerous. Just as soon as you settle into a routine, it’ll all be taken away;
Coffee and a bun at a street stall, then off to the Garnier. The men welcomed him back, caught him up on all the little disasters that occurred during production, then they set about tearing down the set they’d all worked so hard on. See? Nothing lasts. Nothing can ever last.

Erik was sweeping up the leavings of their destructive enterprise when Christine appeared, direct from choral rehearsal.

“Welcome back!” she exclaimed with enthusiasm, skipping forward and giving Erik a warm embrace. He smiled and gave her a squeeze, lifting her up off her feet. It wasn’t only Dalir he missed while he was away; the sweet little Swedish girl had wormed her way into his affections astonishingly quickly. “How was your family?”

Fine, fine, all fine, he assured her, leaving off Lisette’s good news; he doubted if she remembered Lisette in particular and it was time to start reconstructing that wall between Erik and Isaac again; he feared it was starting to develop cracks.

“I turned twenty while you were away,” Christine said proudly, drawing herself up to her full five feet in height as if something about her person fundamentally changed. “Which did you prefer? Nineteen or twenty?”

“Ah, yes, a philosophical question for the ages,” Erik tapped his chin. “Which was the more significant age…”

Nineteen was when he left the fair. It was...too much. Too degrading, too...dehumanizing. Embarrassing to admit, but he hadn’t even realized it at the time; it was Joe who made him see how far things had fallen.

You can’t stay here, Erik, it’ll...it’ll be the end of you. You’ve already done a turn, haven’t you? Remember how it was when you first come? Only wore the mask for the shows - Wilhelm used to scold you for it! Saying as how folks’ll not pay for what they can see on the streets for free. Now you never take it off!

“Twenty,” he smiled. “Twenty was leaps and bounds better than nineteen.”

At nineteen he was still a skittish, jittery thing, skulking around his parents’ house like a ghost, not seeing anyone, not wanting to be taken anywhere - Maman put a stop to that. Papa got him a two-year apprenticeship. And the children...well, they just adored him. It set him to rights. Eventually. Yes, twenty was the superior year.

“Are you...when would you like to have our first lesson?” she asked, in a hush, glancing around to make sure they weren’t being overheard. “I haven’t anything at all to do after rehearsal this afternoon!”

“As it happens, my social calendar is clear as well,” Erik said. Then also added, quietly, “Dalir’s found employment - ”

“That’s wonderful!” Christine clapped her hands, delighted. “Oh, it really is! When we breakfasted together while you were away, he stayed being to talk to Clare, the waitress, and she said their ancient breadmaker was bound for the coast! But I hadn’t heard whether or not Dalir would replace him, you must both be so happy!”

Happy might have been an overstatement; Erik was sure Dalir wasn’t pleased with him for disturbing his sleep the night before. He’d have to disturb his sleep very nicely indeed tonight to make up for
it…

But that was for later. For now there was Christine and her eagerly smiling face.

“We are,” Erik replied. “As to the question of lessons, I suppose I’ll see you when rehearsal is concluded, Mademoiselle Professeur.”

It occurred to Christine only after she set several of her old lesson books atop the piano that she might be taking these lessons more seriously than Erik. Though she was twenty at last, Erik was still older than her. And she knew he was much more intelligent than she could ever hope to be. He might take one look at her with her books and laugh right in her face.

But no, he was punctual, even if he arrived with sawdust all over his sleeves, and he was an attentive pupil. He even indulged her pointing out where middle ‘C’ was on the piano before he mentioned that he did know that much.

“Let me tell you what I do know,” he smiled, “then you can fill in the considerable gaps.”

Erik knew his scales, major and minor chords, he knew what an octave was and his sharps and flats. It really was in the reading that he struggled the most; key signatures and all of the Italian terms had him bewildered.

“There I am in ignorance,” he acknowledged. “I know that forte means ‘loudly’ and piano means softly. One wonders what they say when one is required to play the piano softly.”

“Piano-piano, means very softly,” Christine informed him and he laughed.

It was incredible what he’d managed to teach himself. He played arpeggios when he accompanied himself or others, without knowing the name for it. The books he was pleased to see and asked if he might keep them to study from, which Christine readily agreed to once she had his word that he would bring them back. As to his playing, there was nothing she could do to improve it. He had a sense for how a note should be played, staccato or legato, depending on the mood he was trying to create without being told. It was not all rote memorization and vocabulary - they had some more laughs as well, in particular when she told him what a cadenza was.

Erik chuckled and said, “Cadenza. Well, that certainly sounds better than what I was calling it!”

“What were you calling it?” Christine asked.

“The ah-ah-ah bit,” he informed her and she burst into giggles.

“You’re not wrong,” she said when she’d collected herself enough for speech. “See, I told you you’d be a quick study. You already know everything, I just have to teach you some Italian to put more fanciful names to it. Though I would dearly love to hear M. Reyer tell La Carlotta to please, take it back to the ah-ah-ah bit again!”

Christine allowed herself a little flourish, when she ‘ah-ah-ah’ed she borrowed a little bit from a Rosina cadenza in The Barber of Seville, as she’d heard La Carlotta herself sing it two years ago during the Opéra’s own production.

Apparently Erik had seen it as well.
“Oh, you’re an opera too early!” he teased her. “Remember, Figaro’s getting married in a month!”

“I remember,” Christine sighed. “But... I don’t really like that one, if I’m honest. I’d rather have Rosina and Almaviva happily engaged at the end of the performance, I don’t want him to... be chasing other girls. And after all the trouble they went to! And Figaro went to!”

“But,” Erik pointed out, “if Almaviva was happy with his Rosina, there would be no performance! No one writes operas about happy couples - ”

“Fidelio,” she reminded him.

Erik smiled. “Fidelio. What do you say we sing, something, Christine? Something I already know - I am very ignorant about so many things, it would be good for me to backtrack into something easy.”

All the talk of Rosina had her inspired, “Oh, do you know the duet between Rosina and Figaro in The Barber of Seville? When he tells her to write the letter? I adore that song so much.”

Chuckling, Erik nodded and said he did.

“I might not have the most impressive cadenza - sorry, ‘ah-ah-ah’ bit,” Christine acknowledged, “But - ”

“You’re well warmed-up and we’re only enjoying ourselves,” Erik interrupted her. “We’re only having fun, aren’t we? Anyway, I’m sure you’d be a charming Rosina, you might as well take your chance. Here, I’ll cue you - R-o-s-i-n-a.”

Christine grinned, putting her hands over her heart and batting her eyelashes - Rosina had already written a letter to the Count (believing him to be a drunken soldier) so she could not be surprised when Figaro told her that the Count’s love’s name was her own.

“Dunque io son... tu non m’inganni?
Dunque io son la fortunata?”

The two of them had a great deal of fun with the song, from Rosina’s delight, to Figaro’s amused plotting - and subsequent surprise to find himself outplotted by a besotted young girl. Erik more than matched her for acting, going from fond indulgence to firm orders to head-shaking astonishment, all with an undercurrent of deep good-humor. He really belonged on the stage, not behind it...

Erik knocked his elbow into her arm and winked on, “Il maestro faccio a lei!”

She grinned broadly up at him; smiling that broadly did not help with her vowels, but even she could hear the overall improvement in her singing from the last time she’d sung for him the night of the Gala. It had nothing to do with being better warmed-up. She was happy, she felt happier singing in this little room with a friend than she had at any time during the run of The Pearl Fishers for a packed house. Than she had since she’d lost her father.

Even the cadenza went off without a hitch. Erik kept up admirably and ended with a flourish on the keys.

“It really needs strings,” he acknowledged. “But - ”

“Bravissimi! Bravissimi! That was stupendous!”
They were not so alone as they thought. To Christine’s abject horror, in strode the Comte de Chagny - what was he *doing* there? How long had he been there? How much had he heard?

Enough to make an impression, evidently for he came forward and leaned casually upon the piano, making himself very much at home. “Splendid - I wouldn’t have expected such a voice from a young chorus girl! You’ll go far, Mademoiselle Daaé, you’ll go far! And you Monsieur! Are you...an instructor or...”

“I’m a scene-shifter,” Erik said shortly; evidently he wasn’t any more thrilled at having an audience than Christine was.

Philippe laughed as though Erik were joking. “Aha! Well, when they say the Garnier has talent seeping out of the walls, they aren’t kidding!”

“Who says?” Erik asked blankly, but Philippe continued, ignoring the question.

Philippe straightened up and clapped his hands; the sound was startlingly loud in the little room. “Now, Monsieur, Mademoiselle, I have a little proposal for you - it might seem sudden, but when I heard such talent, I could not help myself but think I ought to showcase it! I am to host a little fete, a party, at my townhouse in a fortnight and we have a band engaged for after dinner, but I do like to inject some culture into these things. Would the two of you be willing to - ”

“There you are!” Raoul exclaimed coming into the room, looking a little frazzled. “Mademoiselle Sorelli is waiting and I said that you - oh! Christine! Erik! I thought everyone had gone.”

“Ah, you know each other!” Philippe exclaimed, smiling very handsomely, but there was something...off about it. The expression did not reach his eyes which were hard and calculating.

Despite the chorus’s estimation of the two brothers, looking at them side-by-side, Christine concluded that Raoul was much nicer looking. Even when he was bewildered.

For Philippe had to know that Raoul was acquainted with Christine. How would he have known that she was Mademoiselle Daaé otherwise? She certainly hadn’t received that imaginary review that she dreamed of, when a keen-eared critic picked her out of the chorus to praise her. Not even from the critics who actually liked *The Pearl Fishers*. So why would he act as if Raoul and Christine’s knowing one another was a surprise?

“I was just getting around to inviting Monsieur...ah, Erik, and Mademoiselle to our party,” Philippe informed Raoul. The bewildered look deepened, then Raoul’s brow cleared and he looked delighted.

“Oh! That would be - ”

“As our entertainment, before dinner,” Philippe finished smoothly. “I don’t know if you overheard them, but they sing marvelously! And I pride myself on having an ear for such things.”

“Entertainment,” Raoul repeated. “I had rather hoped...I had rather thought - ”

“Of course, they have not agreed,” Philippe acknowledged, redirecting his attention to Erik and Christine. “What do you say? A week from this coming Saturday, say, seven o’clock?”

Christine had no idea what to say. The bitter irony was not lost on her that she’d recently been lamenting not ever being invited to Raoul’s house. Here was her chance - to go as a spot of light entertainment.

“You will be compensated handsomely for your time, of course,” Philippe added. “Say...fifty francs. Each?”
Christine tried not to gape; it was a good deal of money for one performance. She glanced up at Erik who looked questioningly at her. Then she nodded.

“I would be happy to,” Erik replied. “If mademoiselle agrees…”

“Yes,” Christine found her voice at last. “Thank you...for the honor...Monsieur le Comte.”

When she chanced a glance at Raoul, she saw him looking at his brother with an odd expression - she’d almost call it fury, but she hardly thought him capable of such. It was so different from the day at the second hand shop. The intensity of the emotion was the same, but the cause was very different.

It was settled, then. Philippe would have a carriage sent round for them - at the Opéra, if convenient. All parties agreed that it was and he strode out the door with a spring in his step.

Raoul did not follow, rather he approached the piano - approached Christine, really - with great intention and opened his mouth as if he would speak, but he did not get the chance.

“Come, Raoul!” Philippe demanded from the doorway. “We have an engagement to keep!”

“I…” Raoul said, but Philippe was tapping his walking stick impatiently against the floor. Raoul swallowed. As ever when he was distressed, he was twisting his gloves in his hand. “Good evening, then, Christine.”

“Good evening,” she said faintly. With a small smile she added, “I’ll see you in two weeks.”

Raoul smiled back, but said no more. Philippe was waiting.

Chapter End Notes

Fancy dinner party ahead! And for anyone who is wondering about a certain peculiar club, that’s also coming up (probably in the next chapter)!
Transitional chapter so that we can get down to some FUN! Paris did have a thriving gay club scene in the late 19th century, though La Chatte Mauvaise is sprung entirely from my imagination and therefore may not be an accurate reflection of what was going on at the time. Still, it'll be enjoyable once we get there!

**Warning for: antisemitism.**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once again Erik and Christine found themselves standing by the side entrance of the Opera in their evening clothes. They’d abandoned trying to teach Erik to read music in favor of putting together a small catalogue of songs they both were comfortable singing in front of a crowd - Erik deferring to Christine. He had a long history of performing alone, while she was used to the anonymity of the chorus.

He also had about half a bottle of wine sloshing about in his veins, a bottle he shared with Dalir before donning his evening things. A true gentleman he would have been thoughtful enough to bring a flask and offered to the young lady.

“This could be good for your career,” Erik reminded her when Christine took to biting her lip and looking generally worried. Ah, well, in the absence of liquid courage, a little encouragement might suffice. “If one of the guests is a patron and takes a fancy to you, I might be watching you in a named part very soon.”

Christine smoothed her skirt and pulled the train around to check the patch in the lace for the tenth time. “Is it - ”

“Expertly sewn,” he reassured her. “No one will notice a thing.”

She left off toying with her gown and looked up at Erik with a contrite expression, “I’m sorry, you must think me very silly - ”

“Not very silly, only very nervous,” he replied. Gloved hands briefly squeezed her bare shoulder and she smiled up at him very bravely. “It will be over before you know it. And we’ll be on our way - remember, Dalir and I promised to take you out when you turned twenty. We’ll take a cab back to our flat, fetch him and be on our way.”

An odd expression flitted across Christine’s face and she seemed to dig deep inside herself to pluck up some resolve, “I’d like that very much...ah...Dalir mentioned to me that there was a...place where you and he went when you were...less intimately acquainted.”

Erik narrowed his eyes and she pressed on.

“That...it was run by two ladies. And had food! And...dancing, only there was some negotiation about leading. Might...might we go there?”

Dalir told her about The Bad Cat? How...delightful. Doubly delightful that Dalir had done the place
such justice that she wanted to go.

Paris was host to many halls and clubs specifically designed for his sort of people, the fashion of them ebbed and flowed with the tastes of the city, artists and toffs flocked to them, slumming, trying to properly capture the shock of two seeing two ladies tangled in one another’s embrace, or two gentleman sitting far to close together to be friends.

The Cat wasn’t one of those places, that tended to be one more feather in the plumed cap of the city’s restaurateurs. This bistro was privately owned by two women, Celine Dubois and Gabriella Rossi, both comfortably middle-aged who would not look out of place at a bridge club. They kept a very respectable place, for Parisiens and travelers of certain tastes to mingle, dance, and enjoy Signora Gabriella’s home cooking. Any funny business in the powder room ought to be discreet and not leave a mess. And even the suspicion that a fellow was there merely to look resulted in his being expelled at once.

And Christine wanted to go. How delightful.

If he’d thought there was a piece of her that thought the venture akin to slumming, he might have turned her down. Said, no, he didn’t think she’d like it, that it wasn’t a place for her. But she was all in earnest - when was she not? And he took her at her word: Dalir described it nicely and she thought she might like it. Why shouldn’t she go? Whyever not?

A slow grin spread over Erik’s face, “Of course, if that’s what you wish. I’ll warn you - you might be asked to negotiate some leading yourself. There will be gentlemen there, but I must tell you, lovely as you are, I’m afraid you won’t attract their notice.”

“That’s fine,” Christine said. “You don’t...mind? I wouldn’t be...intruding?”

“Not at all,” Erik replied easily. “So long as you’re there to enjoy yourself - not there to enjoy yourself watching other people enjoying themselves.”

If she found his comment mystifying, she did not get a chance to ask for clarification. The Changy coach pulled up, festooned with the family coat of arms. Christine committed her first faux pas of the night, reaching for the handle to hoist herself in, just as a liveried footman hopped down to open the door for her.

“Oh!” she blushed hot and red as the young man held his hand out, she already halfway in the carriage. “Thank you - erm. But I can manage. Thank you.”

Erik clambered in after her as she buried her face in her hands and shook her head.

“It’s fine,” he murmured soothingly. “Don’t worry. Just...relax.”

It was rather like preparing a person for an unpleasant medical procedure - fifty francs almost seemed too low a price for all this fuss. Almost.

Christine eventually lifted her head as the carriage slowed before a white marble facade where lamps glowed in every window. “Oh my,” she breathed. “Which do you suppose is theirs?”

She was working on the assumption that each row of windows represented an individual flat, but the windows themselves continued from the top of the building to the street. Six rows of windows; only one door. The house took up the entire corner of the block.

“I think that’s...it,” Erik said, a bit overawed himself. Some of Christine’s anxiety must be catching. A century of war and revolution...and for what? His roots were showing; his first thought was that
those were a great many windows to wash. A great many carpets to beat.

This time Erik put a staying hand on Christine’s arm as the footman came back around to help her out of the carriage.

“Thank you,” she said, “thank you very much.”

But he was silent. Erik exited and the footman directed them around to a back entrance; it occurred to Erik to ask if the man was at all acquainted with Simon Buquet since they clearly had similar hobbies, but he kept the comment to himself; what would be the point? The man wouldn’t reply.

The servant’s entrance was bare, but very clean; they were coming up some kind of staircase that led from the kitchen, the walls had recently been laid with white tile, all of which gleamed in the electric light. Modern. Very modern.

Christine lifted the hem of her gown so that it did not catch on the narrow stairs; a maid in a neat black uniform and cap greeted them at a second floor landing; she, at least, was permitted to speak.

“This way, mam’ssel, m’sieur,” she said quietly, opening the door into an empty library. “The salon is through that door there, Monsieur le Comte will come fetch you when they’re ready for you.”

With a little bobbing curtsey, she was on her way, leaving Erik and Christine by themselves.

It was a beautiful room. The ceilings were high, the bookcases laid into the walls in beautiful mahogany. A fireplace - lit though the room was not in use - dominated the far wall, surrounded by a stone mantle. Erik abandoned Christine to study the carvings - 18th century. Had to be. The stonework surrounded blue-and-white tiles depicting country scenes, a little shepherdess here, a young boy fishing there. The fireback looked older. It too was immaculately clean and reflected the flames.

“Come here,” Erik beckoned Christine, certain she would like it. “There’s a unicorn in the fireplace.”

She scurried over, crouching down in front of the fire along with him. She squinted into the flames and her face lit with both delight and the glow of the fire. “Oh! How charming!”

“Ahem, good evening, you’re remarkably punctual!”

Philippe had come in through the far door, resplendent in his tuxedo, hair and mustache immaculately flattened down and waxed. Erik straightened up and extended a hand to help Christine to her feet, she stood as well and both tried to give off a casual, relaxed air - as though staring into people’s fireplaces was the done thing when visiting a new home.

“That’s to do with your coachman,” Erik replied. “Are you ready for us?”

“Yes, right this way - I’m sorry, do you require music? I rather expected you would bring your own.”

Erik explained that they were well prepared for the evening and no sheet music would be necessary. Philippe smiled appreciatively. “Splendid! Splendid, I do so appreciate your taking the time. So thoughtful!”

The salon had a lighter, more feminine design with white paneled walls, inlaid here and there with green paper, shot through with tiny roses embroidered in horizontal stripes - Erik would bet his eyeteeth that was real gold thread. The guests were already assembled, seated here and there on charming little divans and plushly upholstered chairs. The former Countesses were not among the
crowd of tuxedoed men and elegantly gowned women. The jewels around the ladies’ throats sparkled in the lamplight.

And there was Raoul, standing, not sitting, right by the piano. His own hair, short-cut as it was, was not waxed like Philippe’s and gave him a casual look, set him slightly apart from everyone else who might as well have been cut from fashion plates, they were so carefully groomed and attired. His eyes slid right past Erik and lighted on Christine. He smiled at once and Erik saw the color rise in her cheeks and neck again. Her gown had faded from its original cream to ivory and the cut of the shoulders was out of sync with the other ladies’ dresses, but Raoul looked at her as if he’d never seen anything more entrancing.

Philippe took over as master of ceremonies, presenting two performers (wrong) from the Palais Garnier who were so kind as to take time from their evening to play and sing for the guests. He did not give their names, only gestured toward the piano as a cue they ought to get started.

Erik sat and Christine stood right next to him. The instrument was a Steinway. Of course.

No sooner had he set fingers to keys and Christine opened her mouth than the guests, as one, turned away from them and started chattering among themselves. Christine glanced down at Erik and he hitched his shoulders in a shrug; background noise.

A few turned their heads when Erik joined in on a duet, some even edged closer to the piano, but no sooner would a guest take notice than someone else claimed their attention with an anecdote or introduction that they deemed more important than the music. One-hundred francs for music no one would listen to. It was an indulgence that was unimaginable to Erik; what kind of life did these people live?

Ah, they did have one ardent admirer. Raoul had not moved his feet from his place in front of the piano, nor had he taken his eyes off Christine. They had his full, undivided attention - well, Christine did. Erik was not sure Raoul was listening to them at all, but the illusion that they had at least one audience member was nice.

They concluded with Rosina and Figaro’s duet, the song that so charmed the Comte at the Opera. Christine brought a prop - a little piece of paper folded up in her glove, to act as the letter in question. Erik did not miss that every time Christine sang the name ‘Lindoro’ her eyes flickered toward Raoul and she placed the letter on the side of the piano closest to him. They really were besotted with one another. He couldn’t help thinking that it was too bad.

Madness, really. That he with his preferences might have about as much chance of finding long-term happiness as Christine and the object of her affections. He had about as much chance of marrying Dalir as Christine did of marrying the Vicomte; and that was the irony. For the Vicomte would be expected to marry. So would Christine, someday. For respectability and comfort, if nothing else. But two men of absolutely no consequence could remain bachelors into perpetuity. Even bachelors who lived together and no one would bat an eyelash.

The applause was belated; it took the guests a few seconds of silence to realize that Erik and Christine had reached the conclusion of their brief concert. Even Philippe stopped listening after the first song, but he caught on quicker than the others, especially once Raoul began clapping with real feeling.

“Excellent, excellent!” Philippe exclaimed over the applause. Raoul had been venturing toward the piano, but his brother skirted around him, placing a hand on the varnished wood. “So wonderful to have a maestro at the keys.”
“It’s a beautiful instrument,” Erik agreed, closing the lid, fingers resting lightly atop it. Like everything else in this enormous house. Beautiful, well-cared for, and scrupulously clean.

“Such a pity for it to be neglected since my sisters’ married,” Philippe sighed. “We must have you again to play for us some time!”

General murmurs of assent traveled round the room and Philippe smiled down at Erik and Christine. “Thank you both so much for your time - I left your pay with the butler and I had the cook set something aside for you in the kitchen. Such a treat! Thank you again, I do appreciate you obliging me.”

“But at all, monsieur,” Erik said, rising from the bench. Philippe stuck out his hand and he shook it; the Comte had a firm handshake. Philippe reached out for Christine’s hand as well, kissing it when she presented her hand. Erik’s hand hovered at the small of her back and together the two made their way to the door being conspicuously held open by the butler. Though many guests smiled and nodded as they passed, not a one spoke to them.

And why would they? They didn’t speak to the servants either; no wonder the coachmen were silent as the grave. What would be the point in talking if no one was going to answer?

Christine looked over her shoulder, just once, but Raoul was deep in conversation with his brother and did not see her.

The butler doled out the payment, behind closed doors - in cash, half of which Erik tucked into his jacket.

“Do you want your portion now, or shall I hold onto it until you’re deposited back on Madame’s doorstep?” Erik asked. Christine said he might as well keep it; especially since it appeared that they were going to have to arrange their own transportation back to their lodgings, Philippe had not said a word about calling the coach for them again.

The cook was middle-aged, white haired, and already had her coat and hat on when Erik and Christine were shown into the kitchen. She pointed at two places set at the scrubbed wooden table - one napkin, pewter plates, a cup of water apiece, and a small bottle of wine. There was a half-eaten pie waiting to be finished off.

“Pork pie,” she informed them, a little sourly. “Same as the rest get - or did you think I’d have something finer? No place to prepare a supper since Monsieur Philippe had a chef brought in, I could scarce squeeze that lot into the oven as it was.”

“Thank you, this is fine,” Christine said quickly, taking her seat. She served herself a small slice of pie, taking a tiny bite so that she didn’t spill any on her gown. Erik remained standing, frowned at the supper. His left hand drifted up to touch the money in his pocket hesitantly. Just a bite? Just to be polite...but no. He’d never done it before and he wasn’t about to start now; not even in the house of the Comte de Chagny.

“A thousand pardons, madame,” he said to the cook. “I’m sure it’s fine fare, but I must decline.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “What’s this?”

Oh no. This was not going to end well. Still, he pressed on, distantly feeling that his mother would be proud of him, at least.

“I don’t eat pork,” Erik said simply. It ought to settle the matter, but just his luck, the woman’s narrow eyes widened and her jaw dropped.
“Are you a Jew?” she asked, horrified. Christine’s neck whipped up so fast that Erik was worried she’d done herself an injury.

“I am,” he said, peaceably as he could manage. Shades of the fair again - this woman pronounced ‘Jew’ with the same distaste as others said, ‘The Living Corpse.’ It was as tedious as it was insulting.

The cook’s mouth screwed up in fury, “I should have known! Face like that - like the very devil himself! And here I am working late to serve a Jew what he can’t even eat! Fine days we’ve come to. Fine thing indeed.”

Christine appeared to have lost her appetite; she dropped her fork beside her half-eaten pie.

“Don’t tell me you’re a Jew too!” the cook exclaimed, beside herself.

“No, madame,” Christine replied coldly. “I’ve just lost my appetite. That’s all. Erik, shall we - ”

“Wait!”

Raoul appeared in the doorway, not disheveled, precisely, but he’d clearly come downstairs in a hurry. The cook rose, as if to bar the way. Was everyone in this household trained to keep the Vicomte back from those things that might harm him? However had they managed to let the navy have him?

“Monsieur Raoul, you must go back upstairs! Your brother - ”

“Pardon me, Helene,” Raoul apologetically sidled around the cook and hurried over to Christine and Erik. “You must allow me to apologize. I...I asked Philippe - I expressedly asked him that you be treated as guests. Not...not…”

Servants, Erik assumed he meant. For the life of him, he couldn’t work out just why Raoul was so hot about it; what had they done, really? Provided a bit of background noise. A pleasant addition to the evening, but no more of note to the Comte’s guests than the carefully tended lamps, the passed drinks, or the polished silver. They were engaged to provide a service. Just like servants with one small difference: they came dressed in their own clothes.

Raoul had beat a hasty retreat from the salon as Philippe’s guests made their way to the dining room for their dinner. He was meant to be on the arm of some Russian countess he’d never met and had ungalantly abandoned the young lady. Little matter, he was too angry to make a pleasant dinner companion.

The scene from the drawing room played out over and over in his mind as he bounded down the stairs. Raoul radiating quiet fury and Philippe acting gently sardonic, as if he was being ridiculous on purpose.

“I asked you to set places for them!” Raoul said, as Erik and Christine disappeared through the servants’ door. “Christine is a very dear friend, Philippe! I told you that! You know that.”

“Yes, when you were children,” Philippe acknowledged with a small smile. “And I tried to accommodate your particular wishes, my dear boy, believe me I did. But it simply couldn’t be done! Where would I place them? The little chorus girl beside the Marquis? The set-painter next to the Duchess? It simply couldn’t be done. Surely you understand.”
No. He did not. And so Raoul was now before them, in the kitchen, in his dress clothes. If he could not make Philippe see reason, he could at least apologize to Christine and Erik.

Christine was bright red and looking at the floor, but Erik smiled at Raoul in the same kind, patronizing way Philippe did. He raised a hand and Raoul was sure he was going to pat him on the head, but Raoul saw that he was only withdrawing a small amount of cash from his jacket pocket.

“Guests generally are not paid,” Erik reminded him, replacing the money. “But...I appreciate the sentiment, nonetheless. We were just leaving.”

*Please stay,* Raoul thought, trying to convey some of his feeling without words, but Christine would not look at him.

I can’t bear them upstairs. I can’t bear the insipid conversation. The daughters being foisted on me, dance after dance with nothing but blushing faces and silence.

But why would they stay? There was nothing for them here.

Erik was looking at him, keenly, closely. “Unless...would you like to come out with us?”

Christine’s head snapped up and she looked at Erik incredulously. “Oh, Erik, I don’t think Raoul can just...leave.”

“Of course he can,” Erik replied. “It’s his house, isn’t it? Free to come and go as he pleases. Aren’t you?”

*Of course he can. Of course I can.*

“Monsieur Philippe wouldn’t like it!” Helene spoke up warningly. “No, Monsieur Philippe would not like it at *all.* Just get you gone and don’t drag our Monsieur Raoul along with you!”

Drag. As if he couldn’t make up his own mind. As if he couldn’t say no just as easily as he could say yes.

“I must get my hat,” Raoul replied. Erik smiled and Christine finally looked at him - surprised, but happy. Erik said he’d call a cab. Helene said she was going straight *home* and favored Raoul with a disgusted look and gathered up her hat and coat before she stalked out of the kitchen.

“Oh, one little thing,” Erik added over his shoulder, once they were quite alone. “Have you heard of La Chatte Mauvaise?”

Taken aback by the question, Raoul replied that he did. It was a cabaret of a sort, but not one that Philippe had ever taken him to. He’d heard it was rather scandalous - women dancing with women while gentlemen paid to join in. Philippe said it was not to his taste. There were some places even his worldly elder brother would not stoop to enter.

“Can you be discreet?” Erik asked, his gaze now gone penetrating. “Really discreet?”

“...yes,” Raoul replied cautiously. And he could, he was sure of it - anyway, there was something about the way Erik was looking at him, with his bizarre eyes, that made him disinclined to lie. He looked at Christine, silently regarding the two men, looking wary and uncomfortably - *oh,* if he could just wipe that uncertainty off her face with a caress, he would! “But is it...isn’t it a...rough sort of place? Not suitable for...young ladies?”

Erik laughed and removed a bottle of wine from the kitchen table. “On the contrary - it is eminently suitable for young ladies. It is *we* who must be on our best behavior. They don’t tolerate ungentlemanlike conduct. Get your hat, Monsieur le Vicomte. We’ll be waiting.”
The cab took a rather round-about way of getting to the hill - understandable when Erik ordered it to stop in front of a row of dilapidated-looking houses in an unsavory neighborhood and got out.

“I’ll be no time at all,” he said, and true to his word bounded down the street, rapping on a window in the nearest house shouting, “Juliette! Juliette!”

The window opened and the head and shoulders of a man appeared - the Persian, Raoul recalled, sometimes seen lurking about the Opera House. Erik’s friend he remembered! Down on his luck, who Christine claimed to know through her academic connections.

“Romeo, Romeo, what the fuck are you doing, Romeo?” the Persian asked sarcastically.

“We’re going out, to La Chatte, go on, make yourself presentable,” Erik ordered.

The Persian smiled. “I won’t be nearly as presentable as you - I’ll look like a rent boy.”

To Raoul’s absolute astonishment, Erik grasped the windowsill, pulled himself up on his toes, so close that his mouth was a hairsbreadth away from the Persian man’s. Ah. Yes. Well...Christine told him they were good friends. Very good, from the look of it. “If that’s how you want it - come along, the Vicomte’s paying.”

And then he kissed the Persian man on the nose. Huh. That was...friendly. Yes. Very friendly.

Erik strode back to the cab and got in. Raoul looked down at Christine, to see if she thought anything was odd about the encounter, but she only smiled at Erik, moving over to make room for the Persian. Raoul was left with the strong suspicion that Erik and this gentleman were...very intimate friends.

He knew such things were done, of course. But he'd not borne witness before - no, not even in the navy.

_Did you know?_ Raoul tried to ask Christine, thinking very loudly at her in the hopes that by some miracle she might hear him. _Are you...comfortable, in the company of such men?_

Christine evidently did not hear him. She leaned closer and smiled, saying, “I’m so glad you’ve come with us! I only hope your brother isn’t too cross.”

Raoul chuckled nervously, “He probably won’t notice that I’m gone, after an hour. He has his friends to entertain.”

The Persian emerged from the house, jamming a bowler on his head. He hopped into the cab, hand inching toward the wine Erik had been liberally sampling (did Mohammedans drink?), but he stopped short when he saw beside whom Erik was placed.

“Shit. You weren’t joking,” the Persian said, sitting heavily beside Christine. “When you said the Vicomte, I thought you meant...metaphorically. Since you played for his brother’s party.”

“If I was talking about my earnings, I would have said the Comte is paying,” Erik replied, handing over the wine so that the Persian might take a long draught. Erik gestured lazily to the apparently not teetotaling Persian, “Monsieur le Vicomte, this is Dalir Mazandarani, Dalir Mazandarani may I present Raoul, le Vicomte de Chagny.”

“Errrrrr,” Dalir said, removing the bottle from his lips.

“Good evening,” Raoul filled in the awkward silence. Then, attempting to be a sport, he reached out for the bottle, “May I?”
The Persian - Dalir - grinned and said, “By all means.”

It was Helene’s own wine; her family worked for a vineyard in the country and sent her a case around the holidays. No grand label on the bottle, no extraordinary vintage contained within, but it was good. And half empty. Christine astonished him by tapping on his shoulder and wordlessly holding her hand out for the bottle.

Oh, he shouldn’t - he really shouldn’t, she was so young! So innocent! It wasn’t chivalrous!

A lifetime of good breeding ran smack into the wall of reality separating this night from the rest of his life. Gentlemen did not take impressionable young girls out to fritter the evening away at disreputable bistros. Gentlemen did not abandon their brother’s carefully orchestrated dinner parties to accompany said young girls to bistros...and gentlemen did not sample their cook’s home brew in cabs in the company of men who kissed openly on the street.

Perhaps tonight, Raoul reflected as he handed the bottle to Christine (who took a swig and coughed adorably), he was not meant to play the gentleman.

A warmth gathered in the pit of his stomach, setting his heart to pounding, making his head light. It couldn’t be the wine, he’d hardly touched it. Maybe it was the thrill of the evening, of going somewhere no one knew him, a place of ill-repute where he might be any fellow out for a good time. Just one night, no sisters at his elbows, no Philippe easing his way. One night...of freedom.

Chapter End Notes

Cutting it there since the next chapter will be all party all the time!
La Chatte Mauvaise was a tiny little slip of a bistro, crammed in between two larger, more populated restaurants. Erik led the party to a side-entrance and down a winding set of stairs to a basement door where a tall, elegantly dressed woman was idling by the doorway.

“Erik!” she exclaimed, coming forward to kiss his cheeks. “I didn’t think we’d engaged you for tonight - what a fine suit, wherever did you get it?”

“A tailor owed me a favor,” he truthfully confessed. “I’ve had a windfall, Celine, and I’m treating my friends.”

“I haven’t had a windfall,” Dalir said as Celine rushed to kiss him as well. “I’m dragging along behind his excellent coattails.”

Celine said she was sure that Dalir would find steady work soon, very soon, but her eyes slid past him to settle on Raoul and Christine curiously.

“May I present, Mademoiselle Christine and the - ah, her beau, Raoul,” Erik said, stoppering his tongue before he let slip something that he ought not. “This is Mademoiselle DuBois, one of the proprietresses of this establishment.”

“The other one is in the kitchen, but I’ll tell her you’ve come for the night,” Celine informed Erik. She kissed Raoul and Christine in turn and welcomed them into the bistro proper. The second she opened the door the most mouth-watering aroma washed over them - onions, garlic, spices - and Christine felt her mouth watering instantly.

The room was well-lit, a little smoky from the customers enjoying cigars and pipes with their supper and wine. The tables ringed the room and there were a few curtained-off private tables, which they were led to by Celine. Erik bade her keep the curtains open as they took their places around the table. Almost at once, they were given a basket of bread, a plate of cheese, and a bowl of oil for dipping, along with two bottles of red wine.

“Two bottles to start?” Raoul asked, picking one up and squinting at the label. Erik took the other and broke the wax seal with a shrug.

“They know me here,” he replied, pouring generous glasses for everyone and (to Christine’s relief), slicing a generous helping of bread for himself. “Go on. Mangia.”

“Such a cultured fellow, you are,” Dalir rolled his eyes, but he followed the directions and helped himself.

Christine took a slice of bread for herself and dragged it through the oil. She’d only just taken a bite when Erik added, “I should mention there’s hot pepper in the oil.”
She wound up gulping down half her glass of wine like it was milk to cool the burn - then immediately went back for another piece. “It is painful, but delicious,” she informed Raoul who was eyeing her dubiously.

“If you plan on kissing her tonight, you’re going to have to eat some,” Erik informed Raoul as Christine choked again, but not from the heat of the oil. “If both parties have garlic on their breath, I’ve been reliably informed that neither minds the taste or aroma.”

Christine was sitting far enough away from Erik that hitting him would be impractical - her arms were too short to reach without hurling herself across the table. And kicking him would be a complicated business - she might miss, after all, and make contact with Dalir’s shins (or worse, Raoul’s). He shouldn’t say such things and it crossed her mind to tell him when Raoul soaked his bread in the flavored out and shoved the lot in his mouth. Immediately she forgot just why she was so irate over Erik’s cheek in the first place.

A Mademoiselle Rossi came over to their table bearing a platter of noodles in red sauce and a plate of succulent meat and peppers, along with a little dish of strong-smelling cheese. She was a stout, sturdy woman with frizzled brown hair, tendrils of which stuck to her red face from her labors in the kitchen. Like Mademoiselle DuBois, she kissed everyone at the table, but fiercely, with a loud smacking sound to accompany each kiss. Christine had not been the recipient of so much affection in an age, she felt slightly giddy - or perhaps it was only the wine.

“You will play, won’t you?” she asked Erik. “I’ll give you the meal for free if you do - just to warm up the crowd, we’ve got another engaged for the dancing.”

“How can I say no?” Erik asked. “To an offer like that - and from such a lovely lady?”

Mademoiselle Rossi rolled her eyes, but smiled fondly at Erik and squeezed his shoulder, “Keep that talk up and you’ll make me change my mind about taking up with men.”

Erik closed his eyes and put a hand to his heart, “No, don’t say such things - our love could never be. When a woman loves me, all hope is lost - disappointment and heartbreak forever.”

Mademoiselle Rossi laughed as Dalir groaned. “Eat up,” she advised the table, reserving a special look for Erik. “Especially you - you need it! And there’s not a lick of cheese in the sauce, so you’ve no excuse to fill yourself with wine and neglect your supper.”

Erik opened his eyes and lowered his hand. “You know, anytime I think there could be something between us, Gabriella, you sound distinctly like my mother and the spark is snuffed at once.”

“Your mother sounds a sensible sort of person,” Mademoiselle Rossi replied, then threw her hands up and bustled back toward the kitchen, exclaiming that Erik always kept her chatting too long and the stove wanted tending.

They all helped themselves to pasta and meat, Dalir liberally pouring cheese over the lot. “It smells like socks, but tastes like heaven,” he declared.

Christine sampled the cheese a little more delicately and Raoul followed her lead. There was no fish or soup course, but he ate very quickly; perhaps out of paranoia that his food would be taken away before he was done. Or it might only be his way for no sooner was his plate clear than he went back for more.

“I’ll never forgive my brother,” he said, sprinkling a larger helping of cheese on top. “Never. He’s taken me to some...interesting places, but we always avoided this one. I’d no idea the fare was so
“That’s Gabriella’s doing,” Erik replied. “Celine engages the talent and Gabriella cooks the meals, it’s a system that works marvelously. Of course, it’s not quite famous enough or infamous enough to attract the smart set. I haven’t seen any of the riff-raff from Cormon’s school sniffing about with their charcoals and their quizzing glasses.”

“Shh!” Dalir said, knocking on Erik’s knuckles with the back of his knife. “I hear they’re like evil spirits - if you speak the name loudly enough - or thrice or five times - you’ll smell pastels and then a hoard of bearded artists will crawl out from under the tables.”

Erik made a show of lifting the tablecloth and gravely intoning, “Cormon - Cormon - Cor - ”

“Hush!” Dalir clapped a hand over his mouth. “Eat your supper.”

Once Dalir removed his hand, Erik favored him with the same dubious look he gave Mademoiselle Rossi, “What did I just say? Hearing my mother’s words coming from someone else’s mouth - however lovely that mouth might be - utterly kills my ardor.”

“Eat your supper,” Dalir repeated calmly. “And drink your wine - then forget all about it.”

“So…” Raoul started in, delicately. “Mademoiselle DuBois… and Mademoiselle Rossi… are… er. Ah…”

He looked at Christine as, if by some act of God, she might be in ignorance of exactly the sort of place they found themselves.

“Lovers,” Christine provided, then pressed her lips together quickly and looked at Erik and Dalir. “Aren’t they?”

Dalir nodded, “The sort who mix business and pleasure. My parents run a shop together and they’re always cross with one another, I have no idea how the mademoiselles manage, but they seem perfectly contented.”

Erik looked offended, “What? You mean we’re not going to open a business together? But I had such plans, Dalir!”

“I would murder you,” Dalir predicted. “Inside a week. Two, at the outermost. I love you very much, but you can be impossible. I can’t even convince you to finish a very excellent meal, however would I convince you to balance the books?”

They really were so dear, Christine thought to herself. Couplings such as theirs - the few she heard rumors of at the conservatory - always seemed a furtive and rushed business. Either so secret that she assumed neither party could derive pleasure from it, or so flagrantly bandied about that it seemed half for show. Had either Dalir or Erik been a lady (doubtless Dalir would make a much prettier girl than Erik would), she would have wondered that they weren’t married for they seemed eminently suited.

They finished their supper (even Erik took a second helping of beef and peppers), but it wasn’t long before Celine came back around to their table with another bottle of wine and a request that Erik please make himself comfortable at the upright piano, whenever it pleased him.

After tossing back another glass of wine (and really, it was astonishing how much he could drink and still remain relatively steady on his feet) Erik made his way to the piano. Dalir followed and Christine, rather emboldened herself, took Raoul by the hand and led him closer to the music. Raoul twined their fingers together and did not let go.
To begin with, he played a few light melodies just to warm up himself, and the instrument, and get a bit of notice from the assembled diners, but Erik the showman was in fine form tonight. Once he had a bit of attention and the chatter in the room faded to a lull, he cracked his knuckles and grinned rakishly at the crowd that was slowly gathering. “How many of you fine mademoiselles and monsieurs hail from England?”

There was a smattering of shouts, hoots and hollars. He nodded as though he expected as much.

“Welcome to France” he said, plunking out a little snippet of ‘God Save the Queen’ which he then rapidly transitioned to ‘La Marseillaise,’ “Liberté, égalité, fraternité! Or...perhaps merely, fraternité.”

The vocal response became more enthusiastic and plentiful. Erik’s grin turned wolfish. “Ah, beautiful Paris! Come for the sodomy, stay for the food! Now, now, mes goddons - ”

“You’ve got that right!” an anonymous voice shouted. Christine had not paid a great deal of attention to the other patrons and she tried to look around discreetly. There was a great mix of fashions on display - some in evening clothes, like herself, Raoul, and Erik, other’s dressed as though they’d stopped in on their way home from work, like Dalir. There were more women than men, but no one she would have looked twice at in the street. Nothing that struck her as distinguishing this crowd from any other person who was out for the night. She did not know why she expected otherwise; perhaps that was her ignorance showing.

“I’ve got a sweet little tune picked out for you,” Erik continued. “That you might remember...though, like all good things to come from Great Britain, this song originated in Scotland.”

There were some groans and boos, but Erik patiently waited them out, giving himself a few additional introductory bars to cool down the crowd. Then he started to sing - “My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose,” was so well-known as to seem cliche, but as ever, when Christine heard Erik sing it was like experiencing the song for the first time.

“As fair thou art, my bonnie lass,
So deep in love am I:
And I will love thee still, my dear,
Till a’ the seas gang dry.

The whole crowded room hushed as Erik played. The effect was astonishing. Despite his teasing and his lewd speech, he played with such feeling and sang with such tenderness - Christine did not miss the fact that his eyes were on Dalir the entire time.

“They really love each other,” Raoul breathed quietly beside her. She blinked and looked up at him. He had a wondering expression on his face, as though witnessing something impossible. Christine smiled at Raoul and squeezed his hand, he looked down, seeming to have forgotten that their fingers were still entwined. His palm felt slightly damp against her own, but he still did not pull away.

When the song concluded, the crowd applauded, then a lady's voice behind her called, “Play something livelier, for God’s sake!”

“God,” her companion complained. “You’ve no culture in you whatsoever, have you? None at all!”

“It takes all sorts!” Erik reminded them before a little domestic spat broke out. And he obliged them, taking requests - and astonished a few in the crowd by playing back songs that he did not know, after hearing a few bars sung. But, as Mademoiselle DuBois so rightly pointed out at the start of the night, he was not engaged to perform all evening and soon a small group of musicians came to usurp his place; they played music intended for dancing.
Erik and Dalir stood up together at once - Dalir taking the lead, as he told Christine he often did. Erik was smiling, he looked - they both looked - very happy indeed.

“I’m not sure,” Raoul said, grip on her hand loosening slightly, “whether it would be a faux pas to ask for this dance with you…”

Christine smiled up at him. “That’s alright, I don’t mind if people think we’re slightly backward. I’d love to dance.”

Raoul smiled and gently squeezed her fingers, “Well then, let’s get to it.”

There were no sisters to trouble them. Once again, Christine was treated to the bliss of being held close by him. She’d just cuddled up by his chest, resting her head above his heart, certain there would be no interruption when a gloved finger gently tap-tapped on her back.

“May I cut in?”

Christine lifted her head and blinked, trying to make sense of who she was looking at. For a scant second, she’d been sure she had heard the dulcet tones of La Carlotta, but the woman standing before her - definitely a woman, despite the fact that she was wearing an impeccably tailored suit of men’s evening clothes - had short hair. Short. Red hair. Violently red, in fact.

Oh dear. It was La Carlotta. What a pity she didn’t go in for more trouser roles, she looked stunning. Gone was the dowdiness of her day dress or the ostentatious costumes she wore onstage. She looked very lovely. And very at ease, there was a relaxed quality to her face that Christine hadn’t noticed. Sophie was with her, but she was recognizable immediately. She wore a beautiful dress of dark blue silk and her hair was the same as ever.

“Good evening, Christine,” she smiled at her and curtsied slightly toward Raoul. “Monsieur.”

Carlotta stood by, patiently waiting for Christine’s reply.

“I don’t know how to lead,” Christine confessed.

Carlotta smiled, “Not to worry - I do.”

And she swept her away while Sophie was left to partner with a dazed-looking Raoul who was staring at Carlotta, trying fiercely to place her.

“You needn’t look so glum,” Carlotta said teasingly. “Or am I such a poor partner?”

“Not at all!” Christine said at once, slightly overwhelmed. Since the first day they met in the dressing room Carlotta hardly acknowledged her. To be fair, she hardly acknowledged anyone - she came to the Opera to work and aside from talking through movement and music with directors, conductors, and those with whom she shared a scene, she was not a very sociable employee. To dance with her like this, to be spoken to like they were old friends was strange. “Forgive me. I’m only taken aback - your lovely hair!”

“Oh, I left it home tonight,” Carlotta laughed carelessly. “It can mind itself - it’s well house-broken.”

Christine laughed, despite her nerves (possibly because of her nerves, she’d had an awful lot of wine). “I think your hairstyle looks fetching - very becoming.”

“Thank you,” Carlotta said, twirling Christine away from her and leading her back in again. She really was a fine dancer, but Christine would give up style and flair to be near Raoul again. Foiled at
every turn! “This seems an unlikely place for a secret rendezvous - for yourself and the Vicomte, anyway.”

The blood rose in Christine’s face and neck and she looked at Raoul, being put through his paces by Sophie (she was letting him lead, however). “We’re not having a rendezvous, secret or otherwise. I’d no notion of his joining us tonight, but...oh, it’s a very long story.”

“And we’ve reached the end of our dance,” Carlotta acknowledged as the music paused. “Very well, I’ll take you back - it was a surprise to see you here, Mademoiselle Daac. But not an unpleasant one. I hope the feeling is mutual.”

“Of course,” Christine nodded vigorously, head swimming a little. It was awfully warm in this room, wasn’t Carlotta warm? She was wearing a jacket after all and Christine’s shoulders were bare. “It was lovely to see you - and thank you for the dance, you are a talented partner.”

Raoul caught her up again and whispered in her ear, “Was that - ?”

“I need some air,” Christine confessed to him. “It’s very hot, just now, isn’t it?”

Raoul agreed that it was a trifle warm. They looked around to find Erik and Dalir, but they were so busy gazing into one another’s eyes that Christine doubted they’d notice them leaving.

The air of the alleyway was stale, but cooler and Christine felt refreshed almost at once. Raoul fiddled around with a gold-plated cigarette case, but remembered himself and snapped it shut audibly.

“Oh, you can smoke,” Christine told him, waving her hand. “My father was fond of a pipe in the evenings, I don’t mind the smell.”

“Well, a pipe is one thing,” Raoul acknowledged, “but a gentleman shouldn’t smoke cigarettes in the presence of a young lady. Or any lady. That’s not to say that I would smoke in front of my grandmother. Either of my grandmothers...if they were still living. Which they are not.”

Raoul then occupied himself with lighting one of his cigarettes, presumably to give his mouth an occupation that was not speaking.

So many rules! Christine had no idea how Raoul kept track of them all, but she supposed that was what made him a good sailor, the ability to memorize a routine. Like memorizing the lyrics of a song.

“You don’t need to worry,” she told him, as he put his matchbook in his pocket. “About offending my...sensibilities. I may be small, but I don’t think I’m very delicate. Nor easily shocked. Not by smoking, at any rate.”

“No, I don’t think you would be,” Raoul replied, discreetly removing some tobacco from his tongue. “Coming...here - it’s very nice! Very nice indeed, but - ”

“I hope I haven’t offended your sensibilities,” Christine said, leaning close and grinning so he knew she was teasing. Raoul thoughtfully turned his head so that he did not blow smoke into her face.

“Not at all,” he said, tapping the loose ash to the ground. “I’m not delicate either.”

He finished his cigarette and Christine watched him, for lack of anything better to look at in this alley - ah, but that was unfair to Raoul. Had she been standing in a gallery at the Louvre with the Vicomte at her side, she would have been hard-pressed to notice any of the artwork. What was it Erik had been saying about mouths earlier? It seemed apt...if only she could remember the quote. Raoul had a
very lovely mouth, perfectly shaped. Not...like a woman’s mouth, but she thought his lips should be soft. She knew they were when they brushed her cheek...she wondered what they might be like if they touched her mouth.

“Are you ready to go back in?” he asked, talking to her with those wonderful lips of his.

“Hmm?” she asked, wonderingly. “Oh. I suppose.”

Raoul held the door for her and Christine hung back. He started down the steps, but turned slightly when he realized she wasn’t coming down the landing. They were eye-to-eye. “Are you…”

But he didn’t finish that question. She might have tilted her head slightly. He might have moved in, to look more closely at her. She might have looked bold. He might have looked resolved. But whoever started it, they were soon kissing on the stairwell as music swelled around them from the room beyond.

And, as their lips met, they both shared the same thought: Thank God we both ate the garlic bread.

Chapter End Notes

The art school Erik is referring to is the Artelier Cormon, run by Fernand Cormon who taught such luminaries as Toulouse-Lautrec and van Gogh (Lautrec used to hit up the night clubs to sketch...and drink, I'm assuming).
Putting Up Paper

Chapter Notes

If anyone is under the impression that Raoul is anything other than a hilarious, affectionate drunk, then I advise them to read this chapter and have their opinions corrected.

Warning for: homophobia.

Raoul got in as the sun was cresting over the top of the buildings, washing Paris in a hazy orange light. By the end of the night, he'd consumed another bottle of wine and Christine's lips twice more. He'd also kissed Erik, Dalir, and both Mlles DuBois and Rossi - and he could have sworn that La Carlotta's double blew him a kiss. It couldn't be La Carlotta, naturally, for she had long hair. Raoul could not remember the last time he'd been in a crowd that was so affectionate or enthusiastic. In order to be fashionable, one must participate in heady entertainments while remaining slightly aloof. One must look upon wonders and impressive sights as if one had seen it all before. It was a skill for which Raoul possessed no mastery.

