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**The Timeless Erosion Of Fantasy’s Dream**

by Mertens

**Summary**

It’s no secret that Christine Daaé loves fairy tales. The Angel who gives her voice lessons knows this, too. But for all of her love of fanciful stories, some scenarios are better left to the books than real life. (The Angel does not know this.)

**Notes**

Title come from Bob Dylan’s song Ballad in Plain D, however the original lyric goes “timeless explosion” and I just felt that didn’t quite fit here but I also didn’t want to find another title so I just changed it a little.

Sorry, Bob!
Erik stood on the other side of the mirror, watching Christine for a moment before he made his presence known. She was sitting in her faded pink armchair, her legs tucked underneath of her, a book in her hands. She looked to be more than halfway through said book, and she was smiling down at the pages as she read. He had often seen her reading before her lessons, but she had never smiled like this at what she was reading before.

He couldn’t help but smile as well. She looked so happy.

“What are you reading, child?”

Christine started and looked up.

“It’s a fairy story, Angel,” she explained.

“Is it a very good one?”

“Oh, yes - very good,” she nodded. “I think this one is my favorite, now.”

“Indeed? What is it about?” he was curious.

She blushed. She felt a little silly at the thought of explaining the romantic tale and how she enjoyed it to an angel, but in the two years since her angel had first appeared to her, he had never reprimanded her or made her feel as though her interests were too worldly. Angels were above such earthly things as falling in love, but surely he wouldn’t fault her silly mortal heart’s fondness for daydreaming on such matters.

“Well, it’s a love story, you see,” she kept hers eyes lowered to the pages. “There’s a man - a peasant man - and he’s secretly in love with the princess. But he doesn’t think she could ever fall in love with a man of his station. So one day he’s fishing, and he catches a fish that can talk. It tells the man that it will grant him any wish if he releases it. He wishes that he could always serve the princess in any way that she needs. So he puts the fish back in the water, and the fish turns him into a bird!”

Christine paused, her eyes shining.

“A bird?”

“Yes, a little song bird! So he flies up to the castle, and he sees the princess, and she’s so sad and crying, so he does the only thing he can do now - he sings for her. And it cheers her up. So he lives in the tree just outside her window, and he sings to her all the time - if she’s sad or scared or not feeling well, he sings and she starts to feel better from listening to him. That goes on for quite a while until one day the poor little thing dies, right in the middle of a song - little birds like that don’t live for very long, you know,” she pushed a stray curl of hair away from her face before continuing.

“He dies right on the windowsill of her room, and she’s so upset when she finds him! She scoops him up into her hands and takes him outside, intending to bury him by the river. She kneels by the water and cries over his body - cries that something so beautiful had to leave the world, that something that gave her so much joy and strength and peace was gone forever. Well, the magic fish in the river hears her crying, and it takes pity on them both - it brings the bird back to life and turns him back into a human! And when she realizes her little bird was really a human all along, she falls
in love with him because of his tender devotion to her all that time.”

Erik didn’t know what to say. Christine liked this story?

“Wasn’t she upset to learn it was a man on her windowsill all that time?” he finally asked.

“Oh, no, Angel - it was romantic - to become a little bird and live his whole life just to sing to her? That’s so sweet,” she sighed. “How could she not love that?”

“He could have just made his wish to marry the princess.”

“No! He wanted her to love him because she truly loved him, not because he used magic to make her love him... Besides, if he had, there’d be no story!”

“I do suppose it would cut the story rather short,” he conceded, trying to ignore the strange tremble in his hands.

She set the book aside and stood, smoothing her skirts out.

“It’s such a lovely story, anyway. The princess is so lucky to have someone who loves her like that.”

“Hmm. I believe it is time for your lesson, child.”

She nodded, and they began, but Erik’s mind was only half there in that dressing room with Christine - the other half was consumed with all she had said about her book.

What had she called it? Oh, yes - sweet. Did she really think it was sweet to find a human man where one was expecting... something else? Did she truly find the man’s devotion romantic?

He was her Angel because he had never thought he could truly be a living man to her. She would have been too put off by his appearance to ever give him a chance to tutor her, or so he had thought. But perhaps he had judged wrongly - after he had gotten to know her as more than just the voice from the chorus with the incredible potential, he realized the equally incredibly kind soul she possessed. But by then it had been too late - she was kind and forgiving and understanding, but he was afraid of how she might react to learning that he had posed as an angel. A hideous man could be excused, a hideous man masquerading as an angel could not, so he had assumed he’d have to keep the ruse up forever once he started it.

It wasn’t such a horrible thing, being her Angel. But it was rather... limiting. He was unable to accompany her on an instrument, for one - if she were able to come to his house, or if he were able to conduct their lessons in one of the opera house’s rooms for practice, then he would be able to provide her with music as she sang. But practically none of the other rooms in the vast building were suitable for a girl and her “angel”. A girl and her tutor, perhaps, could do lessons anywhere they pleased, but a disembodied voice could not - such things were limited to rooms with secret passages behind them. If they could stand in the same room together without the mirror between them, he would be able to correct her posture with a mere brush of the hand, a light touch on her shoulder instead of the spoken command “posture, Christine,” which always caused her to pause while singing. Yes, it would be ideal if he didn’t have to keep up the guise of an angel, but Erik knew better than most that life was seldom ideal.

But this was a wholly unexpected turn of events - what if Christine saw the whole thing in a positive light? What if she was flattered by his well-intentioned lie? She had looked so happy reading about such a similar situation in her book, and all he truly wanted was for her to be happy. Would she smile like that at him, if she knew?
It was a notion that he turned over and over in his head. If he knew for certain that Christine would forgive any white lies on his part, and accept him as a human, he wouldn’t have delayed in the least. This whole business with the fairy story gave him hope - hope for some deep wish that had been pressed down for ages.

Simply put, he was tired of being a ghost, of being an angel. He couldn’t remember the last time he had sat and conversed with another person as a person, and though it pained to admit, he wanted that desperately. Madame Giry knew him only as the Opera Ghost, the sometimes booming, sometimes sinisterly whispering voice which gave orders to her. The people he’d talk to to complete his affairs out in the world didn’t know him at all beyond the figure that was cloaked in darkness and had exceedingly deep pockets to fund whatever he asked for. Madame Giry was very good at complying with his wishes, but he couldn’t rely on her for everything - after all, what use would a ghost have for wines and brandies and whatever other human necessities he couldn’t pilfer from the kitchens?

He was so sick of it all, and here was dear little Christine offering him a respite from it. How sweet it would be to sit and talk with her and have her look at him instead of the ceiling as she told him stories about her day, how wonderful to not have to pretend and lie to such a trusting soul anymore. How achingly validating it would be to be seen as a human being and accepted as such, after so, so long. If anyone was capable of such a thing, it was her.

But still, it couldn’t be rushed. An important decision like this had to have thought put into it, or at least he told himself so.

So he held back and watched and waited.
“No book today, Christine?”

She shook her head and smiled fondly as she looked to the corner of the room where the Voice seemed to be coming from.

“No, Angel. I finished the one about little bird that was a man this week, but I wanted to wait before starting a new one so I could think about that one for a while longer.”

“What book do you think you’ll read next?”

The Voice had moved, and she glanced behind her to where he seemed to be now.

“I’m not too certain... To be honest, I might just read the same one again. It was very good, after all.”

“Ah, I see.”

The Voice sounded amused.

“Do you ever wish you lived in a fairy tale, Christine?” the Voice suddenly asked.

Christine paused.

Her first instinct had been to say yes, of course she did, but then she remembered to whom - to what - she was speaking.

Was her life not already blessed, on par with any other girl she’d read about in her stories? Wasn’t she, who conversed with an angel in a near daily manner, just as interesting as the princess with the bird in her story, or the girl who escaped from the goblins, or the girl whose fiancé was turned into a polar bear, or, or- Jeanne d’Arc?

She blushed a little as she thought of that last one, certain that it was wicked to compare herself to a saint, even if she did hear an angel. Jeanne had saved all of France with the help of her angel - so far all Christine’s angel had helped her to do was sing better.

She wondered briefly if the angel was testing her - would he be displeased if she yes, would he think her spoiled and ungrateful? But no, her angel wasn’t like that. He was always curious to know her thoughts and opinions, but he had never disapproved of any of them so far. He had certainly never tricked her before, either, and she saw no reason why he should suddenly start.

Her hands fiddled with the fabric of her dress and she lowered her gaze to the floor.

“What girl doesn’t dream of being a princess, at least sometimes?” was all she answered.

The angel made a small noise of agreement, and left it at that, changing the subject.

“How is your ankle feeling, child? Better now, I hope?”

She nodded feeling, child? Better now, I hope?”

“Better, yes. The ballet teacher says I’ll be able to dance again the day after tomorrow.”
It was one of the things she loved about the angel - his attentiveness. He had noticed her limping the day before and immediately inquired about it, concern coloring his voice. She had explained to him how she’d twisted her ankle after tripping on a particularly difficult new move in her ballet class, and he had been very sympathetic about the whole thing.

“Good, good. Are you ready to sing?”

The lesson went well, but towards the end Christine couldn’t help but glance at the clock every now and then, and of course her angel noticed.

“Are you so anxious for your lesson to be over, child?”

Her face flushed, embarrassed.

“Oh! No, no - it’s just I’m meeting Meg for lunch today at a cafe. I don’t want to be late.”

“You would do well to focus on one thing at a time.”

“I know,” she frowned. “I can’t help but think of it, though. You know it’s been so long since I’ve been out for anything fun.”

“I know. Do one more run through of song from the finale, and then we will be done for the day.”

She obeyed and tried to make it the best she had sung that particular song - the last thing she wanted was to get lazy with it and make the angel regret letting her leave her lesson early.

“Well done, Christine,” he praised, and she smiled. “You’ve been working very hard lately, enjoy your trip to the cafe. You deserve a break.”

“Thank you, Angel,” she looked into the mirror and began pinning her hair up into a fashionable style before meeting her friend. “It’s a new cafe, I’ve never been there before, but I hear they have such lovely cakes and sandwiches. I’m so excited!”

“You’ll have to tell me all about it at our next lesson, then,” his voice was warm and kind and seemed to come from the chair that was in the corner of her dressing room.

This was the other thing she loved about the angel - how personable he was. She found it so easy to talk to him, as though he were just another friend like Meg or Colette or Raoul, not at all how she would have thought it would have been to talk to a heavenly being.

It hadn’t always been that way, however. The first year after the angel had first spoken to her, he had been rather aloof, keeping any talk strictly about music and her lessons. During the second year, she had grown more comfortable around his presence and had ventured occasional questions to him, most of which were brusquely answered, but eventually he would begin to inquire as to how her day was going and as time went on they began to have actual conversations. She enjoyed their conversations, and thought that maybe he did too - or at least she hoped he did.

“I will,” she promised, glancing over to the chair. “Goodbye, Angel!”

“Goodbye, Christine.”

True to her word she told him about the cafe visit on their next lesson.

“Oh, it was wonderful, Angel! I had so much fun with Meg, she and I are simply going to have to go back soon. They had a cinnamon roll that was so delicious—” she cut herself off, thinking about
whether she should ask. “Can angels taste?”

The angel was quiet for a few moments.

“No, we cannot,” he finally replied.

Her face fell just a little.

“Oh. Oh, that’s too bad. This cinnamon roll was so delicious, it was covered in frosting and butter - oh, I wish you could have been there to try it!” she sighed.

“Truly, Christine?” Erik’s heart was hammering in his chest. “You- you wished I was there with you at the cafe?”

“Well, of course, Angel,” she tilted her head, unsure of why he sounded so hopeful. “We are friends, are we not? And friends want to share things with their friends.”

She sighed before daring to tease him.

“Ah, if only you were a human, we could have our lesson out in the park and have tea at the cafe afterwards!”

Erik leaned against the cold stone wall, his knees no longer able to fully support him. His choice was sealed in that moment. We are friends, are we not?

Christine waited in silence for a few moments, unsure why the angel was so quiet.

“I’m ready to begin my lesson, if you are. I’ve been practicing,” she said hopefully.

“Of course, child. Let me hear what you’ve been working on.”

She nodded, wondering at the uncharacteristic waver to his voice, and began to sing.
Chapter 3

He had made his choice, but he had yet to act. He couldn’t simply step into the room with no warning, as much as he wanted to. He had to prepare her for it so she wouldn’t faint of fright. He wanted to act quickly, but not hastily. He considered this on her next lesson.

She had a big bag with a long shoulder strap that she tried to place over the back of the chair. It slipped off, and a few items fell out as she made a noise of distaste. She reached down to gather them up, and from behind the mirror Erik noticed that among the stray hair ribbons and ballet slipper was the book she had been reading not so long ago. She must have a tarted it again, just as she had said she would.

“How do you like the story the second time, child?”

She looked up, a little startled. The Voice seemed to be right in front of her.

“I love it even more,” she smiled. “It’s so lovely.”

“You don’t think it was wicked of him to lie to the princess like that?”

She frowned. She hadn’t thought of it like that before.

“Do you think it was wicked of him, Angel?”

“I asked you your opinion, Christine,” the Voice swiftly replied.

She thought it over, then shook her head.

“I don’t think it was terribly wicked. It wasn’t nice, certainly, but I think it can be forgiven. Besides,” she gave a little shrug. “It’s just a story, Angel.”

He had no more questions for her that day, and her lesson went on as it normally did.

After the lesson, Erik went straight home as he always did. Now, however, he didn’t simply return to composing as he usually did. Instead, he pulled out a letter and an envelope and began writing. When it was finished he sealed it and set out once again.

Madame Giry was busy with bookkeeping. They had sold a number of season tickets the previous day, and as the head of concierge, it was her job to make sure the records were in order. She was nearly finished and was looking forward to a peaceful night after that. Her hopes were shattered, however, when she heard the Voice.

“Madame Giry,” the deep voice of the Opera Ghost seemed to come from everywhere at once. Her heart leapt into her throat. So much for peace.

“Y-yes, Monsieur Ghost?” she tried to remain polite and hoped that the Ghost would not notice the tremble in her hands.

“I have a letter for you deliver.”

“Yes, Monsieur, of course. To whom? The managers again?”

“To Christine Daaé.”
Her brow furrowed for a moment. Christine? Her daughter’s friend? Her hands tightly gripped the pen she was holding.

“Christine, Monsieur? Has- has the girl done something to displease you? Please, I beg you - do not harm her, Monsieur! I will make up for it, I promise-“

“Cease, Madame. I assure you the girl is in no trouble.”

Madame Giry sagged down in her chair, relieved.

“I want you to place this envelope on her pillow before this evening.”

She glanced at the white envelope on the table that she hadn’t noticed before - a change from his usual red envelope.

“You will not open it, as per our usual arrangement.”

She nodded uncertainly.

“The girl will not be harmed, Madame,” he said in a slightly gentler tone. He could tell the woman was still worried for her daughter’s friend. “I merely wish to give her my congratulations on her improvement lately. It surely won’t be long until she’s a prima donna, I’m certain of it.”

Madame Giry nodded again. She had noticed Christine had been improving quite a lot when she saw her in rehearsals.

“Tonight, Madame - it is of the utmost importance, do you understand?” he dropped any gentleness his voice held previously.

“Yes, Monsieur!” she jumped up, grabbing the letter, and headed for the chorus girls’ dormitories.

She nervously fiddled with the envelope on the way there. She often delivered letters for the Ghost, but this one was so unlike all the others. It was not only the color that was different - whereas the others had a wax seal that bore the face of a skull, this wax seal was embossed with the depiction of a wing, like that of a bird or an angel.

She ran a finger across the seal. Was it really what he had said it was? For a brief moment she considered opening it and reading it, but then she glanced about anxiously. The Ghost could be watching, for all she knew. She left it sealed, and placed it on Christine’s pillow as instructed.

That was where Christine found it when she finally retired to bed after a long day of ballet practice. She noticed it right away as she stepped into her room, and puzzled over who could have left it there. She settled her belongings and sat on her bed, carefully opening the expensive looking envelope. Was it from Raoul, perhaps? No, his letters always came through the post. Her brow furrowed as she began to read it.

My Dear Christine,

I noticed today (by the placement of your bookmark) that you have most likely reached the part of the story where the bird has been turned back into a man. Keeping in line with this, I have a surprise for you that I believe you will find most reminiscent of your beloved fairy tale. I will see you at our lesson tomorrow - Your Angel Of Music

Her heart skipped a beat. The angel had never written her any kind of message before. Was this his handwriting? She ran a gentle finger over the delicate, curling script. Could he write, then? Surely this message was priceless, having been written by an angel. It was only after her shock at the letter
began to fade that the actual content of said letter started to sink in.

A surprise? What on earth could it be? ‘In keeping with the fairy tale’, he had said. But what did that mean?

She could scarcely sleep a wink that night, her thoughts consumed with what the surprise could be.

A gift? No, not terribly likely. Something music related, perhaps? Maybe new music to sing. But no, it had to with the story she was reading.

Her half sleeping mind had the terrible though occur that perhaps the angel was going to turn her into a bird, and her hands clenched against the sheets - but surely that was ridiculous. Her angel would never harm her like that, she told herself as she drifted in and out of slumber.

She couldn’t help the spring in her step as she made her way to her dressing room the next morning. She was so excited! Once inside the room her eyes darted about, looking for any clues, but the room looked just the same as it always had.

“Good morning, Christine.”

Her eyes snapped to the mirror where that dark, warm voice seemed to be coming from. The little grin on her face grew to a wide smile.

“Good morning, Angel.”

“Are you ready for your lesson, child?”

She clasped her hands behind her back.

“Yes.”

“I believe our lesson will run long today. We have quite a lot to go over in preparation for the new shows coming up.”

She frowned, but nodded. Surely his surprise was not an extra long lesson?

“Ah, unless of course-“

She perked up at his words. She could practically hear the grin behind them.

“Unless you would prefer the surprise before your lesson?”

“Yes! Please,” she nodded eagerly, placing a hand on her chest. “Oh, I don’t think I can wait!”

The Voice chuckled and her smile returned.

“As you wish, Christine.”

She heard an odd whirring noise, and suddenly her mirror rolled away to reveal a figure standing behind it.
Chapter 4

Many apologies in advance :’)

Christine blinked a few times, not fully understanding what she was looking at.

She could feel her heartbeat in her throat as the figure - her angel? - stepped forward and into her
dressing room. He was tall, a commanding presence that seemed to overwhelm and dominate
everything in his vicinity. He drew closer, but she held her ground, refusing to step back or flinch.
He stopped at a respectful distance away from her and gave her a moment to gather her thoughts as
she stared at him blankly.

Was this her angel? But this figure was dressed all in black. Surely an angel would not wear black,
that was far more fitting for a-

“It is so nice to finally meet you, Christine.”

There was no mistaking that heavenly voice.

She took a deep breath.

Her angel, a man.

Finally a form to house that voice, an image to go with the sound of him.

Except-

Dull horror began to grow in the back of her mind.

“Have- have you always been a man, then?” her hands clenched in the fabric of her skirts, terrified
of the answer.

Erik lowered his gaze from her eyes to the floor, slightly ashamed.

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

For a brief moment relief washed over her - how awful it would be if an angel had given up his
immortal life merely because he thought it would please her! - and then quickly in its wake a new
emotion swept through her.

She blinked once more, and then she started to cry.