He arrived with the scullery. She curtsied and stepped aside so that he might access the servant's entrance himself - it would not do to come through the front doors and awaken the whole household.

Ah. Or he would have let himself into the servant's entrance...if he'd remembered his keys the night before. Which he had not. The coachman had a spare set - that was who Philippe relied upon at the end of a long evening.

"Sir?" the scullery asked timidly. "If you'll...allow me."

"Thank you," he smiled at her and she chanced a quick little smile up at him. She removed her own key from her purse and unlocked the door, standing aside so that he might pass. Raoul couldn't recall her name, but decided she was his favorite among the servants. She ought to have a bonus! He might have been slightly intoxicated, still.

Perhaps he ought to kiss her! One more kiss to finish off the evening - or morning...but no, the door was open and she was gone.

The kitchen was very dark with no one about. It was simplicity itself to pick his way past the butcher’s block, up the back stairs...which floor was he on? Surely he’d gotten off in the right spot, but then once bit of wallpaper looked very much like every other...such a lot of rooms! Honestly. Who needed quite so many rooms? They hardly ever had guests in the city -

“Going to sleep it off?” Philippe asked, exiting Raoul’s...no. No, this was Philippe’s bedroom. It was only that one door looked very like another, especially when it was still very dark in the house.

“Hmm?” Raoul asked. Or hummed. More buzzed. It had been a wonderful night, for an instant he wondered what kept Philippe from joining them - ah. Oh, yes. He had a party. That Raoul walked out on.
But he did not seem all that put-out. At least, he wasn’t frowning, though the ends of his mustache were not waxed as yet, so it was difficult to tell. The upturned mustache was quite a good substitution for upturned lips.

“Are you very cross with me?” Raoul asked because he really could not tell. It ought to be a crime for Philippe to leave the house with an unwaxed mustache; however was one to know what he was thinking?

“Cross?” Philippe asked. “No, not at all. I said you ran off to attend to a sick friend, everyone said it was most gentlemanlike. Of course, they all knew you were running off with your little soprano, but, kind souls, declined to mention it.”

Oh. Good. Well, if they didn’t mention it, how did Philippe know what they were thinking? Perhaps he read the truth in the gentlemen’s mustaches, but he could hardly have done with the ladies. Not even the Russian countess who had rather a dark upper lip.

“Here,” Philippe said, pushing Raoul down to sit in an obliging hall chair. “Just a word - dalliances are all well and good, my dear boy, but you really must exercise a bit more discretion.”

“Discretion,” Raoul repeated, trying to give the impression that he was listening very hard.

“Precisely,” Philippe nodded, imposing in his dressing gown. Raoul hardly thought one could look imposing in a dressing gown. Philippe really could do anything. “And as to Mademoiselle Daaé herself...I know you had an attachment when you were small, but things do change Raoul. People. And I hope you’re not...fixated on her solely. For I have it on very good authority that she does not pin her coquetry on one man.”

Coquette. Was Christine a coquette? Raoul hardly thought so. When he imagined coquettes, he imagined nothing so much as red lips and fluttering dark eyelashes. Christine’s eyelashes - he’d been close enough to see them last night - were pale, pale yellow. Nearly white. Almost invisible. If she fluttered them at him, he’d never know; he’d just as soon assume she had something in her eye.

Her lips - ah, her lips! Perfection. But not red, no, not at all. Peach. A most delightful peach. Only they tasted of garlic; no matter, so did his.

“She’s been seen,” Philippe said, sounding like a detective in a novel, “cavorting with that Persian man. And - well, I hardly need tell you. She chose the scene changer as her escort to the Gala. No accounting for tastes, but I daresay hers are not very discerning.”

Why shouldn’t she been seen with Erik and Dalir. Why, she was seen with them just last night in fact! Raoul had seen them together just last night - been with them through the night into the day. They’d only just left each other’s company. If the crime of coquetry could be proven on the basis of spending time with Erik and Dalir, then Raoul was as guilty as she.

Philippe read much into Raoul’s silence - unfortunately, it was nothing of substance.

“I know you are very young and have not been much about in the world,” Philippe continued. “And it can be a blow to know the object of one’s affections does not confine her attentions to yourself alone, but that is the way of things.”

Oh. Oh! Philippe thought...well, how funny! How funny for Philippe to believe that Erik and Dalir might feel romantically inclined toward Christine. Granted, he himself had harbored such foolish delusions once, at the Gala, but looking back, it seemed absurd! Erik and Dalir were in love. Erik sang him such a jaunty tune the night before. Roses are red. Violets are blue. Or something.
“Oh, no,” Raoul said, waving his hands about with very little coordination. “Christine shan’t break my heart over Erik and Dalir. No, no. You needn’t be concerned about that!”

Philippe looked visibly relieved, “I’m glad you hear you say so. And perhaps...in future you’ll not see quite so much of Mademoiselle Daaé”

“Mmm,” Raoul hummed. Not so pleasantly as Erik. He wondered if he sang that way all the time or only to Dalir - ah, wrong again! For he had a charming voice. More than charming. He’d sung at the house only...only last night? Was it possible it all happened in one night?

Raoul looked down at himself and confirmed, yes. It was only one night. He was wearing the same tie.

“That isn’t to say you treat such girls badly, not at all! Why, you treat them as you would a wife! Ah,” Philippe smiled a small, private smile. “You treat them rather differently than you would treat a wife - ”

“How would you know?” Raoul asked, looking up from his study of his tie, honest confusion all over his face. “You’ve never been married.”

His brother laughed, but it was a short, staccato affair. Ha! Staccato. Perhaps he was becoming less of a philistine the more time he spent around his opera friends. No, no, Raoul thought, pleasantly drowsy and at peace with all the world. Philippe was quite wrong. Of course he should be seeing quite so much of Mademoiselle Daaé. He thought he should see her rather more. And Erik and Dalir, in fact! They made a merry party.

“I don’t remember when I’ve had such a good time,” Raoul remarked, not sure if he was contributing to their previous conversation or starting a new one. Everything - Philippe included - was lightly blurred around the edges. Funny. His elder brother always loomed so large and so colorful in his life.

“I can see I’m not getting anywhere right now,” Philippe said, lightly amused. He hauled Raoul to his feet and guided him to his bedroom. “Have a rest there. I’ll see you for supper.”

At the door of his room, Raoul stumbled and Philippe caught him. It struck Raoul as very funny, this...this. Whatever this was. One - or two - or three lovely kisses with Christine. Chaste kisses from everyone else - aha! They would be chaste, wouldn’t they, coming from the ladies? The other ladies. Obviously Christine was a lady and she seemed to like kissing him. Which was wonderful! So wonderful.

“Good night, Philippe,” Raoul grinned at his brother, kissing him too, rather wetly on the cheek. There. Everyone he cared about most in the world had been kissed - well, except his sisters. He’d have to make it up to them when next they met.

Philippe patted Raoul’s shoulder and restrained himself from wiping his cheek. “Good morning, Raoul.”

_The Pearl Fishers_ was certainly not a show that was going to answer any deep, abiding questions about the purpose of life, the secret of happiness or the futility of existence. But compared to _The Marriage of Figaro_? It was practically profound.

The plot, the sets, the costumes were so lightly and fluffy they seemed liable to float away, like soap suds in a laundry. Frippery. Pure, unabashed, frippery.
“We are the national theatre,” Erik complained during his luncheon, cutting slices off an apple and chewing contemplatively. “We ought to have something to say in our productions!”

René shook his head. “The trouble with theatres where the artists have something to say is that the audiences can’t understand them! They understand humor; it’s universal.”

They were sitting upon the second story of the doll house set, legs dangling over the edge. Erik battled with himself over whether or not to incorporate a railing and hadn’t decided; it might ruin the audience’s view, but it also would ensure that the lead baritone wouldn’t take a tumble off the set and break his legs. Decisions, decisions.

“Not everyone has a sense of humor,” Erik reminded him, casting his eyes into the wings where Joseph Buquet sat, mullishly away from them, drinking his lunch.

“Leave it,” Edouard remarked, tapping Erik’s bony knee with his knife. “Just don’t say anything. Don’t get his dander up.”

Erik flicked Edouard’s knife away with his own. Edouard responded in kind and for a few minutes, they amused themselves with a swordfight writ small; two little paring knives set against one another for honor. In the end it was a draw; Erik wanted to go back to his apples and Edouard wanted to go back to his salami.

“I don’t know why I’ve got to be the responsible one,” Erik griped quietly. “When it’s he who’s gone surly. I’ll have you know on good authority that I am delightful.”

“Whose authority?” René asked, amused. “Your mother’s?”

“Your lover’s?” Edouard guessed.

“Oh, neither,” Erik shook his head sadly. “But the Vicomte de Chagny finds me charming enough. At least, that was what he said a few weeks ago; granted, he was very drunk at the time.”

What a divine night it had been, though! Good food, good company, wonderful dancing partner. And Christine had finally gotten a kiss out of her beau, which she breathlessly related to him once they’d seen the Vicomte to his own door.

I’ve never been kissed before! she told him, twirling about like a giddy little schoolgirl. It was wonderful! I felt dizzy!

That might have been the wine, but Erik listened patiently as Dalir snored away in his corner of the cab. He couldn’t disagree, of course; kissing a gentleman was (in his experience) often a wonderful occurrence. Certainly beat out the one and only time he’d pressed his lips against those of a young lady’s. He was only thirteen at the time, but he knew his mind and vowed never again.

“Do they really want us to paper this hull?” Edouard asked, squinting up at the bare walls around them. “Only the smell of the glue makes me sick.”

“Paper was the order given,” Erik confirmed, putting his knife and handkerchief away. The audience would never know of course, if they used paper or paint. But Erik liked his instructions carried out to the last and he would provide the same courtesy to any other designer. “We can bang it out this afternoon.”

“Floor’s sturdy enough,” René agreed.

“Sturdy enough for dancing was my understanding,” Erik nodded. It wasn’t quite worthy to stand as
a house for five generations, but it would do for a show. He stood up and gave the floor a stomp; nary a wobble.

Edouard shook his head, “I don’t trust it, not from you, you green bean! Let René have a go, if those shovels he calls feet don’t go through the floor, I’ll agree we can start papering.”

René gave an experimental stomp.

“Solid as a fortress!” Erik declared triumphantly.

“Solid enough for dancing!” René agreed. Then, winking, he held out a hand. “Monsieur?”

“Oh, nothing would please me more!” Erik laughed, taking René’s hand with an exaggerated bow. Edouard chuckled and beat out a rhythm on the floor clumsily with his knife’s hilt.

“I’m taking you next time I got dancing!” Erik declared as he and René tested the structural stability of the second floor. “It’s grand to have a partner who’s taller than me - ”

“Disgusting.”

Joseph Buquet stumbled out of the wings and glared up at them from the footlights.

“I don’t recall asking for your opinion, Buquet,” Erik said as Rene dropped his hand and stood by with his arms folded. “Have you come to the end of your bottle already?”

Even Edouard didn’t tell him to knock it off, he was frowning down at Buquet from his place on the set. “Come, man, it’s just a lark - ”

“Not for him,” Buquet said, pointing an accusatory finger at Erik. “I know what he’s about. Looking at the men as he does. Disgusting.”

“Well, I’m certainly not looking at you,” Erik replied coolly. “So you haven’t anything to concern yourself with.”

“And to be fair, I asked him for the dance,” René injected, trying to be helpful. “What are you going to do, Buquet? Tell my wife?”

“Ha!” Edouard laughed. “Paulette will be happy to have you off her hands, I don’t doubt.”

“You laugh!” Buquet exclaimed, weaving slightly on his feet, face red from rage and drink. “All of you! Think you’re so fucking funny, getting away with it. You won’t for long! Mark me! I’ll find you out - ”

“You couldn’t find your way out of a potato sack with a hole in the bottom,” Erik informed him flatly. “Go home, Buquet. You’re dismissed for the day; I don’t need you getting sick on my nice clean floors.”

“I’ll find you out,” he growled. “Mark my words.”

They watched Buquet leave, unsteady on his feet. If Erik were a more charitable man, he might have taken his concerns - concerns only, not complaints - to the management. Or maybe have a quiet word with Simon about curbing his brother’s vices. But he was not feeling charitable; if Buquet wanted to drink and get surly, then he could do it on his own time. Why should his behavior be Erik’s to regulate? He had a wall to paper.

“No sense of humor,” Erik shook his head. “Precisely as I said. Attend to your handkerchief,
Edouard.”

“Breathe through your mouth,” René advised. “Erik’ll look like a fool if he sends Buquet home only for you to get sick all over the floor.”
The Noon Train

Chapter Notes

The city and the country meet in this chapter! Erik is NOT going to be thrilled with Dalir when he's lucid, but I'm always happy to bring the Astrucs together.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nearly three years of knowing Erik had introduced Dalir to many things. Once the mask came off, he thought he knew all he could of Erik. They shared conversation, lodgings and every intimacy besides that, but, in all that time Dalir had never seen Erik become ill. As such, he did not even recognize the warnings signs. Actually, on the morning that Erik woke, speaking with an unaccustomed rasp in his voice that no amount of throat-clearing could shake, Dalir thought he looked uncommonly well. There was color in his cheeks as he went off to work. Color that was heightened when he stumbled in, after midnight. Shaking. Hot. Clammy.

Being a builder for the Opera and not a designer resulted in a lowering of salary. Erik was trying to put a little money by, so that he might go to the country again, to visit his sister during her confinement in the new year. So, right after he was through with work at the Opera, he'd gone to his usual haunts of bistros, playing until he could hardly stand upright.

Dalir was on his way out when Erik came in, but he risked being late to fire up the ovens, just to see Erik get into bed. He left him with a glass of water and tucked him in like a child, blankets under his chin, his mother's quilts heaped on top of him.

“Don’t fuss,” Erik insisted, turning his face away to cough in his hand. “I’ll be fine. I always am. Go on, you’ll be late - ah! No kisses, please. It wouldn’t do for both of us to come over ill.”

And he smiled. Dalir smiled back, but thought of him all day. Erik was so tall, so loud, so bright that it was hard to think of him as frail. But in that bed, he looked so...small. Shrunken, almost. He hated to leave him.

He rushed back at midday to check on him. Erik was fast asleep and when Dalir put an ear next to his mouth, he didn’t hear a wheeze. Possibly he was worrying over nothing; he got a lingering cold with the change of the seasons, rarely needing more than a night of uninterrupted sleep and strong tea to keep him on his feet. The set was complete, Erik’s work on the show nearly concluded. A few days in bed ought to set him right as rain.

But Erik could do nothing by halves; when he got sick, he got sick. The next night he was shivering with cold, though the room was stiflingly warm. And he hardly ever got out of bed; the cold settled in his head, every time he opened his eyes, he winced.

Once, when Dalir was marveling over how much wine such a skinny fellow could quaff in an evening without feeling the effects, Erik laughed, Every time I get a cold, I get an unbearable headache, right behind my eyes - wine headaches are nothing to that!

Dalir hated leaving him like that, but what choice did he have?

If only Erik had the courtesy become ill a month before! When Dalir was still unemployed and might
have spent the day with him. But now he had a job to get to in the morning and when he returned home in the evening, it was to an Erik who was so laid up he’d probably only gotten out of bed to drag himself to the privy at the back of the property.

They were not on intimate terms with their neighbors, Dalir was not on speaking terms with his family. There was no one he could request come in to check on him; every one of their acquaintances worked. Well, with the exception of the Vicomte and he did not feel comfortable asking Raoul to play nursemaid. Though doubtless Erik would find it very funny if he did.

If Erik was up to finding anything funny. He was burning with fever and, at times, forgot where precisely he was. At night, he tossed and turned, saying nothing, but at times plaintively asking to hear ‘the goat song,’ whatever that was. Dalir was becoming increasingly worried, but aside from cheap medicines from the chemist’s, there was nothing that could be done.

It was Christine who suggested applying to the Astrucs - having so many children, she reasoned, surely they could spare one to come and look after Erik for a little while.

“We don’t have the space to put anybody up,” Dalir informed her. She’d not been inside the flat, but Erik often unfavorably compared it, in relative dimensions, to a bread box. Doubtless she understood the difficulty.

“I have a guest room,” Christine told him. Then corrected herself, “Mamma Valerius has a guest room - the professor’s old room. It just wants airing, but that isn’t any trouble at all! If one of his sisters will come, I can put her up for as long as she needs. Really, I’d be glad to!”

In the end - with Erik’s fever waxing and waning and never truly abating, Dalir took up his pen and wrote to his parents. Said only that he was his flatmate. Explained that their son was ill and feverish and that he could send train fare along, if they could spare one of the household to tend to him. The reply came so quickly that Dalir assumed they’d written it at the post office - Yes. They would send one of the elder girls who would arrive on the noon train, if he would be so good as to fetch her.

Though the station was its quietest at midday, Dalir still worried he might wander around for quite a while before finding the sister. He’d no idea what she looked like - Erik told him that none of his siblings looked like him, which only meant they could look like anybody.

Turned out he needn’t have worried; he spotted the sister almost at once, coming off the train with a small carpet-bag in hand, a shawl wrapped round her shoulders and pinned with a cameo brooch. She was very tall and thin, with honey-colored hair swept simply up on top of her head. Glasses. Anna-Lise, he remembered. Erik saved and saved to buy her a pair of spectacles and behind the glass were a familiar pair of mismatched eyes - one brown and one blue. She was actually quite pretty, he noticed, but thin. Not as gaunt as Erik, but far too thin.

Though he recognized her, she had no idea what he looked like and he saw her draw up, hands clutching the strap of her bag tightly as he walked purposefully toward her.

Dalir slowed his stride and chanced a smile that he hoped did not appear too strained. “Mademoiselle Astruc?”

“Monsieur Mazandarani?” she replied, peering at Dalir curiously. He nodded and she smiled in clear relief; Paris was a large city, after all and she’d never been. Her nervousness was understandable.

“Dalir is fine,” he said, extending his hand to her, which she touched briefly. Cold bony fingers, even through her gloves. Yes, this was Erik’s sister, undoubtedly. “Thank you for coming, I
wouldn’t have troubled you, only I work most of the day and - ”

“Oh, no!” she exclaimed, hands fluttering a little nervously. “Thank you for writing! Maman wanted to come, but she couldn’t leave the little ones, Mathilde is really hopeless in the kitchen and since Lisette married - I’m sorry, none of this matters. May I see Isaac now?”

Dalir blinked in confusion before he remembered that Erik was a pseudonym, adopted at some country fair or other to lend him some teutonic gravity or...something. The story was not quite clear, and anyway, it came about at a time in his life that Erik did not relish discussing. Isaac was his name, though by the time Dalir discovered that truth, he’d never developed the habit of using it. Erik never seemed fussed either way.

“Of course,” he said, offering her his arm. Mademoiselle Astruc took it and they walked from the train station to the flat. “I could call a cab if you - ”

“Don’t trouble yourself,” she said at once. “I’ve never been to Paris before, I don’t mind a walk, I’d like to see the city.”

“Once Eri - ah. Once your brother is well, I’m sure he’ll show you a pleasanter view than this,” Dalir replied with a wry grin. There wasn’t much to look at on their block, other than peddler’s carts, small groceries and second-hand shops.

Having never lived anywhere else, Dalir was used to the grandeur and the squalor all cozily pressed together, but he’d heard enough moans and groans from transplants to know that, in the countryside, Paris was seen as a place of gold and light where all was ease and champagne. He only hoped Erik’s sister wasn’t too disappointed. She seemed tolerably well, looking around curiously, but her face was impassive, until Dalir opened the door to the flat.

Mademoiselle Astruc hesitated just an instant, on the landing before she went inside and he realized that, though she wasn’t staying with them, he might have tidied first. Trousers hung from a line strung between the two high-backed chairs which served a greater use for laundry than it did for dining. He’d not emptied the ashtray...or cleaned the small fire in an age and there was a bit of a suffocating miasma about the place. The rug had never been brushed...ever, as far as he knew. Immediately, even before she looked over at Erik, Mademoiselle Astruc opened the windows, drew back the curtains, airing the place out.

“Maman insists fresh air is the best curative,” she informed Dalir, then removed a bottle from her bag. The label featured a dancing girl in a yellow dress. With a small smile she added, “Vin Mariani doesn’t go amiss either. It’s the only thing that puts Isaac to rights when he’s got a cold.”

At the mention of his name, Erik stirred on the bed. He shifted and squinted into the brightness. “A vision!” he declared, before he descended into a coughing fit. “An angel come to see me.”

Mademoiselle Astruc sat down beside him, peeling her gloves off and patting his sweaty hair with a bare hand. Her wrap she abandoned on the foot of the bed, but she kept her hat on as she looked him over. “Poor fellow,” she breathed quietly, as her eyes roamed the room. “You take on too much.”

Erik’s brow furrowed and he stared up into his sister’s face as if trying to remember how she’d got there. “Where am I?”

“In Paris,” she replied patiently. Erik’s right hand crept up, fingers tracing the back of her hand. She turned her palm up and captured them.

“And where are you?” he asked.
“Ah. Imagine that. Did you fly, little bird?”

“Not at all,” she said. “I lurched all about in a train compartment. But that’s alright. I’m here now. What can I get for you?”

Dalir wished they had more food in the house - or any food in the house? When was the last time Mademoiselle Astruc had anything to eat? Their few glasses and dishes needed washing...ah, he was a miserable host. But perhaps she took after Erik in that way - no need for food when there was a bottle of wine handy. And she’d brought the wine herself.

“Will you sing for me?” Erik asked. “Dalir can’t sing - and more to the point he won’t sing. No matter how much I ask.”

“You’d regret it, if I complied,” Dalir spoke up. “Anyway, I don’t know what it is you want to hear - I haven’t got your mind for tunes. He keeps asking for some song about a goat.”

Mademoiselle Astruc laughed lightly, giving Erik’s hand a squeeze. “Oh, you want to hear the goat song, do you? Very well.

Chad gadya, chad gadya
My father bought for two zuzim
Chad gadya, chad gadya
Then came a cat that ate the goat
My father bought for two zuzim…”

The young lady had a pretty voice - not so incredible as Erik’s, but lovely all the same. She held his hand and stroked his hair and looked at him so tenderly that Dalir turned away, feeling like he was imposing on them. There was reason he’d never met Erik’s family. Several reasons. He ought to go, but it seemed a shame to interrupt her while she was singing.

Erik drifted off to sleep soon enough, and Mademoiselle Astruc turned toward him with a soft smile.

“Thank goodness for small favors - that tune’s got about thirty verses,” she informed Dalir with a small shrug. “Isaac likes long songs.”

Knowing well his fondness for ‘Alouette,’ Dalir wasn’t surprised. “I’ll be back in a few hours - I can take you to Mademoiselle Daae’s home then. Thank you, again, for coming.”

“Thank you again, for sending for me,” she said, extricating her fingers from Erik’s and approaching Dalir quietly. “He doesn’t - Isaac likes to take care of everyone, but he won’t let anyone look after him. Even when he needs it. I’m...very pleased that you cared enough to send for me, it’s very reassuring to know that Isaac has a...someone who has his best interests at heart.”

Then she smiled like they were sharing a secret.

Does she...no. No, Dalir thought to himself, frowning in response to her smile. Impossible. You’re only being paranoid. Steady on, Dalir.

“I must be off,” he said at last, backing toward the door. “I-I’ll return soon. I’ll bring some food back. We haven’t much in the house.”
“Oh, don’t worry about me - ” she began, but Dalir slammed the door behind him.

“- I ate on the train,” Anna-Lise concluded to the door. She was a little taken aback by his change in manner, but shrugged it off; he had a job to get to and likely had a devil of a time meeting her at the train. It was very good of him to do so, she would have been hopeless coming to the flat on her own - the room, rather.

She was very young when Isaac came back from his travels abroad with the fair, but not so young that she did not remember Maman, staying up late, sewing him new shirts.

“He ought to have spent something on himself!” she groused. “I’d have sent half his money back to him if I’d known he was wearing rags.”

Anna-Lise understood Maman’s sentiments, as she looked around the dismal little room her brother and his friend resided in. There was a tiny little fireplace, no stove to speak of, only a burner, rusting and neglected in the corner. The bed was very narrow to hold two adult men - if Isaac wasn’t so skinny, she was sure he and M. Mazandarani would have had a difficult time of it.

It made her blush to think of it, especially after her conversation with Lisette, but she couldn’t help noticing that M. Mazandarani was very handsome. A little taller than herself, about their father’s height, he had such broad shoulders and strong hands - to say nothing of his square jaw and lovely green eyes. He swept his hat off in the flat and a lock of hair fell over his brow, giving him a rakish look, belied by the expression of concern all over his face.

*In that you’ve done well for yourself, Isaac,* she thought, searching the room for a broom and a scrubbing brush; if she had no other occupation, she might as well tidy up a bit. Living in squalor would do nothing for her brother’s health.

Lisette volunteered to go, but was voted down - in her condition, traveling alone was unwise in the extreme. Anna-Lise was glad she’d stayed home - she might have fainted when she saw the state of the place and done the baby a harm, dropping to the floor in a heap. She wasn’t so fastidious as her sister (no one was), but she would do her part to at least make the flat appear liveable.

She lit a fire in the hearth to heat some water to wash the windows and an iron for her brother’s and M. Mazandarani’s shirts (if she was doing one, why not the other?) When she put away the washing, she did discover a very fine suit at the bottom of their single dresser. That must have been the evening clothes, gifted to Isaac as a favor. What an odd life he lived here, in Paris, getting gifts of suits.

Isaac never *said* anything about Paris - the story about the Gala was the most he’d spoken to anyone about his friends in the city. She knew he had a flatmate, a foreign man and had to remind Maman of the fact when she expressed confusion over who this person with the odd last name was, writing to them about Isaac being ill. She was certain it was some kind of scam.

In fact, Lisette and Anna-Lise only managed to convince her the letter was genuine when it mentioned Mlle Daœe - Isaac’s companion at the Gala. Maman recalled her name, having forgotten it once the story was through. “I never thought she’d come up again,” Maman explained. “Isaac doesn’t step out with girls.”

The sisters exchanged a significant look. Did she mean…? But no, best to leave it. For if Maman did not mean her words in the way they were taking them, it wouldn’t do to discuss it.
“What are you doing here?”

Isaac was awake. Anna-Lise turned away from the windows (most of the grime was from the street beyond and nothing to do about it, unless she found a ladder) and looked at him. He was leaning up on one elbow and frowning at her mightily.

“Cleaning your flat,” she said, holding up the blackened rag she’d employed to aid her task. “Would you like some medicine now?”

“But you’re not allowed to be here,” Isaac insisted. “Not in the city. Erik lives in the city and he doesn’t have any sisters.”

What that meant, she had no idea. Must be the fever talking.

“Well, I’ve come to tend to my brother Isaac who has five sisters,” she reminded him, as though he’d forgotten. “Sit up, I’ll pour you a draught.”

He drank his medicine without protest, then went back to regarding her unhappily, as if he really did not want her there. “It’s freezing.”

“I opened the windows,” she replied, tucking the blankets back over his shoulders. Resting a hand on his head, she removed it and wiped the sweat off on her skirt. “But you’re burning up - thank goodness for your M’sieur Mazandarani, no one ought to be left in this state.”

“My M’sieur Mazandarai,” Isaac muttered, smiling slightly as he lay back down. “I suppose he is at that. Where’s he gone? You met him?”

“Mmm-hmm,” Anna-Lise hummed soothingly. “He walked me here from the train station. He seems a fine gentleman. And...very handsome.”

Isaac smiled again. “Too handsome for your very ugly brother, you mean?”

“Hush,” she said, flicking his ear. “Of course not.”

A little thrill went through her - Isaac was not likely to remember this conversation. If he ventured to ask her about it, she could tell him he dreamed it.

“Are you...happy?” she asked, smoothing the covers over his chest. “Happy with...M’sieur Mazandarani?”

“Oh yes,” he replied, eyes closing. “Deliriously happy. It’s why I’ve been struck down by illness. I’ve made myself sick with it.”

That was Isaac through and through - never serious. Always a riddle. But she concluded he must be happy. That M. Mazandarani must care for him very much. He’d never have sent for her otherwise.

“Isaac...” she began, eyes traveling the small, dark, sooty room. “How much of your salary do you send back to us?”

“All of it.”

Anna-Lise started and frowned down at him. “Oh, no, that can’t be!”

“Why not?” he asked, blinking blearily up at her. His eyes weren’t focused, but he spoke clearly. “You deserve it. More. For being so good. So good to me.”
Such heart-breaking simplicity and sincerity; she wished he’d go back to riddles, her eyes burned with sudden tears and she resigned herself to stroking his hair since his hands were covered in quilts.

“You’re very good to us. You’re too good,” she whispered quietly. “However do you live?”

“On music, chérie,” he said with a sigh. “Always on music. Don’t look so distressed. Are you crying? Whyever are you crying? Don’t fret. And don’t fuss. I take care of you, don’t I?”

“Oh, yes, of course,” she sniffled; goodness, what a picture they made. “But, Isaac, who takes care of you?”

“Pah,” he said, turning his face away. “Erik doesn’t need anyone to take care of him. Don’t cry, darling. Not for either of us.”

He wasn’t up to this kind of talk, that much was clear. Anna-Lise rose from his bedside; he need to sleep, he’d be more coherent soon, she was certain.

“Rest,” she said, bending to give him a very light kiss on the temple. “Just rest - we’ll talk more later.”

“Are you going to the country?” he asked, regarding her through half-closed eyes.

“Not yet,” she said. Then smiled wryly. “I’ve got to finish washing your windows - you never told me Paris was such a dirty city.”

“Oh, it is,” he said, slowly, as he fell back to sleep. “A wicked, dirty city. Mind your skirts, my dearest. It’s not...you’re not meant to be here. Not with me.”

Chapter End Notes

The Vin Mariani that Anna-Lise brought does WONDERS for a cold - because it's full of cocaine. Yay 19th century patent medicine. Next chapter we'll find out what has been going on at the opera while Erik’s been sick. And I might have Anna-Lise and Christine have a real conversation, Christine might keep the poor girl up all night grilling her about Erik. Also, Chad Gadya is a personal favorite song of mine - I heard it at my first ever seder a few months ago and its been in my head ever since.
I thought a whole chapter of Little Isaac stories might be a bit much, so instead I interrupted Christine's grilling of Anna-Lise to let Erik freak himself out over nothing.

When Christine arrived for work, after quickly checking that Professor Valerius’s old room was suitable for Erik’s sister to stay for a while, she was not expected to be treated to a lecture. And yet upon her arrival, she and the rest of the chorus was hustled out of their rehearsal room and made to sit in the orchestra seats along with the principles and half of the corps de ballet. M. Moncharmin paced the pastel-colored stage before them, looking harried.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said finally, standing a little off to the side, gazing out at them with all the gravity of a bishop sitting upon his throne at the cathedral. “I hope that I might call you ladies and gentlemen. This is the national theatre. You have been chosen not merely to entertain, but also to represent all that is most valuable in the arts. I speak of values not merely in general terms, but in most specific terms. You need not think of your comportment only within these walls, but away from them.”

And so he continued on and on in that vein while Christine struggled to grasp his meaning. M. Moncharmin went on about how money did not come from the air, but from the government and, more to the point, their great and generous patrons. Christian men and women who expected the salaries they paid to go to like-minded, decent people. Not to dens of vice. He hoped and expected only good and moral behavior, indicative of good and moral character in future. Then he left.

“What was he talking about?” Christine asked, glancing about as chatter broke out around her the instant he was out of earshot.

“No idea,” Célestine snorted. “They do this, sometimes. Have this grand pronouncements about our comportment and behavior - then don’t hesitate to sneak those Christian patrons backstage for a fee, drop them off at the prima donna’s dressing room doors, reeking of cologne. Don’t pay him any mind, it’s all just talk.”

“It’s that sister of the Comte’s,” Marcelline, another of the sopranos, playing Cherubino said definitively. She had been sitting behind Christine and now she leaned over the back of the seat to speak to Célestine and Christine in particular. “Mark me, the elder one. Marie-Félicité. She’s always complaining about something or other, writing letters to management. She keeps her nose in her Bible so she doesn’t have to notice her brother’s got his face between the dancers’ legs!”

Christine’s face turned bright red and she looked at her lap. Some members of the company were dispersing, back to the rehearsal room or off to quiet little corners to gossip about what might have happened to cause M. Moncharmin to fall into such a strop. It was only their little group, plus some of the actors in named parts.

“That paints quite a picture,” Carlotta said coolly. She was sitting beside Marcelline, but did not lean forward in her chair and did not seem to care who heard her words. “Careful there, you’ll cause Mademoiselle Daaé to faint.”
“At what, the memory?” Marcelline laughed, but not cruelly. “Tell me, was the Vicomte that good?”

Christine’s head whipped up, but though she opened her mouth, no sound came out.

“Oh, it’s no good trying to talk to her,” Célestine rolled her eyes. “All she’ll say is that the Vicomte is a perfect gentleman.”

“He is,” Christine insisted, once she’d recovered herself enough to find her tongue.

“Do you know what, I’m inclined to believe you,” Célestine continued. “For if you were actually his particular favorite, I think you’d have more to do in this production than stand around holding a feather duster - not even at the front of the line! Though, if you want my advice, Christine - ”

“Not particularly,” she muttered.

“ - you’ll expect him to act less like a gentleman! Fellows like that, they’re looking for a game girl. They’re too tired from their Saturdays to spend their Sundays in church, you know.”

“You seem to have very definite knowledge,” Carlotta interjected, looking Célestine over from top to toe, “for someone who is also holding a feather duster in this production. And not even at the front of the line.”

M. Poligny called the chorus to rise from their seats and prepare for rehearsal, so Célestine was not given the opportunity to make a clever retort. She more than made up for being denied the last word to Carlotta’s face by taking Christine’s arm and cursing the prima donna behind her back.

“That bitch,” Celestine breathed into Christine’s ear. “She’s such a hateful woman! And not even a bit pretty, no wonder she hasn’t got a husband. She’s only jealous she’ll never have a patron, so she can have a little something tucked away when she’s too old and fat to be of use to anyone. And, if we’re honest with each other, she’s already halfway there!”

Carefully, Christine removed her arm from Célestine’s grasping fingers, “She’s only a little brusque. I like her very much, in fact.”

Célestine sighed deeply, “Oh, Christine. Forgive me for saying, but you’re a terrible judge of character - ”

“It’s because she has no moral character of her own,” Jeanette snipped hatefully at Célestine. Christine had been lucky not to interact with her overmuch since that fateful day when she bade her never speak to her again, but it seemed Jeanette had forgotten that conversation. “She’s partly to blame for that chiding! Her and the others like her - you too Célestine! - who look to rich men to make their way in the world. It’s vile! And we’ll all pay for your lack of decorum.”

“I don’t see how it effects you, Jeanette,” Célestine griped. “If you haven’t a patron to throw you over - or for the managers to scold you for! Why don’t you just get yourself a husband, if you think marriage is so grand?”

“How am I to find a respectable man if all good men come to the theatre believing the women to be whores?” Jeanette snapped back.

“Ladies!” M. Poligny called their attention from the piano. “That’s quite enough chatter! You’re paid to work, not to gossip! From the top, if you please.”

By the time rehearsal was over, Christine was flying out the door, eager to talk to someone from outside the Opéra for a change. Mademoiselle Astruc was waiting by the side door with Dalir.
Christine slowed her pace and took second to study her before they were introduced. Such a pretty girl! It was too bad about the spectacles, really, she might have been quite striking, otherwise.

*How lucky for her that she doesn’t look like Erik!* Christine thought uncharitably; really, though it was probably for the best. Erik was teased enough for his looks around the Opéra, how much worse would it be if he looked as he did, but was a woman?

“Ah, good evening, Christine!” Dalir called, waving her over to them. Mademoiselle Astruc stopped staring at the Opera House and instead looked at Christine with a small smile. “This is Mademoiselle Anna-Lise Astruc, Mademoiselle, may I introduce Mademoiselle Christine Daaé.”

“How do you do?” Christine asked, returning the smile. Goodness, but she was tall for a woman! Practically Dalir’s height; it seemed she did take after her brother in some particulars.

“How do you do?” Mademoiselle Astruc replied. Her voices was pleasant, but not so profoundly musical as Erik’s. For that Christine was grateful; it wouldn’t do to agree to put the young lady up only to find herself succumbing to fits of jealousy! Christine was wise enough about her defects of character to recognize a weakness there. “Thank you very much, Mademoiselle, on behalf of myself and my family, for putting me up. It’s a great kindness, we’re very much obliged to you.”

“Think nothing of it!” Christine reassured her. “When I heard Erik was feeling poorly, I only felt badly that I couldn’t look in on him myself.”

Mademoiselle Astruc’s smile faltered and she looked taken aback - oh, good gracious, what was it that she’d said? - but she recovered and repeated her thanks for being so generous. Christine made up her mind about Mademoiselle Astruc: she seemed a sweet sort of girl, one she would be very happy to know better. She was sure they could be friends.

And take *that*, Célestine! Christine actually considered herself to be a very good judge of character; just because Célestine spent so much time scheming about how to snag herself a patron and Jeanette spent all her time cataloging her colleague’s sins did not mean that they were better judges than herself. Christine made up her mind about people fairly quickly, it was true. But she had yet to find herself mistaken in the friends she’d made in Paris.

Dalir offered to accompany them back to Christine’s flat, but Christine said they’d be alright and inquired as to whether or not Mademoiselle Astruc had eaten.

“Please, call me Anna-Lise,” she insisted and replied that she had done. “M’sieur Mazandarani brought some luncheon back for Isaac and myself, fairly late. I don’t require another supper, if it’s going to put you out.”

This time it was Christine’s turn to falter. “I’m sorry...Isaac?”

Her mind raced; she’d only prepared a bed for one, after all - was this the married sister? Had her husband come? Was he a doctor? Dalir said nothing of the kind and while Christine was happy to accommodate more than one guest, she would have liked to have a bit of forewarning. If Mademoiselle Anna-Lise made up her mind about people as quick as Christine was wont to do, she’d surely find her a poor hostess.

Christine decided that she could share with Mamma - the professor’s bed was very narrow and could not comfortably fit two - when Anna-Lise laughed a little. “I’m sorry, I mean Erik - I always forget he goes by a nom de plume in the city, he’s always been a trifle eccentric - ”
Christine stopped listening when she heard ‘nom de plume,’ but she thought eccentric did not even begin to cover it. Appalling was more like it.

“Do you mean,” Christine asked, mouth dropping open and color rising in her cheeks, “that Erik is not his real name?”

“Oh…” Anna-Lise hesitated, very aware that she’d unexpectedly hit a sore spot. “Not the name our parents gave him. No.”

Oh, if Erik - Isaac - whoever he was! - wasn’t lying in bed, ill and likely insensible, she’d march herself right over to his little flat and give him a piece of her mind. In all this time, he’d never even told her his name! It made her quite irate. She remembered, distinctly, asking him whether or not he’d told her a single true thing about him. And he’d laughed! She was sure he’d laughed!

“Well, that’s fine,” Christine muttered to herself. “Just fine. He is the most infuriating man. Oh, forgive me! I mustn’t speak ill of your own brother.”

Anna-Lise smiled, gently and genuinely. “There’s nothing you can say that I haven’t heard before. I have a great patience for him, I’ve been told it’s an unusual tolerance. And…he’s always gone by another name when he was traveling, performing. I think…oh, I don’t know what I think. Lisette always says he’s just a dreamer, dramatic. I think it’s…something else, but please don’t take it too much to heart, I know he’s exceedingly fond of you - why, you’re the only person he’s told us about who knows him in Paris!”

“I am?” Christine asked, flattery shoving resentment clear out of her mind. Erik thought of her when he was out of town? Spoke of her to his family? “What did he say?”

Evidently not much, she was disappointed to learn. Much like with the newspaper critics, Erik had not said, ‘Ah, yes, Christine Daae, the toast of Paris! The greatest singer and most beautiful woman I’ve ever known! Witty! Kind! A paragon!’ Instead he merely mentioned her in the context of a larger anecdote about the Gala. But it was better than nothing. Still, it seemed criminally unfair how much he knew of her and how little she knew of him. Perhaps she would inform Anna-Lise that her name was not, in fact, Christine, but…Giselle. Yes, Giselle. And she hailed not from Sweden at all, but Belgium. Actually, she was a grand duchess in disguise who was only biding her time at the Opéra house until a dastardly uncle was murdered in the night by assassins and she could claim her true inheritance.

Ah, but no. Not only would Anna-Lise think she was insane, but Erik - Isaac - that horrible, infuriating man would never believe it. He’d only laugh at her again.

She realized she’d gone quiet, and that the conversation had dulled to the point where Anna-Lise might find her unsociable, “Well, I suppose I am not surprised he does not talk much of Paris - it was like pulling teeth to discover that he was from Rouen! And not even Rouen, in fact, but…no. No, he’s never told me which village your family resides in. I swear, I am acquainted with your brother, even though it hardly sounds as if I know him at all.”

But Anna-Lise was all kindness and sympathy. “Isaac has a remarkable gift for talking and talking without saying anything important - we are from St. Martin de Boscherville. Don’t take it all to heart, please, I’m sure he doesn’t speak of home much because we’re all quite…ordinary. Dull, even! I know I am.”

“I’m sure that isn’t so,” Christine insisted, remembering that it was Anna-Lise who read three different languages. “From the little he’s told me, he’s assured me that several of the children - yourself foremost among them - were geniuses!”
Anna-Lise laughed self-consciously, face and neck turning red with embarrassment. “No, no, he’s utterly ridiculous, my brother! I’m happy to correct any of his fairy tales that he might have told you - and tell you all his secrets! He hasn’t so very many as he likes to pretend.”

Anna-Lise offered her arm in a friendly manner and Christine took it, drawing close with a satisfied smile. Yes, she decided. She and Anna-Lise could be *good* friends - only she wasn’t so sure about her relationship with the brother. She wasn’t overly concerned, however; a few amusing anecdotes might make her think of him more softly.

The medicinal wine did its work. Not only was Erik feeling much more awake when his sister left him, he was practically jumping out of his skin with energy. *Murderous* energy. He had to kill Dalir; what a pity, for he loved him very much.

He would have pounced on him, the second he heard his key in the lock, but for the fact that, though his mind and heart were racing, his limbs still felt heavy and uncoordinated; he was just as likely to break his own neck as he was Dalir’s.

“Feeling better?” the absolute scoundrel had the gall to ask him.

“What were you *thinking*?” Erik demanded, the last word getting stuck in his throat and causing him to cough and splutter in a less than intimidating manner.

“Come again?” Dalir asked, hanging up his hat and removing his waistcoat.

“My *sister*,” Erik gasped. “My *sister* is here - she told me you sent for her! *Why*?”

Dalir sat down on the end of the bed, oblivious to the danger. He even pressed the back of his hand to Erik’s brow, as if he wasn’t inches away from his mouth - yes, he might *gnaw* his hand off with his teeth. Good luck kneading dough one-handed! “Still warm, but better - it seems she’s done you some good. You’re ill, remember.”

"Of course I remember!” Erik snapped, infuriated, but lacking the vigor to express how angry he was. He sounded distinctly whiny.

“So, what’s the harm?” Dalir asked.

“The *harm*!” Erik exclaimed, manfully holding a coughing fit at bay. “You’re courting disaster - or rather, I am. I...they can’t know *Erik*, you see. They wouldn’t *like* Erik. *Erik* is *not* the sort of person a family would want to come round for Shabbos dinner!”

Someday, there would be a breaking point. Someday, he would finally prove too much for his good family. They’d gamely risen to the challenge of raising a child of unholy ugliness with all the care and attention in the world. They’d recivilized an adolescent boy, fit for nothing other than a freak show as though that was merely what one *did* with nineteen-year-old boys. They kept a bed for their wild, artistic adult son who *would never marry*, nor bring the family name anything like a good reputation.


Erik. *Hideous*, yes, but amusing. Clever. Careless artistic type, with his male lover and bottles of wine.
But Dalir was looking at him strangely. The hand came back up to his forehead, then moved to the back of his neck. “You aren’t that warm.”

“Look,” Erik said, twisting away from Dalir’s hands, trying to explain just why he had to murder him. “There are...boundaries. Not to be crossed, not even by train! Isaac in the country. Erik in town. It’s all quite neat and...and…”

Thinking it to himself made all the sense in the world. But saying it outloud? To another human being? Erik was distantly aware that he sounded insane.

“You think you’re two different people?” Dalir asked, an eyebrow rising skeptically.

“Ah...in a manner of speaking...yes,” Erik was forced to admit. “I’m not even sure Isaac and Erik would like each other very much. If they met. Which they can’t. So you see why bringing my sister here was unwise.”

“No, not at all,” Dalir said simply. “I don’t understand - I thought you changed your name because you didn’t want anyone to know you’re a Jew.”

“At the Garnier, yes, for obvious reasons,” Erik frowned, remembering his work, and Joseph Buquet’s surliness. “But not...at first. Not in the beginning.”

At first - though an accident, a misunderstanding his first day at the fair - Isaac realized that what he was doing was not what he wanted to be doing. Not really. He desired with all his heart to turn around on his heel and go home. He was fifteen, had never been out of the company of his family in his life and he was afraid. So when Wilhelm, the manager, asked for his name, he’d mumbled it, and (being German had hard of hearing) Wilhelm asked him to repeat it.

"Sorry, lad you’ve got to speak up," he said, making a show of cleaning the wax out of his ears with a finger. “What was that? Erik? Did you say?”

Why not? He thought. Why not be Erik? What harm could it do?

Erik saw more of Europe than Isaac would have. Erik degraded himself in ways that Isaac never would have dreamed. Erik...Erik would have disgusted Isaac. Better to have done with that altogether, he thought, but it wasn’t to be. In the end he went home, became Isaac again, but that hadn’t lasted either. Erik had made too much of a mark. And he wanted more.

Dalir folded his arms and leaned back, regarding him with an unreadable expression. “I always wondered, you know, whether it bothered you that I don’t call you Isaac, though I’ve known that was your name for ages. I was used to Erik, you never seemed to mind...but you would mind. If I called you Isaac. Wouldn’t you?”

“Of course I would!” Erik tried to explain. “If I was never Erik, we wouldn’t have met!”

They each had their charms, Erik and Isaac. Their uses. It might seem simplest to cast one or the other off, but he couldn’t He didn’t have the strength. When life in the city was too harried and impersonal, he recalled with fondness the warmth of his family’s hearth. And when life in the country seemed an idyll too sweet to be real, he’d be confronted with the reality of sleeping in his grandmother’s cold, narrow bed. And back to the city he went. A perpetual push and pull like the ebb and flow of the tide.

“So is that it?” Dalir asked, frowning hard at him like Erik was a book in a language he barely knew, but desperately wanted to understand. “Because...you prefer men, you’ve got to...split yourself in half?”
“I hate when you say it like that,” Erik muttered, looking away. *Prefer* men. “You may have loved women before, but me? Never.”

Dalir frowned, “You said there was a girl at home - ”

For an instant, Erik was confused, until he remembered - shortly after he and Dalir became intimate - exaggerating his romantic history slightly, in that regard. Simply so he didn’t frighten him off, if Dalir found the idea of a man who *only* slept with other men odd. It was over two years before, amazing that he would remember.

“I was thirteen, so was she,” Erik rolled his eyes and remembered his fumbling attempts with Estelle - *attempts* only, they couldn’t get very far when neither of them was attracted to the one they were hiding behind a haystack with. “She thought we ought to practice kissing and since we didn’t care for one another *that* way, no one would get their heart broken. She’s brilliant, in her own way. But no, I’ve never gone to bed with a girl. Even...even Isaac has had lovers, you know.”

“Allan,” Erik corrected him. “Married four years, with two children. Clearly it was no hardship giving Isaac - giving *me* - up. Why are we talking about this? I’m trying to explain why I’ve got to murder you for bringing my sister here!”

Something cleared in Dalir’s expression and a look of comprehension overtook him. “You’re worried that she’ll find out. That she’ll dash home and tell them all about us. And they’ll...not have you for your Sabbath dinners.”

So simple. So simple when he said it like that, aloud. “Yes.”

Dalir sighed, heavily, then reached over and lay his hand over Erik’s knee, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Then I’m sorry. But I was worried about you. I didn’t like to leave you. I didn’t think you’d be worried - not about that. Your family is very different from mine, you know.”

Not different enough, Erik worried. “I wish you hadn’t written them.”

“I know,” Dalir said quietly, hand inching further up until he took Erik’s hand and twined their fingers together. If there was a time to go on the attack, it was now! When his guard was down!

Erik took Dalir’s hand and sank back against his pillows with a sigh. No, strangulation was not on the schedule for today. He really did love him far too dearly; he’d forgive him anything, even this.

“Do you want me to send word to Christine? Send her away on the train tomorrow?” Dalir asked.

Erik shook his head. “No. It would be rude. Anna-Lise is a tender-hearted girl. I wouldn’t want to disgust her *and* hurt her feelings.”

“You love them all very much,” Dalir confirmed aloud what he already knew.

“I love you, very much,” Erik said earnestly, perhaps pathetically, but he was too worn out to care. “And I’d like to go on loving *all* of you. As best I can. Even if it...even if it isn’t enough, in the end.”
“It’s enough for me,” Dalir said looking right in his eyes. “If you don’t believe anything else, believe that…”

He trailed off with a rueful smile.

“Just know,” Dalir added, “that I’d like to kiss you, but I don’t want to catch that awful cold.”

Erik smiled weakly and agreed that Dalir shouldn’t. Wanted or unwanted, the fact remained: He had no sister to ask to take care of him.
Domestic times must be put on hold until we deal with some off-stage drama! But for anyone who likes hearing about Erik's home life, he's due for a visit soon.

Mademoiselle Astruc - Anna-Lise - was clearly no slave of fashion. That much was obvious when she unpacked a long flannel nightgown, and another drab dress from her carpetbag, donning the former before bed and hanging the dress in the armoire among the Professor’s old suits to let gravity take care of the wrinkles. She unpinned her hair and braided it simply down her back, secured with a faded blue ribbon. All this Christine knew because she lingered in the doorway, chattering about nothing, and watched her.

She’d always longed for a sister and was indulging a bit of fancy. It would have been so lovely - so much less lonely! - to have a confederate to speak confidences to, share fears, giggle over trifles and traipse into shops to try on hats that they would never wear and couldn’t afford even if they did like them. Perhaps the latter would not be to Anna-Lise’s tastes, but there was something so dear in watching another girl her own age go about her nightly abulations. And, being one of seven siblings, it did not occur to Anna-Lise that she shouldn’t have another person about her as she prepared for bed.

They’d supped on hearty bowls of onion soup - Christine made her apologies for the simplicity of the meal, but Anna-Lise was all gratitude. Mamma had not been feeling well enough to join them at table, but she had appetite enough to finish her portion that Christine brought up to her, which put her in good spirits. Their conversation had been cordial at dinner, inquiries as to whether or not Anna-Lise had been to Paris before (she had not), whether Christine liked living there (she did), and whether they each preferred the bustle of a metropolis, the languor of the country, or the vistas of the seaside (they both preferred the sea to anything). The topic of Erik - Isaac - her brother was only scarcely touched on because, despite Christine’s burning desire to know more of him, she found herself enchanted with this little fantasy of an hour - that, had circumstances been different she might have been living in her own family’s home with a sister of her own and...perhaps an infuriating brother living out of the house.

So much did she wish to indulge herself that as Anna-Lise turned down the covers on the bed, Christine blurted out, “Would you care for a bowl of chocolate before you turn in? Or are you very tired?”

“Oh, I’d love one,” Anna-Lise replied at once, then remembered herself and hastily added, “if it isn’t too much trouble.”

But Christine was down to the kitchen in a trice, heating a bowl of cream and adding chocolate shavings and sugar. As she brought it up, she faltered slightly outside the door; Anna-Lise had taken no cheese on her soup nor butter for her bread. She hoped the chocolate would not give her dyspepsia.

“It’s cream, chocolate and sugar,” Christine explained, feeling a little foolish as Anna-Lise took her mug and thanked her, sipping it gratefully.
“This is very good,” she said, licking a little chocolate mustache off her upper lip. Christine made bold to sit upon the bed at her feet and Anna-Lise did not ask her to rise or send her to bed, so she tucked her legs up and made herself comfortable. “When my mother makes it, it’s so thick you can stand a spoon in it! That’s how Papa likes it, but I think it’s too heavy before bed.”

“I never thought I liked chocolate when I was small,” Christine said. “I had it once at a cafe with my father, but they made it with powder - it was like drinking muddy water! But then I had it in Germany with real chocolate and quickly changed my mind.”

“Maman only makes it with real chocolate,” Anna-Lise replied. “Her family is German, so she doesn’t know any other way. I’ve never even seen the powder!”

“It tastes like the tin it comes in,” Christine informed her with a shudder of more dread than she felt at the memory. Papa so wanted to buy her a treat, so she drank the whole of it right down, even though her mouth tasted of pennies for hours after. “Is...what does your mother look like? If you don’t mind my asking.”

Anna-Lise looked surprised that Christine would think she might mind, “Not at all - she looks rather like me, I suppose. Only much prettier and not so tall. She has very dark hair, like Isaac’s, it curls. And she has lovely brown eyes. I always wished I’d had her eyes rather than Papa’s - or at least her vision! I’m hopeless without my spectacles, just hopeless. I didn’t realize how poor my eyesight was until I was fitted for lenses - then I saw blades of grass and shingles on rooftops and realized just what I’d been missing.”

She laughed lightly and Christine smiled - she supposed it was worth making one’s face a tiny bit plain in exchange for being able to see (still, she hoped that she herself would not need glasses until she was very much in her dotage). “How long have you worn them?”

“Only since I was nineteen, but I’m sure I’ve needed them much longer than that,” Anna-Lise told her. “It was Isaac who bought them for me. He put enough by so that I might see a doctor in Rouen. He said it was all very well to like to have one’s nose in a book - that he certainly would if only he could! - but to have one’s nose pressed against the pages could not be at all comfortable, he imagined. He’s very sweet, but...”

Anna-Lise trailed off, taking another long draught of chocolate while Christine regarded her with wide eyes. Very sweet, but…? And what was that about he’d have his nose in a book if only he could? While Erik confessed he could not read music, she was sure he could read. Perhaps he wasn’t fond of the exercise. Or he simply didn’t have time.

“Will you write to me?” Anna-Lise asked, changing topics. She looked down into her cup of chocolate, seemingly a little embarrassed. “When I return home, I mean! Not so very often, I’d never want you to take up too much time, but -”

“Yes, I’d love to!” Christine gushed, perhaps laying it on a bit thick. “I...”

_Haven’t any correspondents_, sounded profoundly sad, so she merely smiled and repeated that she’d be glad to write. “I can spy on your brother if you’d like.”

Anna-Lise laughed warmly. “Oh, no, don’t do that! It’s only that he doesn’t tell us anything of substance, only asks after everyone at home and sends us money and gifts. I...I _would_ like to be sure he isn’t putting himself out for our sakes, but I’m very much afraid he is.”

“Er...well, for what it’s worth, he seems content,” Christine said honestly. “And he’s such a boon to the Opéra! I’ve only been employed there since the beginning of the season, but you ought to have
seen the set he designed for *The Pearl Fishers*. It was very beautiful and ingenious! Ah! Wait here, I’ll be right back, I’ve something to show you - you can take it home, if you like!”

Christine dashed off to her bedroom and opened up the scrapbook Raoul had purchased for her. It was a lovely blue book with a fabric cover and a study piece of lace glued purposefully over the spine to add some interest. That was, in fact, the only thing she’d glued to it - the review was simply lain between the pages awaiting permanence. It seemed rather a depressing thing, upon reflection, to have only one little clipping for the book so she’d refrained from affixing it to the first page. Now she was glad she had.

Anna-Lise was waiting patiently and a small smile spread over her face as she read the review. “That’s certainly very complimentary...to a point.”

“Well, your brother deserved all those compliments - as I said, keep it,” Christine insisted when Anna-Lise made to hand it back. “I wanted to find another newspaper and give it to your brother, but there were none to be had - people aren’t in the habit of making keepsakes of mediocre theatrical reviews. I thought I might be, but I think it’s better for you to keep it.”

“Thank you,” Anna-Lise said, laying her hand atop Christine’s and giving it a brief squeeze. “You’re a very dear girl.”

The compliment warmed Christine more than the chocolate. “You’re welcome - the pleasure is mine entirely, I’m glad to do it for you.”

She decided to let Anna-Lise be for the remainder of the evening. She gathered up the empty cups and brought them down to the kitchen. When she poked her head in to bid Anna-Lise good-night she found her still awake, a book in hand.

“I’m a bit of a night owl,” Anna-Lise confessed. “So, you see, there was never a fear of keeping me up too late.”

“What are you reading?” Christine inquired from the doorway.

Anna-Lise turned the book over so the cover was visible. *Pride and Prejudice.* “It’s the only reason why I learned to read English,” she informed Christine. “It’s much more amusing than the translations.”

“I’ve only read it in French,” Christine confessed, venturing farther into the room. “But it’s a particular favorite.”

Anna-Lise moved over in bed and gestured that Christine ought to join her. “If you’d like to fetch your copy, I’d be happy to read aloud for you, I can tell you all the jokes - if you aren’t too tired.”

She was not. Christine sat down beside her, bringing the blankets over both their laps. As Anna-Lise read aloud she was struck by the very selfish and very wicked thought that she hoped Erik - Isaac - didn’t make too thorough a recovery too quickly.

A few days more in bed set Erik quite to rights. He’d lost any meagre spare flesh he’d had on his bones and looked dreadful, but he felt perfectly well. Such was the course of his life.

Erik hated being ill, and not for the reasons that most men hated illness - the forced stillness, the reliance upon others, in short, the descent into a decidedly unmasculine role of being cared for rather
than being the one doing the caring. It was the lack of control that rankled so, the periods of dimness between short bouts of lucidity. It made him feel like a child all over again, stuck in bed, while the world passed by outside his open windows.

From birth until adolescence, Erik remembered his life as nothing but a series of illnesses punctuated by brief bouts of activity. A fever, the ague, the measles, whooping cough, a lingering cold, the ague again, and so on and so on. There was a veritable medical library in his parents’ sitting room and his mother swore by scrupulously clean hands for the prevention of illness; it was a wonder his fingernails existed at all and hadn’t been worn away by all the hours he spent scrubbing them.

It made him feel like a child to be tucked in bed and fussed over, though fortunately Anna-Lise was a brisk and affectionate nurse, her brow uncreased by the worry that always beset his parents. She’d known him as an ill child, but one who always recovered. Erik fancied Maman and Papa still had a small, but lingering fear of him. Or fear for him, rather. A singular child, after all, with a singular appearance. Who knew what little ailment would carry him off at last?

Not this latest. No, just as soon as he was able to spring out of bed and boil the sheets, he did so, and gave himself a thorough scrubbing as well. Didn’t help his overall appearance, but at least he didn’t smell like a corpse anymore.

Erik toyed with the idea of sending Anna-Lise back with nothing more than a note delivered by early post to Christine’s doorstep, but dismissed the thought at once. She’d been too good to him to be cast off like an unwanted visitor. So he attired himself appropriately, rose with the dawn and took himself to Christine’s doorstep, ringing the bell and hoping he wasn’t disturbing her guardian.

Christine answered after a short wait and grinned up at him broadly. “Why - ! You look - I can see you’re much better!”

Erik smirked ironically and bent so that Christine could embrace him about the neck. Her pleasure at seeing him up and about was evident, but - bless her! - she was incapable of lying and claiming he looked ‘well.’

“Thanks to the attentions of my devoted nurse,” he said as he untangled himself from Christine’s embrace. “Is she up and about?”

“Oh, yes! We’ve just sat down to breakfast, come, I’ll make you up a place!”

Erik was not given a chance to decline for Christine grasped him by the hand and dragged him over the threshold. He took a breath, steeling himself; here they were to come together, Isaac and Erik. All over a pot of tea and a smear of jam. How utterly undramatic.

Anna-Lise looked up when they entered the kitchen and the second she set eyes on him her mouth dropped open and she quickly covered it with her hands, shoulders shaking. Why...yes. Yes, she was laughing at him.

“I’m sorry,” she squeaked an apology into her palms. “Only you look so funny!”

How hilarious - how terribly hilarious! - that at this first meeting of Isaac and Erik the thing that would most make a mark on his sister was the false nose. Though he couldn’t blame her the surprise; she’d only seen him as he was constructing it, and he’d never worn it home.

“And a good morning to you, darling,” he said coming round to her chair and kissing her. Anna-Lise stood up and embraced him, much as Christine had though she succumbed to another fit of giggles as she pulled away. Christine, for her part, was looking between the two of them as if they were a bit
unhinged. Poor girl, she had no idea, none at all and Erik tried to communicate that by looking into his sister’s eyes, cutting his own in Christine’s direction and subtly shaking his head.

He was only too right about her being a genius for Anna-Lise had only to glance at Christine’s confused face and back to her brother’s temporarily whole one before comprehension dawned and she scrambled to explain herself.

“I’ve...never seen you in derby,” she said hastily. “I must’ve...drunk my tea too fast. I don’t know why I should...ah...there’s no reason in the world why I ought to have laughed so hard.”

A genius, absolutely. An actress? Not at all. But better that Christine think his sister only thought his hat unbecoming rather than his face.

“Have you come to take me to the train?” Anna-Lise continued, glancing down at her half-eaten breakfast. “I’ll only be a few minutes packing - ”

“Oh, must you go already?” Christine asked, confusion fleeing at the thought of losing her houseguest. “Couldn’t you stay on a day or two longer? You’ve not seen anything all of Paris and you told me you’ve never been!”

“I only asked for a week’s absence from the school and that’s been granted,” Anna-Lise explained regretfully. “And - ”

“Old Blanchad still cracking with whip at that school?” Erik asked casually.

“You know he is,” Anna-Lise replied.

“Then he’s well aware of my bouts of grappling with mortality,” Erik waved a hand carelessly as his sister frowned. “Simply tell him it took more coaxing than you thought to get this bag of bones in reasonable shape again. He’ll believe you, I’m sure. What’s one more day, after all? I can take you to the museum, the gardens are nothing just now, or we could stop by a few shops and - ”

He didn’t even need to finish that sentence, for he knew his sister - the word ‘museum’ or ‘library’ filled her with inexpressible longing, the kind poets reserved for long lost loves.

“The museum would be...yes, I think that would be nice,” Anna-Lise interrupted him eagerly, then looked fretful. “If it isn’t too expensive...and, might Christine come along?”

“Oh, I couldn’t!” Christine exclaimed, looking between the two of them guiltily. “I don’t want to...I’m sure you’ve got a lot to talk about now that...you’re feeling well.”

Erik noted with an uncomfortable pang that she didn’t call him by name - either of them. “Well, as I’ve been sick in bed for a week, I don’t have any exciting news to relate. And nothing ever happens in Saint Martin, does it, little bird?”

“Not a thing,” Anna-Lise confirmed.

“Honestly, your presence would be a boon,” Erik continued. “Otherwise we’re in danger of walking through the museum in silence, nothing to say to one another. Passers-by will assume we’ve had a quarrel. It will be very awkward - unless you’ve something else to do.”

Erik looked at her expectantly and Christine lit up, needing no further invitation. “The principals are rehearsing this morning, the chorus isn’t wanted until the afternoon. I can spare a few hours I think, but you must let me pay my own way.”
He agreed that he would - then clear forgot when they arrived.

“Buy me a drink sometime,” Erik said as Christine stamped her foot and declared that he was the most infuriating man. Her ire was overcome as she and Anna-Lise, with all the giddy excitement of children, trampled from gallery to gallery, oohing and aahing over the many priceless works that surrounded them. Erik followed behind like an indulgent chaperone. He’d rarely seen Christine in the company of young ladies of her own age, he thought the company did her a world of good. There was a sparkle in her eyes and a lightness to her steps and movement that faintly screamed happiness. With an uncomfortable pang, he thought perhaps he ought to have been more forthcoming when she asked him to tell her about his sisters.

Christine did wander a little away from them as they walked through the antiquities pilfered from Egypt by some Napoleon or other a hundred years ago. Anna-Lise took that chance to buttonhole him behind a large vase with the head of a cat.

“The pair of you are getting on like a house afire,” Erik observed.

“She’s delightful,” Anna-Lise said fondly. “A dear, sweet girl - I can’t say how happy I am that you found her.”

“Well,” Erik said, leaning against the wall and speaking casually, “she’s one of a dozen such confused chorus girls - a baker’s dozen as I recall, number thirteen - I directed into the Opéra. She’s the only one who talked back to me, so my odds are - ”

“And M’sieur Mazandarani,” she continued as though he hadn’t been speaking at all. “I’m...just so relieved, Isaac. You have no idea how...no, it’s no use, we will quarrel just as you said.”

When he woke and made his way to Christine’s that morning, Erik had made up his mind about something: he would act as naturally as he could and simply see this thing through. He’d much time to think in these past days as his head cleared. Some of his fatalism had disappeared - he no longer desired to kill Dalir, after all, which was a tremendous stride. Anna-Lise certainly wasn’t acting as though anything was...irreparably lost between them. Why should they quarrel?

“What?” he prompted her, gently - always gentle where Anna-Lise was concerned. Lisette was a spitfire, with a soul like flint. Anna-Lise was a different sort of creature and required more careful handling. “Say what you will, you’ve nothing to fear from me, you know.”

“Oh, of course I know!” she breathed, looking up at him, aghast. “It’s only that we were so worried you were lonely. And to see that you have friends who care for you so much, it does me so much good! They can take care of you, if you won’t take care of yourself.”

She clapped her hands over her mouth again, just as she had over breakfast. Erik frowned, but no more than that. “Care to explain just what you mean by that?”

Anna-Lise lowered her hands to her side and her eyes to the floor. “You send us everything. All your money from the Opéra.”

Erik’s frown deepened. “Who told you that?”

“You did,” she swallowed hard. “I...I asked you. That first day, I asked. And don’t deny it! You...you wouldn’t live in such a place if you did not. In so small a room, without a stove!”

“We - I don’t need a stove,” he shrugged. “That’s the trick about living with a baker, they spend all day preparing food for other mouths, they don’t want to repeat the process again when they come home - ”
“Two gentlemen on two incomes ought to be able to afford better,” Anna-Lise said plainly.

“M’sieur Mazandarani was very recently unemployed,” Erik replied, then realized it was the wrong thing to say when she looked at him in horror.

“And still you wouldn’t put anything by for yourself!” Anna-Lise said woefully. “I can’t understand it, Isaac! It’s as though you think you must buy your place among us and that’s…oh.”

Erik had no idea what his face had done, but he must have flinched. For his beloved sister’s eyes filled with tears and she turned away, shoulders hitching. Tentatively, Erik lay a hand against her back and winced when he heard her sniffle.

“Come now…” he said uneasily. “What will...of course I...it’s only natural that a son should…”

“It’s as if you don’t know how much we all love you,” Anna-Lise whispered quietly. The room seemed at once very hot, but a cold shiver went down Erik’s spine at her words.

“I…” but he trailed off, unsure of what there was to say. The minutes ticked by as Anna-Lise collected herself and he let his hand drift back to his side. They might have stood like that until they were shown to the door, but for Christine who scampered up to them and begged their pardon, but said she had to be going.

“Why don’t we accompany you?” Erik asked, looking between the two young women, desperately trying to think of something that might stop his sister’s looking at him like he was some tragic thing. “Would you like that, darling? To see where your brother toils away to buy you trinkets?”

There was a reproachful look in his sister’s eyes, but she was unwilling to continue their discussion in front of Christine. “I should like to see the Opéra,” she replied, managing a small smile. “If I won’t be too much in the way.”

“Nonsense,” Erik said, presenting both arms for each of the young ladies to take. “We’re of a form, you and I - stick the two of us together, we only make one person!”

“Erik!” Christine swatted him, deciding on a name at last. “That’s a monstrous thing to say to your sister - no lady likes being compared in figure to her brother. I might not have a brother, but I’m certain that’s so!”

“Not unless she’s the sister of a very winsome brother,” Erik winked. “Which Anna-Lise, unfortunately, is not.”

“Nonsense, Claude’s quite the little darling.” Anna-Lise said, rousing some of her spirit. She tilted her head to peer around Erik and grin at Christine. “As to the other - you’re quite right - he’s infuriating.”

“I feel quite overrun,” Erik complained with a smile as the two shared a secret smile. They stepped quickly to the Opéra - a good thing as all Anna-Lise wanted to do was circle the building with her mouth open when she arrived, head tilted all the way back to take in every ornament and angel. Christine was very nearly late.

“If you think this is something,” Erik murmured into his sister’s ear, guiding her toward the side entrance, “you ought to see the inside.”

“Papa ought to come, he ought to see this place,” Anna-Lise said as Erik held the door for them and ushered the girls inside. But they didn’t have the time to remark upon the architecture.
Erik had only just come to the door when he was greeted by Edouard who was staring at him, wild-eyed and alarmed. “Where have you been? You’ve missed all the commotion! La Carlotta has resigned.”
“What?!” Erik and Christine cried as one - in perfect harmony, it was a pleasing sound. But then they broke into counterpoint.

“What happened?” Erik demanded, looming over Edouard with his arms akimbo.

“But it’s two weeks before we open!” Christine gasped, hands over her mouth. “There’s no understudy!”

“Who is Carlotta?” Anna-Lise asked, timidly, but no one paid her either an answer or any mind whatsoever.

Edouard held his hands up and said he didn’t know a thing apart from what he’d told them, only all the theatre was abuzz with the shocking news. There had been no official announcement as yet, but the word spread like wildfire - everyone from the cloakroom attendant to the youngest member of the corps knew. The only question was why.

“I’ll find it out,” Erik said, half to himself. He started stalking down the hall, heedless of the fact that his poor sister was left wringing her hands by the entrance, without an escort.

Christine took her arm and said, reassuringly, “I’m sure he’ll be back soon - he and La Carlotta are great friends, as it happens, so…”

Her voice was lost as he rounded the corner, zipping like lightning through the halls. All around members of the company and stagehands and concierge clustered in little groups whispering, some fretfully, some gleefully, but he didn’t stop to listen. He’d have it from the source or not at all.

There wasn’t a reason for it. Not one. At thirty-five years old, she’d only just entered her prime, vocally and in terms of renown. Most women fortunate enough to reach such an enviable position of artistic achievement (world fame! There was talk of a European tour!) had to abandon it, for the sake of husbands and children. Domestic ties could stopper a woman’s career like nothing else. But Carlotta was free of such concerns. She could only increase her fame, her renown, her talents. Not to mention the fact that she was due to appear upon the stage - the costumes had been fitted and finished for weeks! It made no sense!

“What is this?” Erik demanded, walking into the dressing room without knocking. Fortunately it was unlocked, in his state he might have just crashed through the wood itself. Mercifully Carlotta was alone, packing a few things into her valise. There were gowns about, including the blood-red frock she’d worn to the Gala, but they weren’t ready to be folded and packed, it looked like she was leaving them behind. “What happened?”

Carlotta looked up, one brow coolly arched. She didn’t seem surprised to see him, but she didn’t answer his question either. “Make yourself useful, would you? If you’re going to flit about like that, at least pack those jewels away - they were gifts from admirers, I kept meaning to have the settings refit, but - ”

“They’re saying you’ve resigned,” Erik pressed, ignoring her request. “Why?”

Up close he saw that there was a redness about her face, but her eyes were clear and dry. There
might have been a scene, but no tears - not from her. “Sophie was dismissed. I demanded to know why. The reason they gave me was unsatisfying. I refused to stay on without my preferred dresser. Now, are you going to see to those jewels or - ”

“Hang the jewels!” Erik thundered and Carlotta grabbed his shirt, dragging him down so she could clap a hand over his mouth.

“That voice of yours!” she scolded him. “Hush! If you want to hear the truth of it, hush! And make yourself useful, damn you!”

She held him fast for another minute, until she’d reassured himself that he was calm. Regal as a queen, she made her way to the dressing room door, reassured herself that it was shut - then locked it behind her.

“It’s as I told you,” she said, quietly, removing a box from her valise and indicating that Erik should start filling it with necklaces, rings, bracelets, pearls. All gifts for her, collected over the last five years. A mark of just how much her public loved her. Or at least the notion of what they thought she was. “Sophie was dismissed. By the new management - Vaucorbeil doesn’t know who she is, doesn’t care either, which suited both of us fine. Until now. Evidently they heard reports that she was morally...corrupted. You understand?”

“I don’t,” Erik said, fingers tightening around a rope of pearls. “It isn’t as though she cavorts with men after all - ”

“Careful!” she came forward and prised his fingers away from the pearls. “What if the string snaps? I want to be done with this place quickly, not spend hours gathering them all up! It was that odious man, Simon Buquet - I have no proof mind, but I swear I saw him skulking about La Chatte Mauvais. I thought...but, of course, I assumed I was mistaken. For what business had he there?”

Erik’s heart sank to his stomach. Simon Buquet? There? What sort of trick was this? Or was he trying to get into the management’s good graces, spying on employees after hours? Possibly to maintain his brother’s position.

“He must have seen you together,” Erik surmised and Carlotta nodded her agreement. “But why go after Sophie?”

Despite her diminutive stature, Carlotta drew herself up and cast such a withering glance at him that Erik understood just why he was sorting through dozens of precious stones in settings of silver and gold. The woman had presence. “Because he knew that such an accusation as that could not touch me. I am too valuable to this wretched edifice. We are the national theatre - how dreary does that sound? But to have a Spanish prima donna, who brings the exotic, who brings glamor? No. He couldn’t touch me. He wouldn’t dare.”

“So he’d hurt you instead,” Erik said, waking to the terrible truth. “Or try to frighten you.”

“Ha!” Carlotta laughed, but it was torn from her throat like a snarl. “If that was his game, he’s lost! No, no. Do you know how many offers I have from other theatres? The Gaîté-Lyrique wants me for Aida! The Théâtre des Nations sends letters, they’ll have a composer write an opera for my voice. I told them all that and more - I think Richard was starting to bend, but Moncharmin put his foot down. Let him. Let them beg for me to come back if they think they can frighten me!”

It was such a stunning performance that Erik was inclined to applaud, but he refrained. He lay the jewels within the box and shut it up tight. His heart had crawled its way back into his chest, where it pounded against his ribs like a drum. Sophie, got rid of because a building manager claimed to see
her in an unsavory bistro. Despite Carlotta’s claims, Erik thought there was a glamor and prestige in their national theatre. It was why he’d leapt at the chance to work there, even such work as he did. There was fame just beyond his fingertips and more than that, a kind of respectability. Of validation. Dreary? Not at all!

And he was sure Carlotta felt the same way. She’d performed with touring troupes when she was a young woman - she used to do Shakespeare, she said, truncated versions of the comedies. Her Kate was a sight to behold. She’d worked her way up - grasped and clawed for it - and he was certain she’d not been so dismissive of the Garnier when she was offered a contract. But she was willing to give it all up, to start over somewhere else. For Sophie.

“I think you’re very brave,” he said quietly.

Her flashing eyes softened and only then did they become overbright with tears, but she blinked them away as quick as they’d come on. “Oh, stop. I’m only...very demanding. Very arrogant. Remember me that way, if you please.”

“Remember you!” Erik exclaimed. “Come now, you’re going across town, aren’t you?”

An expression of something unfamiliar - doubt - crossed Carlotta’s face and she moved toward him, laying her soft, plump hands over his long, hard ones. “Simon Buquet was not there that night looking for me,” she said quietly, peering imploringly up into his eyes. “You’re a fool if you believe that. I don’t know if his brother hates you more for being a Jew or being a buggerer. If it was only Joseph Buquet, I’d say you hadn’t a thing to worry about - he’s an idiot. But his brother is only half an idiot. And the other half is dangerous. Take care, Erik. Take very good care.”

She tugged on his wrists, beckoning him down. Erik bent obligingly and she got up on her toes to give him a rough kiss on his sunken cheek. “Take care. And get out of my dressing room - while it is still mine.”

He went to the door as if he was in a daze, pausing to twist the key in the lock. He looked back as he did, but Carlotta was turned away from him, fastidiously fastening the latches on her valise closed. He lowered his eyes and slipped out the door, like a ghost, closing it silently behind him. The smooth click of the lock sliding into place was the only sound he heard before he ventured down the hall to find his people; if Carlotta did weep then, she did so silently.

Rehearsals were canceled - there was talk the opening of the opera itself would be delayed until the New Year, perhaps after the annual masquerade ball! For where could they find such a soprano on short notice?

Poor Anna-Lise never got her chance to take a tour of the building, or even to see the magnificent sets. All was in such disarray that Christine could only stand by, trying to catch her up - that La Carlotta was the Opera’s prima donna, that she was so steady, so workmanlike, that it was a tremendous shock that she’d resign, and for such a petty reason! That she’d lost her dresser.

Of course, when Christine heard that - heard that it was dear Sophie who was removed by the management for murky reasons, she thought she understood. It was terribly romantic, in a way, that La Carlotta would do something so bold, so very reckless and all for love, but she kept such thoughts to herself. She couldn’t expect Erik’s sister to understand, for all Christine thought she was a sweet girl. She herself mightn’t have understood, a few months ago.
Erik emerged from La Carlotta’s dressing room as pale as Christine had ever seen him. He begged his sister’s pardon, but said he’d have to take her to the train. They left to collect her bag from Christine’s home and he did not return until late in the afternoon, when most of the company had gone.

She’d remained because she hadn’t known what to do with herself. She’d wandered around the dim auditorium - doubly dim, the chandelier was being wired and cast no light. The cheery pastels were dull and washed-out. The set looked like a tintype, dark, and only slightly tinted with signs of life.

She wished Raoul would come - he’d sent her a letter with a thousand apologies, explaining that since the holiday season was coming hard upon them, his sisters had taken him visiting. Relations. Friends. And there were parties, dinner parties, dances, gatherings at his brother’s club that he attended out of a sense of obligation, after dashing off from Philippe’s party. He said he’d go to church with her, to midnight mass on Christmas Eve, but he hoped to see her before.

_You said I could always find you at the Opéra_, he told her once. _Since that is where you are, that is where I would like to be._

The Opéra was where she was, but of late it was where he wasn’t. Her cheeks burned to think of it, but was it as Célestine said? That she wasn’t a game girl? They’d shared three wonderful kisses, but had Raoul wanted more? Or less? Had he...gotten tired of her? Or was she...too low? Not even petite bourgeois, as she told Erik. All those visits he went on with his sisters, there had to be young ladies there. Game girls? Suitable young women? She didn’t know what would please him more, but she’d be a little fool to believe he’d not been introduced to either since he’d been away from her.

She missed him. Their night out, so vivid in her memory, now seemed a dream. The heat of the restaurant, the feel of his arm around her waist, his hands in hers, his lips...Christine’s heart thudded at the memory. She’d felt light and happy, giddy, nearly. Rather like she imagined one would feel if they were in love.

At home, she’d picked up her pen to write him in the evenings. The letters always began very properly, a dismissal of his apologies, delight that they might see one another on Christmas Eve, an ardent hope that their paths would cross sooner...but the pen would skitter across the page and she’d have to toss the paper upon the fire for her thoughts became mixed up and her words ran away from her. Was she expressing her dismay at missing him too strongly? Not strongly enough? Did she sound somehow resentful that he’d not found time for her. Once she’d even written awful sentimental dreck about the ‘memory of his kiss,’ and she’d crossed it out three times before sending the paper to its firey reckoning place.

Anna-Lise’s visit had been such a boon, in its way. In the first place, she made a new friend. And in the second, she was able to take her mind off Raoul. For how could she be expected to write when she was busy seeing to the company of her guest? When they were staying up late chattering about their lives and interests? When Anna-Lise was so bright, and read to her from her favorite books? No, there was hardly time to think of Raoul, then. But Anna-Lise was on a train, back to her big, boisterous family. And Christine would be alone again at night, once she’d seen that Mamma was comfortable. Alone with her pen and her dwindled pile of stationery.

“What are you doing here?”

A voice echoing all around her made her jump, but she calmed down when she saw that it was only Erik, a lean shadow at the top of the sloping auditorium.

“Nothing,” she replied. Nothing but sitting upon the edge of the stage between the footlights, swinging her legs like a forlorn child. “Did...did your sister make it onto the train alright?”
“She did,” Erik confirmed, striding down toward her. “She wanted me to thank you again, for your kindness and hospitality. She said you seemed distracted when you made your good-byes, she wanted to be sure you got the message.”

“Oh,” Christine bit her lip. “I’m sorry -”

“Pah,” Erik waved a hand dismissively and joined her on the stage, dangling his long legs beside hers. “She was very understanding - quick study, that girl. She knew we were all in a tizzy, though she didn’t quite grasp why. She thought we’d be like to find another singer - two weeks isn’t so short a time to learn a few songs, after all.”

The grin he shot her was wan and worried. Christine didn’t know what to say and so she said nothing.

“Actually, she might not be far off the mark,” Erik continued. He took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair, always a fidget. “I...overheard the managers speaking with Reyer and Vaucorbeil. There’s talk of moving Marcelline into the Countess role - she knows the part well enough - but that leaves Cherubino vacant. What a mess. What a mess.”

His hand ghosted over his face and Christine eyed him curiously. He seemed very distressed. More than she might have expected about the prospect of the show being delayed, or roles substituted.

“Did you...get the chance to really talk to her?” she asked delicately. “Was it...all...for her dresser?”

Erik nodded glumly. “Yes. She’s...very loyal.”

There was a long silence as Christine thought how to answer. They seemed to be alone, but there were so many darkened corners. It was foolish to take chances. “I think that’s...right. To be loyal.”

“Mmm,” Erik hummed consideringly. “Would that we were all so.”

The hand that had flitted from his hair to his face was beside her, twitching convulsively, fingers restless on the stage. Slowly, Christine’s right hand moved to steady him, a light resting of her fingers over his. So long, they were, they would quite swallow her hand up. Erik’s hand stilled and Christine curled her hand over his fingers, giving them a reassuring squeeze. The tips of his fingers curled down, returning pressure for pressure.

“It’ll be dark soon,” Erik observed quietly. “I ought to see you home.”

The prospect frightened her almost as badly as his voice had startled her earlier.

“Oh no,” she said, hand tightening convulsively on his. “Not just yet. It’s only...Mamma has not been much up and about in the evenings and it was such a change to have your sister with me and...it can be lonesome. In that house. Sometimes and...I’d like to stay a little longer, if you don’t mind.”

Erik looked down at her, and his eyes were filled with such...warmth and tenderness for her that, for the first time since she’d known him, she couldn’t see any ugliness at all. It was such a comfort to be by him, to see him looking at her and caring about her that she quite drank it in, his presence, his kindness and, yes, even his face. It wasn’t so bad, really. Because to look at it meant that he was there. And because he was there, she wasn’t alone.

“Could you sing for me?” she requested quietly. “Anything, really. It’s odd, to go a whole day without music. Isn’t it?”

“It certainly is,” he agreed. And he sang. Something foreign, she thought. Spanish? It made her think
of La Carlotta and, wearily, Christine leaned her head against Erik’s arm and shut her eyes. What a mess, she found herself agreeing.

Whatever were they going to do?

Chapter End Notes

Just in case there was any doubt: Carlotta is a BAD ASS. But we need a Cherubino. Hmm...I wonder what little soprano is good in trouser roles...
Even before he saw him, Dalir knew something was wrong. The key scraped roughly against the lock with a clanking, fumbling sound, accompanied by quiet cursing. Then the door banged open on its hinges and Erik lurched over the threshold. He’d been drinking - alone. Always a bad sign.

“You smell like a still,” Dalir groused - cheap English liquor. Clearly it was a bad day, but Erik might have come home before he decided to go drinking. To be perfectly frank, with the holiday a scant three weeks hence, Dalir hadn’t had the easiest working day either. If he never saw another macaron again, it’d be too soon. “I might’ve joined you, at least -”

Erik wasn’t listening. He didn’t seem to hear him at all. He just stared at Dalir, hollow-eyed and strangely intent. Like he’d never seen him before. Like he wasn’t going to see him again.

“What is it?” Dalir asked, worried now. “What’s happened?”

Erik came up very close to him all of a sudden, like he was going to kiss him or strike him. Then he stepped sideways and threw himself on top of the bed, without even taking his boots off. Dalir stood over him with his arms folded, but he didn’t get the chance to repeat himself for Erik seized him by the belt and pulled him onto the bed.

“Hey!” Dalir shouted, rolling off Erik, giving him a half-hearted shove. “Give a man some warning, will you?”

“I’m being dogged,” Erik said finally, lying on his back with his hands over his face. “By an incompetent Auguste Dupin - only he’s working for the monkey!”

The bed was too narrowed to lay like this and Dalir’s shoulder was wedged against the wall. Still, he didn’t move. Erik’s breathing was ragged and, sensible of the fact that if he pushed for answers now, he’d only get a string of nonsense, Dalir said nothing. Just unstuck his left arm from where it was trapped beneath Erik’s side and, carded his fingers through Erik’s hair. Dalir wondered where his hat had got to. The weather was turning and he hadn’t any spare flesh to keep him warm.

“Carlotta’s quit the company,” Erik, then. And that was all he said.

“Oh?” Dalir asked, still not understanding. “She got a better offer?”

Erik shook his head and slowly - intelligibly this time - explained the sorry situation. Simon Buquet, amateur detective. Sophie the victim of his machinations. And Carlotta refusing to take it.

“Shit,” Dalir said, once he had a clear picture. “And...there’s nothing that can be done? No one you could apply to? Buquet’s a lout - surely the management can see that, they’ve eyes, haven’t they?”

Erik made a skeptical noise in the back of his throat. “And say what? ‘Oh, begging your pardon
monsieurs, but Joseph Buquet is a scoundrel - he’s taken against me because I’m a sodomite! Can you imagine the gall?’”

“Hush,” Dalir rolled his eyes. “Obviously don’t say that. But...he drinks all day and doesn’t take care with his work. Surely that’s enough.”

Erik shook his head, sighing heavily, letting his hands drop, left arm trailing off the side of the bed toward the floor. “All he must say in his defense is that he finds me impossible to work for, that he can’t respect me...let’s be realistic, eh? They’d be more inclined to believe lies told by Buquet than truths from me.”

“I think...what about Vaucorbeil? He hired you, didn’t he? He’d take you at your word.”

Another grunt. “No. I’ve tried talking to him about Buquet before. That day he nearly sent Carlotta to hospital. If that didn’t convince him that the man is incompetent, nothing will. He knows he bears me a grudge. Sour grapes, that’s what it’ll sound like. And I can bear his insolence against me - very ill, I grant, but I bear it. It’s...to think he might come after...you...”

He trailed off, sounding utterly desolate.

“Besides,” Erik concluded, rolling onto his side so that he was actually looking at Dalir. “If I go to him now, in the wake of this, he’ll think - he’ll know I have something to hide. And with this...odd moral bent the new managers have taken up...I can’t risk it. It’s too high a price. And I’m a coward, after all.”

“You aren’t,” Dalir shook his head. “You’re sensible - not all or even most of the time, granted, but in this you have sense.”

Erik smiled briefly and flopped down onto the bed, face hidden in the pillow - then he popped back up again to peel the false nose off (it had been hanging rather precariously since his arrival, but that was the least of Dalir’s concerns). “High praise indeed - I rely upon you to be the sensible one.”

“As well you should,” Dalir said, rolling on his side in turn to face Erik. “Which is why you really ought to take me with you every time you get it in your head to go drinking.”

“Oh, I didn’t have that much,” he shook his head. “My despair is fueled by the futile sense that I’m trying to row the Channel in a skiff. To cross the...steppes of Siberia on a donkey. What other hopeless endeavors can you think of? I’ve run out.”

“I think someone has rowed the Channel on a skiff,” Dalir informed him. “What are you...rowing for? Is that right? Or have I botched the simile?”

Erik only shook his head and wouldn’t say. His eyes were looking at the chipped plaster beyond Dalir’s head. There was no expression on his face, no glimpse at what he was thinking. Dalir was left to guess. Fame? Recognition? He’d only been at the Opéra two years, developing a reputation took time, he was sure. Erik was not a patient man, but he had to know that. What else could it be?

Suddenly his eyes focused with intent on Dalir’s face. He ran his long fingers down the line of Dalir’s cheek, to his jaw, pausing at his lips. “Stay there,” he implored. “Just like that. If I’d a charcoal, I’d make a sketch.”

“No,” Dalir shook his head and smiled a lazy smile - Erik wasn’t the only one whose moods could change on a whim. “I can think of a better use for those hands.”

“I’d commission a sketch, then,” Erik said, fingers idling down Dalir’s shirt, removing his waistcoat,
untucking the tails of his shirt, lowering his braces. “Oh. But that wouldn’t do you any good either, would it? For no artist worth his bristles would paint such a scene if I was in it.”

“More’s the pity,” Dalir replied, letting himself relax and let Erik do as he pleased, with hands and mouth - he’d had a **hard** day, after all, and hadn’t trotted off to the nearest pub directly after work. “You’re simply going to have to keep me around - so you don’t forget what I look like. Have done with me when I’m old and fat.”

Erik looked up and locked eyes on him, startlingly keen. “**Never,**” he pronounced, not with the softness of a lover, but with the ferocity of a knight swearing fealty.

This Buquet affair had him rattled, no doubt. But Dalir let his head fall back and his eyes close as Erik brought his tongue, his lips, his teeth down the length of him. So they’d avoid their usual haunts for a bit. Just until the dog lost the scent. This was a petty grudge. Borne of jealousy, no doubt. For Erik was brilliant. Erik was talented. Erik was - **ah!** exquisite. Who wouldn’t be jealous?

Dalir might be inclined to give into such feelings himself, if he hadn’t won his affection, his heart. A smile on his face, he thought perhaps he might explain Joseph Buquet’s obsession as borne of love frustrated - but then the feeling of Erik’s cold fingers on his inner thigh brought him back. And soon he was beyond much coherent thought and speech himself.

Just as well; he rather thought he deserved a little bliss.

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Being the youngest of four - the youngest by a good many years to boot - Raoul was not much in the company of children, even when he was one. He was educated at home and Marie-Grace, his closest companion in age, thought of him more as a little doll she’d been given, rather than a friend. A girl-doll specifically - she’d been in open rebellion when he was put in short pants and, when it was the two of them alone in the nursery, she’d dress him up in his old gowns (at least until they no longer fitted him).

So just why the same Marie-Grace had given him a child to mind, he had **absolutely** no idea. Her husband’s brother and his family had come to Paris for the holiday, staying at their townhouse. The family had three children and the eldest, Camille, had been given over to him as a sort of charge for the day. Along with her chaperone, a fusty maiden aunt who either had a head cold or merely hated Raoul tremendously - she gave a great sniff every time he spoke.

Camille was sixteen, newly arrived in Paris from a Swiss finishing school and dull as a post. Her ‘dear Maman’ (it was always **dear** Maman, never Maman alone) had ordered her outfitted in the latest styles and the fittings she’d been subjected to were her only source of conversation.

“The seamstress was ever so kind,” she said, fingers rolling and unrolling the lace on her reticule methodically. “She said I was a dream to fit - neither too tall, nor too small!”

“Ah,” Raoul nodded, squinting out the windows of the carriage, hoping a tinker’s cart might be so obliging as to catch fire, to give them something else to talk about. “Very good.”

**Sniff,** went the chaperone, Mademoiselle...something. Raoul had forgotten her surname and it would be rude to inquire now, so he simply tried not to address the woman directly.

Marie-Grace, when assigning him this task, had been all excitement. “We’ve told darling Camille all about you - she’s just so eager to make your acquaintance! You must take her to luncheon in the city tomorrow, she’s such a dear, a good, sweet, unspoiled young woman, you’ll adore her, I’m sure!”
She was sweet - in the way Turkish Delight was sweet. Pleasant enough, Raoul supposed, but not to his taste. The one thing Camille had over it was that her sweetness didn’t get stuck in his teeth for hours after.

“Has your family any outings planned for your visit?” Raoul asked, trying to subtly guess how many more afternoons he might spend talking about the merits of long versus short sleeves for evening. “Are you going to...go to the Opéra, perhaps? They’re putting on The Marriage of Figaro, I’m sure our family would be happy to let you have use of our box.”

SNIFF, went the chaperone - it was a wonder she didn’t pull something in her nose.

Camille’s already doe-like brown eyes became round as dinner plates and the lace on her reticule unfurled. “Oh! Goodness! I simply...I don’t know. I’ve never been...to the theatre.”

The word ‘theatre’ was pronounced in a hushed tone, as if there was a curse on it that might be brought upon her head if she spoke too loudly.

“Dear Maman,” Camile continued, “is fonder of the symphony. She doesn’t like women who have painted faces.”

Raoul refrained from mentioning the fact that she might have some trouble getting on with Marie-Grace, then, who he’d known to darken her eyes with kohl and to brighten her smile with rouge. But he smiled and merely said, “Then she would have liked the last performance I saw - the women covered their faces with veils, for it took place in the Far East.”

The chaperone fixed her eyes upon him, menacingly, but at least she did not sniff again - he worried she might turn her face inside-out if she did.

Camille’s lips parted and she gasped. “There were Oriental women upon the stage?”

Raoul chuckled, “Well, I’m not sure about that - perhaps. Though at least one of them was Swedish. But it was alright - her hair was covered and no one was any the wiser.”

“Dear Maman took me to the milliner’s a week ago,” Camille replied brightly, bringing the conversation back to a place of comfort for her. “I found the most charming little hat, trimmed with fur - dark blue. The milliner said it complimented my eyes very well indeed.”

She blinked rapidly then and Raoul looked out the window, just in case she needed to remove something from her eye and would rather not have an audience for the act. As he looked, he wondered what they might do to fill time. There were hours left before they were due to meet the family for dinner. Their luncheon was a brief one - Camille didn’t like salad, but said she never ate meat in the middle of the day, so she and the chaperone dined on soup alone. Raoul was starving and being hungry never put him in a good humor.

“What do you say to a carriage ride through the park?” he asked, though the dullness of the trees meant the exercise would not be as charming as it might be. Perhaps there would be snow soon. Raoul was certain that Christine said skating was one of her favorite pastimes when they were children. Perhaps they could skate…

Camille agreed that the park sounded lovely and Raoul passed the word on to the driver. She’d just gone in about her new muff and boots to match the hat when they rounded a corner and suddenly the Opéra sprang into view.

Oh, he shouldn’t… He really shouldn’t…but technically, Marie-Grace only wanted him to play nanny for luncheon, which he’d done. In the letter of the law, his task was complete.
“I’m afraid I’ve just remembered, I’ve urgent business to attend to,” Raoul said, signalling to the driver to stop the carriage. “Robert will take you along through the park, then back to the house afterwards, if that is agreeable?”

“That’ll do,” the chaperone said, seemingly happy to be rid of him.

Camille’s face fell and she said that she was so sorry to lose his company, but of course, a gentleman’s business was important and she dearly hoped she would see him later. Then she presented him with her hand.

Raoul patted it in a fatherly manner and said he was certain he would see them both for dinner.

*There*, he thought as he waved them off cheerfully. *That suits everyone nicely, I’m sure.*

The atmosphere of the Opéra was more subdued than usual for a rehearsal day. The managers’ office door was shut and heard the sound of voices beyond, strained and raised in conversation - likely to do with finance, in Raoul’s experience no gentleman ever sounded so heated when it wasn’t to do with money. Wisely, he thought, he backed away from the door and proceeded toward the auditorium. Likely the whole company was performing together and, if he was lucky, Christine might have just enough time for a cup of coffee before he was called away to dress for dinner.

But no one was upon the stage at all - no, that was not precisely true, for Raoul picked up Erik’s tall, gaunt frame easily enough. He was surrounded by a gaggle of young girls and seemed to be teaching a lesson.

“You just want to look straight ahead,” he was advising them, though Raoul heard him speaking all the way at the back of the auditorium. “If you start looking at the balls, you lose your place - hang on, I *used* to be able to do six in one go, we’ll see…”

Juggling. Who knew that Almaviva’s estate was home to a circus?

They weren’t balls at all in his hand, but little cloth sacks, weighted...with sand, maybe? Raoul saw their irregular shape as he came closer - one, two, three, four of them were flying through the air before his eyes.

“Come, my assistant,” Erik ordered and a dark-haired girl in a little Scots dress stood up and tossed another bag into the mix. Five. “Alright, hold your breath, my dears…”

The girl tossed the final bag, but in her eagerness overshot her intended goal and got Erik right between the eyes.

“Meg!” another of the girls cried in dismay. “You’ve...*how* did you do that!”

For somehow Erik caught the ball as it ricocheted off his head and got it into rotation with the rest. Raou’s applause joined the squeals and clapping of the young girls.

“Oh!” Erik grinned his somewhat frightening grin and the little girls scrambled to their feet, executing flawless curtsies as he proclaimed, “Monsieur le Vicomte, what brings you here? Fancy a lesson?”

“For somehow Erik caught the ball as it ricocheted off his head and got it into rotation with the rest. Only for a few seconds before he dropped them, but it was impressive nevertheless. Raou’s applause joined the squeals and clapping of the young girls.

“Oh!” Erik grinned his somewhat frightening grin and the little girls scrambled to their feet, executing flawless curtsies as he proclaimed, “Monsieur le Vicomte, what brings you here? Fancy a lesson?”

“Of course he doesn’t!” a small brown-haired child cried, aghast. “He’s a...he’s a gentleman. And gentlemen do not juggle.”

“This particular gentleman doesn’t know how,” Raoul said apologetically, glancing round at the girls
who were, to a one, staring at him quite openly. He ought to have brought Camille to the Opéra, doubtless she would find these little ones better company than himself - and there wasn’t a lick of powder on any of their faces. “I thought I’d arrived to a full rehearsal - or have you changed the production and Monsieur Erik is the star.”

“Oh, never!” the brown-haired one cried again, then clapped her hands over her mouth. “Sorry, Monsieur Erik. Only no one knows what to do with themselves since La Carlotta quit the company.”

“MARIE!” the dark-haired assistant gasped, giving one of her skinny arms a shake. “HUSH!”

“It’s not a secret!” Marie protested. “The managers are sending to Russia, I heard! She’s to come by train!”

“No!” another of the girls shook her headful of curls doubtfully. “I heard England - she’ll arrive by boat!”

“I heard Marcelline,” Erik said, clearly amused. “She’ll arrive by foot!”

Just then, a gentleman appeared from the wings and summoned all the little girls together - it was too late for rehearsing, they were all to be sent home for the day. They gave their good-byes to Erik and another set of curtsies to the Vicomte. Raoul tipped his hat to them and they dashed away, giggling.

“Just think,” Erik shook his head, absently juggling three of the sand bags one-handed. “One of that gaggle is going to be the next La Sorelli.”

“Not if your lessons hold fast,” Raoul replied slyly. “They might run away with the fair.”

“Eh,” Erik shrugged, letting the pseudo juggling balls drop. “It’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Has La Carlotta resigned?” Raoul asked, eyebrows drawing together inquisitively. “But she’s the Opéra’s top-draw.”

“Oh, I know,” Erik replied, shaking his head. “The managers are frantic - this is an expensive production and already there’s talk of refunds and unsold seats. Really, they ought to hire in another well-known singer, but there’s no time! Nor money. Even if Ferni was interested.”

“But why?” Raoul pressed. “Wasn’t she happy here.”

Yes, Erik explained. He thought so. Only her dresser was let go. For being seen in unsavory night clubs.

Then, when Raoul clearly did not understand his meaning, Erik clarified that La Carlotta’s favorite dresser was a young woman named Sophie. Dark-haired. Prominent teeth. Fond of blue gowns and red-headed dancing partners, though she’d been known to tread the boards with a Vicomte or two - but Vicomtes weren’t the problem.

“What?!” Raoul exclaimed when comprehension dawned. “Oh no! For - for - going to that club? Oh, surely not! No, that’s...that can’t be right there was nothing - anyway, whose business is it? Should I speak to the management? Perhaps I can -”

But Erik was shushing him, seemed inches away from clapping a hand over his mouth.

“The walls have ears - and voices too, in this place,” he hissed quietly. “Anyway, if you explained to the management that Sophie really was in a decent sort of place, you’d have to explain what you were doing there. If not to them, then to your brother - speaking of Vicomtes turning up in places
they don’t belong, what are you doing here anyway?’

The ‘don’t belong’ comment stung more than Erik likely intended, so Raoul tried not to let on that his pride was a trifle wounded at being addressed so.

“I was...in the neighborhood,” he said lightly. “Actually, my sister gave me charge of her niece for the afternoon, but...it was rather a tedious exercise. I had no juggling balls to amuse her.”

“Pity,” Erik said, relaxing a little from his conspiratorial posture. “Doesn’t she have a nanny or a governess? Why’d they dump her on you?”

“No idea,” Raoul rubbed the back of his neck and shook his head. “She’s been away at school for a few years and is making her coming out this season - all she talks of is gowns. You have sisters, haven’t you? Are all little girls like that?”

A crooked smile flashed across Erik’s face and he laughed, “Some, but not all. My middle sister, she’s more enamored of snails and spiders than anything else - botany’s her great love, if I had the money, I’d buy her Audubon’s books.”

“Oh, I think we’ve got a set of those,” Raoul mentioned casually, thinking of the great library at their town house. His father was something of an amateur naturalist - an armchair naturalist, he funded certain scientists and purchased their books, but he’d no desire to go abroad himself. He collected butterflies. “They aren’t doing anyone any good, I can see if we might spare one for your sister.”

Erik was looking at him like he’d begun speaking Dutch. “You’d - ”

But the wings were filling with performers and those few dancers who’d lingered after they were dismissed.

“What’s this?” Erik asked a passing young man who shrugged.

“Another morality meeting, I fancy,” he said with a strong accent - English, Raoul thought. “You been sticking your cock anywhere it doesn’t belong, Erik? Ah! Pardon, monsieur, a thousand pardons, I didn’t - ”

“Nowhere it wasn’t wanted,” Erik replied smoothly, shooing the horrified Englishman into the seats beyond the orchestra pit. To Raoul he murmured, “Just take your hat off and lose some of that military bearing, you’ll blend right in. Come along.”

Raoul did just as he was commanded and slipped in among a few of the workingmen who joined Erik toward the back of the crowd - one of them was extraordinarily large so Raoul was not only able to blend, but also to hide.

Out came a man in a dun-colored frock coat who Erik informed Raoul was the chorus’s director, M. Poligny. The assembly relaxed when they realized no one else was coming to join him.

“By now you’ve all heard about La Carlotta’s resignation,” he began, not pausing for a response. “Anyway, the role of Countess has been filled - our own Mademoiselle Delacroix, formerly Cherubino in this production has assumed the role, leaving Cherubino’s position vacant. This is…not an ideal situation, but we will be holding auditions in two days time for those members of the chorus who are suited for the role. Prior experience is preferred! That’s all, thank you - go back to your homes and your families, this production will open before the holiday, that much is known. If you have any other questions, don’t ask me, I haven’t any satisfactory answers.”

And with that, Poligny stalked off the stage. All the men got up as one to leave, half the women, a
few young ladies with expressions equal parts delight and terror remained.

“Open auditions!” Raoul heard one of them exclaim. “What a surprise!”

“They don’t know what they’re doing,” said another.