Erik had been filled with such a nervous hope as he had stepped through the mirror. She had
seemed almost normal at first, but her brief response to his answer had been the first clue that it
was not going as he would have hoped - and then her face had crumpled and she began to cry. He
stood there and watched as the tears rolled down her face, utterly shocked and at a loss for what to
do. The last time he had seen her cry had been before he had become her angel, when she was
mourning her father in the little chapel. It was so unexpected now, and it deeply unsettled him. Christine did not cry - not unless something was terribly wrong.

“Christine! Why are you crying?”

“You were never an angel at all,” she managed to accuse through her tears.

He shifted nervously. She certainly wasn’t taking it very well.

“Christine, I thought- I mean, you liked it so much in your book when- and I thought- I didn’t mean to upset you, I thought you would like it, just like how you liked it in the story- “

“Because it was a story, Angel!” she cried, putting a hand over her mouth - the name felt bitter in her mouth now, but she didn’t know what to call him. “Just because I like when something happens in a story, that doesn’t mean I want it to happen in my life too!”

She started crying harder as more realizations began to hit her.

She had loved having an angel, loved the feeling of knowing that her papa had been looking out for her after all, that she was being watched over. It made her feel safe in a world that so unsafe, but now she no longer had that anchor to keep her steady in the turbulent waters of life. Now all she had was a man who looked to be twice her age who had spent two full years blatantly deceiving her. How often had she comforted herself with thoughts of the angel when she was sad or unwell or frightened? She would never feel that comfort again. It had all been an illusion, all of it - there was no angel who was sent to teach her to sing like one of them, no angel to keep her safe from the terrible ghost that haunted the opera house-

Oh.

Oh no.

“Are you the Opera Ghost, too?” she demanded shakily.

Erik looked struck. He wanted so desperately to look anywhere else, to deny it, but there was something about her heartbroken gaze that refused to let him look away. He nodded slowly.

She gave a mirthless laugh, wrapping her arms around herself. How could he have done this to her?

“Am I a joke to you?” she said in a pleading voice. “Is my religion a joke to you?”

He gasped.

“Christine, no! It’s not like that-!”

“I gave you my mind blindly, I trusted you, and you lied to me!”

“I never meant for this,” he could feel his own eyes starting to water.

He regretted many things in life, but stepping through her mirror was now at the top of the list.

She scrubbed furiously at her eyes.

“Do you know what Mamma Valerius said to me before she died?”

Erik was silent. He felt sick.
“She said, ‘I can go peacefully knowing you’ll be safe in the care of your angel, Christine - your angel will always be there for you’. Those were her last words to me.”

Erik closed his eyes and turned away.

Christine sniffled as she thought of her poor Mamma, of the old woman’s trust in Christine’s angel. But now this man had made fools out of the both of them, and what had been a dear memory of her former caretaker was now forever tainted by the truth of the situation.

What would her poor Mamma say if she had known? She would have been heartbroken as well, she was certain. To Christine, losing the angel felt like losing her papa all over again.

She couldn’t take it anymore. She pressed the heels of her palms into her eyes and tried - and failed - to steady her breathing.

“Christine-“

She tore her hands away just in time to see the angel - no, not an angel - the man take a hesitant step towards her, a hand outstretched.

No! She didn’t want him to come closer! She stumbled backwards, reaching for the door.

Erik did not think he would ever forget the sight before him - Christine with her tear-soaked face and eyes so red and sad, her mouth curved into a scowl, her whole body trembling in fear and anger - and he knew without doubt that the words she then hissed at him with such vitriol would haunt his every moment from that day forward.

“I hate you!”

She turned and slammed the door as she ran out into the hallway, making her way to the dormitory.

Erik stared at the empty space she used to occupy. For the longest moment it seemed that he had forgotten how to draw breath. Her parting words echoed in his mind over and over - I hate you. She hated him, and he couldn’t blame her. He hated himself, too. How foolish he had been to think there could be acceptance - that there could be forgiveness - for one such as him.

He didn’t dare to try and follow her, not after how she had pulled back from him with such revulsion. He wasn’t certain how long he stood in the empty room for, staring at the door, but he knew she wasn’t coming back, so eventually he turned and went back through the mirror, his footsteps numb and mechanical.

He walked through the tunnels as if in a daze. Once back in his little home on the lake he tried to find something to occupy his mind, anything to try to forget that awful scene that had unfolded because of him. But everything reminded him of Christine - the organ, the bookshelves, even a simple cup of tea.

He finally gave up and decided it was time to sleep, regardless of the hour, regardless of the fact that sleep was difficult for him to come by on the best of days. He didn’t bother to change into his nightclothes, he didn’t even bother to take his shoes off - he lay down in the coffin in his bedroom and stared up at the ceiling, wondering why his vision was getting blurry until he realized he was crying.

He had ruined everything. He had ruined his one chance to have someone to talk to, he had ruined the one good thing he had done with his life which was train her to sing beautifully, and most of all he was afraid that he had ruined her. She had looked so broken as she fled the room, and the only
thing worse than knowing that she felt that much despair was knowing that he was the one who had caused it.

He turned to his side and wept on the purple lining of the coffin. As always, sleep refused to come.

*I hate you*

Christine squeezed her hands in the pillow she had buried her face into, trying to muffle her sobbing.

How could a day that started so right end up so horrible?

She didn’t know how she would ever stop crying - even still her mind thought up new things that shook and upset her.

Back when she had an angel as her tutor, it had always seemed to her that she had been immensely blessed - having an angel you could hold conversations with had made her special. Not special like how Carlotta though herself special, not special like she was better than everyone else - but special like maybe she had tried to live a good life and had been rewarded for that, special as in she had suffered through a lot in her life yet even still someone was looking out for her and saw fit to bless her with something good.

But now Christine realized the truth of the matter. Her angel hadn’t appeared to her because she was special or good.

He had appeared because she was stupid.

A man had watched her and listened to her when she thought she was alone, had heard her fervent prayers spoken aloud and then used that knowledge to trick her. He hadn’t seen a girl who deserved to be blessed - no, he had seen a girl he realized he could deceive and manipulate.

And that was another thing - the realization that she had spent two years - *two years!* - unchaperoned in a room alone with a strange man. She had never really thought that simply being in a room alone with a man meant anything untoward had to happen, in fact she thought the entire idea of a chaperone was quite silly in most cases, but as her opinion on the matter was not widely held by most people she had never saw fit to mention it to anyone. So the fact remained that he knew being alone in a room with a young woman was improper, and as far as he would have known she would have thought it improper as well, yet still he lied so he could continue to carry on in such a way several times a week for endless weeks.

Did he think nothing of her reputation if someone should find out?

And although he had never stepped over any boundary of propriety while he was her angel - at least he hadn’t done so yet - she knew what most men were like, particularly the ones that hung around the corners of the opera house, and most especially the ones who tried to tell sweet lies to the girls in hopes of receiving something in return for grand promises and declarations of love and copious flattery. Was that all he had been trying to do? She really had been stupid to ever think otherwise.

She wasn’t able to sleep that night, instead just tossing and turning and punching her pillow, willing it to become more comfortable despite its resolute refusal to do so. She couldn’t get the look on the man’s face - what she could see of it under that ridiculous mask he was wearing over half his face for some reason, that is - to leave her mind, how shocked he had been when she burst into tears, the look of deep regret and anguish when she told him of Mamma Valerius. It was
almost as though he truly didn’t realize just how awful what he had done was until that moment. Had he honestly been expecting her to be glad when he shattered the beloved illusion she had so happily believed in for so long?

She felt a little cruel for saying that she hated him, mostly because of how those three little words had seemed to crush his very soul right before her eyes, but even though she felt guilty for it she couldn’t bring herself to regret it very much - the look of pain on his face and the way he had cringed in on himself seemed to her to be a mirror of how she felt on the inside now that she knew. If he had caused her such misery and heartache, well, at least he was feeling it too.

Did she truly hate him? She couldn’t say for sure. The betrayal was still too fresh, too new. She sniffled a little as she tried to think about it. All the thoughts did, however, was give her a headache, and eventually she managed to fall into a fitful sleep which was disturbed by dreams about flocks of huge black crows with glowing eyes that swarmed in her mirror before shattering the glass and causing the shards to go flying into her.

Erik stared blearily at the ceiling through the splayed fingers of his bony hand that rested on his face. The small hours of the morning were steadily growing larger, and he had run out of tears to cry.

He had been wrong about so many things. He had been wrong to pose as angel, to exploit her memories and her grief like that, even if his intentions had not been sinister. He had been so caught up in the idea of it at the time that he really hadn’t thought it through. He had been wrong about how she react to finding out, but really, he should have expected it. After all, the bird in the story had truly been a bird - Erik had never been an angel. The bird had not lied. But Erik had.

But the loudest voice in his head was the one that told him he had been wrong to hope. Wrong to hope that she would be different somehow, wrong to hope that he would ever have someone who treated him as a man and not a monster (how dare a monster ever hope to be a man?), wrong to hope that he would be able to do one good thing with his life. He certainly hadn’t done anything good with his life so far, what ever had made him think he could do otherwise? He was the farthest thing from angel, truly.

As he lay there and ruminate on how the sweetest, kindest young woman he had ever met now hated him - and how she had good reason to do so - Erik swore to himself that he would never hope again.
Chapter 5

The Persian man strolled quietly behind the empty stage, eyes trained on the rafters and flies, not bothering to look at where he was stepping. Even without seeing it, he carefully sidestepped so as to avoid stepping on the trapdoor built into the wooden floor. The stagehands took great care to make certain each trapdoor was locked to avoid accidents, but the Persian man knew better than most just how haunted the opera house was. He had walked these same paths enough times to know where each trapdoor was, enough that he could have walked it safely in his sleep.

Even with all the care he took to walk as quietly as he could, his footfalls still echoed off the walls, the whisper of them all the louder for the oppressive silence that permeated the auditorium.

It was in the midst of that thick silence that he finally heard The Voice.

“Daroga.”

The man stopped in his tracks, sweat forming on his brow. The voice had sounded right next to his ear, but he strained his eyes to look into the blackness of the unlit flies, knowing that the keeper of the Voice was surely up there somewhere.

“Meet me in Box Five.”

The Daroga’s hand instinctively went up to his throat and rubbed, as though he could already feel that Punjab lasso around his neck. Still, it had been so long since he had heard directly from the man-turned-ghost, and his curiosity got the better of him. He left the stage and found the stairwell that led to the box seats, pausing outside of the one marked number five.

He took a deep breath before he turned the doorknob, his other hand hovering up near his face. The box seemed empty, so he stepped inside. He glanced back for just a moment to look at the door as he pulled it closed, and when he looked up again, the Ghost was in front of him. He stifled a small gasp.

Those yellow eyes glanced at the hand the Daroga was holding up before looking back at the face of his erstwhile companion. It stung him that the man so clearly didn’t trust him - was his promise of no more killing not enough? - but once again Erik supposed he couldn’t blame him. He didn’t remark on it, didn’t tell him to put his fool hand down and that he looked like a ninny standing there like that, instead jumping right in to why he had called him there.

“Daroga, I have done something terrible,” he said flatly, his face betraying no emotion.

The Daroga tensed.

“When?” his mind flashed all the awful things he had read about in the news lately, things he had read and wondered about.

“Recently.”

“What did you do?”

For the first time his facade cracked, and the Daroga saw remorse and anguish flash across the uncovered half of his face.

“There was a girl...” his voice waivered.
The Daroga closed his eyes and sighed.

“Oh, Erik - what did you do to her?”

Erik flinched at the utter disappointment in his voice.

“I-“ he hesitated. “For two years I led her to believe that I- I was an angel sent by her departed father.”

The Daroga gasped at him. He didn’t respond at first, choosing to sit down in one of the chairs before thinking of a reply.

“That’s... quite a lie you’ve found yourself in,” he shook his head. “You should stop, obviously, but you need to be delicate in how you go about it. If you slip up and she finds out, she’ll probably be crushed. You should-“

“She already knows,” he cut in miserably. “I told her the truth.”

The Daroga paused.

“It did not go well, I presume.”

Erik groaned. He sat heavily in one of the chairs, covering his face with his hands.

“She ran out the door crying, saying she hated me,” his voice broke at the memory of it.

“How old is she?”

Erik shrugged and tried to regain his composure.

“Young, I suppose. She’s not yet even twenty.”

The Daroga watched him for a moment. Regret was never an emotion he had seen from him before.

“What exactly was the nature of your, er, relationship with this girl?” he asked suddenly.

Erik’s brow furrowed. There was something about the way the man had said it that bothered him.

“I was her angel,” he said simply. “I gave her voice lessons and helped her improve her singing. Her father had told her before he died that he’d send her the Angel of Music, and I supposed I just... stepped into that role.”

“Do you love her?”

Erik stilled. He was silent a long moment.

“I think, Daroga, that you and I both know that love was not meant for one such as me.”

The Daroga sighed.

“Why did you do it, Erik? Why’d you lie to her like that?”

Erik glanced about helplessly. He was hesitant to fully divulge his reasons to him, not because he was ashamed of them, but because he hated the thought of being so vulnerable, so open. Still, the Daroga already knew him better than anyone else likely ever would. What was one more one little
piece of his exposed soul?

“I suppose I thought that if I could be an angel for her, I would be contributing something good to the world... She would be happy because her father had sent her the angel, and she would become prima donna on the stage and untold numbers of people would be happy because of her beautiful voice... And then maybe my legacy wouldn’t just be one of torture and death... Maybe it would have proved that my life was not an utter waste. That I am not merely a monster masquerading as a person. That I, too, was capable of good.”

The implication of what his failure meant hung in the air. Instead of a legacy of beauty and music, he now had one more wrecked life to add his already lengthy list.

“I don’t know what to say,” the Daroga said with a sigh. “What you did was... pretty awful.”

Erik’s temper flared through his sorrow. He slammed his fists down on the armrests of the seat.

“Erik already knows it was awful!” he grit out. “He does not need to be reminded!”

This was exactly why he hated talking to the Daroga, precisely why he avoided having to have contact with him. He was too quick to point out all the myriad sins of which Erik was already vastly aware. In many ways Erik felt the man still thought of him as he had known him all those years ago in that land so far away. Even Erik would admit that the person he was back then was atrocious - but decades had passed and he was different now. Why couldn’t the Daroga see that? He had changed. Hadn’t he? The briefest thought flashed through his mind, a mere fraction of a second long, but it filled him terror - *what would Christine say if she knew about those years in Persia?*

His hands gripped the ornate carved wood of the armrests with such intensity that he was certain either the wood or his own bones would have to give. He shot up out of his chair and began to pace the room.

The Daroga didn’t flinch at the little outburst, instead breathing a silent sigh of relief. It had been jarring to see the man so broken, so different from how he normally was. Let him fume and rage - that the Daroga could deal with. This pervasive sadness that seemed to settle on him like a shadow - that was uncharted territory.

“Erik doesn’t need the Daroga to tell him how wicked he is,” he seethed.

Suddenly he stopped his pacing and turned to face the other man. The burst of anger has fizzled out, replaced by the return of heavy sadness. His shoulders slumped and he fixed his gaze on the Daroga with all the sorrow in the world held in his eyes, and once again the Daroga was lanced with pity for this man who could have done so much better with his life had circumstances been different, and once again he was moved to help him as he had done so many years ago.

“What Erik needs to know is what to do next. He- I... I don’t know what to do,” his voice had grown to a whisper by the end, and he shook his head a little.

The Daroga thought over his words for a while. Erik sighed deeply and sat back down.

“I think you should just leave her be, Erik,” he finally told him. “I don’t think there’s anything you can do to make it better.”

He glanced sidelong at him.

“You’ll be able to do that, won’t you? You can let her alone, right?”

He knew all too well how easily his old companion could fall into obsession over something, and
heaven help them all if this girl was his latest obsession.

But Erik merely nodded.

“I don’t want to hurt her any more than I already have,” he said, staring down at his feet.

They sat in silence for a few moments.

“If you wanted to be her angel so badly, why did you tell her the truth?”

Erik flinched at the words.

“I thought- I thought that she could handle it... I didn’t realize just how much the story about the Angel Of Music meant to her. And I thought maybe if I weren’t just an angel, I could be a better teacher for her,” he stared off at nothing, pausing before continuing. “But I see now that I was wrong. About a lot of things.”

The Daroga pinched the bridge of his nose.

“You’ll be lucky if she doesn’t go to the gendarmes over this, honestly.”

The thought pierced him like an arrow. Why wouldn’t she go to the gendarmes? She already hated him. There was nothing to stop her. Legally, he was trespassing in the opera house, not to mention blackmailing and extorting the managers. Christine had figured out that he was the opera ghost - all she’d have to do is bring the gendarmes to her dressing room and show them the tunnel behind her mirror. Did she hate him enough to do that to him? Time would tell.

Even if she didn’t go to the gendarmes, surely she would tell one of her friends about him. How would he be able to live once word got out that the opera ghost was just an unscrupulous man hiding in the walls? Someone would call the gendarmes, that was almost certain - and even if they didn’t, they certainly wouldn’t keep paying him the twenty thousand francs a month, nor would they continue to follow his wishes in regards to how the theater was run.

Was there anything he hadn’t managed to ruin with his foolish choices? It didn’t seem so.

The Daroga shifted nervously in his seat. He thought back to the unanswered question he had posed to Erik, and then he wondered if the man would even be able to recognize whether or not he was in love with someone. It would make sense, he supposed, with how mournful Erik was over the situation. But even if that was not the case, he supposed there was still plenty to mourn regardless - when they had parted ways all those years ago, Erik had promised to not actively or passively commit acts of evil. But he hadn’t promised to be good. He had promised, at most, to be neutral. And for so long, he had been neutral - although the Daroga might disagree with him about all the Ghost antics he got up to, at least it wasn’t anywhere near what had happened in Persia. This angel business, however - he imaging it must have been quite crushing for him to try to actively do good for what was likely the first time in his life, only for the girl to tell him she hated him because of it. The only thing that kept him from feeling too sorry for him was how glaringly and spectacularly little thought Erik had put into his actions from the very beginning. Still, it hurt just a little to see him sitting there so silent, resigned to his fate of being hated by the girl he had tried to help.

The girl. She must be heartbroken. The Daroga sighed again. He hated how much he sighed when he was around Erik - he seemed to have endless reasons to do so when he was near.

“Who was this girl, by the way?”
“Christine,” he muttered.

The Daroga frowned, trying to place the name.

“Daaé? The chorus girl?”

Erik gave a single nod.

“How do you know her?” Erik asked after a few moments, sounding rather peeved.

The Daroga shrugged.

“I’m here quite often. I know many of the performers, but not personally, you know.”

“Ah. Well,” Erik looked away. “If you see her... If you see Christine... Tell her I’m sorry. For everything.”

“I’ll tell her, Erik. If I see her.”

“That will be all, then,” he turned a pointed look at him, and the cold sweat returned to the Daroga’s brow.

He stood up, not wanting to be on the receiving end of that look any longer, realizing he had, perhaps, outstayed his welcome. Erik was enveloped in sadness at the moment, yes, but the Daroga did not want to be there should that sadness suddenly give way to anger.

He quickly made his way to the door but paused just a second before opening it. He turned back to face Erik one last time.

“Should you need me-“ but Erik was already gone.