“And they can’t afford to hire anyone new,” noted a third. “What a nightmare!”

In the thinned crowd, Raoul saw Christine, taking up her purse and hat, evidently eager to quit the theatre. “Christine!” he exclaimed, perhaps too loudly, but everyone was so caught up with the announcement, they truly did not seem to see him.

An expression of happy surprise crossed Christine’s face and she hurried to him, hands out in greeting, to clasp his own warmly. Raoul was relieved - he’d written her ages ago telling her what tyrants his sisters were being regarding his social calendar, but he never heard back. He feared she was cross with him, but now he thought it more likely the letter had gotten lost somewhere.

“What are you doing here?” she asked and he just smiled at her having no satisfactory answer beyond ‘I wanted to see you,’ which seemed bold in mixed company - though, perhaps no bolder than hiding himself among the stagehands to linger where he didn’t belong.

“Juggling lessons,” Erik supplied over Raoul’s head. Evidently, he’d gotten up to take his leave and Raoul was proving quite a roadblock. “What are you singing for your audition?”

Christine blinked rapidly. “What audition?”

“For Cherubino,” Erik reminded her.

Christine laughed, fingers tightening on Raoul’s hands. “Oh, I’m not going to audition!”

The matter settled, Raoul rose and slid forward that Erik might pass behind him, but he did no such thing.

“Whyever not?” he asked, like the refusal was the most ridiculous thing he’d ever heard. “Where’s your ambition? Come, come! You must audition! You must at least try.”

Christine’s grip went slack and Raoul was inexplicably cross with Erik - she’d told him she didn’t want to, why couldn’t he let her alone about it? Besides, if she was going to choose songs, she likely wouldn’t have time for coffee - his spare time before dinner was shrinking alarmingly.

“I don’t stand a chance,” she shook her head. “I’m...new.”

“Exactly!” Erik exclaimed. “New talent! New Swedish talent, just as Vaucorbeil wanted. The next Lind! Or, if not the next Lind, the first Daaé! And if you don’t win this part - which I think you’ve every chance of - then at least your name will be known. I’ll help you! As best I can, I know Cherubino’s aria well enough.”

“She said she didn’t want to,” Raoul reminded him, but Christine had stopped looking at him. Indeed, all her attention was taken up by Erik. Without any effort to conceal his impatience, he took out his pocketwatch and made a show of looking at the time. Scarcely time for coffee to cool enough for drinking. Damn.

“What if I make a fool of myself?” she asked softly.

“So much the better!” Erik grinned again and Christine smiled back. “For they’re sure to remember
you! Come, we can begin now - unless you’ve got an engagement?”

He looked between Raoul and Christine like a benefactor, all ease and understanding. Damn the fellow.

“No,” she said uncertainly. “I - we haven’t. Have we?”

“No,” Raoul was forced to admit. “And I must...be off. Erm. A matter of business. Good-night, Christine. It was...good to see you, even for so short a while. I did write to you, did you receive my letter?”

“Oh, yes,” she nodded and his heart sank. “I’d be so happy if you were to accompany me to Mass. If you still...if that is still agreeable to you.”

Raoul nodded, drawing himself up into that military bearing Erik cautioned him over earlier. He’d thought...when they kissed...but the night was hazy in his mind. Perhaps...perhaps she’d not been so moved by the experience as he had. “Of course it is. I only wish...I had more time today.”

When she looked up at him, her eyes were bright, though a little sad. “So do I. But you’ve...I understand you’re very busy. This time of year.”

“Why don’t you breakfast together?” Erik suggested and they both whipped their heads around, having forgotten he was there - a difficult task as he was looming over them, tapping his toe and clearing his throat while they stammered and blushed. “Tomorrow morning, perhaps. Is eight ‘o clock convenient for the Vicomte to call, Christine?”

“Ah...yes,” she said, looking between the two men like a little cuckoo bird in a clock.

“And do you have any pressing engagements, monsieur?” Erik asked, turning to Raoul. “Eight o’clock? At Christine’s flat?”

What was that Raoul was thinking? ‘Damn the fellow?’ What rubbish! Why Erik was an excellent friend! How fortunate they both were to have him about.

“Yes,” Raoul said, then realized he really ought to be talking to Christine. “Eight o’clock?”

She smiled. “Eight o’clock.”

Erik clapped his hands and then walked around Raoul, beckoning Christine forward. “Come along! Make your good-byes quickly - do what you must, my back is turned!”

Raoul only kissed the back of Christine’s hand and pressed it firmly. “Until tomorrow?”

“Until tomorrow,” she echoed, the scurried off to catch up with Erik.
Slightly Off-Balance

Chapter Notes

**Warning** for: antisemitism.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Breakfasting with Raoul was just the thing to set her nerves at ease. Over coffee (terrible for the voice, but she needed a little extra stimulant to get through her day), and croissants she patiently listened to his apologies-cum-stories about just why he’d been so scarce of late.

“Poor little Camille!” she giggled as Raoul did a fair impression of a simpering adolescent girl - rather an unfair impression for she was certain that the young lady in question did not deserve to be made a mockery of. “I’m sure I would have been very happy to have a new hat and boots to match when I was sixteen!”

Actually, she would be very happy to have a new hat and boots to match at the age of twenty, but she kept that to herself.

“And if I were a cobbler or a milliner I’m sure I would have found the topic most diverting,” he said, shaking his head. “But as it is, I tried to engage her and Mademoiselle What’s-her-Name in topics I thought we could all find common interest in. I didn’t talk endlessly about knots and rigging!”

“Perhaps you should have tried!” Christine suggested, laughing. “It could be that Mademoiselle Camille has a tremendous interest in the conduct of the navy. Or else that Mademoiselle What’s-her-Name is secretly a pirate, which is why you couldn’t get her surname out of her! Why, she might be on the run from the authorities!”

This time it was Raoul’s turn to laugh, “Well, she certainly was intimidating. I understand, they were unused to the city and preferred the company of an escort, but why I was chosen for the task rather than Marie-Grace herself, I’ll never know!”

Christine’s smile faded, slightly, for she fancied she had a good idea why Raoul was chosen as escort. He was young. He was handsome. And as Marie-Grace had already married into the family, there was no doubt they would not hold the color of his skin against him. Or, if they were not quite so generous of mind, they would politely overlook it in favor of his other excellent qualities.

Raoul noticed her change in expression and reached across the table for her hand which she gave him, gladly. His fingers were warm against hers and she turned her palm up to lace their fingers together. “I really am sorry. I feel I’ve neglected our… I’ve neglected you. Are you very angry with me?”

“I’m not angry,” Christine shook her head, trying to brighten her expression, but it was no use, for Raoul was looking at her so intently, she knew there was no fooling him. “I’ve… missed you. Very much. That last evening we spent together…”

“I think of it, all the time,” he said quickly, squeezing her hand slightly. “It’s… become one of my fondest memories. I don’t know when I’ve had such a good time. In such… good company.”
She wished he would kiss her, then. The thought came into her head, bold and unbidden. But just as
soon as the flame was sparked, her good sense put it out and she merely squirmed in her chair, rather
than leaning across the table to lessen the distance between them. Raoul would never - he was too
much a gentleman and they were in too much of a crowd. When poets talked of love, they talked of
rose arbors and lush green groves. Not narrow staircases. Such a wonder that the most romantic
gesture ever made toward her should happen outside a dingy alleyway.

Raoul did not let go of her hand, but his tone lightened, became less conspiratorial as he said that
they ought to go out again sometime, only - in light of the present…difficulties, perhaps the venue
ought to be a little more...conventional.

Christine smiled sadly and agreed that might be for the best. “Or you could call on me at home. I’m
in most evenings.”

“I will,” Raoul vowed seriously. “I promise you. Before the holiday.”

It was only her hand that he kissed before he left - Christine waited and waited to replace her gloves,
though the weather was biting, so that his lips might touch her bare skin. It wasn’t enough to satisfy,
but at least it was something.

She walked quickly in the cold air to the Opéra and, as such, arrived with enough time to look in on
the scene shifters - well, one particular scene shifter, anyway.

“Where’s my breakfast?” Erik asked, having dressed for the cold rather unconventionally - he had no
overcoat and so wore an old quilt draped over his shoulders, like a shawl, which he hung on a peg as
smartly as any opera cloak. “I thought I placed my order yesterday - or do you think I sent you and
the Vicomte off just so that you might enjoy yourselves?”

“I haven’t brought you any,” Christine replied pertly. “You live with a - well, I thought if you
wanted croissants, Dalir might bring them to you, sure enough.”

Erik laughed briefly and shook his head, “Dalir’s not my wife.”

“Well, neither am I,” Christine said and he laughed so loudly and so quickly that she was on the
verge of being rather insulted.

“Oh, no, perish the thought,” Erik chuckled, shaking his head. Christine put her hands on her hips
and frowned up at him.

“Why?” she asked, a tone of challenge in her voice, though she was trying for teasing.

Erik cocked his head down at her, his smile fading as well. “Well…” he started, uneasily. “Do you
want to be someone’s wife?”

Yes, of course, Christine thought she ought to say and opened her mouth to do just that, but the
words would not come. I mean, I expect so. I expect I will want to be. Someday.

She wandered off without saying a word, in the end. Did she want to be someone - Raoul’s? - wife.
Not...not yet. No, not any time in the foreseeable future. There was her career to think about. She’d
only just gotten a toehold into the Opéra, why waste time and energy on courting? And if she
courted someone outside the theatre, why, they might expect her to give up singing to keep house!
The thought rather turned her stomach.

No, no, this...whatever it was she had (or thought she had) with Raoul suited her very well.
Luncheons and occasional suppers and very occasional dancing. But how long could it continue?
Not long, she suspected, if her family was already throwing eligible girls in his path. Nice girls, from good families. Christine thought of herself as, in general, a very nice girl. But she’d have to be a fool to think that either of the Maries or Comte Philippe would agree. She was hired entertainment fit for...well. Nothing to do with them socially.

The thought was a dismal one and made her gloomy, as well as anxious, but it turned out she was in good company as she took to the stage for rehearsal.

Choral rehearsal was a slapdash, lackluster affair - most of the sopranos were so dizzy-headed with the thought of auditions (herself among them) that they could not keep their minds upon the parts they were meant to be singing. Or else they were trying to save their voices that they would not sing very loudly. M. Poligny, peeved, wondered aloud before luncheon why they had even bothered coming to work that day at all.

Marcelline was proving a competent, if not inspired, Countess. The costumes were going to be a headache since she had six inches over Carlotta in height and her waist was rather more slender, so the gowns required extensive alterations. Cherubino was excised entirely, the plinking of a lonely rehearsal piano sufficing until a suitable replacement was chosen from the chorus. Every time a doleful note was played, Christine felt a jolt of equal parts excitement and dread - she’d signed her name on the sheet pinned outside the chorus’s main rehearsal room, so there was no going back now.

It was full dark outside by the time enough of the company had departed and she and Erik had a room to themselves. Just why she was putting her faith in an untutored builder from the provinces did not bear up to too close an examination. Others had run to private teachers or called in favors at the conservatory. That would have been the wise thing to do, doubtless there were some among her old teachers who would have been happy to assist her for a modest fee, but the thought hadn’t occurred to Christine to ask. Erik offered. And...she trusted Erik. Implicitly. Somewhere in her soul she was certain he would not lead her astray.

The building was turning cold, so much so that Christine wrapped her scarf around her throat and Erik wrapped himself up in his quilt, donning a pair of glove with the tips of the fingers cut out so that he could play. She warmed up with a few scales and sang through ‘Voi che sapete’ once, twice - but Erik stopped playing on her second go-through, a contemplative look on his face.

Christine immediately assumed the worst, “Was I awful?”

“No,” he said slowly. “Not at all. Your tone is very sweet, only...I think - pure conjecture, but bear with me...I think being in the chorus makes you a little meek. A little quiet. And they’re looking for a singer who can command the stage. At least, I assume so.”

Christine wilted. Meek? Yes, the Christine of a year ago certainly was, but she’d hoped - she’d thought she’d become rather bolder in recent weeks. But then, even if she had, it might only be reflected in her mind, not her voice.

Papa raised her to believe she was special. That her voice was God’s special present to her. That when they had nothing else, she had her special present from God, showing that she was loved, that he thought of her always. But when she lost him, she started to dread that what Papa had told her was only half true. She did have a special voice - but it was only special when she was accompanied by him.

Erik rose from the piano and lay his cold fingertips gently upon her arm. “Come along,” he cocked his head a her. “Let’s try you out in a grander venue.”

The auditorium was very dark, so he lit a few lanterns, giving her a little pool of light to stand in. The
piano, moved toward the wings, was absolutely shrouded in darkness.

“Don’t you need - ” she started, but bit her lip and stopped. Of course Erik didn’t need light; he wasn’t reading the music.

He played again and she sang - but if anything, she was quieter than she had been in that tiny room. The stage seemed staggeringly large, the auditorium moreseo - the plush seats, the curtains hanging from the boxes, the lush carpeting were all designed to eat her voice, like a monster in a fairy tale. She felt like a land-bound Little Mermaid.

“Let’s...try a little experiment,” Erik suggested, rising from the piano. Like an acrobat he took a flying leap off the stage, sending Christine’s heart fluttering, but of course he landed in an aisle, quite unharmed. He turned round and winked at her. “Catch me if you can!”

And then he was off and running, leaving Christine standing on the stage, utterly flummoxed. What did he want her to do? Take a tumble off the stage? A broken leg would get her out of the audition, so she supposed the idea had some merit…

But Erik stopped, halfway down the aisle turning back around to her. “Sing, Christine!” he commanded, his own perfect voice sounding all around in defiance of the sumptuous, sound-destroying furnishing. “On your own now!”

This was hopeless, it really was, but she’d humor him - Erik was only trying to help, after all, she owed him a bit of effort.

“Voi che sapete che cosa e amor,
Donne, vedete, s’io l’ho nel cor,
Donne, vedete, s’io l’ho nel cor.”

“Come on, come on, Christine, I can’t hear you!” Erik shouted from the back of the room. He seemed so small back there, just a little stick, waving an encouraging hand at her. It really was a huge room. And she was only one small woman. “Sing at me! Go on, sing so I can hear you!”

“Quello ch’io provo, vi ridiro,
E per me nuovo capir nol so.
Sento un affetto pien di desir,
Ch’ora e diletto, ch’ora e martir.”

“Drop your shoulders! You’re too tense! Smile!”

Christine stopped and put her hands on her hips, “You can’t see my shoulders and you certainly can’t tell if I’m smiling!”

“No, but I can hear that you aren’t,” he retorted, a laugh in his voice. “You’re so tense! Remember, it’s only me. Just sing for me and you’ll be alright. There’s nothing to fear. I’ll treat you to an excellent supper after we’re through!”

That made Christine laugh, “Are you trying to bribe me, monsieur?”

“Whatever works!” he called back. “If you’re not inspired by your Vicomte, then be inspired by the promise of a hot meal! Come on, now! Sing!”

Inspired by the Vicomte, indeed! Why, Cherubino was a notorious skirt-chaser! (And not a very successful one at that). It wasn’t as though Christine kept a stable of Vicomtes to fall in love with. To be sure, she sang at him, this time, her annoyance for Erik’s cheek bleeding into her expression and
her words, however much she tried to concentrate on breathing.

“Gelo e poi sento l'alma avvampar,
E in un momento torno a gelar.
Ricercò un bene fuori di me,
Non so chi il tiene, non so cos’è.”

Erik was quiet for a long minute, then he applauded.

“I like it!” he said as he strode back toward her. “It was a cheeky rendition - Cherubino’s no famous lover, you know, he makes a botch of everything. Anyway, I could hear you and that’s what…”

He trailed off, eyes rising.

“What?” Christine asked, impatient. “Shall I sing for my supper again?”

“No,” Erik shook his head, cocking it this way and that. “Look up. Does the chandelier seem...crooked to you?”

Crooked? Christine looked up herself and squinted. Perhaps it was only the dimness of the lights, but now that Erik mentioned it, she thought the great thing was hanging a little off-kilter. Just a very little. Not the sort of thing one would notice unless they were specifically searching for it.

“I think so,” she said, “only slightly.”

“Hmm,” Erik nodded. “They must have erred with the counterweights after it was wired. I’ll bring it up to the management in the morning.”

“Well...do you think I’m...ready?” Christine asked after she extinguished the lamps and permitted Erik to put his hands around her waist so he could lift her from the stage to the floor.

“As ready as you’ll be - I think if we keep at it, you’ll make yourself sick with nerves,” he said, setting her on the ground. Christine had to admit that he was right. “You’ve a good, strong voice, Christine. You merely lack...a bit of spirit, sometimes. That’s all. Just have spirit and I think you’ll get through alright.”

“Spirit,” she repeated, biting back the comment that, in three years at the conservatory, she’d been taught technique, Italian, and German. But no one said anything about ‘spirit.’ But no, she would be grateful - he’d taken time for her, after all. Erik had been very kind and very thoughtful toward her for all the time she’d known him. With the exception of Raoul, she didn’t know when she’d had a better friend. “I suppose I ought to fortify myself with supper, hmm?”

“Undoubtedly,” Erik agreed, offering her his arm. “If you don’t mind waiting to pick up an mutual acquaintance of ours - ”

“I don’t,” she told him, knowing immediately that he meant Dalir. “I should like to see him - he doesn’t know anything about music, he’ll be a wonderful distraction!”

Erik laughed and together they walked from the darkness of the theatre into the glow of the city lights.

Erik wore his second-best waistcoat and his third-best shirt to pay his visit to the managers’ office. He even donned a collar and cuffs which was not part of his usual attire. He thought, if he was going to try to get a word in with them, he ought to look at least a little bit like he belonged in that portion
of the building.

Moncharmin was the only one in when he knocked on the door and Erik could hear him muttering to himself, “I need a secretary, answering the door at all hours, never anyone I want to talk to - ah! Astruc. What brings you here?”

Erik smothered his smile and tipped his cap, “Just a...question about building maintenance, monsieur, it won’t take a minute.”

Moncharmin’s mouth thinned under his mustache. “I’m afraid I haven’t any time. If it’s building concerns, take them to Buquet, Simon Buquet. He’ll look into it and if it’s truly a matter of concern, I’ll take care of it.”

‘If’ it’s truly a matter of concern? Yes, Erik would wager that the danger of the chandelier tilting too much to one side, snapping its chains and falling onto the heads of a packed house went a little beyond Simon Buquet checking the windows for cracks.

“No, monsieur,” Erik pressed, removing his cap and holding it tightly in his hands. “It...there’s no need to go to Buquet, it’s definitely an issue of concern. It’s the chandelier, you see. I was in the auditorium yesterday and I saw that it hadn’t been weighted properly. I think the electricians raised it in haste, they don’t have experience, I’m sure, with so large a piece of - ”

“The firm we hired came highly recommended,” he interrupted, and then informed Erik that they had wired the estate of some comte or other. One of the patrons.

“Well, pardon my saying, monsieur,” Erik continued, as though Moncharmin’s words meant nothing - really, they did not, for no matter how highly the electricians were recommended, the fact was, they’d raised the chandelier improperly. “But a chandelier in a townhouse is...really nothing to the chandelier in the auditorium. It requires careful handling and it shouldn’t be allowed to remain in such a state. I could have my men lower it and raise it at no additional - ”

“What do you know about it?” Moncharmin asked, his impatience overriding his manners. “I thought you were a scene shifter. Sometimes a designer, playing at making houses.”

It was a very wise thing for Erik to have taken his hat off. That way, the only thing in danger of being strangled was his wool cap, and not Moncharmin himself. “I...have, actually, worked for an architecture firm. I did so for seven years, in fact, before I came to the Opéra.”

He might have been a master-builder, if he stayed on. He might have hanged himself from the rafters of a house of his own design. Better for him to be in Paris. Except for days like this.

“Well,” Moncharmin said, all brusque dismissiveness. “I still say those electricians knew they were about - take it to Buquet, there’s a good fellow. If there is something to it, Buquet will tell me.”

“But - ” Erik tried one more time, but Moncharmin moved firmly past him, locking the door behind him. It seemed he was going to take his leave without another word between them, but suddenly thought better of it.

Moncharmin raised a steely-eyed gaze to Erik’s face, looking him over closely. “Buquet...he told me about you. Not a great deal, mind. Only that you came to Paris a few short years ago. That he knew very little of your origins. Save that you worked in some disreputable playhouses, but that Vaucorbeil had it in his head that you were talented.”

_I am talented_, Erik thought, but bit his tongue so hard he tasted blood on his teeth. _Or didn’t you_
notice that my sets were the only things to get a decent write-up so far this season? My sets and Carlotta’s voice. Both of which you’re doing without in this production.

“I don’t know about talent,” Moncharmin continued, still staring at Erik quite steadily. “And I don’t know about you. Only a few things. ‘Astruc,’ well, that says plenty already.”

“Does it?” Erik asked, swallowing down everything else he wanted to say. “Do you know any of my extended family?”

“Ha,” Moncharmin barked dryly. He removed a stack of newspapers from under his arm and handed one to Erik. “That there tells me all I need to know about your ‘extended family.’ Makes for very interesting reading. But...well, I’ve traveled much. I was in Germany, had to be more than ten years ago. A girl I was courting...well, that’s not important. But she did ask me, one bright day, to take her to the fair.”

The blood started pounding in Erik’s head. The hands holding the newspaper went damp, but he manfully kept them from trembling.

“It wasn’t a profitable time for many, so the rabble stayed away,” Moncharmin continued, and Erik wished he was looking anywhere but at his face. “We went early, with a crowd of university students. They were all abuzz with word of a living cadaver. They thought it was like Galvani’s frogs, but with a human corpse. A Frankenstein monster. Isn’t that quaint?”

_Step right up, ladies and gentlemen! For a small fee - only a small fee! - you may come forward and see for yourselves. Is it a living man, or a ghoul?_

“Quaint,” Erik echoed, faintly.

“Nonsense, of course,” Moncharmin continued coolly. “No amount of wires and strings could make a marionette of a corpse. It had to be a man. A freak of nature, but a man. Didn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t know, monsieur,” Erik replied, more steadily than he felt.

“Wouldn’t you?” Moncharmin asked, raising an eyebrow, making a show of straightening his gloves. “Well, perhaps you were building houses. At any rate, Astruc, you will understand why I insist that you especially follow the appropriate chain of command set forth for the smooth running of this Opéra, yes? Vaucorbeil might well know he hired an unknown builder of some small skill. But does he know...what would he think, I mean, if he discovered he’d hired an oddity from the circus?”

And he strode away, the newspapers under his arm rustling faintly. While Erik put his hat back on his head, and loosened the damnable collar from around his neck.

As he stuffed his tie in his pockets and valiantly attempted not to be sick on the carpets, he tried to think rationally. He tried to be sensible. Better that Moncharmin know he was a freak than a sodomite. Two halves of one coin, perhaps. A double-edged sword. But the anger rose in his throat like gall. He’d not chosen to love men. That was quite out of his control. He’d not chosen to be born as he was, no, but he had made the decision to profit off it. That he had been able to control. And that, by itself, mightn’t have done him much harm, but to try and make a name for himself? A name other than ‘The Living Corpse’? A name other than ‘Isaac Astruc’?

Erik paused just inside the door of the properties room, unfurling the newspaper - less a newspaper, more a glorified pamphlet - and on the cover was an image of a man’s head, replete with red, hooked nose and scraggly beard. The head was cartoonish enough, but it was on a bent, monkeyish body with long hairy fingers, the digits of which were pressed on various labeled spots on a map.
‘Government’ ‘Banks’ ‘Arts.’

With a disgusted snarl, he tore the paper to shreds, impulsively tossing them into a metal can for refuse. A set of matches, used to catch the gas for the footlights was nearby.

Erik did see Simon Buquet a few minutes later. He tapped him on the shoulder and informed him that someone might have been careless with a match, near properties - he could swear something was burning.

The only thing that kept him from walking directly out of that building as Buquet ran off to douse the fire, was the fact that he’d promised Christine he’d remain for her audition. Even that promise he was on the verge of forsaking - say she failed, back to the anonymity of the chorus for her, and neither of them worse off than they were before.

And if she succeeded? Earned a named role? It would put her in closer contact with slugs like Moncharmin who had the right sort of name, the right sort of background, who could carry around newspapers that made gargoyles of men so that idiots like him had something to feel superior to. And who was to say she wouldn’t revel in such company? If it advanced her career?

No. Erik shook his head. Christine…that was unworthy of her. She was a good girl. Good to him, good to those he loved most. He couldn’t break his word to her. He couldn’t scorn her when she’d done nothing to deserve it.

Erik sat down in the second tier of seating.

“Working today, Erik?” Monsieur Jones of the chorus asked, offering him a tipple from a flask of brandy he kept in his jacket pocket.

Ordinarily Erik didn’t drink at work, but today he thought he might make an exception.

“Not as such,” he said, taking a swig before handing the flask back. “I’ve come to be entertained.”

Jones grinned at him, “Well you’re in for it - eh! I meant to ask, what’s got you so chummy with the Comte’s brother?”

“Chummy’s an overstatement,” Erik said, crossing his legs and folding his arms as the first to audition took the stage. “He’s interested in the mechanics of stagecraft. You know how the creme of society is. Bring them in for a tour, and then gasp at their wisdom and insight about matters they know nothing about, but are certain they’ve a special knack for.”

He felt slightly badly, coming down on the Vicomte like this, but Moncharmin had not put him in a charitable mood toward his betters.

Jones chuckled, “I’ll say - aha! Speak of the devil…”

The Comte de Changy arrived, sitting down behind Monsieurs Vaucorbeil, Reyer, and Poligny, taking his place with Richard and Moncharmin. Erik watched the gentlemen closely, the Comte all smiles and affability as he interrupted the first girl, apologized and bade her continue from the beginning of the aria.

She might have got through it decently without the interruption, but the sudden appearance of the Comte got her flustered. She forgot her words and botched her phrasing. As she was politely nodded offstage, Jones chuckled and offered Erik another drink.

“What larks, eh?”
The next young women fared rather better, but none gave an inspired performance. Any one of them would do, really. Several were rather too old to pass for a teenage boy, several too obviously feminine in aspect. Then Christine took the stage.

“Ah, Mademoiselle Daaé!” the Comte exclaimed, half rising from his seat to tip his hat to her. Erik could not see from such a distance, but he fancied Christine blushed mightily.

“Monsieur le Comte,” she curtsied. “What a...an honor.”

“You’re in for a treat, gentleman,” the Comte said warmly as he settled down in his seat. “I’ve heard this young lady sing before - what a treasure you have in her! What a treasure.”

Vaucorbeil appeared unmoved, Poligny signaled the pianist to begin and Reyer’s shoulders hitched as he heaved a great sigh - but behind them, Moncharmin and Richard were whispering furiously. They did not even pay attention to Christine as she sang.

Just before she started in on her song, Erik saw her tilt her chin up, her head turning slightly, looking for him. He raised his right arm and waved at her - though he could not see her blush from so far away, he thought he saw he shoulders drop. Perhaps she even smiled. Then she started to sing.

Her tone was crystal clear, as always, her pronunciation exact, if not inspired. She sang the song rather more seriously than she had the night before when she’d been cross with him, more as Marcelline had in rehearsals (Marcelline wanted more dramatic roles and had been playing her comic characters with more seriousness than Erik privately thought they were due). Erik thought he voice was absolutely lovely, but in truth, it was not an exceptional audition and the management thanked her just as they had the other girls. Only one of the gentlemen had a different reaction.

The Comte applauded.

“Exquisite,” he said. “Such talent.”

The tone was so oily, it could have greased the gears of the rigging for years to come. As Christine left the stage, Erik rolled his eyes at so much effusive praise - and, in doing so, caught sight of the chandelier.

He wasn’t mistaken. One of the counterweights was off. The imbalance was even more pronounced than it had been the night before.

Chapter End Notes

The illustration in the pamphlet Moncharmin gave Erik is based on similar political cartoons from newspapers like La Libre Parole which was published in the late 19th century. These were French nationalist newspapers with an incredibly antisemitic bent - that particular newspaper was founded by a guy named Edouard Drumont who literally founded an organization named ‘The Antisemitic League of France’ in the 1880s. He ran for the French legislature in 1898. And won.
This is going to be short and not entirely sweet - we're at a turning point in the story and things are going to be a little rough for our favorite band of misfit toys for the next few chapters.

The role of Cherubino will be sung by Mlle. Christine Daaé.

That was the notice posted on the rehearsal room door. That was the word buzzing about the Opera. The most-repeated phrase of the day was:

“Christine Daaé won the role!”

The next most-repeated phrase, spoken directly after the first was:

“Who?”

Which led to a myriad of explanations and descriptions -

“That little Swedish girl. You know, the blonde one? She’s got a face like a soufflé.”

“She’s the lover of the Vicomte de Changy, what a picture they make, eh? Caravaggio would have liked to draw them.”

“She’s always hanging around Erik - you know, the ugly designer? He took her to the Gala!”

“Strange taste in men.”

“Ha! No doubt.”

“I wonder if her lover put in a good word for her?”

“Ha. No doubt.”

Christine herself was difficult to track down on the morning the announcement was made. She’d arrived early, nerves leaving her unable to sleep and was personally congratulated by M. Poligny, but she avoided the crowds and instead haunted the back stalls and carpentry workrooms. There was only one person with whom Christine wanted to discuss this most excellent piece of news.

Unfortunately, he was taking a good long while coming to work. Christine couldn’t understand - Erik had been the one to encourage her to audition - he’d helped her, after all! Shouldn’t he be just as anxious as she was?

She longed for him to come, sweep her up in one of his ecstatic embraces, kiss her cheeks, twirl her around, declare her brilliant or somesuch ridiculous thing. To be happy for her, in short. Happy for her with an enthusiasm that she had come to expect only from her father. With an enthusiasm gone these last five years.
Papa said she was destined to bring people such happiness with her voice. When she was a child, she brought him happiness and that was enough. But now, she was gone and the only glimmer of something like her former joy when she sang was inspired by Erik. Erik, who teased her and joked with her. Erik who became her friend at a time when she thought she might have forgotten how to have a friend. Erik - who was nowhere to be found.

She nearly gave him up when the door of the workroom creaked open, slowly. It took only a glance for her to recognize his comically tall, lean figure. And, throwing all propriety to the wind, she ran to him and jumped into his arms, even as he had jumped off the stage days ago.

Erik caught her, he was blessed with quick reflexes. Briefly she was lifted off her feet and given a squeeze - then he set her gently back down again. The lack of effusion caught her off-guard.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, immediately self-conscious. “Aren’t you pleased?”

“Immensely,” he said with a thin, ghost of a smile that didn’t meet his strange eyes. In fact, everything about Erik was...a little off today. A little bowed down. A little defeated. She hoped he wasn’t ill again. “I only...I’m afraid I’ve got to break my vow to you, cherie.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Christine asked, brow furrowing. “What vow?”

“I don’t think…” Erik cleared his throat. “I don’t think I’ll be able to watch your premiere performance. I’ll be...out of town. Only for a little while, you understand. But out of town nevertheless.”

Christine’s heart sank and childish tears sprang to her eyes as she remembered Erik’s words, months ago, that were she ever to be cast in a named part, he’d watch the entirety of the performance.

*But you promised!* she thought, restraining herself from stamping her foot, but only just. *You promised you’d stay.*

“Oh,” she said instead, lowering her eyes to the floor, folding her hands to keep them from trembling. “I hope - I hope everything is...that everyone is...you’re visiting your family, are you not?”

A spark of jealousy lit in her heart, sinfully. It wasn’t fair, she thought. That Erik should have a large, welcoming family to visit whenever he chose. While she had only her father’s grave on a windswept hill to make a lonely trek to see. A trek she’d sorely neglected, caught up as she was with work and the fun of being with her new friends and acquaintances.

A sick feeling made her stomach turn over. All her elation was gone. Was she really a very wicked girl? Did she deserve this part after all.

Cold hands curled under her chin and tilted her face up. Christine’s lower lip trembled and a few tears slipped from behind her eyelashes, quite without her permission.

“Come now,” Erik said softly, bending so he could wrap his arms around her properly. She laid her head against his bony chest and wrapped her arms around his thin waist. “Don’t cry. It’s not so bad as that! I’ll...I’ll come back. Before the production ends. I just need some time away, that’s all. Hush. Hush.”

“Of course,” she replied, trying to sound very understanding and mature with her face buried in Erik’s shirt, her tears blotted on his waistcoat. “You...you’ve every right.’

“Not really,” he said lightly, loosing his hold on her so he could fumble in his pockets for a handkerchief. “I’m being very selfish. I’m a very selfish man, Christine.”
Christine drew back and accepted the proffered handkerchief, wiping her eyes and blowing her nose. She folded the thin cotton square up very small indeed and tucked it into her purse, meaning to wash it and give it back to him.

“Not at all,” she said, looking up at him with red-rimmed eyes and an even redder nose. “I think...I’m really very happy you’re so close with your family. I just wish...I wish…”

And then the tears came again. Back into Erik’s arms she went, the handkerchief useless against the sobs that wracked her. Just why she was crying so hard, she couldn’t say. Women, in the popular press, were said to be very easily overcome. Victims of hysterical emotions. But was it hysterical, really, to miss her father? To long for the support of a friend? To wish that, perhaps just once in her life, when one thing changed for the better, the rest of it didn’t change for the worse?

Erik had shuffled them into a dark corner, lowered her onto a crate so that she could sit. She refused to let go of him and he wound up sitting as well, Christine practically in his lap. Distantly, she was aware that this would have been a very compromising position, had anyone come upon them, but she was confident Erik knew the building well enough to pick a spot where they would be undisturbed.

One of his large hands was running up and down her back on soothing circles and he hummed a little tune to calm her. Like she was a little girl, tired, and fretful who wanted a nap. Embarrassingly it worked, for her sobs tapered off and she sighed, removing her own, unsoiled handkerchief from her sleeve to mop up her sodden face.

Erik bent and gave her a fatherly kiss on the forehead. That almost set her off again, but she controlled her tears through force of will and practicality - she was out of handkerchiefs.

“I should...I should go, I have to rehearse,” Christine said, wiping away the last of her tears on her sleeves. She rose and half-turned away from him. “Do I look very awful?”

“You look overwrought,” Erik said tactfully. Deftly, he repinned her hair where it had got bedraggled. “Just splash a bit of cold water on your face and if anyone asks, only say that you were overcome by the honor. It’ll do your modesty credit.”

He smiled then, a real smile, which Christine returned tremulously.

“I’ll do that,” she said. “Are you going soon?”

Erik nodded, “Tonight, I fancy.”

“Well…” Christine faltered, not sure if she ought to wish him the season’s greetings or not. “Have a...good journey.”

“Thank you,” Erik replied. “Write me. You’ll have a splendid premiere, I don’t doubt it.”

She left him, then, shrouded in darkness. On the threshold of the door, Christine did turn back, though what she was going to say, she hardly knew. Perhaps she was going to thank him, even as he broke her heart a little. But when she turned her head, she found that Erik was no longer there.

The scene with Christine played over nearly as much as the subsequent scene with Dalir as Erik took the train north. He was leaving just as Dalir was coming in; there was a note on the table explaining where he’d taken himself off to that proved unnecessary.
“You never said you’d planned a trip,” Dalir said, eyeing the valise reproachfully. Erik felt a pang of irrational irritation at being given such a doleful look - he could hardly take Dalir with him, could he?

“I just need to get out of town for a few days...for a while,” Erik clarified, since ‘a few days’ hardly seemed adequate to clear his head of the dirt and filth of Paris. “Why? Does my going away interfere with your Christmas plans?”

“There’s no need to take a tone with me,” Dalir said, finally shutting the door to keep out the cold. “Holiday or...well. A day off’s a day off. Isn’t it?”

A whole day of no work. And Dalir wanted to spend it together. Well, why not? So did Erik. But Erik did not want to be in Paris anymore. Couldn’t stomach it. And leaving Paris, of necessity, meant leaving Dalir.

Oh, yes, for some mad collection of seconds, he thought about telling the world to go to hell and inviting Dalir to come with him. He thought he could explain his presence away, a Mohammedan who was likewise short on winter holidays, but whom Erik felt ought not be left alone over a time of such festive joy for others. Maman would be more than happy to cook for a guest, but…such a guest. They’d know. They’d guess, somehow.

It couldn’t be done.

“I won’t stay away long,” Erik vowed, though he’d a bad record of breaking promises that day. He came near, perhaps to give Dalir a little parting kiss, as lovers did, but Dalir side-stepped him and came more fully into the room, divesting himself of scarf and gloves.

“Alright,” he said. “I’ll see you when you come back, then.”

It wasn’t a fight. No voices had been raised, nor fists. But Erik felt tremendously guilty anyway. And even as the city faded into mist behind the billowing steam of the train, he wanted to order the conductor to put on the brakes so he could jump off and make amends.

But he did not. Just closed his eyes, leaned his head against the window, and wished for a bit of peace.

It was certainly peaceful on the long walk back - Erik had taken the evening train, heedless of the cost and had to walk the five miles in complete darkness. If he’d been so fortunate as to have been blessed at birth with a nose, he would have suffered frostbite. As it was, the mask provided an adequate shield from the wind and a scarf wrapped inelegantly around his ears supplied the rest.

It was eerily quiet, save for the hum of the wind. If he was given to flights of fancy (and he was), he could have sworn he heard the gentle lapping of the far-off sea. A plunge into icy, salty depths would do him good, he thought. Scrub the scummy bits of Paris off him. No regrets either, for he didn’t even have the memory of a lingering kiss to warm his chapped and peeling lips.

He’d been out of sorts since that conversation with Moncharmin. Ridiculous, really, to be so troubled. It wasn’t as though he hadn’t been subjected to worse over the years. Just a little twist of the knife, was all. A sharp, if not subtle reminder to keep in his place. To remember just what he was. To know that his position was precarious. That he was replaceable. That there was nothing special about him - save his freakishness, of course.

_A face only a mother could love_, he thought with a twisted smile as he knocked on the front door of the house.

The expression in his mother’s eyes wasn’t particularly loving. She was wrapped in a dressing gown,
her hair tumbling round her shoulders and a brush dangling from one hand. “Isaac!”

“Good evening, Maman,” he said, half-stopping to kiss her cheek before he remembered that he was still wearing the mask. It felt frozen on to his face and he removed it, the cords tangling briefly in his scarf. “You look beautiful.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked, much as Christine had asked. Poor Christine. Poor Dalir. Abandoned to that awful city with its awful people and awful newspapers. For they hadn’t anywhere to go, had they? They ought to both have come along, they could have made a merry party. And the Vicomte too, why not? Throw in Sophie and Carlotta, René, Edouard. They could have had their own compartment on the train. Raoul might have paid for it, easily.

“I missed you,” he said, honestly, which only seemed to fill her with alarm. Maman seized his arm and pulled him into the sitting room.

“Have you been drinking?” she asked, drawing up on her toes, trying to smell it on him.

“Not tonight,” he replied. “Why? Do you think I ought to?”

“Oh, Isaac,” she sighed heavily. “Sit. Just...sit, why don’t you?”

Her grip transferred from his arm to his hands, which she grasped and pulled close to her eyes - hard to see in the dark, but she noted his red skin, cracked and peeling around the fingernails. Ghastly sight.

Docile as a lamb, he sat on the ancient sofa, elbows on his knees, hands dangling. Maman left her brush on a side table - crammed in between the little shepherdess he bought for her. Ah! No presents; the children would be disappointed. She then swept her gown out of the way and knelt down, trying to coax some life back into the fire in the grate.

“You didn’t write,” she said, not reproachfully though. “You didn’t tell me you were coming, your room has been shut up, it won’t be comfortable for you -”

“This wasn’t a well-planned holiday,” he said, bringing a hand up to rub his eyes. “I’ll sleep in here. I don’t care. Or perhaps I won’t sleep. Perhaps I’ll take the next train back to Paris and you’ll imagine you dreamed this whole thing.”

“Don’t talk nonsense,” she said, looking up at him sharply from where she was crouched by the fire. “Just...sit and keep quiet. I’ll warm you up some stew from the larder. Don’t you dare go anywhere - come pounding on the door in the middle of the night, don’t think you don’t owe me an explanation.”

The latter she said to herself. The warmth of the fire made the air seem heavy and his eyelids drooped against the strain of keeping them open. The little shepherdess blurred. Sharpened. Blurred again. And disappeared.

When Myriam returned to the sitting room, it was to the not entirely unexpected sight of Isaac, asleep - or rather, Isaac unconscious. For sleep was meant to be peaceful and the lines on his brow bespoke worry, even as his body rested.

Run through the mill, he looked, she reflected as she went to his room to fetch a quilt from the cedar chest. Anna-Lise often slept there when he was in Paris, but the weather had been so bitter recently that she’d bedded down with Marthe. The little bedroom was cold and empty, but she clutched the quilt close in her arms, trying to impart some warmth.
Myriam stared at her son, trying to think of the best way to cover him up - he was much too long to lie comfortably on the couch, but being half-slumped over as he was, he was unlikely to sleep very well, or feel very well when he woke.

She studied his face a long while, not happy with the dark shadows under his already sunken eyes, nor with how very drawn his cheeks looked. True, Isaac had never been blessed with cherubic roundness as a child, nor had he blossomed into sturdy youthful health. But she knew that face. Knew when he looked well and he did not look well. She oughtn’t have sent Anna-Lise to Paris, she concluded grimly. She ought to have gone herself and stayed a good long while for while Isaac might have recovered from his bout of flu, he’d clearly not been taking care of himself since.

With a gusty sigh that did not wake him, she gently arranged the quilt, draping it over his shoulders. If could not be comfortable, he could be warm. It was the least she could do.

And, she reflected as she trudged back upstairs to bed, she wanted him well rested in the morning. She herself planned to be up bright and early, ready to hold him to his word to tell her exactly what made him flee from Paris, like a thief in the night.
Oh Holy Night

Chapter Notes

Okay, this one has a lot of not great stuff in it. **Warning** for: pregnancy scare and antisemitism.

The rehearsal schedule was maddening - Christine suspected that the only reason they were given *any* time at all to themselves was to ensure that the performers did not utterly ruin their voices, such that they took to the stage only capable of miming their roles.

M. Reyer’s hopes of mounting a performance before the holiday looked more and more like it would take a Christmas miracle to accomplish - after the New Year seemed feasible, now that the costume department was once again rushing to fit and change Cherubino’s costumes, in addition to those worn by the Countess. And doing so with no money, for the cost of the production looked as though it was destined not to made up in ticket sales. Once an unknown was announced for Cherubino, even more patrons sought refunds for their purchases.

In any case, it was turning out to be a rather depressed production - Christine was fairly certain a comic opera ought to have more levity, but thus far, nothing had been joyful about the rehearsal process.

Carlotta was going to be opening Aida in a few short weeks. Christine hoped there was not a total overlap in the performance schedules, for she would dearly love to hear her sing ‘O Patria Mio.’ Perhaps...perhaps she might ask Raoul if they could go. It would be such a treat to go as audience member to an opera. And...well. On Raoul’s arm she might pretend they were really courting.

Their rehearsal schedule had removed any chance of a get-together before Christmas Eve, but now the day was upon them! The Opéra would take a brief recess for the Christmas holiday, resuming after the Masquerade to ring in the New Year. Christine was fairly decided that she would not be attending - she could not accompany Raoul and Erik had given no indication that he was either interested in going to the masked ball, or that he would be in Paris during the event.

Perhaps she ought to ask Dalir, she mused to herself as she made for an empty dressing room, just to get a glimpse of her reflection before Mass. He had no holiday to celebrate and no one to celebrate with. It would be unusual for a young lady to ask a young man to be her escort, but she thought she might as well - otherwise it was an evening of sitting by herself in the sitting room darning socks, and who wanted to occupy themselves in such a way when there was fun to be had?

Christine was so preoccupied with her thoughts that she did not realize the dressing room was already in use - though not for looking at oneself in the mirror. She walked fully inside before she realized that someone - no, not just someone, La Sorelli! - was crumbled at the foot of the full-length mirror, weeping.

With a horrified pang, Christine recalled, of all the stupid things to remember, that she’d never returned her Rosary beads. They were still sitting atop her vanity at her flat. She’d carried them about for a few weeks, always intending to give them back, but she so rarely saw the senior ballerinas about during rehearsals and she was loathe to go to the dancers’ lounge. Something about all of the gentlemen puffing cigars, *waiting* on the girls, it turned her stomach. She’d never asked
Raoul if he’d gone before, she feared she would not like his answer.

Sorelli’s head snapped up at her approach, “Oh, God, thank God, it’s only you,” and she instantly brought her hands up before her face, as if covering her face up would somehow dry her tears instantly.

“Oh!” Christine exclaimed, shutting the door behind her quickly. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t think anyone was - what’s wrong? Are you ill?”

By rights, Sorelli ought to have snapped at her to leave - accidentally or not, Christine was intruding on a private scene and they were not friends. But instead she only shook her head, wiping uselessly at her eyes with a handkerchief that was already sodden with tears.

Christine was by her side instantly, offering her another handkerchief - Erik’s handkerchief, it was making the rounds - which Sorelli accepted. Her eyes were swollen, her face red and blotchy with tears and Christine thought, suddenly that Sorelli was very, very young. She’d always dressed so well, had an arch and sophisticated way of holding herself that Christine assumed she was her senior. Now, looking at her closely, her eyelashes wet, her lip trembling, she thought Sorelli might be even younger than she.

“It’s nothing,” she gasped, sniffing loudly, scrubbing at her face, her eyes, pressing tendrils of hair back into her brow. “I thought...no, it’s not so. I was only terribly afraid and I’m so...I’m just relieved. That’s all.”

“Oh,” Christine said, slightly taken aback because although Sorelli said she was relieved, those tears she was shedding did not seem like relieved tears. Christine fancied she’d cried enough in her life to know the difference. Wanting to do something, she hesitantly raised a hand and placed it against Sorelli’s back. When the ballerina did not immediately shake her off, she started to rub slow, soothing circles, as Erik had done. She hoped she was doing an adequate job, she’d no little sisters to practice cheering up, as he had. “What...do you want to tell me what happened? Or almost happened? Is someone in your family ill?”

She swallowed hard, not meeting Christine’s eyes and shook her head. She put her hand on the carpet, as if bracing herself and hung her head low.

“I thought I might...” Sorelli took a deep breath and looked at the carpet beneath her crushed handkerchief. “I thought I was going to have a baby. I’m not, but I thought I was.”

“Oh!” Christine breathed with quiet alarm, but she understood immediately. Though she was very young, she’d known her share of young women for whom the news of an expected child was not a cause for delight. Ladies who already had many little ones and did not want another. Young girls caught up with flighty gentlemen who would not be fathers. “Oh dear.”

“For two weeks now, I’ve worried, but today...we were rehearsing and I knew I wasn’t. The ballet master sent me home. But I couldn’t go back to my flat, one of the girls I live with, she said she would give me something, something to - but I couldn’t take it, I’ve heard terrible stories about girls who take medicine to get rid of a baby and... it’s so stupid, to be crying - you must think me very wicked,” Sorelli said, shuddering.

“No!” Christine shook her head and stopped rubbing her back that she might placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Not at all!”

“Well then,” Sorelli bit her lip, tears springing again to her eyes. “I don’t have...my courses have never been regular. I thought there wasn’t a chance that I could. I thought - I assumed I was
barren and to be frank...I was very happy with that. I don’t want a baby. I don’t want one ever, I don’t think."

It was a very intimate conversation, but Christine drew close by Sorelli’s side, suspecting now that there might not be anyone else for her to talk to. It was true, they were not...close. But Christine would listen regardless, even if she was ill-equip to offer advice.

Curiosity reared its head. *Would it have been the Comte’s?* she wanted to ask, so badly the question felt like a hot iron on her tongue, but she didn’t say anything about it.

“I don’t think that’s wicked,” Christine said quietly. “Not to want a baby - I certainly wouldn’t like to have one. Not...no, I can’t even imagine!”

A young girl, all alone in Paris - rooming with other working girls, even the prima ballerina of the Paris Opéra did not make enough to support a baby. She couldn’t dance, certainly, if she were with child and if she took a leave of absence because of *that*, Christine was sure the new managers would see that there was no vacant place for her, after her confinement. Where would she go? To a convent, Christine supposed. But there was no place for a baby in a convent. The poor thing would wind up in an orphanage, the mother in the poorhouse.

“Ladies are supposed to want babies,” Sorelli grimaced. “That’s what they say. The Holy Virgin...when Gabriel came to her and told her she was with child, she rejoiced, didn’t she?”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Christine thought back to her Bible. “He only said that she was to conceive and bear a son - and she agreed. I like to think...I like to think that if she’s said, ‘Oh, no, thank you, I’m far too young,’ that Gabriel might have taken her refusal to the Lord and He would have understood and...waited, perhaps. Or...found another girl.”

“Well, the Virgin was without sin - I can’t say the same.” Sorelli looked at her with red eyes, “Have you been with a man? Like that?”

Almost too quickly, Christine shook her head. “No, never.”

“The Comte isn’t my first,” Sorelli swallowed hard, unknowingly answering Christine’s silent question. “There...were others. He’s the kindest, though. He buys me lovely things. And takes me to dinner, he...kisses my hand. And tells me I’m very beautiful. And sweet. The others...were not like that. I can scarce recall...even with the Comte sometimes...sometimes I’m not there. Not thinking of him or of anything. God, you must think me mad - ”

“I don’t,” Christine reassured her. “Truly, I don’t. If you...do you...*love* him?”

Tears trickled from Sorelli’s eyes and Christine gave over her own clean handkerchief to dry them. “I don’t know. I don’t *think* so. He’s kind to me. I...appreciate that. But I don’t love him. I don’t...I don’t really love anybody. Love...it isn’t constant, you know. And often, it isn’t enough. My mother...there are fourteen of us children, you see. She loves us. She just couldn’t keep us.

“I...used to go to church,” Sorelli continued, twisting Christine’s handkerchief round her fingers. “And pray. And I used to feel something, like...I was home. I had God as a Father and the Madonna as mother and that was alright. But...not anymore. I haven’t been to church since you saw me. Remember?”

“I remember,” Christine said softly. Then quietly ventured, “I have your Rosary beads. You left them.”
“I meant to,” Sorelli replied, with a sigh. “I thought, I oughtn’t pray to the Virgin when I was...so very bad. And I couldn’t confess if I was just going to...go off and do as I’ve always done. I thought God would be angry. But I haven’t...this is how I’ve had to live, you see? And I’m far too much of a coward to starve my way into Heaven."

Christine was no priest, but her heart ached for Sorelli and she silently prayed God would forgive her every time she’d lamented her lot - not having a real home as a child. Not having any family left now. For although Papa could not provide a stable life, or an elegant life, he’d never abandoned her. Not that he could help, anyway, and when he’d passed, she’d had the Professor and Mamma Valerius. And they were so good to her.

Had she thought she was lonely? What did she know of loneliness? For while she might have been solitary, she’d never been abandoned. No, she thought if anyone was wicked in that room, it was not Sorelli.

“I don’t think God is angry with you,” Christine said, gently taking Sorelli’s free hand in her own. A distant clock chimed the hour. “I understand if you’d...rather not go to confession. But I’m on my way to church...would you like to come with me? I’ve always thought Christmas Eve mass was the best of the year.”

“I can’t take communion,” Sorelli replied. Christine was quick to assure her that she couldn’t either - too many little sins on her conscience and she wouldn’t have time for the priest to hear her confession before mass.

“We’ll sit in the middle of the row,” Christine promised her. “That way no one will have to walk around us on the way to the rail. Please come? I’d be so happy if you’d join me.”

Sorelli - who asked that Christine please call her Gigi, as others did - agreed, quietly, but gratefully. They went to Christine’s flat, for a small supper to fortify themselves before mass, Mamma joined them, but mercifully did not ask too many questions of Christine’s new friend from the Opéra - she only mentioned that it was so lovely for Christine to have so many acquaintances of her own age. And such good-seeming girls too. The Rosary beads remained in their place on the vanity.