The box was empty, so the Daroga opened the door and left.
Chapter 6

“What do you mean you’re skipping rehearsal? It’s the first day, you’ll miss so much!” Meg frowned at Christine.

“I just can’t, Meg. I can’t sing. Not right now.”

There was no way she could explain it to her. Meg has asked, once, about how Christine had managed to improve so much, and she had begun to try to tell her about the angel, but Meg had been skeptical and so she had dropped the subject, instead attributing her success to extra practice. She hadn’t wanted her friend to think her crazy at the time, and she had been afraid all the talk of an angel would make it seem that way. But as bad as it would have been to be thought crazy, she felt even worse about being thought gullible. How could she have not realized the Angel was a man?

Christine reached her hands out to grasp Meg’s hands.

“Please Meg, just tell the director I’m ill,” she begged, her voice breaking.

Meg’s brow furrowed and she scooted over to move closer to Christine as they sat on her bed.

“Christine, are you all right? Is something wrong? You can tell me.”

Christine sniffled.

“I’ll be okay, I just- I just need a little time away for now.”

They parted with a hug and Christine soon found herself walking down the sidewalk, the opera house growing smaller and smaller behind her. She had no real destination in mind, she only wanted to flee the presence she knew lurked in the shadows back in the building she had left.

How could she ever go back to her dressing room now? How could she sit in front of her mirror and fix her hair knowing that he could still be back there watching her? She thought with a shudder now how glad she was that her dressing room was set up the way it was, that the partition she always changed behind hid her from the view of the mirror - she had never had reason to change clothes any time around her lessons, but she wasn’t sure if he ever took hiding there and spying on her at other times.

Her head spun with the implications of it all.

“Lottie!”

She flinched at the voice calling her name, stopping in her tracks and turning to see who it was.

Of course, there was only one person who ever called her Lottie - not even her Angel knew about that. Her lips quirked at the thought of it.

“Raoul! You surprised me!”

Raoul hurried up to her, the grin on his face slowly fading as he took in her teary eyes that betrayed her attempted smile.

“Christine,” he said gently. “What’s wrong?”
“Oh, Raoul,” she sighed, ducking her head. “It’s... it’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing if it’s upset you.”

She nodded.

“Let’s go down by the river? We can talk about it there,” she cast one last anxious glance back the opera house.

He accompanied her down to the benches by the river, talking idly about this and that until they reached their destination. They settled on the bench and looked out at the water, both frowning a little.

“Raoul,” she started softly. “Do you remember what I told you about how my singing improved?”

He nodded.

“Your Angel,” he replied.

She had told him about the Angel shortly after she had first began lessons with him. Raoul had been a little uncertain about it all at first, but her singing had improved, and her father had promised to send the Angel of Music, and in every other capacity Christine still seemed quite capable and quite herself, so in the end he had supposed that perhaps she really had heard from an angel after all.

Tears formed in her eyes once more.

“Well, he wasn’t an angel. He was a man. Just a man,” she whispered it as though it was the most shameful secret.

Raoul sat in silence as the revelation sunk in to his mind.

“Has he been improper with you, Christine?” he wrapped a protective arm around her shoulders, already plotting in his head how to track this man down and murder him if he had done something to poor Christine.

“No,” she said weakly. “But to think that he lied to me all this time-“

She turned in to Raoul’s embrace, crying quietly.

“I’m so stupid. I can’t believe it.”

“It’s not your fault, Lottie,” he said soothingly. “It’s not your fault that he lied. And it’s not your fault that you were so trusting - it’s entirely his fault for taking advantage of you. I’m so sorry.”

He held her until her tears quieted. Once she had stopped crying, she still stayed in his arms, staring at the river. Raoul was so kind and such a dear friend, she thought to herself. He was the only other person besides her Mamma that she had told about the angel.

“I guess I hoped so much that it was true that I never thought to question it. What a fool I was,” she sighed.

“It’s not wrong to hope, Christine,” he shook his head.

“I don’t know what hope there is now, though. I still need so much help on my voice, and rehearsals start tonight but I can’t even stand to be there right now.”
“There’s always hope, I think. Even if you can’t see it right now. There’s still hope,” he asserted. “You don’t have to stay at the Opera Populaire, you could go anywhere. I’ll find you another vocal tutor if you wish it - a good tutor, a reputable one. You’ll never have to see that terrible man again.”

Never see the angel again. Was that what she wanted?

She merely nodded as she leaned against him. His understanding tone made her feel safer, and she began to tell him of the ill-fated meeting between her and the false angel.

“I thought- oh, it feels so silly, but before this happened I would have said he was like a friend... and I told him I hated him. What he did is still so upsetting to me, but even still, I feel badly that I told him that. Do you think that’s silly of me?” she glanced up at him.

“It’s not silly, it’s just because you’re such a kind soul. And you shared so much with him for so long, of course it’s surely confusing. But you owe him nothing, Christine. Not a single word, and most certainly not an apology!”

They stayed on the bench a while longer before he had to regretfully leave her.

“You can always stay with my family if you need,” he told her. “And I was serious about finding you someone to help your voice - just say the word and I’ll arrange it.”

She hugged him.

“Thank you, Raoul. It means so much to me.”

She wandered until the shadows on the ground started to grow long, and then used the rest of her pocket money to hire a cab. The house it took her to was just outside of Paris, one she had been to before but hadn’t visited in quite a while.

Erik sat on the bank of the lake near his underground house. The water moved ever so gently, as though perhaps something was there just under the surface, but Erik knew that he was the only thing that inhabited the cavern, utterly alone.

Slowly the noises of rehearsal from up above began to float down to him, muffled and softened but there all the same.

He had promised to leave Christine be, and he meant to do so. But surely he could still watch rehearsals? He lived in an opera house, for goodness’s sake - surely he wasn’t expected to never watch any of the shows again simply because she was in them? Besides, she’d never know, never have to speak to him or hear from him again. He decided to go watch, just for a little while, at least.

Once inside Box Five, he crept to the edge to look down at the stage. His eyes swept across the stage, suddenly stopping on the empty place in the line of ballet dancers.

Christine was missing. His heart twisted. Had he truly scared her that badly? Had he ruined singing for her?

He tried to shove down the guilt and frantic thoughts. Perhaps she was simply late. But no, she didn’t show up for any of the rehearsal. He stayed and watched long after rehearsal had ended, watched as the performers trailed off the stage and one by one the lights went out, but still Christine did not show up. He stared into the darkness for a little while afterwards before creeping back down to his house.
He told himself half-believed stories of why she was missing, but each one grew less and less likely as the week went on and she still did not appear for rehearsal. She would be cut from the show at this rate.

Soon he stopped going to watch rehearsals at all. It made him too anxious to see the show going on without her. Where could she be? It was a thought he heard echoed from the other ballet girls as well. No one knew where she was. The Giry girl would only say that she was ill and then shrug helplessly.

Christine was ill? Was it his fault somehow? Perhaps his betrayal had crushed her spirit far more than he realized - perhaps she was languishing away in some hospital bed at that very moment, wrapped in the grip of some mysterious illness that the doctors couldn’t make heads or tails of, and all because she had simply lost the will to fight it off. He cursed himself even more than he usually did. How could he have done this to her?

He so desperately wanted to find out more, to question Madame Giry, press the matter until he found out exactly what had happened to his former student - but he had promised. For all he knew his continued meddling in Christine’s life might be the final shove required to force her from the world of music forever, and he couldn’t stand for that to happen.

So he stayed down in his home, trying as hard as he could to put her from his mind. Her leaving, however, had unexpected consequences. He had been writing music for decades, on and off. Quite often he would get stuck on a piece and have to leave off, sometimes for years. But that had changed shortly after Christine was in his life. In the past two years he had consistently written some of the best music of his career as if propelled by clockwork. But now - now his ears still rang with her declaration of hatred, and every note he played sounded discordant and wrong.

Perhaps that was only fair, he mused. He had stolen the music from her life, and now his own music had abandoned him in return.

He turned instead to drawing blueprints for extravagant houses that would never exist, castles fit for royalty, quaint little cottages. At least this skill had not forsaken him. At the end of the week he looked over all the plans for each one, the meticulous details he had added to them, all bursting with possibility and potential - and he threw them into the lit fireplace.

Any possibility or potential seen in those thin papers was merely an illusion, one he couldn’t bear to see.
Chapter 7

Christine knocked on the fancy white door. After a few moments it was answered by a woman with long blonde hair twisted into a simple bun.

She looked at Christine for only a moment before she recognized her.

“Christine! How are you? Come in!”

“Thank you, Adele. I... have been better. But it is so good to see you again,” she greeted her as she was ushered inside.

“It’s been too long - we have so much to catch up on. We were just about to get ready for dinner, won’t you please join us?”

Christine smiled warmly. It had been several years since she had seen Raoul’s older sister, but she still had such fond memories of her. She was the only one of his sisters that had married below her station, and she also happened to be Christine’s favorite because she was the only one of Raoul’s family besides himself who treated her with anything more than polite stiffness.

“You are too kind, Adele. I saw Raoul this afternoon.”

“Oh? How lucky - he so rarely gets days off nowadays. Training keeps him so busy.”

Christine helped her set the table before they all sat down to dinner. The last time she had seen Adele’s family, her little girl had just been a baby, but now she was an adorable little girl who could walk and talk and Christine was delighted at the nonsensical stories she would tell. Adele’s husband, Pierre, was friendly and good-natured, just as she remembered from the previous time she’d met him.

She smiled as she watched the little family interact, the obvious joy and affection that seemed to radiate from all them warmed her heart. She had always secretly admired Adele for the very same reason that so many others shook their heads and tutted when they spoke of her. In the minds of others, she had thrown away her chance for greater riches and an improved station. In Christine’s mind, she had been exceedingly brave in following what her felt was right - she loved Pierre, so nothing else had mattered, not the opinions of strangers or how her own family had all but disowned her, not the fact that they would have to live in a smaller house or that she would only have one or two fine dresses, that she would have no servants to help her with the house or the baby - nothing had mattered to her expect how she felt about Pierre, and how he felt about her. Christine admired that kind of bravery. Looking at them all around the table, she knew that Adele had made the right choice for her life, even if very few people would agree.

And it wasn’t just the three of them that got along well - they all made sure to include Christine in their stories and asked her questions. For a little while she managed to forget her troubles and become lost in the camaraderie around the table. She hadn’t had such a lovely time at a dinner table since before her papa had died. That thought occurred to her, and it felt a little bittersweet. If her mother had lived, would they have had dinners such as these? She had never known her mother, but she liked to think they would have. Would she have family dinners like these when she was older and married? She quickly pushed that thought from her mind. She couldn’t even imagine being married. When - or if - she found someone to spend her life with, she hoped they would be as happy as this, but that future seemed so far off and unreal. She wasn’t ready for anything like that anytime soon, she knew.
She helped clean up after dinner as well, despite Adele’s protests. It was in the kitchen when she was drying the dishes that she shyly ducked her head and broached the subject that had brought her there.

“I must admit, things at the opera house recently have taken a turn that’s left me quite rattled... When I spoke to Raoul earlier, he made mention that I might stay with his family for a little while... So I thought perhaps I would ask if you minded very terribly if I stayed here for just a few nights?”

“Of course you may stay, dear!” Adele beamed at her. “I consider you practically family, you know.”

Adele gave a little wink and Christine’s cheeks colored. She knew Adele was thinking of the days when she and Raoul had first met all those years ago, of how they had been inseparable companions to the point that his siblings had taken to teasing him by asking when the wedding would be. It had started off as a mere jest, but Adele still held the not-so-secret hope that the two would eventually be together, if for no other reason than how happy her little brother was when he was around Christine and how well she got along with her also.

“Thank you so much, Adele - I promise I’ll help around the house in any way I can!”

“Don’t fret over it, love. But I do hope everything is okay with the opera house situation?” she frowned. “You can always talk to me about anything.”

She nodded.

“I think I just need a little time to clear my mind,” she replied.

Adele did not push for any more details, and Christine was grateful.

It was the next day when she was strolling the little garden behind Adele’s house that it happened. She was admiring the many crocuses in their varying shades of purple when all of a sudden a little bird with golden feathers landed on the path in front of her. She held her breath, not wanting to frighten it. It peeped a few times and scratched its feet in the dirt before it looked straight at her then flew off once more.

The thought passed through her mind as it often had when something interesting or unusual happened to her - *I can’t wait to tell my Angel about this.* But on the heels of that thought came a pang of sorrow. She’d never again get to tell her angel about her day, never hear his kind words for her, never laugh at his little jokes or hear that warm chuckle when he was amused at her stories. Had all those happy moments truly meant nothing, then?

She couldn’t stay with Adele forever. She would have to make some sort of a choice sooner or later. If she chose to leave Paris, she’d have to rely on Raoul’s funding, because she had nowhere near enough money to do so on her own. It wouldn’t be so terrible to do so, but it did make her uncomfortable. She hated the thought of owing someone something, the feeling that the course of her life depended on the whim of another, that everything could come crumbling down if she displeased them. Raoul was sweet, though, and he would never expect anything in return if she did accept his offer, but to her the feeling would still linger. When it came right down to it, she didn’t want to have to leave Paris, at least not yet. Her friends were here, her job was enjoyable, her papa was buried here. Her entire life was here, and she would feel lost if she suddenly had to start over elsewhere.

She didn’t have to see her former tutor again if she didn’t wish it. Surely he would comply with her wishes if she ordered him away from her forever - and if he didn’t, well... he wasn’t a specter or a
She wrung her hands in anxiety, suddenly picturing the gendarmes trying to capture the ghost from the opera house. Would they harm him? Would the ghost give a long chase, determined to outwit them, and would the gendarmes become impatient? She could picture one raising a rifle, picture the blast ringing out in the theater, picture the ghost falling to the ground, and she put her hands over her face.

She didn’t want him to be hurt! Even after all he had put her through, she still didn’t want him to be injured or killed - she prayed that he would stay true to the benevolent personality he had showed her these past years, that he would accept the ending of their acquaintanceship with grace and understanding instead of raging at her or stalking her, because if she truly felt her own safety was in danger, she would have to go to the gendarmes and she knew it wouldn’t end well after that.

She sighed. Perhaps it would be easier to simply leave. She could start over somewhere new. Her voice was not the best, but it was better than it was two years ago. Did she even want to sing anymore? How could she use the techniques he’d taught her without thinking of him constantly? She wiped away a tear, but she couldn’t say for certain why it was there. Because she’d been manipulated? Because she’d lost her angel? Because she was considering not singing again? She wasn’t sure. She wasn’t sure what she wanted to do, either. Should she even go back to the Opera Populaire?

Christine ended up staying with Adele and her lovely family for the entire week. It was quiet and peaceful there, away from the harsh stage lights and hustle and bustle of rehearsals and the shouts of directors. She slept easily at night and rose early each morning, cooking meals and washing laundry and sitting in the garden and playing games with Adele’s daughter.

A life like that certainly had its charms, Christine thought. How easy it was to fall into such a domestic situation.

By the end of the week, Christine Daaé had made her choice.
Domestic life had its charms, but Christine knew her heart belonged to the stage. She could find contentment in another mode of living, but nothing would ever compare to how it felt to sing for an audience, and she was not ready to give that up over a lie and a shattered illusion. It took courage for Adele to live her life as she did, and Christine knew it would take courage for her to return to the Opera Populaire, but she also knew that a life did not become the stuff of dreams without a great deal of courage - if she wanted to live her dream, she would have to forge ahead, not run away.

She bid the little family the fondest farewell with many thanks, and set off to the opera house once more.

She walked up the stairs, her step firm, her chin lifted defiantly as she shot glances to the corners and dark hallways. Was he watching, even now? She didn’t care. Let him watch. This was her home - she belonged here.

The other girls surrounded her that afternoon as she appeared on the stage to begin learning the choreography they had already been working on, each one of them full of a dozen questions about where she had been and what had happened.

“I don’t think it matters very much,” she told them, glancing up at the rafters. “I’m here now, aren’t I? Isn’t that all that matters? Now, show me that step again that comes just after the first pirouette.”

She worked ceaselessly on learning the new choreography, practicing even in the dormitory when all the other girls were getting ready for bed, trying to make up for the time she had lost.

By the time Erik finally dragged himself up to Box Five a week later, she had memorized it all.

Crushing boredom and the incessant accusing voices in his head had driven him up to watch rehearsals once more, because he had to do something and hopefully hearing the singers, unskillful though they were, would help to propel him into creativity again.

From the back of the box he glanced down at the stage and his breath stuck in his throat. There was no longer an empty spot in the chorus, and in that spot was the dancer he would recognize anywhere.

He fell to his knees, crawling toward to the very edge of the box and peering over the railing. Was he hallucinating? Was it truly her? He gripped the railing until his knuckles turned white and he quietly wept in relief. Maybe, just maybe, he hadn’t ruined her life after all.

She moved across the stage as though she’d never been absent from it. The ballet mistress and the show directors were pleasantly surprised. The other ballet girls were slightly jealous - the break away had seemed to renew her passion for her art. She had a determined air about her that had never been there before.

Faced with losing the dream she had held so dear ever since she was little, she had realized that there could be no other choice for her. And after much soul-searching during her week with Adele, she felt confident that her papa would have approved of her choice, too. There was no guarantee that she could find work in another opera house. But here she had the chance to continue to improve and work her way up as time went on - when she had garnered a bit of a name for herself,
then she would be more likely to land a job elsewhere, but that would be several years until it was a possibility. Why should she have to leave? Because she was embarrassed over how trustingly she had accepted the Voice in her dressing room? She would reconsider leaving if he became unstable or she felt unsafe because of him, but he had always been good natured with her before, and she had been back an entire week now and hadn't heard a single whisper from him. She had the feeling that perhaps it was he who had moved elsewhere - perhaps he had found another building to haunt. It was a thought that filled her with a confusing mix of relief and melancholy.

Besides, surely she had very little to be embarrassed over - Raoul was the only one who knew about the whole business with the angel. Maybe she would take him up on the offer of finding a new tutor, after all. She loved dancing in the ballet numbers and was good at it, but she wanted to aim for prima donna one day, and to do that she would still need to improve her voice.

Soon the choreography for the entire show was nearly finished, and she felt mostly confident in all of it. There were some new steps she still struggled with, but many of the other girls were having the same problem so she didn't worry herself over it too much. She left the stage, too tired to stay and gossip with Meg or anyone else after the rehearsal had officially ended. Once inside, she locked the door of her dressing room, pointedly avoiding looking at the mirror and pretending it simply didn’t exist anymore. She hadn't looked directly at it ever since returning. She quickly changed behind the partition and then swiftly left the room. Her dressing room used to be one of her favorite places to linger, but not anymore.

She was on her way to go upstairs to the dormitories when someone approached her.

“Mademoiselle Daaé?”

She stopped and turned. It was that odd Persian man who often lingered backstage and wandered through the building. Christine was familiar with him, though she had never spoken him to herself - rumor had it that he had paid a small fortune to be able to wander the building freely at any time he wished, so it was not unusual to see him here or there at any given time. Despite what he had paid to buy this kind of access to the Opera Populaire and its performers, he seldom actually spoke to anyone, and when he did on occasion approach any of the singers or dancers, she had heard he always treated them with the utmost respect.

“If I may offer my congratulations, mademoiselle, I thought you were splendid tonight,” he gave a little bow.