If Raoul was surprised to see Sorelli - looking far less poised and aloof than she ordinarily appeared, he was good enough not to say anything when he came in his coach to fetch them. Gallantly, he stepped extended a hand to aid her on her way in, greeting her with a polite, “Good-evening, mademoiselle - or good-night, rather.”

“I think you know each other,” Christine said, unsure how to proceed, but Raoul said he was very happy to see Mademoiselle Sorelli, whose company he had not enjoyed for some time. Gigi’s olive skin turned scarlet and she did not say anything.

Gigi turned her head to look out the windows and Raoul caught Christine’s eye, his face asking the obvious question, though he didn’t speak. Christine only shook her head slightly and stared out the window in her turn.

The mass was beautiful. The church was lit by candles and the choir was in excellent voice. They even sang ‘Minuit, chrétiens,’ one of her particular favorites. Christine strongly suspected the organist had been influenced by Père Le Thiez, she had no doubt the pastor would consider the song irreligious.

All the while, Christine glanced up at Gigi in concern. She couldn’t tell if being in the church was a comfort or not. She whispered her prayers and closed her eyes as the choir sang, but in pain, or reverence, or...oh, Christine could not tell, but she hoped, she prayed the Sorelli felt slightly better.
That she did not still think herself so very bad for praying she was not carrying a child she could not
care for. A child she might have to give up, even as her own mother had given her up.

_She’s all alone_, Christine thought, remembering now that they were in the same church they’d
spoken in what Sorelli told her about Erik. How he put her off because he didn’t look at her as she
thought men were meant to look at women. Because he didn’t want anything from her, other than
friendship. Perhaps Sorelli did not want any male friends, but Christine rather thought she needed a
friend.

After the mass, Raoul insisted upon seeing Sorelli to her door - he even got out of the carriage and
walked her the rest of the way, it being so late at night and her lodgings not being in a respectable
part of town. Once he was back in the carriage, he looked at Christine with quiet expectation.

“She thought she was going to have a baby,” she said baldly, though she blushed to repeat the words
aloud to a gentleman. One of Raoul’s fists clenched and the other hand went to his throat. But he
was neither surprised nor scandalized, for he asked her at once, “Philippe’s?”

Christine nodded, biting her lip and looking away. “She’s not. She’s sure she isn’t. But she was very
upset. And I didn’t like to leave her.”

“No,” Raoul said faintly, massaging his temples and closing his eyes. “My God, of course not. The
poor...the poor girl.”

He was so long quiet that Christine began to become anxious that he was angry, but when he looked
at her it was with the same dear fondness as ever he had. “Come,” he asked, shifting slightly in his
seat. “Will you sit by me?”

Christine moved across the carriage to sit next to Raoul and he took up his hand in hers, warming her
palm even through his gloves. Gently, she rested her head against his shoulder and felt him sigh
beneath her. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you,” he said simply, squeezing her hand tightly. “But...Cherubino is quite something,
isn’t it? I’m sure you’ll be splendid.”

“I don’t know about splendid,” Christine admitted. “But...passable, I hope. I hope I do myself credit,
anyway. Will you come and see me?”

“Oh, yes,” Raoul said immediately. “Every night. You’ll be tired of me. Tired of seeing me.”

Christine raised her head and squinted at him in the dim light of passing streetlamps. There was a
strained look about Raoul’s face that made him look suddenly aged. Had the information she shared
about Sorelli affected him that much?

She opened her mouth, about to apologize - whether for implicating his brother in something so
indelicate or what, she wasn’t sure, but Raoul spoke up.

“I hope you don’t think me forward,” he said, reaching into his coat pocket, “but I’ve got you a little
something.”

Horrified shame washed over Christine in a flood - she’d not even _thought_ to purchase Raoul a
present. She and Mamma Valerius had not exchanged Christmas gifts in years, her place at the
conservatory was all the present she needed or wanted. She was out of the habit.

“I know, I know,” Raoul said, mistaking her silence for modesty that had been imposed upon.
“But...I wanted you to have something from me. To...to think of me, sometimes. When you see it. It
isn’t - just a trifle, really. But I saw it and thought it would suit you.”

He removed a little cardboard box from his jacket, simply tied with a green ribbon. The box was plain, unmarked, and Christine was grateful that there was no stamp from some grand jeweler on it.

“Thank you,” she said belatedly, then blushed. “I’m just so sorry I haven’t anything for you.”

Raoul shook his head, almost sadly. “I don’t want anything. I just...I very much would like it, if you would accept this from me. I wanted you to have something from me.”

It was a thin silver band, set with a blue stone in the center, surrounded by delicate filigree. Very lovely, but not ostentatious.

“Oh,” Christine breathed, lifting the bracelet out of the little square of cotton it rested upon.

“It’s...beautiful. Thank you so much!”

Raoul smiled and asked, “May I?”

Christine handed the box back to him and allowed him to close it around her wrist. She smiled at him, but it faded at once - Raoul was looking at her so oddly and so intently that she was taken aback. He looked...fearful and terribly sad.


“May I kiss you?” he asked, uncharacteristically forward. “Please?”

“Of course,” she said, worry lighting in her heart, but she drew near, just a breath away. He took that breath, closing his mouth over hers, so sweetly. A gentle, warm pressure of his lips meeting hers. His eyes were closed and, as Christine shut her eyes in turn, she thought some of his strain ebbed away. One of his hands came round her waist and they were close together, closer than they’d been in the stairwell. She fancied she could feel his heart thudding through his shirt, his jacket, his greatcoat.

When they came apart, as they had to when the carriage stopped in front of Christine’s flat, Raoul took off one of his gloves. With his uncovered hand, he held her face still, stroking his thumb softly against her cheek. “Joyeux Noël, Christine.”

“Joyeux Noël, Raoul,” she echoed. His hand fell away from her cheek and he rose to hand her down from the carriage. Raoul walked her to the door and, gentleman as he was, seemed about to part with only a kiss on the hand.

There were a thousand questions, once again scalding Christine’s tongue, but she quenched them. It had been such a tiring night and she was sure she could ask them all later. They had time.

Instead she got up on her toes and pressed her lips to Raoul’s.

“Good night,” she said, settling back down. “Come to the Opéra, soon. Even if we don’t have time to take dinner together. I don’t...I don’t like going so long without seeing you. You’re rather like the sun, you know. The world seems awfully gloomy without you.”

Even as she spoke this spontaneous platitude, she thought she sounded rather like a greeting card and not a clever one. But Raoul seemed affected, not happily so.

“Oh,” he sighed heavily. “I don’t know if you’d like me for a sun, Christine. I don’t know that I’m...so reliable, as all that. Good-night.”
And with that perplexing utterance, he left her, descending the stairs and watching her from the sidewalk as she let herself in. He stood there for some time. It wasn’t until Christine was in her room, letting down her hair for bed that she heard the sound of a carriage in the street pulling slowly away.

Isaac was thoroughly enjoying his time in the country. The pond had frozen over enough for skating and there was a bit of extra work to be had at the firm that employed his father and David, patching roofs and shoring up drafty windows that he was not entirely idle. Then there was the afternoon when Maman baked enough biscuits and cakes to feed the village, which was entirely her intention.

“My mother always made a little something for the neighbors at Christmastime,” she told him from when he was small and lamenting that she always made treats for other people and never for him (which was an enormous falsehood in itself, but Isaac was only ever given extras from the stove, or the biscuits that were burnt round the edges). “It’s a mitzvah.”

This year, however, the blessings they were visiting on others were coming back to them in a most delightful way! For, when Claude and Emilie, (who had been dispatched to deliver the little packages to the neighbors after their school recessed for the holiday), returned home an hour before sunset, it was with no fewer than three bundles in their basket.

“No one was at the door,” Emilie explained, of the Lesniaks, the M. and Mme. Antoine Deschamps, and the Greniers. “May we eat them? Or should we try again tomorrow?”

There was some debate in the kitchen about that. Tomorrow was the Sabbath and they couldn’t carry any goods out of doors, as Maman reminded the children. But if they left it until Sunday, well, that was Christmas and it seemed rather rude to go banging on the neighbors doors on Christmas day, even if they were coming to deliver treats.

“Your grandmother’s rugelach?” Papa asked, opening one of the packages, curiously. “With walnuts or jam?”

“Both,” Maman replied. “They’ll keep for a few days, but I wish they’d been home to receive them! I can’t imagine where they might have taken themselves, two days before the holiday.”

“I think the Greniers were home;” Claude piped up. “I thought I saw Adelaide look through the curtain, but she shut it quick.”

“That’s odd,” Papa mused quietly, but he was drowned out by the torrent of voices demanding that they keep the biscuits and eat them for the evening’s dessert.

“Very well, very well,” Maman said irritably. “We’ve so much to do and we’re running out of time! I’ve lost all faith in Henri Vincent, there’s no telling if that boy will come round anymore. So bank the fires as best you can, and, Isaac, could you chop some wood, please? I don’t want to run low and I’m sure it’ll snow on Sunday.”

He did as he was told - Maman had been trying to needle him into telling her all of his woes and it was far better, for his own sake, to simply follow her orders than answer her questions. Besides, he reflected grimly as he shouldered his axe and made his way past the dogs to the wood shed, there was nothing he could tell her that wouldn’t either upset her or shock her.

Well, Maman, he thought as he set up a log to split. Where shall I begin?

Thwack!
The company is falling apart - from performers to the roof! And the managers read newspapers that compare Jews to monkeys, but also accuse us of controlling the government and economy! Mad, isn’t it - that we have such power, but don’t ever seem to benefit from it?

Thwack!

Oh, and another thing. I’m in the unenviable position of being declared an oddity before the world. I know, I know, which will they chose? I’ve so many deficiencies! In the first place, I’ve the face of a corpse - though, not so very much like a corpse that a beady-eyed businessman was fooled! In the second, I only like to make love to men! Such depths of human depravity to plumb!

Thwack!

Also, I think my lover is cross with me.

Thwack!

“Careful, now!” came a cheerful voice over the garden wall. “What’d that log ever do to you?”

David. Ha-ha! A comedian, first-rate. Surely Isaac would be nursing a stitch in his side before the night was out. What possessed Lisette to marry that idiot? Hopefully the baby didn’t inherit any of the father’s wits.

“Why aren’t you wearing a scarf?” Lisette scolded him from afar. “It’s far too cold to go about like that, you’ll get another head cold, mark me and it’ll be all your own doing!”

Alright, fine: the baby could have Lisette’s wits and David’s easy nature. That would satisfy him quite nicely.

“I like to live dangerously,” Isaac informed his sister, shouldering the axe. David bounded over the wall to take the firewood in and Lisette presented her cheek to kiss. She looked quite hale and hearty, the baby’s presence now a marked curve protruding through her dress. She was almost pretty, really.

“We’re in luck - the Antoine-Deschamps, the Poles, and the Greniers weren’t in, so we get the lion’s share of their rugelach.”

Hmm,” Lisette made a considering noise and a sour expression that undid whatever prettiness she previously possessed. “I can’t say I regret hearing about the Greniers - that eldest son Charles is a wastrel. I went to school with him, he always chewed with his mouth open and now he only plugs it up with a bottle. His mother prays for him, but it doesn’t seem to be doing any good. Do you know, I hear Henri Vincent’s taken up with him? I’m so disappointed, his poor mother!”

“Henri?” Isaac asked, pulling a similarly disgusted face as his sister’s. “Really? I’d never think of him as a lurker around the taverns.”

“Only recently,” David interjected. “As I hear tell. He works at one of the factories in Rouen, I think he finds the work a trial, only he hasn’t been round as he used to to build up the fires and such on Saturdays for your parents.”

Henri’s mother, Madame Celia Vincent, had come to the neighborhood twenty-odd years ago in widow’s weeds with an infant son in tow. Maman was one of the first to reach out to her, sending Isaac and Papa to assist the woman who hadn’t any family nearby that she could depend upon. To return the favor, she sent Henri over once he was old enough, to help out with those little chores the Astrucs were not permitted to take on during Shabbos. But not lately, it seemed.

“Well, if the kitchen fire goes out tonight,” Isaac shrugged, “I’ll tell Maman I had to let the dogs in
my room, if she wanted to wake up in the morning and find me alive and not frozen to the sheets.”

Lisette’s frown only increased as she looked up at him. “You know, Maman is very worried about you - ”

“All you ladies ever do is worry about me. It can’t be good for your health. Isn’t that what the alienists call an idée fixe?”

“- and frankly, we’re all wondering what brought you here from Paris so suddenly - without even a letter!” she continued as if he hadn’t spoken.

“I came for the holiday,” he said, which was all he’d been saying since he arrived. It was a lie, of course. For while Isaac loved his father’s mother dearly, her Hanukkah pasties were not a favorite holiday dessert of his. “My work on the opera is complete and it’s far too cold to play...elsewhere. No one dines out of doors in December.”

*And the indoor venues where I play are populated either by can-can girls or women in tuxedos. And don’t bear mentioning in such company.*

The conversation stalled when they came inside, the whole house bustling as they prepared for Shabbos, Marthe taking the candlesticks out, Papa shutting up the few cracks in the windows with rags to keep the wind out, Mathilde being ordered from the kitchen where her very presence was said to deflate cakes and burn the meat.

“I don’t want to get your hopes up,” Isaac said as they sat down to the table. “But, as a certain young lady I know will be sixteen, I might have a way for you to embark upon expanding your education.”

Mathilde looked up at him with shrewd eyes. “Even if I masqueraded as a boy, I’d still need money to go to university.”

Isaac chuckled darkly, “You and I both, chere - but listen, I have a...friend who might spare a copy of one of Audubon’s books for you. Nothing definite! But we’re in talks.”

It was difficult to shock Mathilde, but her mouth dropped open and her eyes bulged in her head. “Who?” she demanded at once. “What friend? You don’t talk about having any friends in Paris! Was it that girl you took to the ball? Or the fellow who wrote to us saying you were ill?”

“Neither,” he shook his head. “A Vicomte.”

Mathilde groaned and slumped in her chair. “Oh, Isaac,” she complained. “Don’t joke like that, I thought you were in earnest.”

The sun went down, the covered dishes were set on the table, and Maman began the prayers. Isaac’s mind wandered slightly to the thought of the neighbors, preparing their Christmas dinners. When he was a boy, he thought that his family got the short end of the stick - after all, his friends looked forward to the Christmas holiday tremendously and he didn’t have anything like it to compare the holiday to.

He might have been complaining a little too keenly, for Papa sat him down to have a talk about it.

*What is it that your friends do during Christmas, Isaac?* he asked.

*They sing lovely songs,* he pouted.
And don’t we sing all the time, at home? Papa countered. Isaac was forced to admit he was right. What else?

They have a big meal, he replied.

Papa laughed at that. Ah yes, I can see how that matters tremendously to you, my little broomstick. But doesn’t Maman make the most delicious casserole?

Isaac replied that of course she did! Maman’s casserole was his favorite!

What else do you fancy happens on Christmas?

They played games, he said. And they see all their family.

And, Papa replied patiently. Didn’t the family gather together, every Friday at sundown? Didn’t they spend all the day in one another’s company? Didn’t they sing? Didn’t they play games together? Didn’t they enjoy an excellent meal?

Christmas comes once a year and it’s good that your friends take such pleasure in it, he said, generously. But we have our own special holiday, every week. With prayers and family and food. And that’s rather a wonderful thing, isn’t it?

It was, he thought then, and still did now. Spending so many Fridays, flouting Commandments to earn money, he understood better than he had when he was small just why his friends were so excited for their holiday - when a celebration such as that was rare, it was all the more fervently enjoyed.

Anna-Lise had command of the room as Maman went back into the kitchen to fetch the rugelach. She was telling a story about one of her students who was caught in a fib (only to save himself, he just started compounding lie upon lie, until the whole matter was patently absurd) when the sound of shattering glass brought the story to an abrupt conclusion.

It happened so suddenly and so without warning, that Isaac looked around at the table, sure someone must have dropped a wine glass. It didn’t immediately register that the sound was from behind him. The sitting room window. Or that there were voices outside, shouting unintelligibly, but his keen ears pricked up and caught the end.

“DAMN YOU! GO AWAY FROM HERE! BACK FROM WHERE YOU CAME FROM!”

Isaac did not recall getting up from the table, nor the sensation of shoving his chair away from the table so fast that it toppled over. He didn’t remember upsetting the side table as he ran through the sitting room, knocking his mother’s new shepherdess to the floor. And he didn’t remember wrenching the door back so hard that the handle left an impression in the plaster.

He didn’t even hear Lisette, shrieking at her husband who was hot on his heels, “Stop him! Stop him before he does something stupid!”

The night was bitterly cold, but he didn’t feel it as he vaulted over the garden gate, quick as the wind, or the devil. There were running feet, stumbling, going as fast as they could toward the village. There were no street lights this far out of town, only the glow from the windows of some houses.

“You fucking cowards!” Isaac roared into the night, cold air piercing right to his lungs, stabbing his throat like knives. “Come back here! Come back here if you think you can frighten me!”

One of them slowed and turned - red hair, pale face - Henri fucking Vincent. That little shit! Isaac
himself used to watch him when he was small. Toss him in the air, let him follow him about like a little shadow. And he would break their windows?

Isaac was fast on those long, skinny legs of his and he could catch him. He knew, he could. At least him! He’d beat him until his face was as red as his hair. He’d take his head from his shoulders and stick it on a pike, deliver it to his mother’s door. Had he felt a twinge of sympathy for Madame Vincent, when Lisette spoke of Henri earlier? No, not any longer. For she must have been a piss-poor excuse for a mother to raise such a son as that.

“Isaac!”

Someone was calling to him. Who?

A hand reached out, swiping, nearly grasping the hem of his coat. Had one of the bastards hung back? Waiting for him?

Isaac swung round and struck out, without looking. It had been a few year since he’d been in a proper brawl, but his knuckles connected with...with the handsome cheek of his sister’s husband.

David took advantage of his surprise to tackle him to the ground. The shouting voices and running feet got quieter and quieter. He’d never catch them now.

David might have been shorter than him, but he was much heavier, stocky and solidly built. Wildly, Isaac thought that, if this wasn’t his idiot brother-in-law, he might have been in trouble of a whole different sort. Clearly the shock of the night was making him hysterical.

“Shit,” David swore, working his jaw slightly, wincing. “You’ve got an arm for such a skinny fellow, haven’t you?”

Isaac couldn’t say anything - he was sorry he’d struck the man, but even sorrier that David let them get away

“Look,” David said, breathing hard, knees digging in to Isaac’s sides, meaty hands pressing him into the earth. “If it’s...I don’t hold it against you. I was going to help you - until Lisette told me to put a stop to it. Isaac?”

“Let me up,” Isaac growled, trying to get some leverage to rise, but he was effectively pinned - this wasn’t David’s first brawl either.

“Not ‘til I’ve got your word that you won’t run off again,” he said reasonably, damnably reasonably for a man whose dinner had been interrupted by drunkards armed with stones.

Isaac turned his head away, cold earth pressing against his cheek. “If you were any kind of man, you wouldn’t stop me.”

I’m not a true man, in the eyes of so many, and I know what ought to be done!

“You’re not thinking,” David said, shaking his head - making a little noise of pain when that irritated his already swelling jaw. “Think Isaac. Who’s got the advantage here? Them or us? We’ve got a broken window. If you break one of their noses or worse...come. Think.”

Remember your place. The freak. The sodomite. The Jew.

Go home, they’d shouted. As if that wasn’t their home. As if his parents weren’t the owners, as if it wasn’t theirs for thirty years. Henri Vincent and his mother arrived twenty years ago. But they were
more at home than the Astrucs would ever be. The whole thing made him sick. Was there nowhere that he - that they could go? No peace?

_I thought you changed your name because the men wouldn’t work under a Jew._

His head was swimming. From Isaac to Erik to spare his parents’s shame. From Isaac back to Erik to spare himself shame. And where had it gotten him? A life, shattered, put back together. Shattered again. Like that fucking window.

“Let me up,” Isaac said, resigned now. “I don’t know who I should fight.”

David relaxed and stood, even offered a hand to help him up. “You didn’t get a look at them either, eh?”

Then he smiled. His eyes were full of such understanding, commiseration.

_He doesn’t like this any more than you do, Isaac realized. But he lives in this town. He’s making a life here. He has more to lose than you._

“I’m sorry I struck you,” Isaac said, and meant that. He was sorry for the blow and...sorry for a lot of other things too. David, now that he reflected on it, would make a fine father.

“No harm done,” he said, rubbing his jaw and giving it an experimental flex. “It’ll only be sore. I don’t blame you, for not thinking straight. The only thing that stopped me was your sister’s orders.”

“She knows what she’s about,” Isaac agreed. David nodded and, there being nothing left to say, the two men trudged silently back toward the house. The prohibition against work would likely be bent for the night - the window would have to be patched to keep the wind out. Somehow, Isaac couldn’t imagine any divine powers holding such a thing against them.
Dalir wasn’t so cross as Erik feared - either that or it had been so cold in the flat in his absence that he was merely happy to have another body in his bed, and was willing to let bygones be bygones.

It wasn’t with an easy mind that Erik left the family behind - irrationally, he thought that so long as he was ensconced in his room downstairs, he might stave off worse upsets than a broken window. But his mother told him he was being silly. That he ought to return to work and they’d see him in a few months, or sooner, if he put a bit of extra money by. She seemed to have given up finding out what brought him from Paris in the first place.

As they huddled in bed together, Erik told him about the window, his ignoble attempt to chase the vandals down, how he wound up on his back in the road, his brother-in-law on top of him.

“I’d have been furious with him,” Dalir muttered into Erik’s hair. “For stopping me. Even if he was acting on my sister’s orders. Men like that? Who do such things? There’s only one sort of consequence they understand. Like as not, they were toasting their victory clean through the holiday.”

No doubt, Erik agreed, though Madame Vincent did up the next day, despite its being Christmas day, incensed, with her son in tow and money for the replacement of the window. Henri muttered an apology, unable to meet their eyes. He had only been caught up in the wrong place at the wrong time, he claimed. He’d no notion they were going to do something so awful. Or say such terrible things - he’d certainly not thrown the rock. Or raised his voice. He’d only run away because he panicked.

Maman and Papa accepted the apology, but not the money. They’d tend to it, Papa said firmly. Madame and young Henri should attend to their Christmas dinner. And no, thank you - they didn’t need the fires stoked or the lamps lit.

They were the recipients of many sympathetic words and gestures in the days leading up to Erik’s return to Paris - even, fresh baked goods, strangely. As though they were sitting shiva for the windowpane. Many shaking heads and tutting tongues and remarks of, ‘One hears about such things, but never believes they could happen here!’

An aberration, that was how the neighborhood thought of it. Merely an act of vandalism. Brought on by drink. Terrible, naturally, they all thought it was terrible, but it did not signify anything in particular. A shameful display; adult men throwing rocks like little boys.

The village no longer felt like the cozy little hamlet he could escape to when Paris seemed rotten to the core. The contagion had spread. Or perhaps it was there all along, like a canker in a rose.

And so back to Paris he went, reflecting that his always thin pocket-book was looking downright
emaciated. Back to the boulevards, back to the bal-musettes. Back to one in particular that he’d been avoiding like a coward - damn Simon Buquet for making him afraid. Damn himself for giving into that fear.

Why shouldn’t Gabriella and Celine have his services? He rather owed them, he thought; it was at their place that he’d first worked up the nerve to do something about the handsome Persian man who’d become his shadow.

“How do you remember?” Erik asked, quite out of nowhere, “that night I first brought you home with me?”

Dalir chuckled into his hair. “Don’t say it like that - you didn’t carry me, like a bride over the threshold. But yes. I remember, of course I do.”

“Tonight’s ramblings will be a tad...eccentric,” he warned Dalir when they set out into the frozen night, Dalir looking for a little warmth, Erik looking for a little coin. They’d been acquainted for a season - friends, now, as Erik reckoned friendship, for a month. And sometimes he sensed that there might be more for them. If he was careful and Dalir was bold.

Erik thought he had the measure of him - so much as he could without asking outright. Men without an inverted sense of romance did not eschew the sight of dancing girls to take frozen walks by the Seine with their ugly musician friends. Erik was old enough, and practiced at the art of this strange seduction to know that, to look for little signs that affection - more affection than was usual, even between the best of friends - would be welcome.

So it had been with Alain, years before. Long walks to nowhere in particular. Conversations over beer and wine. A hand lain upon a knee, squeezing slightly. Gazes held. Empty glasses lingered over. Finally - finally - a kiss. First together, then apart. Color high in the cheeks. A tilt of the head, a question in the eyes, a challenge, Will you strike me? Laugh? Pretend it never happened?

The night at La Chatte Mauvaise was a test, of sorts. To see if Dalir wrinkled his nose in distaste, disgust. Or if he laughed at the novelty. Or, if he gazed about with parted lips and wide eyes thinking, I didn’t know it could be like this.

Ah, but Erik was already captivated. Had been for ages, ever since Dalir brought his family’s wares to the cafe and watched him play. He’d been so smitten, so overcome by that handsome face (all except the mustache!), those beautiful eyes, and strong hands that he acted quite an ass. Covered the helpless fluttering of his heart with jaunty tunes and a teasing, arrogance that fortunately had not put him off.

Dalir pursued him and Erik let himself be pursued. He couldn’t imagine what Dalir thought he was doing - perhaps he liked his voice, as others had liked his voice and ignored the deficiencies of his figure such that he imagined that under the mask, Erik had a handsome face. But then the mask was taken off and his physical imperfections could not be denied.

It had to come off, despite the churning in Erik’s guts, the sweat freezing on his neck in the cold. Dalir had given him his scarf. Wrapped it around his scrawny neck and tied it neatly. It smelled of him. If he wasn’t already smitten, such an intimate gesture would have decided it for him. Dalir was, if not a lover, a friend. And he’d never hidden himself from a friend - if Dalir would be his friend in truth, not merely in deed, he had to know.

What a dear he’d been! His smile had been the spark to ignite a flare of hope in Erik’s breast - hope that this might not be the last barrier to come down between them.

And so, to the restaurant. Dalir took La Chatte - as he took most things - cheerfully in his stride. The
company charmed him. The food impressed him. And the music, ah the music. Well, Erik hoped the music besotted him. It was the only beauty he could ever offer.

Erik played for hours that night, thinking he could not be tired so long as he had such an audience. First, the piano, songs to dance to, bawds, and little ditties being sold on streetcorners for a few pennies. Then, the violin.

He did not usually bring his violin when he knew there was a piano - too much risk of getting into a scuffle with desperate toughs in the wee hours, looking for things to pawn. But he brought it that night because while he could speak other’s souls with the piano, but his own? It only spoke through strings.

It was on the keys of the organ that he’d learned his scales and chords, but the violin had been his first instrument, belonging to him, the only little bit of home he’d taken on the road with him. He played by feel, by ear. Despite Christine’s lessons and books, Erik privately believed that the violin could not be learned. It must be felt.

Dalir roundly praised him for a wonderful evening - for the venue, the food, but most of all, for the music.

“Eccentric, you said!” he exclaimed, more expressive than usual from the wine. “I thought you were taking me to some gallery or other. That wasn’t eccentric, that was exquisite! Sublime. I’ve never heard you play like that - and I fancy I’ve heard you play enough.”

Erik halted in the street, clutching the violin against himself, like it was a child or a shield. “You’ve heard me play for money, but tonight...tonight was for you.”

There were the parted lips. There was the wondering expression. But the tap-tap of a gentleman’s walking stick on the road behind him gave Dalir pause.

“Is there somewhere...else we could go?” Dalir asked, tone heavy with meaning. “Somewhere private?”

“I have a flat,” Erik said, somewhat generously since his little room was hardly worthy of the time. But it had doors. And curtains on the windows.

“That sounds about right,” Dalir said simply. He offered his arm. Erik took it - took him home, despite Dalir’s protestation that the turn of phrase didn’t fit. He took him home and, to his constant amazement, Dalir was still here.

“What’s that song, anyway?” The Dalir of the present day asked sleepily. “That you played that night - that you play sometimes, on the violin? You never told me where it was from.”

To say ‘my heart,’ would be sentimental hogwash beneath both their dignities. But it was the truth.

“‘Mon Coeur,’” Erik said, opening an eye and favoring Dalir with a sly grin. “A movement from an anatomical opera.”

“Never heard of it,” Dalir muttered, rolling onto his side, half dragging Erik with him. He rearranged himself on his side, trying mightily not to disturb the blankets such that the heat was let out.

Quite cozy and comfortable, Erik kissed the nape of his neck and replied, “The composer is not well-known.”
The Christmas season passed in a blur. If Raoul thought the weeks leading up to the holiday were busy, it was nothing compared to the flurry of dinners, visits, and parties he’d been invited to during the holiday itself. The Opéra’s annual Masquerade, which came at the conclusion of the season, looked to provide a bit of welcome relief - mostly because Raoul would not be attending the ball and his family was. He and Christine were going to take the opportunity to watch La Carlotta in *Aida*, a role for which she was being praised in the newspapers.

“The managers must be beside themselves with regret,” Christine confided to him, uncharacteristically unsympathetic about it. “All they had to do was keep Sophie on, but look! Now they’re losing money.”

Raoul had taken Christine up on her suggestion, to meet at the Opéra during the working day and together they balanced cups of coffee on their laps as she told him about the air of woe that surrounded the whole production. Unsold seats, patrons angry that they’d let their Spanish diva slip away from them so easily. Luckily, she said, they had a Verdi coming up which was bound to attract an audience, *A Masked Ball*.

There was talk of trying to tempt La Carlotta back to the stage - it involved negotiation of upcoming roles, salary, and (of course) a dresser of her choosing. Rumor had it that the managers could be overheard in their office, rehearsing speeches to beckon back their prima donna. Rumors that were quickly laid to rest by Erik, recently returned from the countryside.

“If they’re sending anyone to apply to her, it’ll be Vaucorbeil himself,” he predicted, only the day before when Christine (to Raoul’s slight consternation) asked him to sit and take coffee with them. “She wouldn’t deign to receive the other two - Moncharmin because he has no taste, Richard because he has no spine.”

Raoul did make every effort to be a gentleman and act as though Erik’s presence was entirely wanted - he even asked him when he was next planning a trip home, that he might take the Audubon with him (once he secured it, of course, which he had not yet done).

“Pesach,” Erik replied, then clarified. “Passover. So, not for a few months more - unless my sister delivers her child before then, in which case I’ll probably make an additional trip for her sake.”

Christine immediately inquired after the health and well-being of all his family, a recounting that took so long, Raoul was not able to speak another word before she was called in again to rehearsal and he parted from the Opéra a little glum; it was no blight on Christine’s character that she wanted to take tea with additional friends. It was no blight on Erik’s character that he had such a large family to make an account of. But, it was highly inconvenient for Raoul that his time with Christine be so curtailed; he hadn’t much of it left.

The letter containing the details of his commission and departure date stared accusingly up at him from the desk in his bedroom every morning as he made his ablutions and dressed. They would be departing in fewer than three months, if the waves and weather were favorable. The journey was expected to take a year, at least. And Raoul hadn’t spoken a word about it. Not to Christine, anyway. She never knew that his sojourn in Paris was only intended to be a brief one.

Even now the ship was being outfitted and readied for the journey north. In truth, Raoul had thought the six months preparation a tedious waiting time. He never knew what to do with himself, having no intimate acquaintances or friends to wait upon his homecoming in Paris. But that was before. Before Philippe took him to the Opera. Before he saw Christine.
There was a failed Arctic expedition that wanted rescuing. When the expedition was announced, Raoul was rather put-out that he was not to be one of the sailors making the attempt. Second sons of noble houses needed to distinguish themselves somehow, didn’t they? And being one of the first men to reach the North Pole...that would be something, wouldn’t it?

But they hadn’t reached the Pole. No one was certain if there were any survivors left to be saved. Yet Raoul’s ship was set to sail, just as soon as the weather warmed up. Too soon now, by his new reckoning of time.

When it was determined that the vessel was lost or worse, lodged in the ice with no way forward or backward, Raoul received a letter from Philippe, brimming with uncommon emotion.

Thank God, he wrote, thank God, that you were not on that misbegotten voyage. If such had been your fate, I don’t know what I would have done with myself.

Raoul still had the letter, carefully preserved, in his sea chest. Philippe would call him sentimental, but he marked it as one of his most prized possessions.

Strange how things could change so suddenly. The Raoul of a year ago had been not a little jealous as France threw her hat in the ring for scientific glory. Every precaution had been taken - the intention was to travel a temperate current to reach the Pole - and to leave earlier than the Jeannette in hopes of escaping the dismal fate of that expedition. Raoul was not ignorant of the fate of many those who preceded them. The horrors of the Franklin Expedition captivated the world, he had a chapbook about it as a boy which he read until it fell apart. But there was still something magical and romantical in the notion of going to a place in the world no man had seen before - he imagined himself, in truly fantastical daydreams, sailing alongside Captain Hatteras to the volcano at the top of the earth.

But there had been no glory. No flag stuck inside an icy mountaintop. Only hindsight and shaking heads and editorials in the newspapers pronouncing the venture doomed from the start. Fools on fools’ errands. Bleeding government funds as they searched for an icy El Dorado.

The Raoul of six months ago still thought of distinguishing himself - if the rescue attempt was successful, if they brought the survivors home, that was still something. And he’d marked the days on the calendar, counting down to when they’d put out from port.

But now the calendar sat neglected and he’d yet to pin another one up, marking the changing of the year. The blank place on the wall stared him accusingly as he dressed and his hands started fretfully kneading, pressing wrinkles into a previously immaculate shirt. But he wasn’t thinking about the chance of glory gone by, the dangers ahead, or even the dismal fact that there might be nothing waiting for them but a ghostly hull, bereft of life. A year gone away. For nothing - more than nothing for now he had something to lose.

What if, in his absence, Christine found another fellow? They might promise to write, but shipboard post was as unreliable; the men privately joked they’d have better chance of hearing from home if their relations tied the letters to the legs of obliging gulls. A year - two years without a word? No woman could be expected to remain constant in affections through such a long absence to a man who wasn’t even her husband.

And there was a mad, foolish notion, that popped into his head as he gazed up at her flat for long minutes in the dark and cold on Christmas Eve. The bracelet had been rather forward - the kisses moreso. But that thought, the one that compelled him to stare and stare like a silent Romeo, pining away while the coachman became ever more anxious to go home was unthinkable. Yet he’d considered it.
You could ask her to marry you.

What a farce that would be! What a lark! To play at engagement, to imagine ties as substantial as a
zephyr, to pledge devotion and constancy, knowing all the while that there could be no guarantees of
a renewal of affection upon his return. If he returned. If she wanted him upon his return.

Raoul finished dressing; Philippe wanted to engage a valet for him, but he asked his brother not to
bother. He’d never had a valet before and was quite capable of managing his own tie. Anyway, what
would be the point? No sooner would they find a man, then he would be gone again. No valets
aboardship.

Suitably dressed, he eschewed the breakfast table and instead took himself directly to Philippe’s
study; his brother was an early-riser who liked to get his work finished in the morning and reserve
the rest of the day for his own pursuits. Raoul knocked on the door and was invited in immediately.

Three separate newspapers were spread out on Philippe’s desk, *Le Temps*, *Le Figaro*, and *Le Petit
Journal*. Raoul occasionally glanced through the latter of those papers himself, but Philippe read
them all, cover to cover, daily. He looked up from his perusal of the papers and smiled at his brother.
“Good morning. I’m glad to see you, if you’ve no other plans, I thought we might lunch at my club
today.”

“Yes, if you’d like,” Raoul said distractedly. “I did come to ask a question - you know Papa’s
library?”

It was really the family library, the collection being added to by many generations, but Raoul always
thought of it as his father’s - Papa liked to collect books about the sciences, engaging informed
individuals to recommend titles for purchase with the latest in scientific theory, medicine, and
exploration. The colorful illustrations fascinated Raoul as a boy and he had a particularly morbid
interests in anatomical illustrations that worried his sisters; he did not think it was so very peculiar, he
was simply fascinated by the fact that all of humanity, when one got right down to it, was practically
identical beneath the skin.

“I’ve seen it, yes,” Philippe smiled indulgently, like Raoul was being purposefully stupid. “I keep
intending to engage someone to organize it - some of the books in their are ancient, I’d like to know
if their contents will prove valuable for future generations or if they’d be better used as kindling.”

“So you aren’t opposed to...removing some items?” Raoul ventured, testing the waters.

“No at all, if they’re only taking up space and no use to anybody,” Philippe agreed. “You may take
whatever you like on the voyage North, you know. I’d not expect you to replace them if they
become waterlogged.”

The mention of his upcoming journey discomfited Raoul greatly, but he tried not to let it show, “Ah.
Well, I was wondering...I had mentioned to a...friend that we had Audubon’s book - that great
illustrated monstrosity, you know?”

“Oh, yes,” Philippe sighed. It was permanently installed upon a table, having no place else to put it.
“The ironing table, you mean? What of it?”

Raoul explained that this friend had a relation with a keen interest in the natural world and he was
wondering if the friend might take possession of it.

“Certainly,” Philippe said at once. “They may borrow it as long as they like - once you’ve seen a
pheasant, you’ve seen a pheasant, haven’t you? I can have it wrapped and brought round their home
This was all going rather better than Raoul expected, even after he clarified that the book had to travel outside the confines of the city, Philippe expressed no reservations. That was, until Raoul said he thought it easiest if the book was brought to the Opéra. Where his friend might take possession of it with the smallest amount of trouble.

Philippe had gone back to skimming his papers, but he looked up slowly, eyes narrowing. His hands folded on top of *Le Temps* and he regarded Raoul closely. “As a matter of interest...what friend *is* this?”

“Erik,” Raoul replied. “You know, from the Opéra?”

Philippe did *not* seem to know what he meant, but then he grimaced with understanding. “Oh, yes. Astruc. The designer with the good voice and *hideous* face. He’s been causing the management no end of trouble.”

The emphasis on ‘hideous,’ though perfectly just, struck Raoul as rather callous - the man couldn’t help how he looked, could he?

“What trouble?” he asked. Nothing so very bad, from Philippe’s perspective. Just being rather a nuisance, knocking on their doors at all hours, complaining about the wiring of the chandelier, the conduct of the men he worked with. An annoyance, merely, placing himself above his station.

“Though,” Philippe acknowledged with a rueful smile, “Moncharmin has recently become a nationalist, so I think that rather shades his opinions. Hmm, but I *have* heard the fellow’s...ah. Got some *bohemian* proclivities. One of the Decadents, in the Verlaine mode. All rumor. All conjecture. Then again, as he is your friend, perhaps you can speak to the subject with greater authority.”

Raoul did not consider himself *clever*, in the arch, biting way of sophisticated young men. But even he was not so very dull as not to realize when he was being fished for gossip. Not that Philippe *gossiped*. He only liked to be well-informed.

“He’s an artist,” Raoul shrugged. “I haven’t got an artistic bone in my body, so I really couldn’t say what sort of artist he is. I think he’s an amusing chap, that’s all - the books are for his sister, she lives in the country.”

“Very good,” Philippe said, unconcernedly once he realized Raoul wasn’t going to take the bait. “Well, if that’s all, I’ll see you later. Does one o’clock suit you?”

One o’clock suited him very well, for he’d no other plans - Christine told him, as they entered their final week of rehearsals before the show was to open, not to bother coming down. She’d be too busy during the day to pay him much attention and too tired by evening to be of any use to anyone.

He had to tell her. He couldn’t very well sail off *without* telling her. If his absence wasn’t enough to drive all affection from her heart, dashing off to sea without a word certainly would.

Raoul was *going* to tell her. He’d vowed as much weeks ago. Only the time never seemed right. Either they were having such a good time, he hated to spoil it. Or they were discussing melancholy matters and he hated to add to it, wanting to cheer her and lift her spirits. He hated the idea that he might make her unhappy.

An idea struck him, as Raoul made his way past ‘the ironing table.’ Perhaps...perhaps he could do
with a little rehearsal himself. He had time before luncheon with Philippe. Maybe he ought to accompany the book to its destination, just to ensure it was delivered into the right hands.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so a few points of clarification: There was no French expedition to the North Pole, certainly not one that needed rescuing, that's just straight-up invented. The ironing board jokes refer to the fact that if have a double elephant folio of Audubon's magnum opus (which I've decided that Papa Chagny, as a nature enthusiast would have), it's basically the size of a coffee table. Good luck taking that on the train, Erik! 'Decadent in the Verlaine mode' is a coy way of hinting about Erik's sexuality - Paul Verlaine was a poet who had a torrid affair with Arthur Rimbaud, another poet, they both wrote about their relationship which...was incredibly unhealthy.

I'm working on an interaction between Erik's ex beau Alain and he between the broken window incident and Erik's return to Paris, I'll post the link here once it's done (if you haven't picked up on it, Dalir is VERY jealous of this Alain guy, though he tries to be level-headed and not obvious about it).

I reworked this chapter a few times, not entirely satisfied with the results, but I thought I'd post it just to keep things chugging along.
Philippe offered to send a man with him to carry the parcel, but Raoul insisted on going himself. A decision he regretted as soon as he wrestled the book, wrapped neatly in brown paper and bound up in twine, out of the coach.

“Would you like me to take it, Monsieur le Vicomte?” Robert, the coachman inquired.

“No, thank you very much,” Raoul replied, awkwardly balancing the enormous (and heavy) book in his arms, using his stomach as a ballast. “I’ll take it in myself.”

No sooner had he awkwardly shuffled a few feet toward the stairs than he thought he’d made a bad choice, but his pride would not allow him to admit he needed help. Just to the foyer, he told himself. He’d send for Erik and then the book would be his problem.

It wasn’t the weight, he told himself as he slowly heaved himself and the book up the stairs. It was the shape of it, how cumbersome it was, that was all.

*Has the Opéra always had this many steps?*

A whistle and a call of, “Steady on, lad!” accompanied his journey up the last few steps. Raoul had gathered a bit of a crowd as people paused on the street to watch him. Heat infused his cheeks (from embarrassment, not exertion!), and he was grateful that someone was going in, just as he was coming out so that he didn’t have to try to open the door on top of everything.

The brief feeling of triumph that surged through him at making it into the building with the bloody thing was short-lived.

“I’m here to see Monsieur Erik - Monsieur Astruc;” he clarified to the building manager with the side-whiskers.

The man frowned mightily, but, recognizing who he was talking to, did not ask questions. Only nodded and said that, if it pleased M. le Vicomte to wait, he would locate the fellow presently.

It pleased Raoul very much to wait. It pleased him mightily. He shifted the book in his arms, thinking he might put it down, but dreading having to pick it back up again, loitering on in indecision before a workingman approached, cap in his hands and a contrite expression on his face.

Raoul recognized the fellow as the enormous scene-shifter he’d hidden behind some weeks ago, that day he and Christine made plans to breakfast together. It was hard to miss the fellow, he was big all around and more than usually tall.

“Beg pardon, monsieur,” he said, his voice booming despite the nervous tone. “But Erik’s not here at present. His work on the show being done and all. Like as not, he’s home, at his flat. I’m sore sorry you’ve come all this way...er...want me to take that, monsieur?”
Raoul’s arms were certainly not trembling from exertion. Merely...disappointment. Yes. A very disappointed tremble, to be sure.

“My coach is waiting,” he replied, glancing over his shoulder down the long, long staircase that awaited him. Thank goodness it hadn’t snowed, he’d break his neck on the descent. Though it would solve a problem - he’d be useless in the Arctic if he was all bound up in splints and bandages.

“I’d be happy to carry it down for you, sir,” the man offered again, meaty hands outstretched.

Not relishing a long stint in hospital by any stretch of the imagination, Raoul replied that he’d be much obliged to the fellow for taking the book to his carriage. And watched in no small amount of envy and amazement as he turned it sideways and tucked it under one arm, fingers just about curling under the spine to hold it securely. Raoul tried to massage some life back into his own numb fingers inconspicuously.

The workman, whose surname was Ferrand, repeated again that Erik was likely at home - between shows, he earned his bread playing the violin and piano in guingettes on the hill and slept in during the day. “I can give you the address, if you’d like, if it’s urgent.”

Raoul said that would be very nice of him and he’d appreciate it. He gave Ferrand a few coins for his trouble, which he hesitated slightly before accepting. The matter wasn’t, strictly speaking, an urgent one, but he thought he might as well finish the job - he didn’t relish the idea of going through this little pantomime again.

The street that Robert pulled down looked even smaller, shabbier, and more disreputable by day than it had by night. There were a few peddlers' carts at regular intervals down the road where ladies in shawls with babies on their hips and thin children at their sides picked over half-frozen cabbages and jars of pickles. Some tramps were huddled in doorways, trying to get some sleep in a patch of weak winter sunlight.

“Would you prefer I make the delivery, sir?” Robert asked gallantly.

But Raoul refused and told him to water the horses nearby.

“You mean...” Robert paused and cleared his throat. “You mean to...make a call, sir?”

“I do,” Raoul replied firmly. “Come round in half an hour, would you? There’s a good chap.”

Robert did not pull away until he saw the door of the flat open and Raoul (with his parcel) step inside.

When Erik came to the door, it was with a blanket thrown round about his head in such a way that only his eyes were visible. They widened considerably when he saw Raoul on his doorstep and he exclaimed, with no small degree of shock (though his voice was muffled by the quilt), “What are you doing here?”

Not the friendliest greeting, but Raoul was prepared to overlook it; it appeared that he’d startled the fellow out of bed...and that he might be suffering from a head cold, with the way he’d wrapped himself up. “I’ve come to deliver the Audubon. May I come in?”

Erik paused for such a long time that Raoul thought he was going to be refused (in which case, he would find himself quite at a loss since he could hardly leave the book on his doorstep anymore than he could drag it around half of Paris), but at last he stepped inside, gesturing Raoul in with the hand that wasn’t clutching the blanket over his face.
Raoul looked about, trying to find a place to leave the book, seeing that his options were limited. The room was absurdly small - less a flat and more a berth - and rather cluttered for all that. There was a little kitchen table that would not suffice, an armchair that looked more stuffing than upholstery which was already home to a violin case, a bed, recently vacated, a side table with an ash tray containing a nose, a small chest of drawers, and -

He blinked. Squinted. Looked at Erik, his blanket, his eyes, his bare feet nervously tapping on the threadbare carpet...and swallowed very hard.

“Ah…” Raoul wasn’t sure what to say. Neither his education, his upbringing, nor his years in the service quite prepared him for what to say when in an acquaintance’s flat beholding a part of their face sitting...apart from their face. “Is there anywhere I might put this...down? Where it wouldn’t be in the way?”

“Ah…” It brought Raoul a small measure of comfort to see that Erik was similarly at a loss for words. “Give me...just...wait.”

Raoul’s elbows protested, but he merely nodded as Erik turned away from him, retrieving a satchel from under the bed and removing the nose from the ashtray. There was a bit of fumbling under the blanket, but Erik tossed it aside and straightened up. Raoul was so startled he almost dropped the book; Erik turned around wearing a mask that covered most of his face, leaving the mouth and chin uncovered.

“Better than the alternative,” Erik shrugged, sounding a little more like his usual self. He was wearing trousers and a flannel undershirt with nothing else. “Put that on the bed, if you’d like. What is that? A wedding dress?”

“The Audubon,” Raoul reminded him, placing it down upon the bed with a thump; the already sagging mattress sagged further under its weight.

Erik’s mouth dropped open. “That?!” he asked incredulously. “When you said, I thought...one of those five-volume sets. With the lithographs, you know. That...what am I supposed to do with that? Buy it a ticket for the train?”

*This was a terrible idea,* Raoul thought, though which ‘this’ his mind was referring to was unclear, even to himself. Knocking Erik up in the middle of the morning? Erik, who apparently was missing some of his nose. He remembered, the first day he saw him, thinking there was something odd about his face, but he put it up to natural ugliness, possibly an old scar. It hadn’t even occurred to him that it might be something else.

Or, was the truly terrible bit, the part where Raoul ignored the logistical difficulties of lugging an enormous book across the country, without a helpful coachman to offer to relieve the burden. Wasn’t that just his luck? To try to do a good deed and wind up looking more than usually callous.

Erik rubbed the brow of the mask, correctly interpreting Raoul’s humiliated silence. “Thank you,” he said belatedly. “It’s only more than I imagined, that’s all. Just a little taken aback, you understand. I’ll sort it - Mathilde will be thrilled, I’ll get it to her. Just...be assured you’ve made a young lady very happy. Ah. Sorry, do you want to sit down? You’ll forgive me, I haven’t anything to offer you.”

“Quite alright,” Raoul said automatically retreating into his manners. He took a seat upon the armchair, one Erik removed the violin. It was surprisingly comfortable for such a ratty piece of furniture. Erik set the violin upon the little table and dragged a wooden chair over, sitting upon it backward, dragging a hand through his hair to push back his unruly curls where they fell over the mask. “Ah…”
“I was born…” Erik gestured toward his face uncomfortably, not meeting Raoul’s eyes as he spoke. “Well. It occurred to me to tell you I was a victim of the Siege, since that’s a better story, but - ”

“Oh, no, you don’t need to explain to me,” Raoul said in a rush, grateful that Erik brought up the elephant in the room (well, the other elephant in the room). He laughed nervously and gestured to his own face. “No more than I need to explain to you - ”

Erik snorted (how?) a laugh and shook his head, “I suppose there’s an odd symmetry at that. Handsome and dark-skinned, pale and...ah. Well.”

“I was going to ask if you’d been in a duel,” Raoul said awkwardly. “But that seemed...insulting.”

“And improbable,” Erik grinned briefly. “Gentlemen duel, men like me brawl.”

Raoul shrugged, “Philippe belongs to a boxing club.”

“And I suppose I must thank your brother as well,” Erik acknowledged, conversation coming slightly easier now (Should Raoul ask him to take the mask off? Would it be polite to ask for him to take the mask off? Or more polite to pretend it was perfectly natural for a man without a nose to wear a mask in mixed company?) “Or did you not have to obtain his by-your-leave to remove the book from the family manse?”

Raoul explained that Philippe had given his permission for the book to be borrowed for some significant length of time. “I think he was rather relieved that it’s going to the country,” Raoul said carefully, now coming to the meat of his problem, the reason why he felt the need to speak to Erik, to pay a call, rather than simply have a servant deliver the parcel for him. “Rather than...with me.”

“With you?” Erik said, cocking his head at Raoul. “Where are you going? Somewhere southerly to escape the winter?”


The phrase, ‘I’m embarking for the North Pole,’ stirred up many feelings in Raoul’s brest. Pride. Dread. Anticipation. But here, in Erik’s dingy little one-room flat, on this dingy little street, it felt for the first time absurd.

Certainly Erik seemed to think so, for he teetered forward on his chair, the back legs leaving the floor as he leaned toward Raoul, eyes narrowing behind the mask. “Come again?”

“The North Pole,” Raoul repeated, lacing the fingers of his hands together. His hat he’d removed and set upon his knee. He held himself back from clutching it and fiddling with the lining. “To...see about the fate of last year’s expedition. To enact a rescue. If such a thing is possible.”

Another long silence. Damn. They’d been doing so well at speaking companionably as if they were both ordinary men with noses and occupations that didn’t take them to an undiscovered wilderness.

“You’re serious,” Erik said at last, sitting down, the legs of the chair hitting the floor with a thump.

“Why would I joke about that?”

Erik scratched his head, mouth twisting into something that wasn’t quite a frown, but neither was it a smile. “Well...I don’t know. Who goes to the North Pole?”
“You knew I was in the navy,” Raoul replied, feeling the slightest bit affronted in the face of Erik’s stupefaction. Though, he reminded himself, this was good practice. If Erik, to whom he’d only spoken a handful of times was so surprised, it would be nothing to Christine’s likely reaction. They’d whiled away dozens of hours in each other’s company, talking of everything and nothing...and not once had he mentioned his leave-taking. Not even alluded to it.