“Thank you, Monsieur,” she said cautiously. She knew the man didn’t have a reputation of harassing the dancers as some of the men who hung around the building did, but in this environment it didn't hurt to be cautious when approached by strange men with compliments - a lesson she knew all too well, now.

“I hope you will forgive my presumptuousness in approaching you, but you see - I believe we have a mutual friend,” he nodded knowingly.

A cold chill passed through her. She said nothing. Was he talking about one of the other performers, or was he talking about-?

“I had noticed that you were absent for a week, mademoiselle, and I just wanted to check with you to ensure that you...” he trailed off, unsure of how to pose his question. “That you were in good - safe - company?”

She blinked.
“What- what do you mean?”

He shifted nervously.

“You were not, perhaps, with our ghostly acquaintance during your absence?”

She paled. So it was about him.

“I was with a family friend.”

He nodded, relief washing over his features. He only hoped the girl was telling the truth - because really, wouldn’t it be just like Erik to kidnap the poor thing and hold her hostage after she had scorned him?

“I am quite relieved to hear that. Should you ever have any sort of... difficulty in regards to him, please do not hesitate to seek my help.”

“I thought you said you were his friend,” she cut in.

“Well, in a sense, yes - but I know quite well what he can be like,” he raised an eyebrow. “My main priority is the safety of those around him, however.”

“Oh?” her hands trembled a little so she squeezed them into fists. “Do you think he’s... unsafe, then?”

The Persian paused.

“I think,” he said carefully. “That sometimes he doesn’t fully think through his course of action, and that he can make rash decisions at times. He and I have discussed your, ah, situation and he expressed a great deal of regret over what he’d done - I don’t think you’re any danger. I only meant to say that should anything ever happen in the future - if, perhaps he attempts to contact you and wish him to not do so, I would be a most willing ally in your cause. Has he, since you’ve been back? Try to contact you, I mean.”

Che shook her head.

“I thought maybe he left,” she said softly.

“No, I’m quite certain he’s still here. He - and I, as well - thought it best if he gave you space after what transpired. I highly doubt you’ll be hearing from again.”

“I see.”

“That brings me to my second reason for speaking to you today - I wanted to ensure you were well, but I also wanted to apologize on behalf of him. He himself asked me to tell you that he was sorry for ‘everything’, I believe he said. But I also felt the need to apologize as well.”

He was silent a moment, gathering his thoughts.

“I don’t tell you this in the hopes that you’ll forgive him - indeed, I don’t expect or encourage you to forgive him - but he’s not like most other people, you know. He wasn’t raised like you or me, his life has been very abnormal and because of that he sometimes does things that aren’t what one would expect of someone. That’s not to excuse what he did, however, it was still an abominable thing of him to do, but... But I know he meant no harm from it. He simply didn’t see it as anyone else would see it.”
She nodded a little, trying to blink away the prickle of tears in her eyes. At least he was being kind about it, not treating her like she was stupid to have believed the angel in the first place.

“He truly thought he was doing something good, and he was quite upset over how it ended.”

“Oh?” she tried as best she could to hide the waver in her voice. “I’m sure he was quite upset, when after his years of flattery he was unable to turn my head after I found out he was a man.”

The Persian frowned.

“That did not seem his intent when I spoke him, though I will defer to you as I was never there to know the nature of your conversations during your lessons. But he expressed regret for hurting you. He had no ill will or nefarious intentions from what I could gather, though again, you would know best from your interactions with him. He is simply... very incompetent when it comes to dealing with other people. When it comes to music he’s a genius, as I’m sure you know, but human interaction, human relationships, having friends -“

The Persian gave a helpless little shrug.

“He simply isn’t used to it, doesn’t understand it. He has trouble with the nuances of it all, but I can say with certainty - as far as I can tell - he never meant to hurt you or upset you, though obviously he ending up doing so anyway. His lack of social skill in that regard is an unfortunate side effect of- well, you know.”

He here made a vague motion of his hand towards the side of his face, and Christine’s brow furrowed, uncertain of what exactly he meant.

“If not for that, he might have had a chance to live normally and learn to behave like anyone else. But it is what it is, and he did what he did, and no amount of apologies or explanations of why he did it can ever truly make it right for you, I’m afraid. He’s sorry, and I’m sorry about him and his actions as well, and I do hope you can find some sort of peace after all this.”

“Thank you, Monsieur,” Christine hesitated. His words were a lot to take in. “I appreciate it, truly.”

“It was a pleasure to meet you, mademoiselle Daaé, I only wish it had been under better circumstances,” he bowed once more as he bid her farewell.

Christine rolled his words over in her mind all night long. So her former tutor wasn’t laughing at her, then? He wasn’t mocking her naivety behind her back, or trying to take advantage of her?

And it was true that he hadn’t tried to contact her, beyond perhaps sending the Persian man to apologize to her. There was that strange feeling back again, the one she couldn’t put her finger on. Was it disappointment? Was it peace? Did she actually want to see him again?

She still didn’t understand some of what the Persian had said. What had he meant by saying he didn’t understand human interaction because of how he was raised? How was his life so abnormal? It didn’t make sense to her - he had talked as though there was something he thought that she knew already, but clearly she didn’t since she had no context for what he had said. It baffled her, but her mind turned mostly to the parts she did understand.

He truly hadn’t meant to hurt her, and she desperately wanted to believe that was the case. It was with that in mind that she snuck out of bed after all the other girls were asleep, and that justification was what she repeated to herself as she scribbled out the words of the note on the scrap of paper before quietly sneaking into the hallway that would lead to the box seats in the auditorium.
Chapter 9

The opera house was nearly completely dark except for what was illuminated by the thin crescent moon that shone down the rough the skylights and the occasional gas lamp left burning, and Christine very nearly regretted her course of action because of it. Why did it have to be so dark? She hated it.

She grew nervous, too, the more she thought about the Angel and the Ghost being the same person - after all, didn’t the Ghost threaten the opera employees? Weren’t a number of unfortunate ‘accidents’ said to be caused by him? But she tried to calm her breathing and recall how kind her Angel had been... before, at least. Surely he wouldn’t hurt her - the Persian had said that the man hadn’t wanted to hurt her.

She finally reached the entrances to the box seating. She gripped the dressing gown around her tightly, realizing that there was no going back now. Keeping her footsteps as quiet as possible, she approached the door with the number five above it. Everyone knew that Box Five was the Ghost’s, and since the Ghost and her Angel were one and the same, then it stood to reason that she could contact him through this box. She reached a hand out to the doorknob, but it refused to turn - it was locked.

She looked around for a moment, at a loss of what to do, then she dropped to her knees. She folded the note in half and carefully slid it under the door as far as she could before hastily scrambling to her feet once more. Her task finished, she hurried back to her dormitory.

She crawled back into bed, pulling the sheets up to her chin - had the rustle of her sheets always been so loud? She held her breath for a few moments, but she didn’t hear any of the other girls stirring and she gave a sigh of relief as it seemed she had succeeded in her plan.

Still - there was a lot to be nervous about. Leaving the note was by far the easiest part. She closed her eyes and tried to let that be a problem for another day.

Erik could hear the music from rehearsals even as he made his way up the winding spiral of steps inside the hollow pillar in Box Five - he was late, a frequent occurrence recently, though it had never been his habit before. Ever since he had seen that she had returned to the stage he waged a constant war with himself in regards to watching rehearsals - seeing her reminded him of her parting words to him, but seeing her on stage also reminded him that despite what he had put her through, she hadn’t lost her spark or her love for singing.

He noticed the little piece of paper on the floor almost immediately after he stepped through the hidden door in the pillar and into the little room. He stopped down to pick it up, wondering why Madame Giry hasn’t left it on the seat like she always did. He sat down, glancing at the stage - Christine wasn’t on yet, and he’d take any opportunity to tune out Carlotta, who was singing at the moment.

He unfolded the note, quickly realizing that it wasn’t from Madame Giry at all - there, at the bottom, was Christine’s name. His heart had seemingly ceased to beat.

Monsieur Opera Ghost,
I have given it much thought and after a discussion with your Persian friend, I have decided that I wish to continue vocal lessons with you - provided that certain conditions are met, of course. If you also wish to continue as my tutor, please meet me in my dressing room tomorrow morning at seven, and we can discuss this matter further. - Christine
Monsieur Opera Ghost. His heart sank. He had given up the chance of being an angel to her in the hopes of the chance to be a man, but instead he was now only a ghost.

He felt irritated, also, at the mention of his “friend”, even though he himself had asked the Daroga to talk with her. But he had only asked for him to apologize to her - how much of a “conversation” did “Erik is very sorry for the wretched excuse of a man that he is” actually warrant? What all had he said to her? “He used to strangle men back in Persia, I’ve seen him do it”? But no - she wouldn’t want to continue lessons with him if she had been told that.

The rational part of his mind (a very small part, admittedly) told him that it would be a mistake to try and tutor her again - that if he had already accidentally hurt her once, he was likely to accidentally hurt her again.

But he so dearly wanted to make it all up to her somehow, and he couldn’t very well make it up to her by refusing to even meet with her, could he? He had told the Daroga that he’d leave her alone, but surely this didn’t count since she had contacted him, did it?

He watched the rest of the rehearsal with anxiety buzzing in his chest. Did she really want him to teach her again? What if it was a trap? Perhaps she was trying to lure him out so he could be arrested and dragged away. He shifted uncomfortably. It was a risk he was willing to take, he supposed. To not show up would hurt her further if she was sincere in her request - and if she wanted him out of the opera house and behind bars, well, he could hardly blame her. If that’s how he had to make it up to her, that’s what he’d do.

He ended up leaving before rehearsal was over (Christine’s rehearsal was over, and that was all that mattered to him, really) and swiftly returned to his house underground, her note safely tucked in his pocket. He read it several more times that night before he retired to his coffin, leaving it on top of his dresser - a place he could see without much difficulty even as he lay down. His eyes were drawn there every so often as he’d wake from dozing off, still not quite believing it could be true.