“Yes,” Erik admitted. “In the general sense of...having something to do with boats and wearing a uniform. Not...going to the North Pole. I suppose that’s what the Navy does, in absence of a good sea-war. When do you sail?”

Raoul explained that they would be leaving in a little over three months, then launched into an explanation of the weather and the currents, their journey, the mistakes that were made the previous year that the fleet hoped not to repeat. Though Erik’s eyes were shadowed behind the mask, he perceived that they’d glazed over. Raoul made a note to himself not to delve into the particulars when he spoke to Christine.

As if Erik read his thoughts, he shook his head and sighed.

“The Opéra’s season will be wrapping up,” he rightly observed. “Poor Christine, just when she has a few evenings free, you’ll be up and gone. You’ll be pleased to know that she’s been very understanding about the whole thing - I mean, she’s not said a word to me about her impending disappointment.”

This time it was Raoul who could not meet Erik’s eyes. He stared down at the carpet, fixing on a hole made by a cigarette. “That...that is because she has not been informed. Yet.”

“Oh, Raoul,” Erik said immediately, and Raoul’s head snapped up, face blanching at the disappointment in his tone. Erik seemed slightly taken aback himself for he smacked a hand over his mouth and apologized. “Sorry. I forget myself, sometimes. I’m not a very mannerly fellow, after all, but I oughtn’t talk to you like you’re my younger brother.”

“Quite alright,” Raoul said with a weak smile. “I’m very used to it...erm. I was wondering...you being such a good friend of Christine’s, knowing her quite well...ah. If you...had any particular advice.”

“What?” Erik, asked, astonished. It was a day of surprises for him. First, finding the Vicomte de Chagny on his step, holding a mammoth book. Then discovering that the said Vicomte was practically en route to the Arctic. Then learning that the polar-bound Vicomte was coming to him for advice about his sweetheart. Raoul did not miss Erik giving the inside of his right arm a subtle pinch, evidently reassuring himself that he was not dreaming.

“I don’t want to upset her, though I know I can’t help disappointing her,” Raoul explained in a rush. “You’ve...been very kind. To her, I know, but I’ve also...I’m not a fool. I know my brother and sisters find my attentions to Christine excessive. Not distasteful, but perhaps the association, in their eyes, is too close. I don’t...I haven’t many friends in Paris. I couldn’t think of anyone else to ask.”

The last was said rather faintly, an admission of defeat. Luckily, it was not only to Christine that Erik could be kind. He stood up from his chair and paced, as well as he could, in the confines of the flat.

“I’m a poor agony aunt,” he said waringly. “About leave-takings. I go abruptly, in fact, only a few weeks ago...but never mind. Never mind. You ought to tell her soon.”

“I know that,” Raoul interrupted, following Erik’s movement with his eyes. “The question is how - when?”
“Not at Aida,” Erik said at once. “Christine told me you’re having a night out before The Marriage of Figaro premiers, is that right? Well, let her have her night. Don’t say a word about it. Be...gay, if you can manage it. Don’t let on, don’t spoil it for her. Wait.”

“But then she’ll be performing, and I’d hate to ruin her first turn upon the stage in a prominent role with the prospect of my leave-taking hanging over her head,” Raoul said. “And once that opera is finished, the day will be even closer and I’ll look like more of a cad for leaving her in the dark so long.”

Erik made no reply; clearly he had none. It was quite the conundrum; spoil either Christine’s perfect night on the town, or her first major performance.

“Let her have Aida,” Erik said finally. “That’s my advice. Our production’s going to be a mess anyway, a depressed Cherubino won’t do the show a bit of harm.”

It was not the sort of advice Raoul had been hoping for. “I hate to upset her,” he said softly, knuckles standing out prominently against his leather gloves from where his fists were clenched.

“You will,” Erik said, but not unsympathetically. He hesitated, then approached Raoul, laying one bony hand upon his shoulder. He gave a brotherly squeeze and let him go. “It can’t be helped. She...I can’t imagine she’ll take it well. I think...she worries about being alone. Not lonely, but alone. I know her father’s passing was a blow. And I assume that the journey North is not without its risks.”

Mutely, Raoul shook his head. No. As he had ample proof. There was a real possibility that this rescue attempt might turn into another tragedy. Any time a ship left port, there was always a chance of disaster.

“It will upset her,” Erik continued. “It will hurt her. But that’s merely a consequence of caring about someone, becoming close to another person. Sooner or later, you’ll hurt them. I speak from experience.”

There was a hard set to his chin, and Erik said no more about it. Raoul heard the sound of horse hooves on the pavement outside and realized his time was up; that would be Robert.

Raoul rose from the armchair and replaced his hat.

“Thank you for letting me bend your ear,” he said, extending a hand for Erik to take. His eyes flickered up to the mask. “Especially since I called so unexpectedly.”

Erik took his hand with long, cold fingers and pressed Raoul’s palm lightly. “Thank you for the loan of that monstrosity of a book. And...ah. Well - ”

The door flew open and Dalir stomped in, tossing his hat onto the bed where it joined the Audubon. “There’s a coach outside, I could have sworn it was the - shit. I mean...good afternoon. Monsieur le Vicomte.”

Dalir’s hand drifted up to his hair as if he meant to tip his hat, but, finding it out of reach, only clapped his hand atop his head, looking bewildered.

“The Vicomte was just leaving,” Erik said smoothly, dropping Raoul’s hand and making his way to the door. “My calling hours are so irregular, you know.”

“Sorry to have missed you,” Raoul said apologetically, sidling awkwardly to the door since the flat was slightly too small to accommodate three men standing in such a fashion. He bade Erik a final goodbye and heard him say, just as the door was shutting behind him, “You will
not believe the morning I’ve had…”
Christine looked like a scarlet woman.

With a frustrated cry she furiously lathered a cake of soap and scrubbed at her face until she was red all over. That was hardly an improvement and she turned away from her small vanity mirror to squint at the clock on the mantle in frustration. Raoul would be by to collect her soon and she was in no way prepared for their evening out. She looked down at the pots of powder, rouge, and kohl pencil as if they’d betrayed her. She either went about with nothing more than a dab of powder if her face was botchy or she caked on greasepaint for the stage, she knew no happy medium.

Well, her face was certainly blotchy now. Back to a light application of powder and she tried a light application of rouge. Just a little, on the lips.

Christine’s newly-reddened lips twisted as she surveyed her face in the glass. She looked like a doll. A little porcelain doll all done up in laces and bows. The kind of doll she wanted as a child, but her father could not afford. Perhaps she was a victim of a curse. Some tricky goblin heard her prayers when she was small (hadn’t she heard once that selfish prayers never reached Heaven, but remained earth-bound?) and so cursed her to look like that which she’d so coveted.

She poked her unfortunately round cheeks with her forefingers and watched them spring back to shape immediately. There was no need to add any color to them, she decided firmly. Rosy cheeks would only make her look more childish.

Giving her fingers another quick scrub, she rose at last, hearing the tell-tale click-clack of horse hooves and carriage wheels on the street. Hastily she gathered up her gloves and the bracelet Raoul purchased for her. Mamma Valerius gave her a pretty necklace that complimented it nicely and it was already glinting in the gaslight - on second thought, Christine darted back in front of her mirror and tugged the sleeves of her gown down so they hung lower off her shoulders.

She wore the same cream-colored gown she’d worn to the Gala and the Chagny manse, but she had made some alterations that brought it more into current style. She shortened the sleeves and added to them some lace embellishment from the same piece she used to patch the train. She’d also pinned up the back so that it was more gathered and rigid in its draping. Still feeling it looked a bit plain, she sewed little silk roses into the sleeves, permanently borrowed from one of Mamma’s old hats.

Tonight Mamma Valerius was sitting up by the fire in the parlor, where she insisted on looking Christine over as they waited for the rap of Raoul’s walking stick upon the door.

“You look so beautiful, my dear girl,” Mamma said as Christine took up her usual place on the footstool by her feet. “No! No, up you come, I won’t have you go out wrinkled and mussed.”

Christine straightened up, all at sixes and sevens, one glove on, the other tucked in the crease of her elbow as she gamely attempted to affix the clasp of her bracelet one-handed.

“Let me, child, let me,” Mamma coaxed and, despite her age and her gnarled fingers, managed the clasp with ease. She smiled and her eyes twinkled as she took in the sight before her. “Like a pretty little doll.”

Christine’s returning smile was delivered a little stiffly, but she thanked Mamma earnestly for the
help and the necklace. Just then, there was a knock and Mamma bade her open the door.

She took a short breath before drawing back the latch; this evening ought to be perfect. No interruptions from sisters who thought Raoul’s time might be better served with someone else. No one from the Opéra who knew who she was and thought they knew what she was doing with the brother of one of the patrons. Tonight they could just...be. Two young lovers spending an evening together. Eating dinner. Seeing an opera. Just like anyone else.

“Good evening,” Christine said as she took in the sight of Raoul in his topper, holding his walking stick, every inch the gentleman. She’d been quite right to eschew the application of blusher for she felt her cheeks flaming as she looked him over.

Raoul was handsome as ever in his suit, starched white collar, and cravat fixed in place with a little pearl button. His brown eyes set upon her warmly and Christine could not help, but smile at him, despite the fact that she knew she looked like a child’s toy and there was nothing she could do about it. Mercifully, Raoul did not mind.

“Good evening Christine,” he smiled at her and kissed her hand. “You look beautiful. Is that a new dress?”

I might love you, Christine thought, eyes going soft and dewy at the words. No matter what she expected of him, Raoul always found a way to surpass her expectations. Really, truly love you.

She didn’t say that, of course, merely smiled - grinned really, before she bit her lip and tasted a bit of rouge on her tongue. “No, but it’s kind of you to say,” she replied, gesturing him inside. “Come, say good-night to Mamma, if we’re not too late.”

“Not too late at all,” he said, and went straight to the parlor, kissing Mamma’s hand as he’d done Christine’s and exclaiming with all sincerity how well she looked and how happy he was to see her.

“And I’m very pleased to see you, young man,” Mamma’s eyes sparkled with all of her old wit and vivacity, which warmed Christine’s heart to see. “I was afraid you’d gone back to sea without a word!”

She chuckled at her joke and Raoul joined her mirth, just half a beat later than she.

“Oh, no,” he said, withdrawing his hands from Mamma’s grip. “Not at all, I’ve only been busy - the holidays, you know.”

They made a bit more small-talk about how they’d spent their holidays. Mamma and Christine spent them quietly at home, Raoul for the most part, was at the home of his eldest sister. She and her husband announced that they were expecting a child a few months on.

Raoul caught Christine’s eye as he made the careful announcement, then looked away quickly, embarrassed as Mamma congratulated him and his family. No doubt he was thinking of poor Sorelli and Christine’s heart skipped a beat when she thought of her and her recent fright. How strange that childbirth could be received with all pleasure on the one hand and all dread on the other.

Christine had seen a little of Sorelli at the Opéra House. She made a point of seeking her out now, when she could. There was some trouble with the room she was letting in a woman-only boarding house. Some of the other tenants were claiming that they had seen a gentleman coming and going from Gigi’s room - a claim she denied, but it was their word against hers. The Comte tried to assuage her fears, said he was devoted to her and would set her up in a beautiful apartment in a hotel, where no one would feel inclined to stick their noses where they didn’t belong.
The last time they’d spoken, Gigi confided to Christine that she wasn’t certain she could accept...but neither was she certain she would refuse either.

If Mamma noticed Christine had gone oddly quiet, she did not scold her for it, only glanced at the clock and shooed them out they door. If they wasted any more time chatting, they would miss La Carlotta’s entrance in the opera.

“I’m sure you’ll be a fine uncle,” Christine said awkwardly, when they were in the carriage and on their way to the restaurant. Raoul offered up a shadow of a smile, but did not say anything in reply. So Christine tried again, determine not to let dread in one quarter cast a pall on happiness in the other. “Are they hoping for a little boy or a little girl, do you know?”

“I believe her husband is hoping for a boy and Félicité is hoping for a girl,” Raoul replied, with a slight shrug. “It hardly concerns me, I won’t be...I won’t be...so much involved in the child’s upbringing as they will.”

The reply struck Christine as odd - Raoul had spent many holidays at his aunt’s home on the coast and though she had no extended family herself, it seemed that Raoul was fairly close to his own. She did not have time to comment on it, for Raoul changed the subject and asked her how rehearsals were running. Christine answered gratefully, for that was a subject less fraught with pitfalls. She talked for the rest of the drive about the cast, the music, and the costumes.

“I’m afraid I don’t make a very convincing boy,” Christine confided to him he handed her down from the carriage. “I’m just too small, the costumers had a devil of a time altering the trousers so that they fit - Marcelline is all legs and I’m the approximate size and shape of a tree stump!”

“Hardly a stump,” Raoul smiled, tucking her hand into his elbow. “A sapling, surely.”

“I’m still shorter than the girl I’m meant to be in love with,” Christine informed him. “But the director said that was alright, it makes it all funnier that way.”

The interior of the restaurant was all marble and twinkling electric light. There were three tiers of seating around a floor where waiters criss-crossed with trays of food and the smell of cooked and seasoned meat mingled a little strangely with the ladies’ perfume and the gentlemens’ cologne.

It was a finer establishment by far than Christine was accustomed to, though she tried not to let her nerves show. She was an actress after all, and she could play the part of a real lady on the arm of her beau, though her dress was second-hand and her necklace and bracelet only shone dully at her throat and wrist, and did not glitter like the diamonds and jewels the other ladies wore. She consoled herself that at least some of them were wearing costume jewelry and paste pearls.

They had a table near the rail on the second balcony, overlooking the other diners and the string quartet that was just tuning their instruments as they took their seats. The bill of fare was short, but quite elaborate for all that - cold dishes and hot dishes, duck liver pate in aspic, chilled pheasant, rack of lamb, and turtle soup.

It being Friday, their options were somewhat limited (though, Christine noticed as they were led to their table that few of their fellow diners seemed to be observing the required fast as steadfastly as she generally did).

“What do you think?” Raoul asked when she placed the menu down on her plate, feeling a little overwhelmed.

“I’m not sure,” she replied honestly. “Whatever you’d like, I suppose - is a turtle meat or fish?”
Raoul glanced about, but unfortunately no kindly monsignor was among the patrons of the restaurant to give them advice. “We’ll call it fish,” he said at last. “And plead ignorance upon Judgement Day.”

That suited Christine’s conscience very well, though she was not at all sure about how it would suit her stomach, but she let Raoul order for both of them.

“I’ve never eaten a turtle,” Christine confided to Raoul after the waiter filled their wineglasses and left. “Have you?”

“Yes,” Raoul said, then continued, “though not in the Navy.”

Christine paused, expecting more, but then when no other information was forthcoming ventured, “Are turtles popular fare in...the Navy?”

“Well, once upon a time,” Raoul began, innocently enough, but then he was off to the races talking about how giant tortoises were the best thing a sailor could expect on a long voyage, seeing as how they could be kept alive on the ship for months and months. “I’ve heard their flesh compared to mutton, beef, even butter! On The Beagle they picked up thirty, or something like, for their voyage to Polynesia. It was only after they’d all been eaten that M. Darwin realized he might have saved one or two for study!”

Christine laughed, though she feared the humor was a bit beyond her - at least Raoul was talking! For the first half of the evening he’d been content to stare at her and listen to her speak, as though he was a minor character in a dumb show, not even a bit of pantomime to perk him up. It was most unlike him, most unlike them to experience difficulty keeping up a conversation when they were alone together. Not that they were alone, strictly speaking, in the restaurant, but in a crowd Christine always had the uncanny sense that they were all alone in the world.

The soup course arrived and, though it was better than Christine expected a turtle to taste like, it was not comparable to butter. Butter was in every way superior.

“You know so much about sciences, you make me feel quite ignorant,” Christine confessed, hoping to keep the conversation lively so Raoul would not notice if she did not finish her soup.

“Just a smattering,” Raoul shook his head. “My disposition isn’t serious enough for study like that.”

Christine expressed a modicum of surprise at that - surely sailors must be serious? Raoul laughed so loudly at that that fellow dinners turned to look at him in nervous irritation.

“Oh, no,” he said when he recovered himself. “Not serious - orderly and regimented, perhaps, but not serious. I simply read some of the books in my father’s library, that’s all. Papa was far more scientific than I - he dabbled in botany, astronomy, even a bit of anatomy. We none of us children are very good stewards of his legacy. Philippe reads only the papers, Grace only magazines, Felicite only devotionals and those ghastly pamphlets the missionaries send back.”

“What of you?” Christine asked, turning the topic ever more on Raoul, if only to avoid admitting that she only had a taste for magazines and novels herself. “You seem a decent steward.”

Raoul smiled briefly and shook his head, “Papa, I’m sure, would have wanted me to read Darwin and von Humbolt. I prefer Verne and Dumas and Melville.”

Christine had read Dumas herself, but her one and only attempt to get through Typee (furtively, in a bookshop, when she was sixteen) was abandoned since she was too embarrassed at the content and the thought that she might be caught reading such a book as that.
“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Christine replied, feeling that she was defending Raoul to his father, somehow. “There’s nothing so wrong with...adventure. And excitement and far-away places. Anyway, I think you’re very scientific. The first day I met you, you were catching crabs and I’m sure you would have taken them away for serious study had I not so rudely barged in on your plans.”

“I’d gladly give up all pretensions of scientific advancement to spend an afternoon by the sea with you,” he said sincerely. Raoul hadn’t finished his soup either; evidently neither of them had a taste for turtle.

Christine looked up at him shyly, “I’d thought to go to Brittany, once the weather was warmer. To...visit Papa’s grave. I’m not asking you to accompany me, but...if you wanted a holiday at the same time…”

She trailed off, feeling more and more as if she’d spoken out of turn for Raoul looked distressed at the prospect. An evening out in Paris together was one thing, but an unmarried woman proposing traveling with a man who was not her husband (even if they were not, strictly speaking, traveling together) was evidently a step too far.

“Never mind,” she said quickly as the cold and congealing soup was taken away and replaced with their entrees. “Never mind.”

“I’m afraid I don’t...I don’t know if I’ll be able to take a holiday,” Raoul said, fisting his gloves in his hands and twisting them. “But - ”

“No, no,” Christine shook her head and feigned enthusiasm for her supper. “Forget I said anything it was...indecorous.”

The word choice seemed to strike Raoul as odd and she reflected that perhaps she and Anna-Lise had read a little too much Austen when she was in town.

“I don’t like the thought of you making that journey on your own,” Raoul confessed. “I am sure Madame Valerius could not undertake such a journey - you misunderstood me, I think. I should like to be there with you. Very much. Only I fear I cannot.”

Christine was certain she’d understood him perfectly. “Of course,” she replied, “we don’t have to talk about it anymore.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” she tried to tell him, but feared that he would not read so much in
her expression in the darkened house. *I forgot myself; that’s all.*

Instead of trying to talk to him like a mesmerist, she only turned her hand and loosely captured his own in her fingers. He gave her hand a little squeeze and did not let go for the remainder of the act.

But it was easy to forget her little gaff when Carlotta took the stage. Her brilliant red hair trailed down her back and her eyes were lined with kohl, giving her an exotic appearance, though perhaps not quite so grandly done as her priestess.

It was not a subject that Christine had given thought to, but here, sitting beside Raoul and holding his hand, she relieved to realize that they hadn’t darkened Carlotta’s face a shade. It was not a foregone conclusion that the actors’ faces would be darkened for such a performance, even less so because the management of this theatre would have wanted the audience to be assured that they were seeing *La Carlotta*, Barcelona’s songbird and not an imitator. It had not occurred to her to be worried about it, really. Not until she was seated at the performance and realized how awful it would have been for the performers to do such a thing. To black their faces for a performance and scrub it off at the end while Raoul was harrangued in shops by ignorant storekeepers.

*Such things don’t happen often,* he assured her that afternoon, seemingly so long ago. But it did not change the fact that they did happen.

Carlotta was as proud and strong a princess as Christine was sure she would be. ‘*O Patria Mio*’ was beautifully sung, but Christine found her enjoying her rendering of ‘Ritorna Vincitor’ the best – that spark, that fierceness was what she expected from Carlotta and she was forced to take her hand from Raoul’s to applaud for her.

Tears were streaming down Christine’s cheeks at the opera’s conclusion - she thoroughly soaked her own handkerchief and had to borrow one of Raoul’s.

“Do you want to see if we might go to her dressing room?” he asked her. “Carlotta’s, I mean. I could ask the management.”

Christine’s first impulse was to say no, that she didn’t want to be a bother...but she really did want to see her, she found. Just to see how she was, and to learn if the rumors were true - if she really did mean to come back to the Opéra after all this.

She waited in the lobby, watching people come and go - it seemed Raoul was gone quite a long time, but he returned smiling.

“At first she refused,” he said, holding out his arm for Christine to take. “But I was insistent - annoying, perhaps, but I said to go back again and tell them that Mademoiselle Daae wanted to see her. And that settled the matter, the man came back straight away and said we were welcome.”

They made their way through a crowd of bewildered-looking gentlemen in toppers, some holding boxes of jewels, others bouquets of flowers, ogling at the young man and woman who were admitted, empty-handed, into the great diva’s dressing room.

And little wonder! Christine gazed around, wide-eyed and open-mouthed at the profusion of hothouse blooms that decorated the dressing room - and then let out a cry of delight when a little schnauzer came trotting up to her.

“Oh, hello there!” she gushed, unbuttoning her gloves and kneeling down on the floor so the dog could sniff her hand and receive a pat upon his head. Though years of travel taught her a certain wariness of strange dogs, this fellow looked very well-cared for and indeed he sniffs her fingers and
let her scratch him behind the ears.

Raoul followed her lead a beat later, removing his own gloves and earning a friendly lick for his troubles.

“I thought you wanted to see me,” Carlotta spoke above their heads, sounding tremendously amused. Her hairpiece was gone and her short-cut hair was plastered down with sweat. Her make-up had also been removed and her face was scrubbed to a tomato-hue, but she had changed into one of her usual shirtwaists and skirts, like a hybrid of the daring woman they’d seen at the restaurant with Erik and Dalir and the understated diva who brought such attention to the Opéra House.

Christine got up at once, taking her hands and kissing her cheeks. “You were wonderful!” she gushed and Carlotta smiled knowingly, as if to say, ‘Well, of course I was.’

Raoul also stopped playing with the dog long enough to congratulate Carlotta on her performance. She accepted their praise with a little sardonic gratitude - was there really any need to go on and on about what she already knew, after all? Then she set her entire attention on Christine and inquired as to how The Marriage of Figaro was coming along.

She seemed satisfied when Christine informed her, candidly, that all was chaos. And delays. And refunds.

“Have you been contracted here for one performance only?” Christine asked with would-be innocence that Carlotta saw through immediately.

“So, you’ve come to spy on me?” she asked, but not without humor. “No, I’ve only been contracted for Aida, they’re putting Lohengren next and they’ve already got a German on loan to them. I’m at my best when singing Verdi. Everyone knows that.”

Her mouth thinned a bit and Christine nodded; doubtless that was why the Opéra House was putting on A Masked Ball. Specifically chosen to compliment their leading soprano. She was distracted from asking more pointed questions when a small commotion kicked up behind her; the dog had managed to get one of Raoul’s gloves in his mouth and Raoul was having a devil of a time getting it back.

“Drop it, Feo!” Carlotta ordered and the dog’s little mouth opened just wide enough for Raoul to snatch his gloves back. The dog evidently thought it was part of the game and he pawed at Raoul’s trousers, urging him to give it back that he might continue.

“Don’t call him that!” Sophie emerged from behind one of the flower-laden tables to join them. She smiled at Christine and said, “He was a gift from an admirer. I thought we should name him ‘Figaro,’ but that one said absolutely not.”

“Schnauzers are ugly dogs,” Carlotta retorted defensively. “They look like little old men. They were bred to catch rats, they’re disgusting, really.”

“Hush!” Sophie said, crouching down and covering the dog’s flopping ears with her hands. “You’ll give him a low opinion of himself.”

"Do you have any plans?" Christine asked, glancing between the two of them. Flowers and dogs were all very well, she knew, but a performer's career was so uncertain without a long-term contract. Carlotta was still young enough that she doubted she had much tucked away for her retirement.

"After the run is over?"

Carlotta shrugged, mysterious as a sphinx. "That remains to be seen. I won't be trodden over. And I won't be intimidated. Those are my terms, if they're met I may well see you very soon, little
"If you'd like," Raoul interjected awkwardly, "I could have a word with my brother - "

"I'd rather you not," Carlotta interjected before he could finish that sentence. "No, if I'm to talk to anyone, it'll be the manager or no one. Meaning no disrespect to M. le Comte, but I prefer negotiations to be less...crowded. Remember what they say about too many cooks spoiling the broth."

Though La Carlotta might have meant no disrespect, Christine feared that she might be giving some. Whatever Comte Philippe's faults, Raoul was devoted to him and there was no denying that he had given more than advice and suggestions to the Opéra. Christine became concerned that, if the conversation were allowed to continue, she might materially damage her chances of getting back in the company, if her terms were respected, should Raoul happen to mention the diva's opinion of his brother to his brother.

"Have you ever eaten a turtle before?"

The words were out of Christine's mouth before she realized she'd voiced the non-sequitur aloud. Everyone (including Feo the Schnauzer) turned to look at her.

"Meat or fish?" she continued; in for a penny, after all. "M. le Vicomte and I weren't sure."

Sophie smiled at her the way one would smile at a well-intentioned, but backwards child and Carlotta laughed.

"Fish, I think!" she said decisively. "For they swim, don't they? I'm amazed that M. le Vicomte did not settle the matter at once - though I can't imagine he'll be dining on many turtles en route to the North Pole, will you?"

Silence. Even Feo stopped begging to be played with.

"No," Raoul said shortly. "I don't imagine we will at that. It's been...such a pleasure seeing you again, mademoiselle. But I really must see Christine home."

They departed the dressing room, Christine feeling she was floating, more than walking, outside herself. The North Pole. The North Pole? Like that dreadful expedition that had not returned last winter? Belatedly, she realized that as they made their way back to the street, Raoul had been talking to her the whole time.

" - meant to tell you, really I did - never found the right time - I wish I had been the one - but I didn't want to ruin - the papers must have - I'm so very sorry, Christine - "

"When are you leaving me?" she asked, so quietly she almost could not hear herself. Could not even feel embarrassed about her slip of the tongue. Not 'When are you leaving?' When are you leaving me?

"In a little over two months," Raoul replied. Cold air whipped her shoulders; they'd walked all the way out into the dark winter night without stopping in the cloak room. "Come, come back inside. I'll get my hat, your wrap - wait for me. I'll only be a minute."

Raoul took her elbow and led her back inside; it seemed no warmer in the building than out. Two months. Two months and he'd be gone. He'd been gone for ten years. Another good-bye. Another parting. It shouldn't affect her so much. How long had she had him back, after all? How long had she managed without him...however had she managed without him?
Her throat felt tight and her eyes hot. It wasn't fair, not fair to lose him when she had him, even pieces of him, even infrequently, even if she knew that some awful day he might be married off to someone like the little finishing school girl he'd ridden around in a coach with all afternoon. She accepted that, though she tried not to think of it. It hadn't even occurred to her that he might be taken from her for other reasons. By a different kind of duty than that which he owed his family. And tonight, of all nights. Tonight when she thought, for the first time, that she loved him. There were so few people she loved. Fewer still who she fancied might love her back.

Christine did not wait. She stood on the side of the road, shivering in the cold until a cab pulled over and inquired if she needed assistance.

"I'd like to be taken to my home, please," she said, clutching her purse tight in her hand, fingers aching with cold.

"You certain, miss?" the driver asked, nodding at the theatre. "Whatever spat's been had, I'm sure your fellow could smooth it over."

"I'd like to go home," she said more firmly. "If you won't take me - "

"I surely won't have you walking," the fellow said, leaping down from the seat to hand her up into the carriage. As he shut her in he muttered, "Leave a little girl on the street like that? My sainted mother'd hide me..."

Christine paid the man, who did not leave until he saw her inside her flat, door shut behind her. It took a few tries to manage the lock; her fingers were blue-tipped and clumsy with cold. The house was dark, but Christine only lit a lamp when she made her way into her room, mechanically divesting herself of her gloves, comb, hairpins, necklace and bracelet. She rather wanted to throw it, but instead placed it on the vanity, staring at the simple stone laid in it, remembering how oddly serious Raoul was when he clasped it around her wrist. A parting gift, she realized.

Oh, if *only* there was someone she could talk to! She couldn't burst into Mamma's room, disturbing her rest, upsetting her with this awful news. Erik...oh, he wouldn't do at all. He'd either laugh at her, or try to make her laugh at herself, which she could not abide. Dalir would probably think her foolish for being upset over something so inevitable. And Gigi...she had troubles enough without Christine adding to her burden.

She unlaced her gown with aching fingers and cursed when the busk of her corset caught one of her fingers as she unlocked the clasps and made her bleed; there was a dot of blood on her garter as she took off her underthings and stockings. Her flannel nightgown was laid out on her bed and as she shrugged into it, she was suddenly filled with a restless energy. Turning the lamps in her room to burn brighter she sat down at her vanity, sweeping the evening's finery out of the way. Sucking on the stinging wound in her left hand, she took out a few pieces of paper, uncapped a pen, and began to write.

*My Dear Anna-Lise,*

*I so dislike beginning a letter gloomily, but I've had such an awful night, I am afraid there is no help for it. Do not be alarmed, I am not ill, nor has my guardian taken a bad turn. It is only that Raoul must go away - far away, as part of his naval service - and I am breaking my heart over it.*

Chapter End Notes
Christine isn't the only one with an ear for gossip - hey, it's not Carlotta's fault that she assumed Raoul would have been quicker telling his girlfriend he was leaving town for a year. And quick literary note - Herman Melville was way more famous for his travel books during his lifetime than for The Whale, though Raoul probably enjoyed that one, Christine found one of his earlier books which involves lots of sex and potential cannibalism.
Christine was surprised to see Erik at the final dress rehearsal for *The Marriage of Figaro*, idling around the flies with the other stagehands. When she asked what he was doing there, he rolled his eyes so far back in his head that for an instant, all she saw were the whites. Her lingering anger at Raoul made her ungenerous toward everyone - the first thought she had was, *God, he looks like a ghoul.* But the expression changed quickly so that Erik just looked his normal uncanny level of ugly, rather than demonically hideous.

He informed her that the chief of the flies had gone on an unexpected holiday and, as he had also been in a traveling mood of late, he thought he might as well pick up the slack.

"Quite literally, in fact," he grinned and plucked the hemp rope like the string of a guitar. "We don't want a repeat of the Sandbag Incident, do we?"

"I should say not," Christine replied and that was all she could say, for she was needed upon the stage and did not get her chance to speak to Erik again until the conclusion of the rehearsal and only after she'd removed her costume and dressed in her street clothes. She feared he'd be gone, for he was no longer being paid to linger around the theatre, but she found him again, lounging against the wall a respectable distance from the women's dressing room.

"I thought you'd be a little more pleased about my changed circumstances," he said when she approached him. "Not only am I obliged to watch you on your opening night, but all subsequent nights thereafter - or until M. Buquet returns from his Bacchanal. Why do you look so gloomy, petite citrouille?"

*Ask your sister all about it,* she thought, feeling waspish. Christine pressed her lips together so that she did not snap at him. For days she'd vacillated between feeling angry and sorrowful, not settling comfortably into one emotion or the other. It likely showed in her performance for the director kept reminding her that this was a *comedy*.

"Ah," Erik said softly, his long cold fingers finding their way under her chin, tilting her face up to him. "I see. You’ve heard - "

"*Everyone’s* heard, it seems!" Christine said shrilly, voice harsh even in her own ears. "He might have *told* me, mightn’t he? All these weeks - *these months*! He’s known from the first, from before he even laid eyes on me that he was sailing off to get himself *killed* and he didn’t even...he didn’t…"

Tears felt, hot and harsh. Erik drew an arm around her and bustled her away into a cupboard which made her throat burn with tears and the harsh smell of the astringent soaps and wood polish used by the concierge. She let him draw her against him, his bony chest providing no comfortable place to rest her head, but she wrapped her arms around his waist and wept all her anger and sorrow into his sternum.
When her tears trailed off into hiccups, Erik produced a pocket handkerchief and let her compose herself.

“And now I’ll be in bad voice tomorrow,” she croaked, folding the handkerchief up and handing it back to him. She had blown her nose in it and ordinarily would not have been so crass, but he pocketed it all the same. “Having gone to pieces. I’ve been trying, really, not to let on but - ”

“Well, you’d not be so fine an actress if your feelings didn’t show easily on your face,” Erik interrupted her, spidery hands running up and down her arms and shoulders, like he could massage a good mood into her. “I’m very sorry, Christine.”

*Sorry doesn’t mean anything! Sorry doesn’t keep him here! Sorry doesn’t keep him out of danger!* 

“That doesn’t help,” she muttered quietly, not meeting his eyes.

“No, of course not,” Erik said, releasing her. “But I’m sorry all the same.”

Distantly, Christine appreciated him. His reassurance. Once she was home in bed and calmed down, she’d feel wretched that she’d not been more kindly disposed toward Erik. But in the cupboard all she could do was turn her face away and sigh, rolling her eyes up into her head to keep from crying. She was the one who opened the door and walked back toward the stage.

Erik followed, keeping a respectful distance between them. The rest of the company had changed and gone home, the costume girls would be all atwitter if she didn’t shuck off her clothes soon.

“Are you - ” Erik began, but she turned round, looking up at him with a determined set to her eyes and mouth, hoping that she adequately communicated (with that emotional face he’d complimented her on minutes before), how much she did not want to talk about it anymore.

“What do you think?” she asked, voice falsely light and conversational. “About the show? How awful was I?”

Erik paused, a frown pursing his thin lips. He seemed like he wasn’t going to let her get away with dropping the matter, but changed his mind and replied, “You weren’t awful. Actually you were quite funny - ”

“Don’t be vulgar when I’m upset,” Christine interrupted, pouting magnificently. Erik choked on a laugh, then contracted his eyebrows and spoke in a mock-chastising tone.

"I was about to say, you were quite funny in your mannerisms, if not your acting,” Erik said, starting to smile. “Your manner of playing a fellow, I mean. It was very...well, that is to say, if you’d gone to a convent school and spent your time praying with nuns and young ladies for the past twenty years, I could understand, but...you know, I’ve some experience with men - "

"Not according to M. le Director,” she interjected bitterly.

"I was referring to *being* one, Christine,” he continued, watching with satisfaction as she blushed to her earlobes. "Not *having* them. Though, now that you mention it - "

"Alright, alright," he waved a hand about as if wiping away the whole conversation. "Never mind. It's only...hmm. How do I say this without sounding vulgar...just, the way you *sit*"

In the end Erik decided to demonstrate. Perching himself upon a little chintz setee, he demonstrated
one of the aspects of Christine's performance that so amused him. "This is how I sit upon a chair - as
a man, remember - and this is how you sit. I mean, I understand Cherubino’s a lusty lad, but there’s a
difference between being eager and setting out an open invitation. You understand?"

Evidently, in her effort to seem cock-of-the-walk, Christine had been...oh, well, really, surely she’d
not spread her legs so... ahem. The blush had no further to spread on her face, but it did deepen,
somewhere between crimson and burgundy. It complimented the vibrant walls around them very
well indeed.

“You’ve never shared a crowded tram with a young man taking up more than his fair share of the
seat,” she insisted, smiling a little, despite herself.

“You also walk as though you’ve just gotten off the back of a horse,” Erik informed her, springing
up and doing an exaggerated bow-legged ramble about the stage. That might have been a bit too
dramatically performed, for effect, but it had the intended outcome of making her laugh. It had been
days since she properly laughed.

“I’ll take your good counsel under advisement,” she said, more warmly than she’d spoken to him all
day. Erik grinned and bent down to kiss her head.

“There’s my Christine,” he said fondly. “I missed her very much all day. May I take you to supper?
Or only home?”

“You may take her to the costume room!” Charles stormed the stage, branding a clothes hanger like a
sword. “I’ve been waiting for half an hour, Mademoiselle! As you make your supper plans, recall
that there are others in this theatre who’d like to dine sometimes before midnight as well!”

“Oh, go boil your head, Charles,” Erik said casually, before Christine could become upset again.
“It’s my fault, I insisted that she learn to walk like a man and not a duck before the performance. If
you want to kvetch at someone - ”

“I don’t know what that means, but it sounds filthy,” Charles retorted scornfully. “And I wouldn’t
give you the time of day, nor evening - not even with the lights snuffed. You’re too thin to be of any
interest to me. The costume, mademoiselle.”

“Yes, of course,” Christine said, scampering away toward the dressing room (though she had the
distinct impression that if she changed her clothes on stage, neither Charles nor Erik would mark it
much). “I’d rather just go home, Erik, if it’s all the same to you. But...you may walk me there, if
you’d like.”

He bowed extravagantly. “As you command, mademoiselle.”

Charles looked between them skeptically. “I wouldn’t waste my time, Christine. Erik’s bound to
break your heart.”

Christine said nothing as she made her way to the large dressing room that she shared with the other
girls in named parts (no one dared take Carlotta’s dressing room, out of the fear that if someone else
took up residence there that she might not come back and doom them all to unemployment). Break
her heart? Oh, it had already been broken many times. When she lost her mother. When she lost her
father. When the professor passed. When Mamma began to succumb to the lingering indignities of
old age. And now, Raoul.

But Raoul would have gone anyway, wouldn’t he? In a year, five years. Married to a girl of means
and rank. A girl his family approved of. Supposing he came back from the North Pole, how much
time did they really have left?

Erik, though, he’d been steadfast. A good and considerate friend. Perhaps he...perhaps she could count on him to stay. For the foreseeable future.

At least, she reflected ruefully, thinking of Charles’s warning, there was no danger of his getting married.

Raoul was smartly turned out in evening dress with a black topper and white silk scarf. He wasn’t attired like a man in mourning, but the somber expression on his face belied his fashionable dress. Glancing at himself in the mirror, he turned away, scorning his reflection, the smudge of dark skin under his eyes that bespoke sleeplessness. The worry lines that would not smooth on his brow. It would be the first time he saw her since Aida. It was not a reunion he sought with glad anticipation.

After the performance, Raoul stood on the steps of the Theatre de la Gaite feeling (and looking) like an imbecile, the lovelorn fool stood up after the fact, holding his lady's wrap while she was nowhere to be found. Panic flared in his breast and he briefly feared something ghastly had happened to Christine, that she had been beset by thieves or worse. But the street outside the theatre was still tolerably busy, couples and small groups of friends waiting on carriages and cabs, all speaking quite normally in the streetlights. No sign that a girl had been abducted by toughs. The rational part of Raoul's mind concluded that she must have gone home and a trip to Madame Valerius's street confirmed the fact; the light was on in Christine's bedroom and he saw her shadow moving restlessly about the room. She did not go to bed for a quite a while. This he knew because he stood outside her home for a half an hour, risking frostbite to the nose as he wrestled with himself over whether or not to knock on the door.

She'll want her wrap, he'd think one minute, striding up the street purposefully.

She doesn't want to see you, he'd remind himself, turning despondently, shoulders rounding, head hanging. Then the cycle would repeat over and over until Christine snuffed the lamp and he thought that if she did not hate him yet, she might if he roused her to the door from a sound sleep.

It was destined to be a late night for everyone, it seemed. Raoul arrived home to find Philippe smoking his pipe and enjoying a glass of brandy before a cheerfully roaring fire. He looked up at Raoul with a pleasant expression and asked how he'd enjoyed the opera.

"Very much," Raoul said automatically.

"Did Mademoiselle Daae find the production adequate?" he inquired, with a fatherly, benevolent expression on his face. The sudden interest ought to have struck Raoul as odd, but he was too distracted to mark it much.

"I think so," Raoul replied. "We did not...did not speak much of it."

Philippe smiled up at him, a contented, warm expression much enhanced by the firelight and the brandy. "Perhaps she was merely mulling her options. If she attracts critical praise for the Garnier's production - assuming it ever goes forward, of course - I am sure she will have many attractive offers from other theatres. Despite her talent and considerable charms, she is very green, you know. Unlikely to earn herself a leading role for another three or five seasons, at least. And who knows - five years is a long time for a young girl. Anything might happen to stymie her ambitions."

"It'll only be year," Raoul muttered to himself. "Two, at the outermost."
The smile faded slightly. "I beg your pardon?"

Raoul recovered himself and remembered with whom he was speaking. With a regretful shake of his head, he made for his own room and asked Philippe to forgive him. He was tired, he claimed. He wanted to go to bed.

But Raoul did not sleep. He did not even change clothes, he took up pen and ink and began a dozen letters that soon littered the floor of his room.

\textit{My dear Christine,}

\textit{My dearest friend,}

\textit{My dearest,}

\textit{I much regret...I cannot express my shame...I truly meant to tell you...}

But, just as he had about his leave-taking, he said nothing to her about his regrets, his cowardice. He did not visit the Opera. He paid no calls at her home. Feelings of grief warred with a bit of righteous indignation - after all, he was only doing his duty, wasn't he? After all, they'd only been reacquainted for six months! After \textit{all}, she wasn't his fiancee, was she? What right had she to know of all his comings and goings?

Those sparks of anger were extinguished as soon as they flared. She had \textit{every} right. For God's sake - \textit{La Carlotta} had known before Christine! If that didn't bring home how very \textit{wrong} he had been to conceal his departure from her, nothing would. A woman to whom he'd hardly exchanged more than a few sentences knew more about his future plans than Christine, the person who (always, it seemed) was closer to him than anyone. And he'd held off from telling her because he did not want to face her disappointment. He'd behaved abominably. He deserved her scorn. He \textit{wanted} her forgiveness, but he had no idea how he was going to go about begging for it.

The carriage ride to the Opera on the night of the premiere was subdued. Philippe gamely attempted to engage Raoul in conversation, but found his brother uncommonly taciturn. Likely he knew the cause of Raoul's distress, or at least could make a reasonable guess at it. Rather than having the effect of dampening Philippe's good mood in turn, rather the opposite turned out to be true. He was whistling when they arrived at the Opera and met Marie-Grace and her party at the door.

Raoul followed his brother out of the carriage, donning his hat as though putting on armor. He had to attempt to be gay in front of his family. It was no one's fault but his own that he was in such a state and no one ought to suffer for it but him.

"It's Camille's first opera!" Marie-Grace informed Raoul, after kissing him in greeting. It took Raoul a second to recollect exactly who Camille was - ah, the niece, only this time without her congested companion.

The girl was standing awkwardly on the arm of Marie-Grace's husband, Leonard, wearing a gown of dark blue silk, her hair piled on top of her head in an unbecoming way - it made her ears stick out and her bare shoulders only emphasized how thin her neck was. She looked like a little girl playing dress-up, a sensation Raoul was well acquainted with. He'd been squeezed into Marie-Grace's old frocks and had flowers poked in his hair and behind his ears to look the part of the younger sister she'd always wanted. At least Marie-Grace left off by the time he was out of short pants and he wasn't forced into the role of her life-sized doll as a spotty adolescent.

The girl looked up at Raoul, flushed, and looked away. He gamely smiled at her, kissed her hand
and told her how nice she looked; doubtless she was terribly embarrassed to be turned out so and he thought he might as well make her feel better about it. Having failed so miserably at doing the honorable thing in one instance, he decided to make it up by being especially kind to his sister's niece.

"Is your mother at the symphony?" he asked as Leonard handed the girl off to him. Camille tucked her gloved hand into his elbow and shook her head, all seriousness at his jest.

The Countess, Marie-Grace informed him with rolled eyes and an impatient tone, was spending the evening quietly at home.

"I told her darling Camille would be in excellent hands," she said to Raoul, looking at him significantly. Raoul smiled back at her, certain he comprehended her meaning perfectly.

"We'll have a lovely time, I'm sure," Raoul said to Camille reassuringly. "It's a comedy, I'm sure it will amuse you."

By the time they actually entered the building, the overture was nearly over. They were sat by a solicitous attendant in the usual box overlooking the stage.

"Oh!" Camille breathed, enchanted, as she took in the set. "How marvelous! How pretty! Oh, I'd adore a house, just like that!"

It looked like a confectionary exploded. Or that the designer was lately a guest at a wedding, made a detailed study of the cake, and told the builders to recreate the image in wood and plaster - then painted the whole of it an alarming shade of fuschia. Raoul had not marked the name of the designer in the program, but something told him this was not one of Erik's original creations. It was certainly impressive in terms of scale and detail and workmanship, but not as clever as recreating the sea out of glass or toppling a whole seemingly-solid temple in fifteen minutes.

Camille was staring up at Raoul eagerly, expecting a reply to her remark. He smiled, patted her hand absently and said he was sure that she would, someday. Assuming her husband was short-sighted or frequently away from home (this last he kept to himself).

Christine - as Cherubino - was introduced by way of tumbling out of a bush placed on the far side of the stage, clearly a favored trysting place. She was followed shortly by one of the other chorus girls, who fled the scene, giggling and placing a kiss on Christine's cheek. Her long blonde hair was pulled back in an approximation of a queue and there were flowers and leaves stuck haphazardly in her curls. She looked like a wood nymph in breeches. She was bereft of her coat and when she turned round to address Susanna, the audience saw the streaks of grass staining the back of her waistcoat, which provoked great laughter from the audience.

Raoul alone was not laughing. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands folded on his chin. Leonard offered him his opera glasses, evidently under the impression that Raoul's eyes were bothering him. Philippe reached out and tugged Raoul back, silently urging him to sit up straight, like a gentleman. Raoul heard Camille ask Marie-Grace in confusion, just how old the boy playing Cherubino was - he must be very young, she supposed, to have such a high voice and such a hairless face.

The audience approved of her, that much as clear. They smiled at her antics and applauded her singing. Christine gave a lively performance, out to the house, not once glancing his way, though she knew his family's box. He wondered if it was deliberate, a slight or a snub and felt wounded. Then chastised himself for getting upset over imagined cruelty.
Look at me, he pleaded with her silently. Look at me and smile and let me know I’m forgiven.

Later. In the aftermath, Raoul would feel terribly guilty that he’d not been paying more attention to his surroundings. That he’d not noticed something was amiss. That he’d done nothing to prevent the tragedy that would unfold. But at the time, nothing else caught his notice. He thought only of her.

“What was that?” Leonard asked, glancing around, peering out of the box up at the ceiling. Marie-Grace pulled him back, the same way Raoul had been urged to sit up by Philippe, like a pup grabbed by the scruff of its neck.

“Honestly, you two,” she grumbled. “It’s as though you’ve never been in public before - ”

“I thought I heard a crack,” he said.

“I know you don’t like opera,” Marie-Grace rolled her eyes. “But at least attempt to listen to the music - look, the Countess has a charming aria coming up - and not imaginary cracks and - ”

But the actors onstage seemed distracted. Christine in particular was looking into the wings with wide eyes, hands drawing up to her mouth in horror. She took a few stumbling steps toward the edge of the stage and nearly collided with the Countess, who failed to notice anything was amiss. But then the Countess too stopped and stared.

The sound of raised voices, faint, but increasing in volume was barely audible from their box.

“What can it be?” Philippe asked irritably. “I - ”

Another crack, this time from above their heads. It was more audible now, some members of the audience became restless, a few left their places in the stalls. The singing had stopped, members of the orchestra ceased playing. All was confusion and the actors, to a one, had their eyes trained on the wings.

All at once a figure stumbled - was thrown really, bodily flung - out of the wings. Raoul stood up, recognizing Erik’s figure at once, and stood, leaning over the edge of the box. He was bloody, all over his face, his hands, blood poured especially from his face and Raoul saw Christine running to him, emitting a sharp scream -

Then a longer scream came from beside Raoul. Camille grabbed his arm and pulled him back, pointing at the ceiling.

“Oh, God!” she shouted, loud enough to fill the house. “Look! The chandelier!”

The auditorium filled with screams. There was a mad rush of people tripping over one another, being trampled as the patrons in the stalls made a rush for the exit. To the horror of Raoul and the occupants in the box, huge, heavy disks, pins, and cables began to fall from the ceiling. The great, enormous, golden chandelier swayed and rocked, but remained above the heads of the audience, as some the counterweights that held the thing aloft fell with hardly any warning, to the floor.

“My God!” Philippe shouted, his voice just one among the din of chaos as the plates slammed to the floor in the fourth and fifth tiers, all over the chairs, the floor...and those opera-goers unlucky enough to be stuck in the row. It all happened so fast, but the metal, glittering in the glow of the lights cast from the stage seemed to take forever to fall.

Raoul said nothing. A cry was caught in his throat and he felt Camille drop his arm, rushing into Marie-Grace’s embrace as she tucked the girl’s head against her shoulder, shielding her eyes from the sight.
Philippe was gone - to get help, presumably. The house was chaos and behind him Raoul heard Marie-Grace insisting to her husband that they must go at once, while Leonard argued that they were better off staying where they were, that it would be madness if they tried to go now -

Raoul tore his eyes away from the stalls and looked once more to the stage. Erik was gone. Christine was standing stock-still as if she was rooted to the spot. Her hands were over her mouth and she was trembling, shaking with sobs.

Heedless of the questions and warnings of his family, Raoul left the box and made for the stage. There was one thought, only one in his mind as he made his way past the stagehands, fleeing patrons, and concierge that rushed past, to escape or help. *I must find Christine.*

His visits to the Opera let him know the swiftest route to the stage and it seemed an instant before he was there, running, the sear of the limelight making the rest of the house seem a confused dreamworld. There was only Christine, tears streaking the greasepaint on her face. Erik’s blood still spotted the floor.

She turned to him, as if she expected him. Her face crumbled and she sobbed, “Oh, Raoul.”

In all the horror and confusion of the scene, no one marked the Vicomte de Chagny lifting the opera singer off her feet and carrying her bodily from the stage as she wept openly into his neck.

Chapter End Notes

CARNAGE! Erik's part in the pre-chandelier drama will be explained in the next chapter. Just to clarify in this story (as in life) the chandelier doesn't actually fall - two of the counterweights that held it in place fell, apparently, despite dramatic license in certain early 20th century mystery novels it would be basically impossible for the chandelier to fall on the audience.
A bit of a rush-job, this, but I didn't want to make you wait too long for Erik's (confused, unreliable, and angsty) perspective.

**Warning:** for *Antisemitism*, *homophobia*, and *violence*.

When his heart slowed to a pace less than frenetic, his throat no longer burned with bile, and his head no longer ached from the force of holding in furious, guilty, miserable tears, he wonder whether there was something he might have done to prevent it.

And there was. He’d know this certainly, with a heaviness in his chest and a queasiness in his stomach. Of course there was. It mightn’t all have been his fault. He might not have started it. But he might have prevented it. Had he been a better man.

Might have kept his hands clenched, even as his knuckles ached and his nails drew blood.

Might have found another man to take his place, or at least intervene before it all came to blows.

And failing that, he might, at *least* have kept his damn mouth shut.

But he hadn’t. And he was on a train, emptying his purse on a train ticket to the country. Nothing left for a return trip.

No prospects *again*. The life he’d cobbled together destroyed *again*. The man who’d coined the phrase ‘burning bridges’ clearly never imagined anyone like *him*. For he did not burn bridges. He obliterated them. Tore them from their moorings and cast the lot into the river.

And who was left standing on the other bank?

*Dalir, Dalir. My love. Forgive me.*

No. None of that. For then he’d surely weep.

Fool. He was a fool. Not an artist. Not a musician. Not a great lover, a good friend, or even a halfway decent son. Not even Erik, anymore, he didn’t think. He’d have to shed Erik again, start afresh. And who knew who he’d turn out to be this time?

The last time he’d been a frightened child. Now he was a man with nothing but disappointed ambition and such *anger* to him. It was all he could claim. All that was his.

Well. That and the mask. The mask soaking through with his blood. He’d left the violin at the flat in his frantic departure; perhaps Dalir could pawn it for next month’s rent.

No! None of that now. No talk of Dalir. Not even a thought of him. That hurt worse than the stinging in his face, the rawness of his throat or the throb in his knuckles.
But he had to think of something. A mind like his could not be idle. It conjured thoughts, dreams, imaginings. Great things, sometimes.

At times like this though, it conjured memories. One memory. Christine’s pretty little painted face. Her look of dawning horror. And her scream. It multiplied. Screams upon screams. And then he remembered nothing. Running through the streets, people staggering away from him like he carried a pestilence. Grabbing his meagre belongings. The mask, of course.

How he’d gotten past the ticket-taker without inquiry was beyond him, but he must have. The ticket was even stamped, twisting, folding in his hands, going damp with sweat from his palms. No, he scarcely remembered the journey to the train. But he remembered what came before. He’d have chance to think of it much in the coming days. What he might have done. But most of all, what he had actually done.

A square meal and a good sleep had done wonders for Christine. Perhaps she’d chanced to look out at the house before she went on and was relieved to see half the boxes empty, the stalls only three-quarters full - a show of public outrage over the replacing of La Carlotta.

She was performing well, earning laughter from the audience for her put-upon swagger, exaggerated cheekiness. The set was fairly static, so Erik merely stood by the flies, occasionally giving signals to the men, but overall enjoying the performance. Until the beginning of the second act.

Erik stood by, alternating between watching Marcelline strut and scheme and picking splinters out of his fingers when he heard a door to the corridor open behind him. He did not look up at first, assuming it was one of the actors, being careless with the amount of off stage noise they were making (as actors often were). It was only when the pungent smell of strong drink assailed him that he looked up in surprise and beheld the bloodshot eyes and unshaven countenance of Joseph Buquet.

“I’ll take my place,” he said, almost naturally, but for the unnaturally erect way he held himself, the careful precision of his speech (a very drunk man would do his best to act sober, after all). Then, with a mocking inclination of his head and a sneer, added, “If you don’t mind.”

“I do,” Erik replied, boredly. “Toddle off home, Buquet. Lots of water now! And asparagus, if you can find it. The English swear by it as a preventative for un gueule de bois, you know.”

Buquet’s mouth twisted down and his red eyes narrowed, he drove a finger into Erik’s bony chest and insisted, “Give me my place! I’m here, aren’t I? What else do you want, you shit? Stick me on the flies, in properties, you dog me! I could be cleaning out the gutters and you’d be dogging me - cur that you are - swine that you are? Like that, eh? Swine.”

He might have stormed off, then. Called to one of the other men, one who Buquet actually liked, to talk him down, see him home. If he’d been a better man, a more thoughtful man rather than just a clever one, he would have done just that. If he’d been...but he hadn’t. He’d been Erik and Erik was a disrespectful hothead who paid no one a compliment unless it was deserved. Who couldn’t be counted on to keep a civil tongue in his head even under the best of circumstances.

“It’ll be a cold day in hell before I follow you into the gutter,” Erik retorted.

“It’s where you belong,” Buquet spat at him hatefully. “You and your kind.”

Erik - clever Erik, clever thoughtless Erik - had a revelation. Just a small one. But one that turned his mouth to a sneer and made him bend the knobs of his spine down so he was leering over Buquet
like a particularly haughty scarecrow.

“Do you know?” Erik asked, cocking an eyebrow down at Buquet, all swagger and arrogance - all the things Buquet, he knew, hated most about him. “I had a think and it occurred to me...odd, isn’t it, that it should only just have occurred to me...Joseph. Simon. What was your mother’s surname? Perhaps we’re near cousins after all!”

Buquet’s already dark expression turned twisted. “Shut your filthy fucking mouth.”

“Could be, couldn’t it?” Erik said, his voice low, but clear as he advanced on Buquet, bending down to look him more closely in the eye. “Maybe you were told when you were small that there was this little secret shame in your family, mustn’t be talked about. Maybe your mother or her mother converted and you thought that was that, all would be right. You’d take your place at the table. But you haven’t have you?”

“Think you’re better than me,” Buquet muttered, staggering backward into the flies, but staying upright even as Erik advanced. “Think you’re more of a man - ”

“Not more,” Erik hissed, jaw tight and eyes narrow. “Only just as much of a man as you. And that drives you mad, doesn’t it? Some filthy, fucking Jewish buggerer comes up from the country and he’s set before you? You work under him. Is that the problem, has that always been the problem?”

“You’re the problem,” Buquet spat up at him, fists clenching. “You...you...monster. Think you’re just as man as I am? Think you’d have the respect of the men if they knew what you are? A circus freak? Sinning, buggering - not half the man I am. You’re halfway to a eunuch, men like you. And no wonder. From the first, they cut you, don’t they? Little wonder you turned out the way you did. Disgusting.”

Seized by rage, unreasoning fury, Erik trapped Buquet between his arms, hands gripping the flies rail, his pale face inches from Buquet’s red one.

“Why the sudden interest in my cock, Buquet?” he hissed. “Worried - even after I’ve been cut, as you say - it won’t fit?”

Erik’s head hit the floor with a crack. Blinking stars out of his eyes, his hands came up to strike at tear at any piece of Buquet he can hit - here a cheek, there an ear - but Buquet was more overwhelmed by fury than even Erik was and his blows came, clumsy and heavy upon his head, chest, and arms.

At first, there were murmurs, hands pulling the men apart, gripping at arms, collars, and jackets, but they were locked in a dangerous embrace, neither aware of anyone around them, the consequences of brawling during a performance, of what it could cost them.

One of Buquet’s fingernails opened a wound above Erik’s eye and blood started trickling into his field of vision, making it difficult to see. He finally reared his head back and smacked Buquet square on the nose. He heard a satisfying pop and Buquet, drew back, giving Erik just enough time to scramble out from under him.

Erik staggered to his feet, hand on the back of his head, feeling the base of his skull. Rene was hovering nearby and made toward him, but Edouard, who’d come scampering down the ropes when he saw and heard the commotion gave a sudden yelp that even the actors onstage heard.

“What?” Erik asked blankly when he saw Buquet look over at him and smile.

With a roar of rage he seized Erik by the shirt and though Erik was strong enough, he did not weigh
very much and it was easy for Buquet to drag him toward the stage.

“You monster,” he growled, not bothering to keep his voice down. “You wretch. You demon. Thought you’d brazen it out, did you? They’ll see. Let them see. How low you are.”

Erik had managed to get his spindly fingers wrapped around one of Buquet’s thick thumbs - bend it back, easy to pop it out of joint, spare him a few seconds to get out of his grip and regain his bearings - when Buquet, with all his strength, increased by drink and fury, hurled him bodily onto the stage.

There was a table and Erik couldn’t get his legs under him. He hit it and the whole lot collapsed under him, searing pain seizing his arm. There was a gasp from the house and startled yelps from the actors.

Erik merely lay there, the lights searing his eyes after the darkness of backstage. There were feet running toward him, a small hand turning him over, then Christine’s blurry, horrified face swam into his vision.

He was choking on blood. It was running down the back of his throat. He coughed and sat up. She drew away with a cry as his hand went to his face...his bare face.

Had he been dozing? Or daydreaming? Lost in a horrifying reverie of memories - could something be a memory if it happened an hour ago? Either way, he was snapped into sudden awareness, ears buzzing with the sound of those screams. It sounded like hundreds of people. It sounded...like the fair.

After that, his recollections were spotty. Running into the night, jacket abandoned. The air was freezing and he choked on it. He’d gotten home in an instant. Fumbled his keys, once twice, numb fingers having trouble with the lock. All the money from his pocketbook sifting through his fingers. The mask. The awful, necessary mask.

One for Rouen. No. No return at this time.

They’d take him in, he was sure. The children would ooh and ahh over his wounds and his mother would fuss. He’d no doubt they’d take him in.

Once they heard the whole, sad story, though...would they let him stay?

He didn’t know. Part of him didn’t care. Part of him did with an ache that seemed to spread from the center of his chest out through his fingertips. Or perhaps Buquet had kicked him. Drunk and goaded into snapping. By the insolent upstart from the provinces who didn’t know enough to keep to his place. Whose stubborn arrogance, whose playing at being a man, being Erik brought him to this.

The bile rose again. He swallowed it.

Sick. Sick to his stomach. Over what he’d done. What he was. What he’d turned himself into.

He shouldn’t even be there, had no right to that house, those people who never caused any harm to anyone, who bore their shattered windows and withdrawn neighbors with quiet dignity. He wasn’t like them. Wasn’t worthy of them.

Yet the train sped back and he had no thought of getting off at another spot. There was no place else for him to go. And...maybe there never had been, despite his pretensions.

He did not sleep again. Did not dream. Only sat, alone, in the dark of the compartment. And waited
for the train to stop.
He awoke to sunlight and the unaccustomed sight of seven perplexed faces staring down at him. Vision blurred, mind hazy, he struggled to recall where exactly he was - for one disconcerting instant he thought he’d fallen asleep in his cage at the fair (which happened from time to time when Wilhelm was droning on and on about how horrifying he was, hoping to drum up more business). Yet he was usually roused into wakefulness by a forceful clanging on the bars, not a polite cough.


The events of the night previous rushed back, fresh and terrible to recall. He shut his eyes and groaned.

“Ah, there, you see? He’s perfectly alright,” Maman’s voice sounded, impatient, but laced with tremendous concern. “Off to school with you now.”

At once Claude begged off, claiming a sour stomach. Emilie demanded to know why Isaac was wearing a mask. Marthe, in her sweet quiet way, asked if he was really alright.

“I’m sure he’s just had too much to drink,” Mathilde replied as the younger children were herded toward the door.

Anna-Lise chided her and said she was sure Isaac had only taken a very late train.

“Perhaps he wanted to be here for the new baby…” her voice trailed off as she shut his bedroom door with a quiet ‘click,’ of the latch.

Claude made one final observation before their voices faded away, “He’s been visiting so much, I think he ought to just stay home!”

“What need have we of a baby in this family?” Maman muttered under her breath. “When we’ve such a one as this. Up, Isaac! I don’t care how much your head aches!”

And to add insult to injury she pulled the curtains apart and threw open the windows, sending a sharp gust of cold air whipping through the room.

Through half-closed eyes, he saw Papa wince.

“Have a heart, Marie - ”

“Oh, I have,” Maman cut him off sharply. “I certainly have and your son has given it a through pummelling these past months, I’ll tell you - turning up in the middle of the night! No letter! No word! And in such a state! Up, Isaac! I let you keep your own counsel last time and now look at you!”

Yes, he thought, awash in self-pity. Look at me.

But he obliged her. Sitting up, every passing minute making him more aware of the ache in his
knuckles, his head, the feeling of dried blood in the corners of his eyes. Let him be Isaac, then. For however long he was granted the privilege.

The room tilted dizzily, the act of sitting up nearly landing him on the floor, but Papa had been beside him and caught his scrawny arms as he started to pitch and sway, gently guiding him back against the headboard. Maman was unmoved.

“You might at least have taken your boots off,” she chided, eyeing the dirty coverlet with distaste. “And that mask. Take it off, Isaac. Take it off.”

“I don’t want to take it off,” he said wearily, closing his eyes. Now he remembered. The long walk in the dark and cold. Fingers fumbling on the hidden latches he’d installed years ago so that he might come and go without tromping through the whole house (while Maman was content with the illusion that the door was tightly locked). Collapsing on the bed, certain he’d never sleep again, but he must have nodded off as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Maman put her hands on her hips and ‘tsked’ impatiently. “Really, Isaac, I’ve had quite enough - ”

“It’s stuck,” he clarified, finally looking up at her through the eyeholes of the mask. “I was bleeding.”

Now it was Maman’s turn to close her eyes, but she opened them very quickly and started for the kitchen, “I’ll boil some water.”

Papa rose as well, but not before he gave his son’s shoulder a squeeze.

“Scissors,” he said, by way of explanation.

He was not left alone for long. Pale sunlight filtered in through his grandmother’s Breton lace curtains. She’d passed away in this room. On this bed, if he wasn’t much mistaken. In his mind, it was always ‘Mémère’s Room,’ he only ever borrowed it. That ought to have made the prospect of being thrown out on his ear easier to bear. But it wasn’t. It wasn’t.

His parents returned quickly, Papa holding a pair of tiny sewing scissors, Maman standing by with a bucket of steaming water and some fresh rags, passing them silently to his father. Doubtless they’d had words for she gave no more criticism, asked no more questions. Just stood by in sullen silence, reproaching him through looks only.

Papa worked carefully, but the mask was unsalvageable, rendered useless with the cutting and the blood. Maman would get to live her dream at last and burn it. As gently as his father tried to be, his thin flesh still reopened and trickled fresh blood onto his collar, over his lips. Droplets clung to his eyelashes like tears.

“I’m getting the tub,” Maman shook her head and looked away, leaving the rags and the cooling water behind.

“Don’t, Marie, it’s too heavy for you - ” but Papa stopped himself and sighed only as she swept out of the room, arms folded tightly in front of her. He wrung out the washcloth and dabbed gently at the worst of it, taking especial care around where the nose ought to have been. It resembled nothing so much as a great, bloody scab. Isaac could smell it, taste it on the back of his throat. It almost made him gag.

Papa had no such reaction. His face was still and almost blank, but for the worry lines that creased his forehead, even when he smiled. Papa used to say he had one wrinkle for every child, but Isaac didn’t doubt he was responsible for all of them.
“Sorry,” Isaac mumbled, ducking his head and lowering his eyes. “It’s horrible.”

“Not as bad as the time you had the measles,” his father reminded him and smiled briefly.

“You’re never going to let that go are you?” Isaac asked as a trickle of blood ran down from a cut on his brow.

Papa made a pained noise and cleaned up the blood, “Never. It was very distressing for me.”

“But not for me?”

“I hardly think so,” Papa shook his head. “You were out of your mind with fever the whole time, I’m sure you don’t remember a thing. You kept crying for your mother, it very much hurt my feelings to know I was so inadequate.”

Such a homely, careworn face his father had. Such a good man he was. How could he ever say such things about himself, even in jest?

“Hardly inadequate,” Isaac scoffed. “I lived, didn’t I? For all the good it’s done me, or anyone - ”

“Hé,” Papa’s voice was stern and his face solemn. “None of that. Do you hear me, my boy? None of that. Your mother and I have worked very hard for thirty long years to keep your body and soul together.”

“What a terrible return on your investment - ”

“Isaac!” Papa lowered the cloth and shouted this time. It produced quite the effect. His son sat bolt upright upon the bed and shut his mouth at once. “Arrête!”

After that outburst the room was silent, save for the drip, drip of the water and Isaac’s breathing.

A knock at the door. Maman stuck her head in, informed them that the tub had been dragged in from the shed and she was going out to run a few errands.

“When I return,” she concluded, pinning her hat to her head with rather more force than necessary. “I expect you clean and dressed. And I also expect an explanation.”

Papa gathered up the dirty water and the rags. “Stove’s lit,” he said, in contrast to his earlier tone. “I’ll leave you to it.”

Like a parasite he preyed on their hospitality, peeling off his shirt and jacket until he was barefoot in his undershirt, braces and trousers. Maman had dragged the tub in, but left Isaac to his own devices to heat some water and fill it. This he did, first with cool water from the pump, supplementing with boiling water from the stove until the lot was hot enough to scrub the worst of the night off. When was the last time he’d had a proper bath? Lisette’s wedding, no doubt.

He needed one; there was blood encrusted in his hair, which he felt as he ran a hand over his head in a useless gesture. Mechanically he employed himself in the preparation of a bath. First the water.

Then, find a cake of soap. Then discard all those worn, dirty clothes he’d arrived in. And scrub like he’d take his skin off. And wouldn’t that be novel? Maybe there was a better man underneath.

Dripping and shivering he toweled off the water and dressed himself from the clothes in his room. Donning his father’s heavy coat (too broad in the shoulders, too short in the sleeves) he dragged the tub out the back door. In the weak sunlight he caught a glimpse of himself in the still water. Bruised. Hideous. Ghastly. He snarled at his own reflection and heaved the lukewarm water into the garden,
melting the little crust of snow and ice that remained over their vegetable patch. The snow was briefly crimson before it vanished into the hard earth.

A monstrous failure. *Monstrous.*

He hung the tin tub back up in the shed, where it sat until they had use for it. Then he trudged back inside, hoping Maman’s errands involved a tremendous lot of talk with the neighbors.

Clearly, he’d been successful in his attempt to focus his mind solely on the present. For Isaac failed to realize that if he was wearing his father’s coat, that meant Papa was not wearing it. And if Papa was not wearing his coat, that meant Papa never left the house.

The smell of vanilla pipe smoke, warm and inviting, wafted out of the sitting room.

“Isaac,” Papa called as he heard the kitchen door close. “Come in here.”

Too old for a thrashing, Isaac nevertheless walked with leaden feet toward the sitting room. What was it to be? A lecture, then the boot? His father was a kind man; perhaps he’d offer him a few coins to ease his way before he ordered him out of the house.

Papa was not sitting in his customary armchair, but on the sofa; he bade Isaac sit beside him. The cushions sagged beneath his weight; his knees came up over the edge of the sofa. Isaac sat on the edge of the cushions, hunched, wary, and ready to run.

Papa exhaled a cloud of smoke. Looked at him. And asked, “What happened?”

What more did he have to lose? Isaac told him - not quite everything. He left off the bit where Joseph Buquet loathed him for being a buggerer. But he said enough. How difficult it was to balance his place at the opera. Half workingman, half artist. How difficult it was to command respect from the men under him. How Joseph Buquet took against him.

How he made no effort to mend fences. How he goaded the fellow. Wouldn’t let well enough alone. How he smirked and laughed at him, and was more *himself* than he’d any right to be.

“I behaved abysmally,” he concluded. “We came to blows. During a *performance.* I...fled. Like a coward. Ran. Came here. I had…”

*Nowhere else to go.*

“No right to do so,” Isaac said, staring at his hands, clasped loosely in front of him. He swallowed hard. Did not look at his father. “I’m sorry.”

Sorry for so many things. All these years he’d been bitter. Bitter that they’d not had more money. A better position in town. Bitter that he’d not benefited from the charitable inclinations of the Marinists and Christian Brothers - but what if he had? What if he’d had the university education that he craved, the respect he wanted? What if it was handed to him? An ordinary life, a leg up, a better start?

Where was the guarantee that just because he was *given* advantages he wouldn’t squander him? Isaac was a young man without direction, drowning in ambition. Erik was a volatile idiot, who managed to scrape together something better for himself and bring it all to a ruinous end in ten minutes. He’d been both. Played at both. And failed equally at being both men.

“Blood will out,” Papa muttered, scrubbing a hand over his face.

For a second, he was confused, thinking that his father was talking about laundry. After all he’d said,
Papa was worried about getting blood out of his shirts?

“What?”

Papa sat up straighter, letting the pipe smoke faintly in his slack grip. He closed his eyes, shook his head and sighed.

“You are…”

A disgrace. A disappointment. No son of mine.

“You are just like me,” Papa raised his head and looked at Isaac with red, wet eyes. “My God, Isaac...How long? How long has all this been going on? And you said nothing.”

It was nothing like he expected. Shouting and condemnation, yes. Sympathy? No. Not even from such a man as his father.

“There was nothing to say,” Isaac replied, slowly. “What was I...who was there to listen? Vaucorbeil, I tried to tell him that Buquet was incompetent, but - ”

“You could have told me,” Papa said with sudden passion, seizing his son’s long, bony hands in his broad ones, squeezing tightly and looking him right in the eyes. “I might have...I was just your age, wasn’t I? Yes, just your age when I lost my temper with the partners at the firm. I sought...an elevated position. I’d worked for them for ten years. I had a family. And saw men with less skill than I given more responsibility, stakes in the company. And why not me, I asked. And they told me.”

Papa’s eyes went far away and his tone was dark. “Blood will out, they said. They were happy to hire a Jew, particularly one skilled at his work, diligent and careful. But no more than a laborer. Not a partner. Because blood will out. That no matter how I acted, I could not deny what I was. And sooner or later, I’d show how deeply unlike them I was.”

This was not the story Isaac had been told. Papa quit the masonry trade for his health, Maman said. To avoid going to an early grave. Carpentry and house-building was a better occupation. They’d decided on it together. Isaac had only been ten when his father found new employment. He’d accepted the story without question.

Not so, he learned now. Papa quit on the spot. Gave up the place, the financial security, the respectable trade out of pride. Without consulting Maman. He’d not come to blows with his employer.

“But my temper got me in the end,” he said, shaking his head in shame. “I’ve a terrible temper. And a worse streak of pride. And so have you - only rather the reverse, eh, Isaac? Anna-Lise told me how you live. Where you live.”

His heart pounded in his ears, he felt dizzy all over again. Did she tell him - did she suspect - did she know…

“In a hovel,” Papa continued. “A one room flatshare with a single burner and a gaslamp, sharing quarters with another fellow so your family might have your wages. Putting nothing by for yourself. And why? Because of me. Because I threw away a decent life for my family and started over, forcing my son out of the house, into...an ignoble business - ”

“No, no, it wasn’t…”

“- when he ought to have gone to university,” Papa continued. “So clever, so talented, a genius.
You have so much...you’re meant for so much more than all of this Isaac. If anyone squandered an opportunity, it was me. When you were a child. I set you on the wrong path from the start. And I am so sorry.”

Isaac shook his head, on the verge of denying the whole story. No, it’s not possible, Papa. You’ve never taken a wrong step in your life. Not you. You’re the best man I know.

But he blinked and it was like looking at his father with new eyes. There was more silver than honey-brown in his hair. His beard wanted a trim. There were lines of worry not only on his brow, but around his eyes. Dark circles. And his hands, where they still grasped his, shook slightly.

Papa was a man, after all. And men...men made mistakes. Vaucorbeil, putting his own artistry over profit. Joseph Buquet, making his brother run around town, compensating for his mistakes. Simon Buquet, preferring to put out the fires his brother started rather than confiscating the matches. Even poor little Raoul, hiding his leavetaking from Christine so he could play at being a devoted lover.

And Dalir. Foolishly loving a man who was only an act, at the end of the day. A country boy’s imagination of what a man of the world might look like.

Still, a man. At the end of the day, how could any of them pretend to be anything else? Isaac squeezed his father’s hands, calmed their trembling.

“Don’t...don’t make yourself sick over it,” he said quietly. “I don’t...I don’t hold it against you. How could I?”

Papa laughed hollowly, releasing his hands and wiping the moisture from his eyes. “You might. Easily. Your mother does - oh, not every day. She’s too practical and dear for that. But sometimes...she wishes things were different. How could she not?”

It was Isaac’s turn to laugh. “Well. No doubt you wished things were different the instant you saw this little ghoul masquerading as a baby - ”

“Isaac,” Papa looked at him gravely. He shook his head. “No. We wanted you to...survive. At first, that was all. It’s only that we - well. Both of your parents are ambitious. We want you to thrive as well. And that’s proving more difficult.”

He tried for humor; tried to be a good son, a good man. It might be too late for a lot of things, but surely it couldn’t be too late for that. “Worse than nursing me through the measles?”

Papa laughed, a genuine, full-throated laugh this time and his discolored eyes crinkled as he looked at his son with all the tenderness and love in the world. “Not so...taxing. But it is taking rather longer than your bout of measles. This bit, anyway. That’s the thing about children. Even when they’re no longer children...you never quite have done with raising them.”

The front door opened with a sudden burst of sound. Lisette stood upon the doorway, breath misting the air, belly proceeding her, fury and indignance burning hot enough out of her eyes to bring back the summer blossoms.

“Maman’s been fretting at my house for an hour,” she informed them, head drawn up, hood of her cloak falling over her shoulders. Her face was red and flushed, her breath a trifle labored. “I told her all the fuss would just have to wait. Would either of you be good enough to fetch Madame Broulliard? And then David? I hate to interrupt your latest crisis, Isaac, but the baby will be here sooner than not.”
Dun-Dun-DUUUUUUUUUUN! Baby Bensimon is going to make an appearance! I knew the Astrucs wouldn't let him down. But what's been happening in Paris?
Christine remembered very little about the immediate aftermath of the accident - for that was what it was. An unforeseen accident. The initial assessment done by the police and the fire service (and, of course, the insurers), blamed the wiring. Their electric lights, which had caused so much disruption early in the season.

“Insufficiently insulated wiring,” Raoul read from the morning papers, only a day after the accident. “The heat from the electricity burned right through the steel cables.”

Oh, yes, Raoul had come to breakfast. And to tea. And, when they enjoyed a few warm days, they went for rides through the gloomy parks and boulevards in his coach. They talked of skating together, if another cold snap blew through before he left.

The one reality that she was cognizant of, as the cast huddled backstage, listening to the ushers and concierge attempt to restore order in the house, was Raoul’s arm around her, steadying her and she was too upset to care what it must look like to other people - if anyone was even paying them any mind.

All attention was focused on M. Moncharmin, rolling his program between his hands, looking anxiously beyond the curtains and pondering aloud whether or not the performance might continue after a sufficient intermission…

Raoul alone voiced what the rest of the company was thinking; bully for him, he hadn’t a job on the line, despite everything.

“Yes you mad?” he asked, voice raised and incredulous. “People have been hurt! Possibly killed! And you want to carry on? Have you no decency? An ounce of human sympathy?”

M. Moncharmin had enough sense to look chagrined. He flushed under the bristles of his side-whiskers and muttered that it was only a suggestion. That, despite appearances, the damage was not quite as catastrophic as they feared.

In the end, they all went home. The production was put on indefinite suspension.

And, it was revealed, a woman had been killed after all. So much for Moncharmin’s optimism.

Christine went home in her costume; no one stopped her and she did not paused to wipe the greasepaint from her face, stopping briefly in the dressing room to retrieve her reticule with her house keys. Raoul took off his jacket and slipped it round her shoulders when they got outside.

“Your cloak, your hat…?” she asked weakly, stupidly, but he shook his head.

“I’ll see you home,” he insisted stubbornly and hailed a cab.

“Won’t your brother wonder where you’ve got to?” she asked. “And your companions?”

Raoul shook his head and opened his mouth as if to retort, but in the end he turned his face away from her and muttered something that she could not hear distinctly, but sounded rather like, “Hang them all.”
The streets were a clot of cabs, hacks, and coaches, all cluttered round to remove the traumatized spectators. Christine saw stretchers being run up the stairs and turned away, sick to her stomach.

Raoul caught her under the elbow as she swayed and must have handed her up into a cab soon after because the next thing she knew, all she was conscious of was the beat of his heart under her ear, the smell of his cologne. She lifted her head and saw a smear of paint left in the wake of her cheek.

“I’ve ruined your shirt,” she observed sadly.

Raoul leaned his head down and pressed a brief kiss to the top of her head. “I have others.”

“What a sight, eh, monsieur?” the cabbie cried down to them. “Bad performance?”

“Something like that,” Raoul sighed deeply, crushing Christine more tightly to him. She let herself be crushed, let him take the lead, even letting him take the keys from her shaking hands when she could not manage the lock on the door. He sat her down on the sofa in the parlor and poked the fire back into something like life; Christine shivered violently when the flames leaped up. She’d not realized that she was cold, that she was shivering. Though, of course, she must have been to have had such trouble with the door.

Raoul disappeared into the kitchen, returning with a teacup into which he poured a tipple of brandy from the sideboard.

“Just a drop for your nerves,” he cautioned her, handing the teacup over. Christine was not accustomed to strong drink and the brandy did more harm than good; she coughed and Raoul took the cup away.

“Tea,” he muttered. “Have you any - never mind. Just...remain right as you are. I’ll take care of you - everything. I’ll take care of everything.”

_I should wash,_ Christine thought numbly._I should...I ought to do something._

But she couldn’t stand, couldn’t make herself get off the sofa, not even to kick off her ridiculous frilled pumps, leftover from another production, toes stuffed with old newspaper and cotton that they might fit her.

Sitting with no occupation was no help. All she could remember was the hideous crash, the screams from the spectators, from the cast, and all that blood -

But no. The blood had not been from the chandelier, but from -

_Erik!_

In all the madness she’d quite forgotten about him - imagine! When she’d seen him tussling with another workman, she’d been horrified, had nearly run offstage to ask him what in God’s name he thought he was about…

Then there he was before her. Flung at her feet like a broken marionette.

_Broken._

At first she hadn’t realized what she was seeing, thought he was so tremendously roughed up that she couldn’t make sense of his injuries. There was so much blood, after all, running in rivers down his sunken eye sockets, pooling at the corners of his thin lips. _gushing_ from...well, from his...but there hadn’t been -
The sight was horrible. But then, it was nothing compared to what was to follow. And so she’d promptly forgotten. Until she sat in the still and quiet and remembered that she’d not seen Erik in the aftermath.

“Erik!” she exclaimed and Raoul ran in from the kitchen. His shirtsleeves were rolled up and his necktie was undone.

“What is it?” he asked, kneeling before her, all concern.

Tears gathered in Christine’s eyes and her hands trembled again. Raoul took her hands in his and stilled them.

“I didn’t see Erik, after...oh, he was so hurt! He was bleeding and - ”

“Shh, shh,” Raoul hushed her, running his thumbs in circles on the backs of her hands. “Erik wasn’t, I’m sure of it - he wouldn’t have been in the house anyway, Christine. Just...just take a nice deep breath and - ”

“He was,” she insisted, breath coming too fast and she could feel her face getting red and hot. “I saw him! Oh, God, his face! He looked...I don’t know what happened to him. But his face. And I didn’t see him after and what if he’s...what if…”

But words were beyond her and she broke down sobbing. Raoul got up and joined her on the sofa, arms wrapped round her, tucking her head under his chin.

“There, there,” he soothed. “I’m sure he’s quite alright. Maybe...maybe you didn’t see what you thought you saw, eh? We can pay a call tomorrow, you and I. Hmm? We’ll just look in on Erik and Dalir, won’t we? I’m sure Erik will raise Cain - or didn’t you tell me he had his doubts about the chandelier?”

That was right, Christine recalled as her sobs tapered off and her breathing evened out. That day they were alone together in the auditorium. He said he thought the electricians erred when they rehung the chandelier. Why hadn’t anyone listened to him?

“And the managers will have to eat crow - more than that, by God,” Raoul continued grimly. “What an awful scene. What an awful thing…”

His voice faded and they sat like that for quite some time, holding one another until Raoul remembered the kettle and retrieved a cup of tea for her. This time the drop of brandy did not make her cough, mellowed as it was in the tea. Christine felt tremendously tired all at once and Raoul helped her rise to her feet, gently suggesting that she go to bed. He’d come to her first thing in the morning.

“Won’t you…” she stopped, bit her lip, looked at the floor between them.

Won’t you stay the night?

she wanted to ask, but couldn’t. She simply...couldn’t.

Raoul bent down and kissed her brow. “First thing. I’ll come at first light. Wild dogs couldn’t keep me away. I promise.”

Christine looked up at him, eyes red, makeup run down her face, into her collar, at the mess she’d made of his shirt. “Do you, really?”

Raoul nodded solemnly and swallowed thickly. “As long as I can...I...I may not have forever by your side, I may not be able to promise you...always. But so long as I am able, I shall be yours. If you’ll have me. I...I love you, Christine.”
Such a simple, sad declaration of love, but love it was all the same.

“I love you,” Christine replied, her tone tremulous, voice a whisper. They did not even kiss on it. Raoul touched her cheek, his fingers feather-light, drifting briefly to tangle in her knotted curls. Then he bade her a gentle good-night, and was gone.

But he was good as his word. He came back just as the weak sunlight touched the top of the houses, though he came with distressing news: Erik was gone.

He’d dropped by the flat and spoken briefly with Dalir who assured him that Erik was fine, at least, he thought so. That he’d been home, taken some personal effects, likely gone to the country since none of their friends knew where he was.

René Ferrand had given him a brief recollection of the night before; it was Joseph Buquet who had come to work, drunk, and picked a fight with him. At least, that was René’s take on things. As far as he could tell, Erik ordered Buquet off the property, Buquet hadn’t gone, then he took a swing at him. Of course, in light of the greater tragedy, two of the stagehands coming to blows hardly seemed a thing worth going over with management. Or anyone else, for that matter. They had much bigger concerns on their hands.

“But why would he leave? Just like that?” Christine asked as they sat in the parlor, waiting for the first of the morning papers to come off the presses with details from the night before. “When he was in such a state! He ought to have gone to a doctor! I think that Buquet man must have had a knife, been out of his mind! I think he...oh, he looked mutilated! I think he cut off his nose!”

Raoul coughed and looked embarrassed. “Ah. I don’t doubt that he...hit him very hard. But as to the...er...issue of...well...ahem.”

Christine looked at him strangely and he confessed that he had some little knowledge of the matter; that Erik had evidently been born missing some - ah. Well, one to be precise...facial extremities.

Christine did not have it in her to be surprised, not overmuch. Actually, it brought a few facts about Erik into clearer focus. His time in a freakshow, for example. His occasional bouts of strange modesty for a man who could be so commanding and arrogant the remainder of the time. Why his conversation invited company, but not intimacy. Had she learned this all a week ago, she might have been vexed. Wondered why Erik didn’t simply tell her, would have been frustrated that he did not trust her or consider her a true friend.

Now...now so many things seemed to be falling apart that it was hardly worth marking. Oh, Erik was deformed, was he? No matter what his face looked like, it hardly compared to a woman being crushed under the counterweights of the chandelier. It was a trifle, in the grand scheme of things.

The paper came. Raoul read out the investigator’s report over toast, since no one was particularly hungry. Mamma Valerius was told of the tragedy in the gentlest way; the kindly lady was rightly horrified, patted Christine and Raoul’s hands and muttered about ‘you poor dears’ having to see such a sight. Then she declared she’d never have the house wired; electricity was far too dangerous, being invisible. At least gas could be smelled and flame could be seen.

“Sometimes, the march of progress ought to be halted,” she declared, shaking her head sadly.

And so they talked of other things. The brightening weather. The possibility of skating. Christine penned a brief note to Anna-Lise, inquiring after Erik. They did not go to the Opéra. It was as though they themselves were halted, stuck in a limbo of action and feeling, with no end in sight.
Still, it was sweet, in its own way. As long as the air continued cold, the water in the gutters was frozen when Christine woke of a morning, Raoul was there. To ride with her, to talk with her, to hold her hand and kiss her and tell her he loved her. One surety in an uncertain world. Until the thaw came. Not for always. Not forever. But for now.

Chapter End Notes

I took some liberties with the chandelier incident - although the counterweight did fall because of crossed wires burning through the steel cables, it didn't take months for this to happen, but years. According to one source, the audience actually filed out with minimal panic and confusion though one person was indeed killed (and many others injured) and I have no idea whether the opera went on hiatus in the aftermath, but I've decided to follow the ALW timeline in this regard and give them at least a few weeks to make repairs and get the next production started. Show must go on, right?
Nothing was better for taking Isaac’s mind off his own suffering than his sister having a baby. Nothing illustrated quite how self-centered he was being quite like his sister having a baby. For the next twenty hours, all that he could think of was Lisette’s well-being. There wasn’t room in his mind or heart for anything he’d left in Paris.

There had been precious little for him to occupy himself with - though the task of fetching the midwife seemed to drag on and on. Madame Broulliard was home when he called, but seemed very nonchalant about the whole thing; she insisted on preparing a poultice to bring down the swelling on Isaac’s face before she gathered up her hat, cloak, and little bag of instruments to make the journey up the hill to Isaac’s parents’ home.

Lisette insisted on only one provision for the birth: that she labor at her parents’ home. She was entertaining a bit of superstition: her mother had seven good deliveries in that house and she hoped some of that good fortune held true in her case.

The birth was attended by their mother and Anna-Lise. Mathilde was brought in to be of some little assistance, but was ordered out of the room when she erred by bringing the “good washing-up linens” instead of the “bad washing-up linens.” Isaac dug the old rags out of the back of the linen cupboard and was permitted to pass them through a doorway provided he turn his face away and not say a word. He was under strict orders not to tease anyone until after the baby was born. That wasn’t Lisette’s order either, but their mother’s.

It was a long day and night of monkish silence for Isaac - despite Lisette’s insistence on calling for the midwife at once, the baby wasn’t born until the following dawn, almost a full day after she felt the first insistent labor pains.

“First babies take ages,” Papa counseled David at regular intervals throughout the day (and most of the night). “Not to worry - if things weren’t going along nicely, you’d know. Believe me.”

Papa took over the kitchen, preparing a simple supper for the family, since Maman was otherwise occupied. The little ones ate with gusto, but the older children only picked at their food and David ate nearly nothing at all. Anna-Lise or, more rarely, Maman might make an appearance with soiled rags or a request for a soaking bucket, or boiling water, but they brought little in the way of information.

When pressed for information Anna-Lise just shrugged and Maman sighed.

“He’ll come when he’ll come,” she’d reply, a bit impatiently. “And won’t come any faster for nagging.”

David spent a night on the sofa, presumably not sleeping at all while while Isaac passed an equally fitful night, for he was forced to give up half of his bed to his father who snored like a freight train. Eventually he gave up on sleep and dressed himself. He wandered into the parlor where he found David, picking at loose threads on the quilt they’d given him for bedding and looking wretched.

“Coffee?” Isaac asked quietly.

“Please,” David replied.
There was not as much noise as one might expect. Sometimes slow, plodding footsteps. Every once
in a while a low moan or exhausted cry that made David startle and look up at the ceiling as though,
if he exerted enough will he might be able to see through the plaster.

“All this time,” he said when Isaac returned with the coffee. “I’ve only been thinking of how it might
be for her. Not how awful it might be for me.”

“You had your thinking the right way round, I think,” Isaac replied grimly. Delivering babies was a
risky business. Oh, to be sure, there were ladies in the village who boasted about giving birth to their
tenth and not a week later tramping off with their scythes to bring in the wheat harvest. And many a
woman who boasted broods of ten or more. But there were widowers among them who had buried
wives and children. Some whose wives were nearing middle age when they passed, whose bodies
simply couldn’t handle the strain of one more birth. Some with two or three children small children
left bereft and motherless. And still some would-be husbands and fathers who no longer had the
opportunity to be either. Hollow-eyed and pale who couldn’t help thinking that it wasn’t meant to be
like this.

“Are there prayers for this?” David asked, clearly overcome with the idea that he must do something.

Isaac shook his head, “If there are, I don’t know them.”

He joined his brother-in-law, sitting side by side on the sofa. David looked over at him and flinched.

“Isaac! I never noticed your face - ”

“Forget it,” he shook his head and rolled his eyes. “It isn’t important now.”

“At least tell me how many there were,” David implored, the ghost of a smile cracking the doom-
and-gloom expression he’d been sporting all day.

“One,” Isaac said with a sigh. “But one was enough.”

Once again they lapsed into silence. Isaac filled their cups once again before a thin wail broke the
silence making both men sit up straight and raise their eyes to the ceiling, limbs tensed immediately
for action.

It was some minutes after the first cry reached their ears that Maman descended the stairs, looking
drawn and pale, but pleased. Her eyes were very red.

“David go on up - Lisette came through splendidly,” she said. David was off like a shot, bounding
up the stairs with enough force and clatter to wake the neighborhood. Isaac rose as well, but she
raised a hand and crossed the remaining steps, wrapping one of her hands around her son’s wrist and
dragging him back down to the sofa.

“How long should I give them together?” he asked, since the prohibition on teasing was off, seeing
as mother and baby appeared to be perfectly alright. “I want to dart up there, establish myself as the
baby’s favorite uncle - not that Claude’s likely to be stiff competition, but - ”

“Isaac,” Maman said quietly. It was only then that he noticed, just how tightly she was gripping his
hands, how intently she was looking into his face. He knew, then. Knew without being told.

“There’s more than a passing family resemblance,” Maman said, more tactfully than the situation
merited, he thought. “Now, the little dear’s much sturdier than ever you were - honestly, Isaac, I
think he weighs more now than you did at six months, you were such a little slip of a thing - ”
“How bad?” he asked, his voice little more than a whisper, even as his mind raced, *Oh God, not that, I thought - I worried - but I thought it couldn’t be. What have they done to deserve it? Not a thing. Not a blessed thing.*

“Not bad,” Maman said, a trifle indignantly. “Not bad at all - just the same little matter of the nose not being…complete, and once of his ears isn’t either, all wrinkled and closed up. But just the one! And he’s fat as anything, though some of that’s down to the swelling. Oh!”

He’d started to cry. He couldn’t help it. *Poor little wretch.*

Maman stood up, despite her exhaustion and held him as he wept. She trembled too, once or twice, loosing a few tears that hadn’t been wrung out of her upstairs.

“That’s why I wanted to tell you, before you saw,” she murmured quietly. “I knew you’d be nervous and upset and I didn’t want you barging in there and...but honestly, Isaac, it’s not as bad as all that.”

“How’d she take it?” he asked, once he had breath to speak, though he didn’t quite pull away from his mother’s embrace. Then, with more horror, “How will he -”

“Very well,” Maman said firmly. “Oh, we shed a few tears. But Lisette...well. She and David are practical people. Both of them were prepared for such a thing. And do you know what she said?”

Isaac shook his head, fishing around in his pockets for a handkerchief to mop his face up. *Why? Why, when we’ve been such decent people and not done a thing to deserve this?*

“She said,” Maman continued. “That you’d turned out alright. And if her son could turn out to be half so clever and capable as her brother, she’d consider herself a lucky mother indeed.”

Isaac was reckless and foolhardy - but not so much that he’d risk the consequences of calling his mother a liar. So he didn’t. He let the words wash over him and nodded, as though he were taking it all in, as though he could accept that Lisette and David were perfectly alright having a hideous child. That his sister would compliment him, would think of him at all at such a time, except to spit scornfully, *But look at what a mess Isaac’s made of his life! I don’t want a child like that!*

“It’s a boy?” he asked, belatedly realizing that Maman was no longer referring to the baby as ‘he’ in theory.

Maman nodded. “They’re going to call him Jacob - for grandfathers on both sides. Anna-Lise predicted he’ll be Jacques to the neighbors, but what can you do?”

Her hands were back around his wrists, tugging him to his feet, “Come, come - Lisette said she wanted you to be the first to meet him.”

Isaac was still numb as he walked upstairs, bracing himself. What did a smile feel like? Could he manage one? A sweet smile and a sincere congratulations?

*Hatov vehametiv. Really?*

The windows were open to let out the bad air, but there was still a faint foulness clinging to the place that spoke of blood and suffering. Maman gave Isaac a little push over the threshold. Lisette looked pale as he’d ever seen, hair stuck down to her face as though she’d had a bucket of water thrown over her head; even her lips were white. But she was dressed in a clean nightgown, unbuttoned at the throat and looked alright. She smiled to see him and beckoned him over with an impatient flick of her hand that was a signature gesture, despite the ordeal she’d been through.
David was holding the little bundle of wrapped blankets and he looked like a new man. He looked - Isaac nearly rubbed his eyes as if clearing away grit, not quite able to believe the sight - he looked happy. No, not just happy, elated. The lack of sleep must have made him delirious. Isaac could believe David could grudgingly accept the child’s appearance - he was a good man and a generous one and he never doubted that David loved his sister very much and might overcome his disappointment in time, for her sake. But it hardly seemed possible that he should look so thrilled so quickly. Why, even his own parents...

...well, to be fair, he’d no idea how long it took them to come around to the idea of loving such an ugly child. He’d never asked, afraid that he wouldn’t like the answer.

“He’s so small,” David marveled, in a hushed and wondering tone. “Madame Broulliard said he’s -”

“Perfectly average,” the old midwife chuckled, gathering the last of her things. She smiled at Maman and said something about coming round for her payment in the next few days, that she was in no hurry to collect. “Fathers always ooh and ahh over how little their children are - anyway, I’ll just collect my pay and get me gone.”

Maman counted out Madame Broulliard’s payment as Isaac drew closer to the bed. He went round the opposite side to where David was sitting with the baby, bending to give Lisette a tremulous kiss on the forehead. “Brava.”

“Oh, thank you,” she laughed lightly. “Is that a better than ordinary ‘well-done’? Shouldn’t you have sworn at me before I came upstairs, if you really wanted to wish me well in the manner of the theatre?”

She was smiling. Was this all some grand performance? He couldn’t flatter himself that his feelings would be uppermost in everyone’s consideration now. Was it possible...was it possible they truly didn’t mind?

David was holding out the little bundle that fit neatly in his two large hands. “Hold him! Go on! Careful of his neck!”

Lisette rolled her eyes and said there was no need for all that. “Isaac’s taken care of more babies than you’ve met, I’m sure. Isn’t that right, Isaac?”

Indeed he had and his body seemed to operate like a wound-up clockwork figurine, taking the baby by force of habit, settling his head in the crook of his arm, curling underneath the warm weight - and David was right, of course he was. The child was tiny. Impossibly so. And...and...

There were a few strands of dark hair, clinging to the top of his head, still somewhat conical from the birth. The eyes were swollen and squeezed shut. The cheeks round, red, and fat. And yes, the twisted little bit of flesh in the middle of the face with two holes only was a small shock, and yes, the right ear was a wrinkled nub, with no external hole for sound, though the left ear was tiny and perfect and...

Not bad. Not bad at all. Quite as his mother said.

“Mazel tov,” Isaac said, naturally as you’d like. The words weren’t a lie. How could they be?

It would be untrue to say that old attitudes and anxieties were broken for Isaac that morning. Thirty years of worry - some spoken, some not, all deeply felt - could not be undone in an instant. But something in his opinion of himself was shaken loose.

For he hadn’t been damned from the first. He couldn’t have been. Not if he’d come into the world in
much the same way as this little boy - Jacob - with parents who saw no reason not to love him from the beginning.

And so it was the rest of the day. Papa cried, but only because he was so proud, as he told Lisette over and over, giving her and David a dozen kisses apiece. The little ones were allowed in to see their new nephew one at a time. Mathilde asked if it was alright that the soles of his feet were so very purple. Marthe’s eyes went loving and dewy and she cooed that he was adorable. Emilie said he was boring. Claude exclaimed that he was so small! so loudly that he roused little Jacob from a peaceful slumber and earned himself a scolding from Maman.

Not a one said anything at all about his face.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, the Astrucs ran off with the plot! I wound up only having enough room for Jacob's arrival, when I was hoping to include more plot stuff - still, babies are great! And even ugly babies are cute.
Dalir had nearly turned back ten times - and that was only on the trip to the train station.

Doubts plagued him (Obviously he doesn't want you chasing after him, he's gone for good, he'd have left word if he was coming back...), warring with anger (What right had he not to leave word? Three years after all. Three damnable years. And there was the rent to think about...), and finally disbelief (He didn't mean to pack up and go, just like that. He's coming back, isn't he?)

Although, this was how it had always been with them, wasn't it? Erik running about the city and Dalir chasing after him like a faithful dog. A small, prideful part of him burned with shame over the whole affair.

I'm not his wife, he thought bitterly that night he'd come home to find Erik's traveling bag and mask gone with no explanation. I'll not be made to sit here, fretting over where he might have taken himself to.

Hence the train ticket. If Erik thought he could up and go, leave him high and dry, that he didn't even owe him a fucking good-bye, he was thoroughly mistaken. They weren't married. They hadn't any children at home to mind. There was nothing to fetter him to the flat, to Paris, even. The price of getting away from the house was merely the cost of a train ticket.

No, Dalir reflected bitterly as the conductor took his ticket and wished him a good journey. Nothing bound him to Paris. Only to Erik.

Rouen was a dismal little medieval town, to Dalir's eye, with black plumes from the manufactories curling around the church steeples, lending an air of dreariness to the whole place. His impressions were not improved when he was informed that the quaint little village of Saint-Martin-de-Boscherville was located six miles outside the city, and (ha! ha!) no, there was no tram service that went out so far.

"You might have some luck finding transport out of town," a sympathetic attendant at the railway station suggested. "Some of the farmers from around those parts seek work in the factories this time of year. They see themselves home for church with the family on Sundays."

Which was how Dalir found himself crammed, shoulder-to-shoulder in the back of a cart for six jolting miles with two cheerful day-laborers, who spoke to him slowly and loudly, in their ridiculous country accents, assuming him to be a foreigner unaccustomed to the language. The elder of the two was tall, fair-haired and handsome with light blue eyes and an easy smile. The second, and by far the more irritating of the two, was young, skinny, and red-haired with a face equally full of the spots typical of adolescents and freckles.

"LOOKING FOR WORK, MONSIEUR?" the red-haired chap inquired. "MY UNCLE IS A FOREMAN - A BOSS - MAN IN CHARGE! I COULD SEE ABOUT A PLACE FOR YOU. YOU HAVE STRONG ARMS, EH?"

He reached out as though making to squeeze Dalir's upper arm, like a prize steer at auction, but Dalir's glare warned him off.

"I'm employed in Paris," Dalir replied back, perfectly fluently, to the astonishment of the boy and the
amusement of the man. "I'm...visiting."

If he thought that would cease the inquiries, he was sorely mistaken.

"Visiting?" the elder of the two unwanted traveling companions inquired. "What's the family name? Between Henri and myself I'm sure we can make a good accounting of them, at least to tell you where they live."

There was something deeply unsettling about rattling off a surname and being given not merely a place of residence, but an accounting. It reminded him uncomfortably of his family's flat, in a row of homes thickly settled with fellow Persian ex-patriots. Everyone knew everyone's names, families, and characters there too. It had been a relief to be rid of the stifling intimacy of the place. Dalir didn't know how Erik could bear it for weeks at a time on his visits home, but perhaps the distance between houses provided some physical separation from the neighbors that eased matters.

"Astruc," he said, after a short pause. "I have...business with the eldest son."

The man whose uncle was a foreman went ghost-white under his freckles and looked away.

"I'm not much acquainted with the family," he mumbled, hunching his shoulders and inching as far away from Dalir as their scant room in the cart provided.

The older man frowned, but not at Dalir; rather his sour looks were directed to young Henri. "Hmm. I should say not. I know them quite well, monsieur, young M. Astruc especially - Isaac's not in any trouble, is he?"

A worry line had appeared between his fair brows and he looked at Dalir intently. Trouble? Who could say? Dalir had an account of the whole sorry business at the Opera, first from the newspapers, then René Ferrand, who was able to give an accounting of just what Erik had been up to while the chandelier was busy unmooring itself. In Dalir's humble opinion, Erik showed remarkable restraint in not laying hands on Buquet long before, but the management, with their pretensions to gentility might have a different opinion. If they even marked the brawl; according to René, they were too busy dealing with the insurers, building contractors, and electricians to concerns themselves with much else.

Then again, Erik was in a sort of trouble. Though it was the kind of trouble Dalir was not about to share with these two men.

"No," he shook his head and tried for a bland smile. "Just visiting."

It was a quiet journey after that, with the fair-haired man giving Dalir detailed directions to the house before they parted.

"If you don't see a lamp burning, don't worry, the family's home," he reassured him. "It's only that it's their Sabbath and they can't light the lamps 'til the sun's properly gone down! Remember: white house, blue shutters, stone fence in the front - they've dogs as well, you might hear them before you see the house. Have a good visit, monsieur and tell them Alain Deschamps gives the family his best!"

Something sparked in the recesses of Dalir's memory at the name, but he was too busy trying to remember the directions to much mark it. The Astrucs lived at the top of little knoll, just beyond the town proper - if one could call it a 'town.' From the looks of the place there was a church, a post office, and absolutely nothing else. Once again he marveled that Erik - cynical, bohemian Erik - came from such a place, much less enjoyed it so much that he made regular trips back. It seemed impossible to believe that he meant to stay -
Stop. None of that. Find him first, have it out, then...then.

It was less bitterly cold here than in the city and eerily quiet. The sun was hanging low on the horizon, dappling the sky with bronze and red, making the clouds glow. Very nice for a landscape painter, he supposed, though as with anything involving art, he was ultimately unmoved. Maybe Erik could explain the appeal of the place to him. Once Dalir got through shouting at him for dragging him out of Paris through the invisible fetters that bound them together.

The house was dark, but he spied some shadows moving beyond the windows. Somewhere beyond the house he heard a dog barking, but none approached. Dalir strode through the gate purposefully, though his steps faltered as he neared the door. He'd prepared a speech, of a sort. A cover, at least, assuming Erik wasn't the one who answered the door. He would say he'd come to see the younger M. Astruc about a matter pertaining to the rent.

Dalir was conscious of the flaws of this plan. How flimsy it all was, how implausible - coming all this way, just to ask after a few francs for the rent? The trouble and expense hardly justified the cause. But, being a man of little imagination, it was the best he could do on short notice.

And so he knocked, speech on the tip of his tongue when his knock was answered by a violent flinging open of the door and he was treated to the sight of a short, stocky girl whose only resemblance to Erik were her riotous black curls and bi-colored eyes. One of the middle daughters he supposed - either Marthe or Mathilde, though he suspected the latter since Erik always said she had the social graces of a boulder.

"Who are you?" she asked bluntly, looking him over with curiosity and not a little suspicion. That settled it: he was dealing with Mathilde.

"Dalir Mazandarani, good afternoon, mademoiselle," he said, tipping his hat to her, hoping to pass along some good manners by example. "Is your elder brother home? I've come - "

"From Paris?" she asked, suspicion sliding away, now replaced by eagerness.

"Yes," he confirmed. "I've come about - "

"Have you brought my book?" she demanded, peering behind him at the empty lane leading up to the house.

"What?" Dalir asked, forgetting the enormous, leather-bound tome that had been shoved under their bed, for lack of anywhere better to put it. "No."

"Oh." Her expression fell as she frowned and she said, "Isaac's not here, he's at the Carpentier's house."

Dalir managed to get directions out of her before she shut the door in his face. Luckily the Carpentiers did not live far away and soon enough Dalir found himself approaching another little country house, this one distinguished from its neighbors by several scraggly and bare rose bushes under the windows. The glow of a lamp was visible through one of the windows and Dalir once again knocked on the door, slightly more forcefully this time. The pressure of the day was starting to weigh on him, make him irritable. Erik doing a runner. The fact that he felt compelled to chase him. And the quieter, thrumming anxiety that after all this, Erik might not have wanted to be pursued.

The door was opened by a woman about his own age (Madame Carpentier?), round and matronly with reddish-orange tendrils of hair plastered to her face by sweat.

"Good afternoon," she said pleasantly enough, looking him over with slightly wide eyes. "Can I help
"Good afternoon," Dalir said, repeating his hat-doffing introduction to this more receptive audience. "I'm sorry to disturb you, my name is Dalir Mazandarani, I've come looking for Er...ah, M. Astruc? The younger? I was told he was here, I've...come to see him about the rent."

Madame Carpentier cycled through a number of facial expressions very quickly, Dalir had trouble keeping up with them: Confusion. Surprise. Recognition. Then, oddest of all, satisfaction. Her mouth quirked to the side in a lopsided smile and she beckoned him over the threshold.

"Come in, come in," she said briskly. "Don't let's stand in the cold - ISAAC!"

Whatever initial assessment Dalir made of her good manners was cracked somewhat by her bellowing as she scurried off toward her kitchen. As the door swung open, Dalir caught a glimpse of Erik, spindly and unmasked, dandling a child on his knee before the door swung close and obscured the sight.

Although Dalir was a man of little imagination, his heart leapt into his throat and his palms started to sweat. Homely little cottage. Children. But Erik...he said he'd never...well, only once...

Though he couldn't see any more of the pleasant domesticity he could certainly hear Madame Carpentier well enough through the door as she exclaimed, "Isaac, the handsomest man I've ever seen in my life is standing in my parlor asking about your rent!"

The door opened again and there he was, filling up the doorframe, that lovely, hideous face all astonishment at the sight of Dalir. A smaller man who Dalir had not seen in the kitchen ducked his head under Erik's arm muttering, "I don't know about handsomest -"

But then he looked Dalir square in the face and his mouth dropped open. The man (Monsieur Carpentier?) added with raised eyebrows, "Ah. No, Estelle, you're right."

Dalir looked at Erik. Erik looked at Dalir, but only just, not meeting his eyes. Peripherally, Dalir was also aware of the arrival of two small children, the elder of whom tugged on Erik's sleeve and asked, "Oncle Isaac? Who's that man?"

But Erik didn't speak. He wet his lips with his tongue as though he might say something, but he only stared. As he beheld him, Dalir found himself similarly tongue-tied. What was he going to do? Reproach him? Curse him? Ask him, quietly heartbroken, whether he'd truly meant to run off without saying goodbye?

Finally, Madame Carpentier clapped her hands sharply to break the silence. "Well! I can see you both have much to say to each other! About the rent of course! Would you like the parlor? Or..."

"We'll go," Erik said abruptly, gingerly peeling the little boy's fingers off his wrist.

"Should I set an extra place for supper?" Madame Carpentier asked, blase as anything. When she received no reply, she merely shrugged and said, "Well, whatever you decide. Don't worry, M. Mazandarani - when Isaac comes to supper we don't serve pork."

Dimly, Dalir was aware that he ought to have made some reply, but he did not. He followed Erik out into the twilight, back behind the house, all the way out to a bare apple tree whose gnarled branches curled up toward the darkening sky. They were far enough away from the house that no one could see them in the gloom. And it was so damnably quiet that it was easy to believe that he and Erik were the only two souls in the world.
A chill breeze struck up and Dalir realized that Erik left the Carpentier's home without his coat. Automatically he began to unwind his own scarf from his neck when Erik startled back violently, hands raised as though fending off an attack.

"Don't," he said sharply, turning away and sniffling loudly, a hand coming up to cover the lower half of his face as he did. "What are you doing here?"

Dalir gave a shrug of his own, scarf held limply in his right hand, a half-hearted offering. "It's as I said. I came about the rent."

His paltry attempt at humor fell flat. Erik glanced at him warily out of the corner of his eyes, looking at the scarf like it was a venomous snake.

"You...you leave a note," Dalir said finally, fist tightening on the material. "You leave a note or you speak to me. But not this time. I wanted to know why."

"Oh - " Erik began, his voice sounding wretched and miserable, but Dalir wasn't finished.

"I wanted to know why," he repeated, clenching his fist so hard that his arm trembled. "And it wasn't a question I could answer myself, though I thought of a few answers - it's not a brief train ride, you know. Of course you know, you make it all the time. And after I got here, I wondered why. Dismal little excuse for a city, godforsaken countryside - six miles, Erik! I know your family is here. But even so. You tell me when you are leaving and when you care coming back. So what was I to believe? That you weren't coming back. Only you hadn't said. And I...I..."

Erik was staring at him, hand over his face and Dalir finally thrust the scarf at him. "Take the damn thing, you stubborn ass. I may not be your - you might not owe me anything, not even an explanation. But I'll have one if I have to wring it out of your throat with this."

Wonder of wonders, Erik took the scarf. Slowly, he wound it around his face and neck. He looked like a scolded dog, a wounded animal, but Dalir refused to feel sorry for him; he felt sorry enough for himself.

"I didn't think you'd come," Erik said thickly, not looking Dalir in the eye. "I didn't think - I was ashamed and I didn't think - "

Dalir heard a harsh bray of a laugh, and it was only by the residual ache in his throat that he realized the sound came from him. "Idiot," he said, not too fondly. "After all...three years. And you still don't realize how much I love you."

Finally, finally Erik really looked at him. Ridiculous tears welled up in his ridiculous eyes and Dalir felt his own throat get tight when, at first, Erik made no reply. His long, nervous fingers began to wind in the trailing tassels on the end of the scarf and Dalir reached out to stop him - when Erik was in a fidget, he could unravel entire blankets. The action wound their fingers together and they stood like that, hands loosely clasped in the dark and the cold for some time before Erik spoke.

"I...I suppose," he said, nervously. "I don't at that. Realize how much you love me. Because...hmm."

Erik raised his eyes to the branches overhead and swallowed hard, blinking back tears. Dalir's fingers tightened on Erik's own limp digits, but though Erik didn't return the pressure, he didn't pull away either.

"Because," he continued, talking to the sky. "I don't...I don't think! And you - you're a very good sort of person, Dalir. It's very easy for me - for anyone, I should think! - to love you."
"Thank you," Dalir replied shortly.

"And I..." Erik cleared his throat and brought his free hand up to fist in his hair. "I...am an ass."

Dalir laughed again, more naturally this time, a laugh that didn't make his throat ache.

"Well, of course," he said patiently. "Of course you are! An insufferable ass who sings stupid nursery songs, and drinks like a fish, and works like a horse, and..."

"Is very ugly?" Erik supplied, though Dalir heard a bit of a smile creep into his voice.

"Yes!" Dalir replied emphatically, drawing up close to Erik, crushing his hand between them, grip tightening so he'd have to fight to let go. "You're loud and irritating, you work and drink 'til you get sick, and, of course, you're very ugly, absolutely! But the trouble is, I don't...see colors, when you're gone, understand? I only see the beauty in the world if your ugly face is in it, and as quiet as this awful countryside is, it's quieter by far in the flat without you. That's just how it is with me...but."

It was Dalir's turn to lower his gaze from Erik's eyes and he let go of his hand, however reluctantly. He stepped back a pace and spoke to the ground, "But, if that's not how it is for you, then...it doesn't matter, does it?"

There it was. The crux of the matter. The plaguing doubt that had, Dalir now realized, been a burr in his side from almost the instant he'd met Erik. The dismal, heart-rending thought that, even after all this, Dalir needed, Dalir loved Erik, far more than Erik needed or loved him.

Two strong, bony hands seized Dalir by the shoulders and he was abruptly held to Erik's bony chest, nose crushed against Erik's woolen waistcoat.

"I just thought...I thought you wouldn't want me back," Erik murmured, cheek pressed against Dalir's hair. "Erik was...I was...the man I've been. The one with whom you see colors. He came to a bad end, you know."

"René told me," Dalir replied. "It doesn't matter."

"I don't know that I want...to be that man," Erik continued, voice low and harsh, breathing a trifle labored. Dalir pulled away, slightly, just enough to look up at him. Erik let him pull back and made to drop his hands from Dalir's shoulders, but Dalir kept a grip on his elbows, just in case Erik thought that pulling away meant leaving. "Erik in the city..."

"Isaac in the country," Dalir finished for him. Erik sucked in a breath and blinked rapidly a few times.

"Would you...could you...just repeat that for me?" he asked. "Please?"

Wrinkling his brow, Dalir did as he asked, "Isaac in the country."

"Just the first bit."

"Isaac." Dalir's brow cleared and he smiled. "Isaac? Would you rather? I might forget, you know. Sometimes. I'm used to it the other way round and you insisted on being so mysterious about yourself."

"Well, some of that was for your sake," Isaac - there, not so hard, was it? - admitted. "Who cares about some ugly man from some dismal little country town six miles outside Rouen?"
"I do," Dalir replied honestly. "I have. I will."

Erik - damn it, not so easy after all - Isaac's eyes dimmed a bit and he hesitantly said, "I might not have a job, you know."

"I didn't have a job for months!" Dalir reminded him.

"That's different," Isaac said distantly, shaking his head. "You're...different. I don't deserve you, I'd do anything to keep you - "

"Well, don't run off!" Dalir exclaimed. "You want me around? Then don't run away from me! For someone so clever...you're such an idiot."

The scarf crinkled along with the skin around Isaac's eyes and Dalir knew he was grinning that ghoulish grin he loved so much down at him. "You've said."

"It bears repeating," Dalir said, similarly smiling like a loon. "You're an idiot. But you're my idiot and I intend to keep you."

The scarf shifted slightly with a change in expression and Isaac said, "I'm not converting for you."

Dalir snorted and shook his head, "Nor me for you."

"Then we can't be married," Isaac concluded, shaking his head regretfully. His tone was joking enough, but his fingers dug into Dalir's shoulders as if Erik was bracing himself against something painful.

"No," Dalir said, swallowing hard. "We can't at that. Even so..."

"Even so," Isaac nodded, sighing slightly. Then he chuckled slightly and said, "I should never doubt you...not a romantic, a man without an ounce of poetry or music in his soul, but you chased be down into the countryside for...love. Without even an engagement to show for it. We'll never have our own sentimental novel."

Dalir pulled away slightly. He didn't get down on one knee, but he did shift his grip, clasping Isaac's left hand warmly with both of his own. His hands were always so cold, one thing that never changed, city or country.

"Would you?" he asked softly. "All things being what they are. Would you?"

Isaac's breath hitched and his eyes closed. "Of course I would."

"Good," Dalir replied, dropping his hand.

"Good," Isaac nodded, folding his arms over his chest; it was cold and his coat was still inside.

There was little left to say to one another after that. They were out of doors, however alone they felt. And Isaac's friends were waiting. They walked back to the house, side by side. Not touching. Not looking at one another. But - all things being what they are - together.

Chapter End Notes
Plot? What plot? This is just unapologetic romantic schmoop. *throws rose petals* I could write another story that's just them being idiots in love, but show must go on!
Together in Paris

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Raoul had been summoned to Philippe's study. Summoned. Like an errant schoolboy to the headmaster's office. He was really quite indignant about it, certain it was to do with his whereabouts being unaccounted for the night of the accident at the Opera. Raoul cloaked himself in indignation, prepared to defend himself as a man, to declare that his elder brother had no right - no right whatsoever to demand an account of him. He was not his commanding officer. Or even his father, come to that.

Remarks, counterarguments, and prepared statements neatly cataloged in his mind, prepared for the inevitable confrontation, Raoul stood before his brother's desk, shoulders squared, head back, and after a perfunctory opening remark of, "You wanted to see me," was completely taken aback by Philippe's response.

"Yes, indeed. What do you know about this Astruc business?"

Well, we love one another and I don't see how that's any of your concern!

Thank God Raoul only thought his prepared declaration and did not actually speak it. Most assuredly would have led to some awkward backpedaling and hasty explanations.

It was nothing to do with Christine at all. Only Erik.

"What do you mean?" Raoul asked, taking the seat that Philippe had proffered when first he'd come, now feeling that his shoulders could round a bit. The hard set line of his mouth had also softened, and the stern line he'd made with his eyebrows utterly lost to confusion. Bit of bother; quite took the wind out of one's sails when they arrived ready for a confrontation, only to find that nothing of the sort awaited him.

To do with the chandelier, Philippe explained. The matter had first been brought to the insurers' attention when they were asking questions of M. Richard who recalled that there had been some confrontation about the stability of the chandelier between M. Moncharmin and Astruc the designer. Moncharmin, caught off-guard, admitted that the man brought a concern to him about the electricians' work leading to potential difficulties. But, Moncharmin added, Astruc had only posited the thought that they might have hung it incorrectly, not wired it incorrectly. So his prescient remark wasn't really anything at all. Then, the manager continued, that he couldn't be sure he'd spoken to Astruc. There were so many working men about the Opera, after all. It might have been anyone.

Philippe found that all a little difficult to believe - not that Erik might have spoken to Moncharmin about the chandelier, but that Moncharmin couldn't recall whether or not he'd spoken to Astruc or another man. Given his 'singular appearance,' as Philippe so delicately phrased it.

"You know the man personally," Philippe concluded. "I thought you might have heard tell of it. I'm trying to make heads or tails of it. I like Moncharmin a great deal, of course, but...well. A woman was killed. There must be a limit to bygones, especially if he had been informed that there might have been cause for concern and he chose to do nothing."

In fact, Raoul had heard something of the matter, a fact he eagerly informed Philippe of once he had his bearings and wits about him. "Yes, Chr - ah. I know he went to Moncharmin, but Moncharmin
dismissed his concerns. Said it was a building matter and so Simon Buquet ought to be told first and if Buquet deemed the situation serious, then he would inform Moncharmin of any further steps that ought to be taken."

"And did Astruc take the matter to Buquet?"

Raoul knew for a fact that he had not. "I don't believe he saw any merit in walking his concerns backward. No matter how the matter reached Moncharmin's ears, once he was told, Erik expected something would be done."

Philippe nodded, mouth thinning to a hard line beneath his mustache. His dark eyes lit on Raoul in a pondering way. "What do you make of it? Surely you understand the merits of the chain of command."

"Certainly I do," Raoul nodded. "But if that chain is broken due to necessity, or emergency - I find it alarming that M. Moncharmin would attempt to un-know something he'd already been told. Had it been me, I would have looked into it, at the very least. And as it turns out something was the matter. Even if it wasn't what Erik thought."

Philippe smoothed a corner of his mustache consideringly. "There's something in that. Well. I'll take that under advisement. You're due to sail in two months?"

The conversation volleyed about so much, Raoul's head was swimming.

"Y-yes," he stuttered. "Just about then, if all goes according to plan."

"The young Countess de Thouars will be heartsick," Philippe predicted. "I'd hoped the family would remain in Paris longer, but her mother is determined to quit the city as soon as possible. Lovely woman, almost criminally unworldly. But some men prefer that in their wives, and I can see the merit in that. To a point."

Clearly, he was expecting Raoul to chime in with some witticism or observation, but Raoul was utilizing all the power of his mind to recall just who the 'young Countess' was.

Little Camille! he came to at last and so shrugged, "Well, it is too bad her first opera ended so horribly. From what she's told me of her mother, no doubt the woman won't let her near any musical event more stimulating than a handbell choir."

Philippe smiled a knowing sort of smile. "I am glad you liked her so much, Marie-Grace was worried she was too young."

"She is a very charming child," Raoul replied, but Philippe eyed him closely; evidently that was not the answer he was hoping for, but Raoul thought he was being very kind. 'Charming' might have been overgenerous to describe little Camille's conversation, but she was...fine. Not objectionable. A bit...dull, but as Philippe pointed out she had few opportunities to go out into the world. Likely she would improve with age.

Eyes narrowing, Philippe leaned forward against the desk and asked him, "Is she too young, then?"

"Too young for what?" Raoul asked innocently.

"For you," Philippe replied baldly.

For...
Raoul stood up, pacing away from the desk as his recent role of governess for the day suddenly took on a whole new meaning.

"She's...she's..." he spluttered, appalled by the thought that his brother - that his sister - that his sister and brother together thought...thought...well, no wonder her chaperone kept eyeing him with such disdain! "She's a child!"

Philippe raised his hands, palms up and nodded, "Too young for your taste, then. Very well, you might have simply said so. We thought it might be worth considering, our families already being well-acquainted. But if you aren't interested, the matter can rest there."

That his brother could sit before him and casually raise the prospect of Raoul's future matrimony, then put it away again, like bad hand at cards was incredible to him. Almost as incredible as the fact that Raoul hadn't guessed that was what they were up to. His heart was so full with thoughts of Christine, there wasn't room to consider any other.

"I wasn't aware there was anything to be interested in - good, God, Philippe, that poor girl!" he exclaimed, appalled on her behalf. He had two elder sisters, after all, and knew full well how it tore up a young woman's heart when she set her cap at a man only to find him utterly dismissive of her. Raoul might have conceived of little Camille as a child, but he was certain she did not see herself that way. And if there were expectations...God, what a humiliation when her mother told her there was to be no more congress with the Vicomte. She'd think she'd done something wrong, said something wrong, when really, she ought not to have been put in that position from the first.

Yet his brother was utterly unconcerned. On the contrary, he chuckled and shook his head. "Every little girl loves the thrill of a first heartbreak; it'll give her something to put down in her diary. Don't think anything more about it, it's none of your concern."

"It's my life, though, isn't it?" Raoul asked, all scripts and well thought-out remarks flying from his mind. "I'm not a child any longer, Philippe - I'll not have you and Grace fixing up matches for me the way you used to...to choose my suits!"

He was standing, agitation radiating off his frame. By contrast, Philippe sat still and placid, look up at Raoul, but in no way occupying the inferior position.

"Really now," Philippe replied reasonably. "This is all quite ridiculous. Sit down. And, anyway, we two would not feel the need to involve ourselves in your affairs if you brought them to heel with a little more mindfulness. You've got your future to think about."

The future. The future. Some neat and tidy Wonderland where all the disparate pieces of his life, himself would come together all quite neatly, doing credit to the family name. Guided by the hand of Comte Philippe, no doubt.

"My future," Raoul repeated dully. He swallowed and met his brother's eyes straight-on. "You asked when I was going to sea. Has it occurred to you that I might not come back?"

For the first time since Raoul entered the room, Philippe looked less than composed. His mouth dropped and he swallowed, paling very slightly. Then he rallied, his expression smoothed and he spoke with a bit more jovially than the conversation warranted, "Don't talk nonsense, of course you will! And I'm perfectly happy for you to take a hand in your future, if there's a girl you like, or would like to get to know, I'm more than happy to arrange an introduction, a dinner, a - "

"There's no one," Raoul declared, heart pounding hard against his ribs. "No one. Except Christine. You...you know that, don't you? Like Moncharmin and the chandelier. You know it, but you don't
want to know it."

Philippe surveyed his younger brother in a cool silence, evidently weighing the cost of hashing it out with him right then and there. Seemingly deeming it not worth the upset he pretended he'd not heard Raoul's last and dismissed him.

"Thank you for coming to see me about the Astruc question," he said, taking up one of the newspapers that lay before him. "Nasty business. Nasty. But it'll be sorted, one way or the other. I'll see you at supper, won't I? Or won't I?"

"Philippe..." Raoul began, but trailed off, speechless. Was there any point in wasting breath on one who could not - would not - listen? All this talk of his future. Introductions. Dinners and invitations, all coming on the heels of acknowledging that Raoul was leaving. He thought of the Jeanette, Philippe read all those papers. But did he take any of it in? Or only store such knowledge as he deemed useful in matters pertaining to business or society? Didn't...didn't he care

Unwilling to ask that of the brother who was almost a father to him, Raoul nodded mutely. "Yes. I...I expect you will."

"Good," Philippe nodded, eyes on his newspaper. "Félicité and Honoré will be joining us - that'll be a droll party. But you know how much she enjoys seeing you, her little boy. She was worried she might not manage it before her confinement, or before you leave, whichever comes first, but I said she was being overly fretful. You know how she is."

Raoul nodded again. "Yes. I know how she is."

Philippe smiled a thin-lipped smile at his paper. Raoul stared at him a beat longer. Then, with a muttered farewell, left the room. His brother did not look up from his newspaper.

Once he was in the hall, Raoul felt fury rise within him. How dare Philippe send him away like that? He wasn't one of the servants, to be summoned, given his orders, and dismissed. Shouldn't his brother pay him some measure of respect? How dare he? How could he pretend that Christine didn't exist? That she didn't matter? How dare he?

Raoul doubled back; he'd left the door ajar in his hasty retreat, it swung open silently.

He drew in a breath, intending to give Philippe a good piece of his mind - but stopped upon the threshold, stunned.

The newspaper had been cast aside in haste; a prop that served its purpose. Philippe stood with his back to the study door, having crossed the room to one of the little side tables upon which sat a dozen photographs and daguerrotypes of the family. The picture in the frame with the gilt edges that he held in his hand Raoul recognized without seeing it. It was a picture of himself, aged seven in short pants, holding a little model sailing ship which Philippe had purchased for him and helped him assemble. Raoul had been terribly proud of that ship, since he'd only called upon Philippe to help apply the glue to the fiddly bits. It was a popular tale to tell around the holiday table, the day that Raoul threw a rare, but passionate snit over holding the ship while he had his photograph taken. Marie-Grace, he recalled, had been adamant that he be photographed holding her own kitten. As he recalled, Philippe intervened with their father on his behalf and the picture was taken sans cat.

It was at that photograph Philippe cast all his attention. Not his newspapers or his stationery. Not the news of the day or the gossip to come. Just at an old photo of a little boy, long gone.

Raoul watched as his brother's shoulders hitched. And silently, he backed away, awash in confusion
and a bit of embarrassment at having caught his brother so unguarded. Heart heavy, he retreated to his room, understanding, if possible, even less about his brother than he thought he did.

The day was so gloomy and dreary that, though Christine rose with every intention of attending Mass, once she shifted her blankets and felt a rush of cold air about her throat, she immediately drew the blankets up as high as she could, rolled over, and went back to sleep. She more or less succeeded in her goal; though she did not drift off again, she did lay about so long that by the time she felt resolved to greet the day, it was too late to consider attending morning services.

She grimaced when she saw the thin sheet of ice over the water in her pitcher, but the quick wash she gave herself jolted her into wakefulness quicker than psalms and aves would have done. Teeth chattering she dressed her her warmest frock - a wool suit, a bit overdone for a day of staying at home, but even her flannel petticoats were not enough to keep out the biting chill. Amazingly, on this awful day when all Christine wanted to do was stay in bed, Mamma was feeling very well. Christine warmed up a breakfast for both of them in the kitchen, then, while Mamma was finishing her tea, made up a roaring fire in the sitting room and soon got her sitting comfortably in an armchair, a shawl around her shoulders and a blanket round her legs.

"Will he play for us, today, do you think, my child?" Mamma asked Christine, who was removing her stained and sooty apron.

"Who, Mamma?" she asked gently. Sometimes, Mamma forgot the year. She might have been inquiring after Christine's own dear father, or the Professor, her husband. Christine long ago learned that gentle reminders that they were in Heaven and could only play for God made Mamma confused and fretful. But pretending that the Professor or Papa had only stepped out to buy a loaf of bread or a newspaper made Christine heartsick and she steeled herself for their terrible game of pretend.

What she said instead astonished her.

"Why your good genius, that boy who took you to the party," Mamma replied. "So tall and thin, with such elegant hands."

"Erik?" Christine asked, eyes wide. "Oh, no, I...haven't seen him. Not...I haven't seen him."

Not since the Opera. Not since the night of the chandelier accident. Weeks ago and the place was still at sixes and sevens. *The Marriage of Figaro* was called off. And no one knew if the season would be cut short entirely, or they would try to make up for their losses by extending the run of *The Masked Ball*. No word about salaries. No word about the renewal of contracts.

And no word from Erik. Christine had a letter from Anna-Lise and knew he was with his family, but most of Anna-Lise's missive were inquiries about Christine's health, about the Opera. Evidently Erik hadn't told her about the accident. And much joyful gushing over her new darling baby nephew, Jacob. The letter was sitting, open, upon Christine's dressing table; she hadn't written back yet. Didn't know what to say. Not to Anna-Lise, it seemed callous to write to her and only want to hear about her brother.

"Well, he should be here soon," Mamma said confidently. "He promised he'd play for us."

Christine nodded and bit her lip; at least she wasn't being forced to pretend her father was alive. This was a much smaller lie. "I'm sure he'll keep his word, Mamma."

They passed the morning quietly. Mamma knitted, dropping half her stitches and losing her count,
but she was content. Christine tried to read a book, but found her mind drifting. At eleven o'clock, she thought vaguely about going into the larder and looking over their supplies of butter and sugar, to see if she could whip up a batch of småkakor - when her culinary ambitions were interrupted by a knock at the door.

Raoul, she thought, though she had no reason to expect him. Often he spent his Sundays at home. Nevertheless she rose and peered briefly out the windowpanes onto the landing, wondering who it could be.

A lanky frame. A thin wool jacket. A blue scarf, wound about the face, covering everything put the eyes and yet there was no doubt who had come to call.

Erik. Erik at long last. Christine glanced over her shoulder at Mamma who was dozing over her knitting needles; perhaps her mind wasn't going at all. Perhaps that was how all people acted when they'd developed Second Sight.

Briefly, Christine's emotions were at war. Part of her wanted to fling the door open and embrace him. Another part wanted to fling the door open and shout at him, What on earth took you so long? Still another wasn't sure she wanted to see him at all.

Yet opening the door won out in the end. Christine opened it, letting a gust of frigid air in as she did. Shivering she opened her mouth, ready to forego pleasantries and only ask, What are you doing here? when Erik answered her question for her.

"I've come to offer you an apology," he said, mellifluous voice only slightly muffled behind his scarf. "I didn't stay for your debut like I told you I would. I'm very sorry, Christine."

Silly, that she should be so overcome by a few hasty promises, not kept. But she was. And the apology, late as it was, was welcome despite all that.

"Well," Christine replied, offering a small smile, "the whole of the audience ran out. I must have been ghastly."


"Come," Christine held out a hand for Erik to take. "Come inside, you must be half frozen - did you walk all this way?"

He nodded, eyeing the proffered hand, but not taking it. "I didn't intend to impose myself, I only wanted to say I was sorry and walk, if you'd like. Not to trouble you again."

"Oh!" Christine growled, losing her composure. "Come inside, you ridiculous man! Honestly! Before you freeze on my doorstep."

A chuckle sounded forth from under the scarf.

"You could cover me up in ice and frost," Erik said as he obliged her. Christine held her arms out for his jacked, which he peeled off with numb fingers. The gloves he removed as well, but, strangely, not the scarf though it had to be just as cold and wet as the rest of his clothing. "I could be the perfect union of a snowman and a scarecrow."

"Not the sort of ornamentation I'd prefer, and anyway the holidays are over," Christine replied pertly, waiting for him to take the scarf off. "Aren't you going to..."

Erik hemmed and hawed awkwardly, finally admitting, "The ice and snow are unkind to adhesives."
She blinked up at him, uncomprehending. Until she remembered. His face. The face she'd never properly seen. Yet another mystery, another omission, from a man who was one of her closest friends. How odd to love a cipher so much.

"I'll hang your scarf with your other things," she said, unperturbed. Then added, "You remember the way to the kitchen, don't you? Could you stoke the fire in the stove for me? I want to make some biscuits and it'll be warm in there besides."

"Alright," Erik said cautiously. Then he began to unwind the scarf as Christine waited, patiently. Perhaps it would have been more of a shock, had she not last seen him covered in blood and battered in the midst of chaos. But, altogether, it wasn't so bad - well, it was rather grotesque, the overall oddness of his appearance coupled with the aborted structure in the middle made him look like an anatomical illustration given life. This first glance was a brief one; no sooner had Erik handed her his scarf than he turned away, pressing a pocket-handkerchief to his face, making a deep, odd-sounding sniffle. The ice and snow were not only unkind to adhesives.

"I'll be in very soon," she said as though this was all quite ordinary. Then again, she reflected as she hung Erik's outer things by the fire to dry, they had escaped out a window at the Opera together. Gone to a peculiar club together. Sung for the creme of society together and admired a unicorn in a fireplace. For life with Erik this was ordinary.

She found him crouched by the fire, coaxing a bit of life back into it. He spoke, again before she did and again he astonished her.

"I had a visit from Vaucorbeil," he informed her, straightening up. "Did you know he's from Rouen?"

Christine shook her head, "No, I didn't know. Did he see you...while you were with your family?"

Erik nodded, eyes (how deep and strange they looked, even stranger than when he wore the false nose, but still Erik's eyes) seemed far-away, like he was talking about a dream. "No one was more shocked than myself. Rene Ferrand it was, told him where we lived. I don't know - I still don't know whether I ought to kill him or kiss him."

Unsure where all this discussion was going (it was impossible, wasn't it, that M. Vaucorbeil would have gone all that way to bring bad news...wasn't it?), Christine tentatively replied, "A kiss sounds more pleasant. Won't you sit?"

Erik sat, but restlessly, long legs stretched under the kitchen table, fingers of his left hand drumming out a restless melody. "I suppose you know. No more Figaro. Bad taste, the management thought, to carry on as though nothing had happened."

Suddenly he reached out and seized Christine's hand with icy fingers. The touch made her jolt, but she did not pull away. On the contrary, she held on to his much larger hand, chafing it a bit to bring him some warmth.

"You poor girl!" he exclaimed. "I didn't...I was gone so fast I didn't know, not until...that horror scene. Did you see much of it?"

Christine nodded, swallowing back tears as she willed away the memories of that awful scene. "All of it."

Erik closed his eyes and squeezed her hand. "Poor thing," he repeated. "If I had - if I hadn't have been so selfish...I should have realized...should have seen to you."
"Raoul did," she said and felt his grip on her hand loosen. Christine freed her fingers and swept around him to retrieve her apron and inspect the pantry. "He...came for me. Took me home. And stayed until I was asleep."

Erik's eyes were on the tabletop, but his thin lips quirked in a smile. "Good man. I should say, he's almost worthy of you."

Christine smiled. "I'd hate to think how terribly unfair you were to your sister's husband when he was only her beau, if you're going to be so hard on Raoul."

"Oh," Erik sighed, passing a hand over his face, covering the whole, briefly. "I was monstrous to him. Monstrously unfair. But that's all bygones now, I realize the man's as good a soul as ever lived. Likely soon I'll have the revelation that Raoul's an angel."

"He is," Christine said, retrieving flour, butter, sugar, a bit of almond paste. The eggs on the table were few in number, but she knew they needed to be used quickly. As she started to divide up the ingredients, Erik stretched out his hands.

"Let me rub the butter in," he requested. "My mother always said I was the best for it - my hands are always so cold, you know."

"How - how is your mother?" she asked, knowing how seldom he spoke of his family, testing the waters now. Something felt...different about Erik's demeanor. Just as restless, just as odd, just as...strangely endearing. But a little softer. A little less loud. A little less frantic.

"Well. The whole family's well," he said as he rolled up his sleeves before helping her form the dough. "Claude's still adorable and foolish, Emilie is still fierce, Marthe is still sweet, Mathilde still mad, Anna-Lise still brilliant, and Lisette still bossy, only rather preoccupied just at present. I've got a nephew now."

"Anna-Lise said," she informed him, finding she rather liked this different shade of Erik, this one that was a little easier to talk to about ordinary things, pleasant things. "Jacob."

"Jacob," he said, favoring her with a real smile. It helped his appearance tremendously. It always had. "Such an ugly little fellow. But darling."

"Erik!" she exclaimed, flicking a bit of flour at him. "What a thing to say! I'm sure there's no such thing as an ugly baby."

"Ill-favored," he amended, pointing at himself with a finger encrusted in flour and butter. "You see? You can't imagine this was such a pleasant thing to look at on what ought to have been a cherubic specimen."

The revelation caught Christine off-guard and she wondered what she should say, what the right thing to say was. 'I'm sorry,' seemed inappropriate. Anna-Lise said nothing about the child being disfigured in her letters. But then again, why would she? It was not the sort of thing one wrote to friends about. Unless...unless she didn't think to mention it. She said he was healthy. And after all, if he was like Erik, they'd every expectation that he'd be perfectly alright. Even extraordinary if he took after him in more than just appearance.

"I'm happy your sister has a healthy child," Christine said finally, adding, "one who might be an excellent help in the kitchen someday. But...you were saying - Vaucorbeil? And the season's...canceled?"

This piece of information, forgotten among the rest, rose to the fore of her mind. Christine looked at
the food upon the table, feeling suddenly sick. Sweets did not appeal as much as when she first had the notion to do some baking. Yet Erik shook his head beside her, wet curls flopping onto his brow. He wiped his hair back with the heel of his right hand, leaving a streak of flour behind.

"Oh, no, not the season, only Figaro," he clarified, looking around for a tea-towel to clean his hands. "I ought to have brought Dalir with me, this is in his wheelhouse. No, that was what he - Vaucorbeil, not Dalir, he came for...never mind. Never mind! Except about Vaucorbeil. A Masked Ball will go ahead as scheduled. Moved up a bit, but...he's asked me to design the production."

Of all the things Erik could possibly have said to her, nothing prepared her for that. Christine dropped the spoon she'd been holding into the bowl with a clatter.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands over her mouth. "Oh, that's wonderful, Erik! And - you said yes, of course? Didn't you say yes?"

He did not answer straight away; Erik was paying unusual attention to washing his hands. "I did. It's not - don't flatter me, now! It's only that he has no choice, you see. Very little money. I'm the best he can afford."

Erik explained in a bit more detail. Vaucorbeil tried to be coy about it, attempted to flatter (it seemed he had not been informed about a little skirmish in the wings, forgotten in the face of chaos and real tragedy). But Erik understood. Other designers backed out, not wanting their name associated with an Opera house that was in such disarray. Scandal after scandal. First Carlotta's dramatic exit. Then the chandelier. One more thing, it was feared, would tip the scales and turn their precious Palais into the laughingstock of Paris. Or at the very least, people would begin to believe the place was cursed. Something about bad luck coming in threes.

"What I lack in salary, though," Erik concluded. "I make up for in some slight leverage. Three conditions, the first of which he met eagerly - I wanted to design the whole of the production, not split the acts and scenes with other designers. Done. Second, I wanted Joseph Buquet removed from the production. Done, but not by Vaucorbeil. He's gone to the coast to take a rest cure, or so said his brother. Simon has also taken a temporary leave of absence to look after him. Sometimes blood will out."

Christine nodded; she'd wondered what had become of Joseph Buquet, but knew no one to ask. "And the third condition," she prompted gently.

"The third," he said slowly, "was...also met. Or it will be met. He was reluctant, but not so much that he refused me. I'd like to credited under my own name. Surname alone would do it, I said. I wasn't asking for the moon."

Such a little thing. Such a natural thing. But the way he talked, the look on his face, the sound of his voice...Christine did not understand, could not understand. But it seemed to mean the world to him.

"Oh," Christine replied, dusting the table with flour, preparing to roll out the dough. "That seems...reasonable. I think. No mysterious 'Erik', then?"

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "No. No more Erik. Erik est mort, if you like. Or, if you're of a less morbid bent...just remember he never really existed."

"Is that so?" Christine asked lightly, turning out the dough. "So, have I been talking to myself all this while?"

Another smile - that sly, teasing Erik smile she knew so well. What a ridiculous man he was.
Ridiculous and she loved him, despite it all. Though, she reflected, heart light at the thought, perhaps now she'd get the chance to love him as he was and not as he pretended to be.

"No, in fact," he gave his hands another quick going over with the towel and rose, towering over her, bowing deeply at the waist. "Isaac Astruc. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mademoiselle Daae."

While he was still bent, Christine braced her floury hands on the table and kissed him on the forehead; she tasted flour and butter. "Oh, please, Monsieur Astruc, I insist you call me Christine."

Grinning, a boyish grin that made his strange face endearing, he nodded. "Very well. And you must call me Isaac."

"Christine!" Mamma's voice sounded from the living room. "Where have you gone? Is someone here?"

"Yes, Mamma!" Christine called back. Glancing over her shoulder she said, "You were right! My good genius is back."

"Oh, how lovely!" Mamma replied sleepily. "And will he play for us?"

Christine glanced over her shoulder, Erik - Isaac, alright, but it would take some getting used to - gestured to his face and shrugged helplessly.

"I think he shall," Christine said confidently. "Only he's got a rather bad head cold and must keep himself wrapped up. I'll just fetch his scarf and he'll be in presently."

"How lovely," Mamma repeated herself. "How lovely..."

Chapter End Notes

I actually did write the 'Vaucorbeil visits the Astrucs' bit, but deemed it too long spent in the country. Everyone's back together! Only Raoul will soon be leaving, poor guy.
To Pay Respects

Chapter Notes

Inspired by last-night's viewing of the restaged tour (no, really!), here's our continued denoument, folks! This story is going to continue to be fluffy and cute for the duration.

La Carlotta was set to make a triumphant return to the stage of the Palais Garnier. It was not quite the front-page splash management had hoped for, but then, contract negotiations did not create the attention-grabbing headlines the way unmooring chandeliers and fatalities were wont to do. For her part, Christine was back in the chorus.

Which suited her perfectly well. Some of her time was her own again. And she had a duty she'd long neglected.

Papa would have understood the difficulty, she consoled herself. Her education, at first, took up so much time and his passing was still such an open wound that she could not bear the thought of making that long train voyage to Perros-Guirec to pay her respects, though she knew she should. Then Mamma Valerius's health began to fail and Christine could not leave her. The thought that she might go away to visit her father's grave and return to find herself preparing for Mamma's funeral was too horrible. Besides which, her schedule at the Opera during rehearsals for The Marriage of Figaro kept her entirely occupied.

But Figaro was finished. And Erik - Isaac! - said he would look in on Madame Valerius every day, twice, if she'd like, so that she might make the trip.

At first she objected, citing his duties at the Opera, but he wouldn't hear any objections. And after the tenth time that he reassured her it wouldn't be any trouble at all, that he was glad to do it, that it was important she visit her father's graveside, Christine began to wonder if her very reasonable difficulties in having gone before were really as insurmountable as they seemed. The flush of guilt the send chills down her spine was what compelled her to pack her valise and go at last; it was one thing to avoid going to Brittany because she had too many demands on her time from the living and quite another to avoid going simply because she did not want to.

Papa's health had been poor for most of her adolescence. An affliction of spirit, perhaps, moreso than of body, but an affliction all the same. The city depressed him. The only time he was anything like himself was on their seaside holidays to Brittany where he would play his violin. Ah, the violin, whose sound she had not heard except in her dreams for almost five years now. Christine thought that he ought to be buried with it, but selfishly hid it away before the funeral. It was tucked away in a cupboard in her bedroom, hidden behind a large hatbox.

Papa would never approve, she knew, for instruments were meant to be played. But he couldn't very well play it in his gravesite. And if he was playing in Heaven, surely God had given him a new violin, with a clear, pure sound, not something battered and weather-stained, in desperate need of restringing, with a bow tattered and useless at its side.

She'd not taken the violin down from its hiding place since she'd placed it there, before she began her training at the Conservatory. She really had no plans for it, not even the vague ambition of passing it down to her someday-children, should she have any and should one show promise for music. It was
more like a relic, carefully guarded and preserved. Or, more gruesome, like a decaying being itself, shut up behind a wall like the victims of the Commune whose bones were said to reside beneath the Opera House.

"Christine?"

She looked up. Some of her morbidity must have showed on her face, for Raoul leaned across the aisle to take her hand. "You're very pale. Are you feeling well?"

It would be pointless to lie to him. She didn't event trust her voice not to quaver and break. She squeezed his fingers, then let his hand go, shaking her head. A tear slipped from her eye and traced a trail down her cheek. Wordlessly, he reached into his pocket and removed a handkerchief, presenting it to her.

The presentation of the handkerchief was all it took, as if she needed permission to cry before she let herself give way to weeping; which she did, not with silence and dignity, but with ragged breaths and hiccups. Raoul watched her across the aisle, his hands knitted together, his brow creased with concern. Distantly, Christine began to regret turning down his offer of a private compartment.

It couldn't be done; an unmarried man and woman who were acquainted with one another might easily sit near one another on a train, but traveling together, in their own compartment, was a shade too far for Christine's own comfort. Raoul's family would disapprove in the strongest terms, she had little doubt. And since he was soon to depart, she thought it important that he leave on good terms with all of them.

But that was a week ago, when she'd informed him of her plan to travel and readily agreed to his offer to make parallel plans of his own. She wanted him to come, she very badly wanted him to come. Mamma Valerius aside, Raoul was the only living being of her acquaintance who'd known her father. Who'd heard him play. The only other person who could mourn him.

They checked in separately at the inn, scarcely looking at one another, went up the stairs separately to their separate rooms. But they walked together to the church where they heard Mass and Christine lit a candle for her father. She was a long time at prayer, Rosary beads clutched tight in her fist. One decade, she prayed, for every year he'd been gone. Raoul knelt beside her, occasionally she heard a muttered Hail Mary whispered under his breath; she wondered who it was he was praying for.

Knees aching, back smarting, Christine nevertheless took her time putting the Rosary beads back into their little box in her purse. There was only one thing left to do: visit the cemetery.

_Maybe you could pray one more for luck_, came the impish little voice in the back of her head that always chose the most inappropriate times to insert itself. That was another sin for the confessional; using words that were meant to fly right up to Heaven for the sake of her father to keep her anchored to one spot in the earth so that she was not obligated to make herself unhappy.

Resolute, she stuffed her beads away and Raoul rose beside her, holding out a hand to help her up. He did not let go of her hand as she led them to the churchyard. To a simple stone, with no inscription, just a name: DAAE.

This time, Christine came armed with her own handkerchief; after her falling to pieces on the train, she assumed she would be inconsolable at the gravesite. But strangely, no tears came. There was a peculiar numbness that overcame her, and it had nothing to do with the chill seeping up from the frozen ground.

Raoul stood stoically by her, hat in his hands. "It's all very..." he started to say, then stopped.
Christine looked up at him, not speaking, but her expression prompted him to go on.

"Small," he said finally. Then, realizing how that might sound, hastened to add, "Not...it isn't that I thought...it's all just stone and soil, isn't it? I'm sorry, that was unkind."

"It wasn't unkind," Christine said, shaking her head, prompting a curl to pop free from under her hat. "It's small and sad. I suppose all graveyards are. I don't - I expected to feel more. I think...it's why I put off coming so long. I've spent so long trying not to feel anything. But...he isn't here, is he? Not really."

Raoul shook his head and chanced putting an arm around her shoulders. Christine allowed it and pressed closer to his side, drinking in his warmth. "No. I remember when we waked my father. I didn't want to go in the room, I was afraid. Philippe thought I was being childish, but I thought he'd be changed somehow. Frightening, like a ghoul. He wasn't, he looked the same. Only...he wasn't there. It was like looking at a wax figure. I didn't cry at all, I didn't feel anything. My sisters went all to pieces, I thought there was something wrong with me."

"Well, I've certainly gone all to pieces..." Christine trailed off, remembering the train car, all those other nights of holding back tears, until it all became too much and she cried until her face was red and swollen, her throat sore. Again, she waited for the tears to come, but her eyes remained dry. "It's the missing, more than anything. The missing him. Coming here...I've known he was gone. This doesn't...well. It doesn't help at all."

They stood by for a time, aping the motions of paying respects. Christine wished she had flowers, at least, to mark the fact that they'd been there, but it was too early for fresh flowers and she didn't want to give her father hothouse blooms.

"Let's go to the sea," Raoul suggested. "Your father loved the seashore so much, perhaps that..."

She agreed and they set off, but almost ten years' absence was enough to change any place. Where once there was unspoilt countryside, there were new hotels to accommodate visitors. A casino near the bluffs where they used to play as children.

"See any korrigans?" Raoul asked, an ironic little half-smile curling his lips.

Christine squinted at the casino. "Not a one. I can only assume they're playing at roulette."

Raoul chuckled and she smiled for the first time since they boarded the train.

Turning her back on all the new construction, she took his hands and looked up into his eyes. "Thank you for coming. I appreciate it more than I can say."

Raoul squeezed her hands. "It's nothing, Christine, it was the least I could do. I liked your father very much. He was always so kind to me. I was always so happy here. It was...you should know - you might already. But the time I spent with you - all the time I've spent with you - is the happiest of my life. Those are my fondest, best memories."

The tears came now, slowly trickling from her eyes. Raoul was not due to sail for over a month, but this felt so like saying good-bye that she could not help it.

"Must you go?" she asked, knowing it was stupid, that it was pointless, only she was unable to stop herself.

He let out a gusty sigh and looked out at the sea. "If it was in my power to stay, I would. I swear I would. If it was in my power to mar - "
"Oh, please," Christine released his hands and backed up, looking up at Raoul with frightened eyes. "Please, don't."

"I'm sorry," he apologized at once for making her uncomfortable. Christine nodded and they said nothing more about it, just walked, away from the newer areas of town, by the rocks leading down to the sea. The sky was overcast, the water was the color of slate. Her favorite colors, her favorite seaside views, she'd once told an inquisitive designer. Only now it all looked so cold and gloomy; she longed for a bit of sunshine.

She should have waited longer, she reasoned as she and Raoul left the water's edge to make the trip back to the inn. They would leave on the morning train to Paris. If they'd come closer to the summer season, they could have stayed longer by the water. The daylight would have lingered. There would have been wildflowers to pick and she might have persuaded Raoul to comb the beach for pretty shells. They might have made a sandcastle, sturdier and less lopsided than the ones they created as children. He might have bought a kite at a market stall and they could have resurrected the happy ghosts of their childhoods. A little sprite might have even come out to play, a flash of wings and a bright-eyed face glimpsed among the dunes. At least Christine would say she'd seen it and Raoul would play along.

But none of that could happen until spring. And Raoul would be gone.

They were waiting at the station at Lannion, lost in thought. Christine broke the silence. "I know it's not particularly modern of me, but I don't like trains. All that smoke and noise. I don't know how Isaac does it, back and forth, back and forth all the time."

There was a glimmer of startled pride, a second where, 'Who is Isaac?' flashed across Raoul's thoughts, but he recalled Christine's mentioning their mutual friend's pseudonym and he relaxed at once. "He must be used to it by now. And it's a shorter journey by far to Rouen than here. It was very good of him, to look after Madame Valerius in your absence."

Christine nodded, "Very good. He was so sweet about it, he said she reminded him of his dear little grandmother who passed when he was away from home. I don't know - you never know with him do you, how much of what he says is real or make-believe, but I think he was in earnest. Not just trying to make it easy for me."

"I don't think he'd lie about his family," Raoul reasoned. "Though there seem to be a lot of them to keep track of."

"Oh, yes," Christine nodded. "And one more - he has a new nephew. He's looking forward to seeing them again, once A Masked Ball is concluded. He's staying in Paris for the duration, it's not his usual custom, but he's got some kind of clever device in the working whose operation he wants to oversee personally. Something about a revolving staircase, I confess, I wasn't being very attentive when he told me."

"Well, you had other things on your mind," Raoul pointed out. Then added, "Might a few of them come down to see him? Not everyone, but...his parents, surely? Or a few of the elder children?"

Christine gave him an inelegant shrug. "I don't think so. It's a bit of an expense, the travel, and he hasn't anywhere to put them up so they'd have to stay in a hotel."

"Oh," Raoul replied. "That's a shame."

They spoke no more about it. Despite the lurching of the compartment, and the noise, Christine managed to fall asleep about an hour into their journey. Raoul, on the other hand, remained awake,
turning the matter over in his mind.

The visit to the graveyard affected him more than he supposed it would. He'd gone, intending to be a ballast for Christine, to shore her up in the face of her grief. Yet now he was troubled, remembering her father as he was in life. A melancholy man, but still capable of great affection. Of creating beautiful music. And telling stories to entertain the insatiable imaginations of a pair of children. And now...gone. A small stone in a little brown corner of a churchyard. All that remained of him on this earth were the memories that Christine - and he, he supposed - held of him.

Memories were all they had. Even photographs meant nothing if the people behind the glass weren't known or remembered. Raoul thought of Philippe, looking at the picture of him as a child. If...if, how would he be remembered? A little boy in short pants, swallowed by the sea.

There was an itch under his skin. A call to action. Not a response to whistle and bellow, the call of the currents, but a more immediate desire to do something. To be remembered. To be thought well of.

When Christine woke, massaging a crick in her neck, Raoul leaned over and asked her. "How many of them are there? The Astrucs, I mean?"

She blinked at him owlishly, it took a bit for her to get her bearings and respond, "Well, there are the seven children - six, I suppose, minus Isaac. The eldest sister's husband, the baby. His parents, of course. Why?"

"It's...it's a shame," Raoul said again. "That they live so far away, that he's got this terribly clever device for the opera and they're none of them to see it."

Christine nodded sympathetically. "Yes, I thought so too. I correspond with one of his sisters, she always says he doesn't talk much about Paris. Maybe he doesn't want them to know what they're missing out on."

"Exactly," Raoul said, the itch percolating into a notion, which became an idea, which was now a conviction. "But what's stopping them, really? Train tickets and a hotel room, tickets for the Opera. Nothing impossible or insurmountable. Not with a little...help. What do you think?"

All thought of pretended propriety abandoned, Christine made it very clear what she thought as she got up from her seat and half threw herself, half fell across the aisle into Raoul's waiting arms.

"Oh," she sighed happily into his shoulder. "I think you're wonderful. That's what I think. The best, most wonderful man I've ever known."

Raoul held her and closed his eyes, sighing into her hair. It would do. Such praise as that - he could think of no better legacy.

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