Finally he rose and began to get ready for the morning.

He was impeccably dressed as he approached the final corner in the tunnel before reaching her mirror, but he paused to smooth down his already-smooth hair one last time. One last turn, and he would know what awaited him in her dressing room.

But there were no gendarmes in that little floral wallpapered room - only Christine, sitting on her chair and fiddling with a makeup brush. On first glance she appeared bored, but Erik knew her well enough to know that underneath the apparent boredom, she was actually nervous. She was nervous because of him, and his heart twisted at the thought.

“Christine,” he called softly.

She started, dropping the brush. Her eyes went wide, looking at the mirror for the first time since she had returned. She swallowed hard and nodded.

“Come in,” she said, and the mirror opened.

He stepped through, but didn’t come any closer after the first step out of the mirror. He still remembered how she had flinched from him when he had started to draw closer when they first met in person.

Her brow crinkled. He was still wearing that ridiculous mask that covered half of his face - more than half, really, all of his nose and all of his forehead and down to his chin on one side - and she
couldn’t imagine what purpose it served. She put it from her mind, though - she had bigger issues to tackle with him than his silly mask.

“Do you wish to keep teaching me, then?” she asked meekly.

“Of course I do, Christine. You were an ideal student, and you have a great deal of potential. Any teacher would be blessed to have you as a student.”

“I want to be prima donna one day,” she told him, and he nodded.

He didn’t seem surprised by her ambitions, so she continued.

“I’ve taken lessons from a number of vocal teachers in the past, at the conservatoire. They helped, of course... but no one has managed to take my voice to the heights that you have,” she paused, afraid that she had made herself sound too dependent on his skills, so she added - “yet.”

He nodded again.

“You truly wish to continue lessons with me, then?” he asked, scarcely believing his luck. “After-after...”

She pressed her lips into a thin line.

“Why should your poor decision making keep me from gaining the skills I need to improve my voice?” she shot back.

He lowered his eyes to floor, suddenly ashamed. It was as though she’d dumped a cold bucket of water on him, and he was reminded that she was doing this in spite of him, not because of him.

“So I want to keep doing lessons,” she said, taking a deep breath. “But we can’t go on as we did before, obviously.”

“Your conditions?”

She gave a brief nod.

“My first condition is that you can’t ever lie to me again. I don’t care what it’s about. I don’t care if it’s an innocent lie, or if you think you’re doing it to spare my feelings. No lying. About anything.”

“I swear it to you, Christine, I won’t lie to you anymore.”

“The second condition is that you have stop all of this Ghost nonsense. It ends now.”

He frowned. He wanted to comply with her every wish, but-

“Christine, that’s how I make my money. It’s my only source of income - I won’t even be able to afford food if I stop.”

She frowned in turn. Why couldn’t he just teach lessons and charge the students? She didn’t understand.

“Then the Ghost can’t seriously scare anyone, and you can’t hurt anyone.”

“I’ve never hurt any-“ he began to protest, but she stared blankly at him and he knew this was not the time to argue about whether or not he had been at fault when that stagehand had stepped in the
path of the bucket of sand he had dropped to stage, leaving the stagehand with a concussion.

He tugged on his sleeves, knowing he was beaten.

“The Ghost will not harm anyone,” he conceded.

She wasn’t entirely pleased with how that had turned out, even with his promise of his not hurting anyone he was still lying to others even if he wasn’t lying to her. Her mind raced to find something, anything, to add that might make up for the compromise she hadn’t foreseen, and she blurted the first thing she came up with that sounded acceptable to her.

“You’re going to come to church with me, too.”

His eyes snapped to hers, incredulous.

“Church?” he parroted.

She nodded.

“Christine, I- I don’t leave the opera house,” he shrugged helplessly. “I mean, sometimes I do, but-“

“You don’t have to leave the opera house, there’s a chapel right here and a priest conducts a sermon once a month.”

His shoulders sagged. He was aware of the monthly sermons held in the little chapel, a time he always made sure to avoid lest he accidentally be discovered. He could go with her, he assumed, though it would be difficult. The sermons were sparsely attended, and he hated the thought of the priest staring at him. Still-

He nodded, accepting.

“That’s all,” she said quietly. “I just- I just wanted some assurance that you’d be good.”

“And you have it, Christine,” he said eagerly.

She twisted her hands a little, both of them standing in silence for a few moments.

“Did you ever watch me undress?” her face burned at the question, and she was certain she wouldn’t have had the courage to even ask if not for the familiarity that existed between them from when she had thought of him as an angel. Besides, given their history, any semblance of formality or propriety was surely useless by now.

“Ch- Christine!” he sputtered, sounding scandalized, and she noted with faint amusement the way his face turned red. “I would never! Please believe me, I would never do something like that to you.”

The pleading look of hurt on his face convinced her.

She almost thanked him for not exploiting her in that way, but she held her tongue because she realized how strange it would be to applaud him for basic decency. It put her a little more at ease to hear it from him, though she did wonder for a moment if he could even be trusted to tell the truth at all at this point.

“What are your intentions towards me, now that you’re a man?”
He stared dumbly at her.

“Intentions?” he said at last. “To be your teacher, of course."

“You were my teacher when you were my angel,” she frowned. “But you aren’t my angel anymore, so I want to know how you expect us to get on from this point. What do you wish to be to me, if not my angel and besides my teacher?”

He couldn’t gather the nerve to look her in the eye, instead studying the threadbare carpet. He didn’t remember when his throat had last been this dry. It would be easiest to simply say he only wanted to be her teacher and nothing more, but he had promised the truth to her in all things.

He felt like a child again there before her, as though he were standing in front of his mother once more and she was waiting for his request so she could rage and scream at him before locking him in his room. She had shouted that she hated him, too, and as he remembered things he’d rather forget he found he couldn’t even bring his eyes to glance at the hem of Christine’s dress.

Christine. She was not his mother, he told himself, trying to convince himself that she would never be so cruel as his mother had been - but of course, she had already said she hated him, and so had his mother, so perhaps his mother wasn’t being cruel to him all that time - perhaps she was simply being honest - perhaps there was something deeply flawed inside of him after all that caused others to rightly revile him - perhaps he truly did deserve it.

He could feel her steady gaze on him, but still couldn’t bring himself to look at her, so he missed the way she was looking at him - open and honest, firm yet kind as she waited patiently for his reply, not at all how his mother used to look at him.

He took a tremulous breath before answering, finally saying the shameful words out loud, preparing to be verbally accosted or perhaps have something thrown at him.

“I only wish to be your respectful friend.”

It was the honest truth, the words he couldn’t even tell the Daroga. Even after everything, he still dreamed of a future where they might laugh and talk as they had when he was an angel, except now with him as a man. He knew it wouldn’t ever truly happen - but he could dream. He could always dream.

“And as your respectful friend, please know that I don’t expect anything in return, not even your friendship, if you don’t freely wish to give it.”

“I see,” her voice gave away nothing.

He suddenly couldn’t bear to be in the same room with her after confessing his wish - she hated him and still he groveled at her feet nearly begging for a scrap of kindness and saying he wanted to be her friend and all she could reply with was ‘I see’ - it was too much for him to cope with.

“Thank you for the opportunity to teach you again, Christine, and I truly am sorry for my deception,” he turned to go through the mirror again. “I will see you at your usual days and times for your lessons, if that still works for you.”

“Wait!” she called out, and he froze mid-step.

He turned to glance back at her.

“What’s your name?”
She realized in all of this she’d never even heard his real name. She couldn’t call him Angel anymore, obviously, but it also felt obnoxious to have to call him Opera Ghost - no more titles, she thought to herself. He was a man now, nothing more, and men had names.

He stared for a moment, blinking several times. His name? Her question flustered him. How long had it been since someone had asked him what his name was? When was the last time his tongue formed those syllables in a context that wasn’t in the midst of a fit? Did he even remember his own name?

“Erik,” he finally said.

She nodded.

“Erik. Very well, Erik, this weekend is the sermon in the chapel. I expect to see you there.”

“Of course,” his gaze lingered on her one second longer before turning and carefully sliding the mirror back in place with him behind it.
There were two days until Sunday morning, and Christine spent them in a bit of a daze. She was still surprised by it all - surprised that she still wanted to work with him, surprised that he wanted to work with her, surprised that she had the courage - nearly audacity - to ask for her demands, and even more surprised that he had so readily agreed to them.

It had been a risk, she knew, secretly meeting with a man who could so easily overpower her, and she hadn’t told anyone about the meeting beforehand - he could have kidnapped her and no one would have known where to even start looking for her. Who knew where that tunnel behind her mirror led to?

But still, he had been very respectful just as he said, and it had turned out well enough. Better than well, considering that it seemed to be a situation where he held the majority of the power - she needed him to refine her voice if she wished to go anywhere with her career, yet he could surely find any number of other students instead of her, so she was replaceable in this equation and he was not, at least that’s how it looked to her.

Erik. She finally had a name to call the Voice she had known for so long.

As she took her seat in the back row of the chapel, she wondered if he’d truly show up or if he’d just been humoring her at the time when he’d agreed. It began to seem as though her fears were coming true as the service was starting and he still didn’t show up.

He slid into the pew with her like a shadow, and she almost jumped when she noticed him suddenly sitting a few feet from her. She was relieved that he was there, but she stared at him with wide eyes - he was wearing a black hat with a long brim that he had pulled low over his face. He could feel her looking at him, and one glance at her was all it took to realize that she expected him to remove the offending hat.

He slowly removed it and set it next to him. She gave a silent huff at the now revealed sight of that damn mask on his face. What was he hiding trying to hide from with that? Was he, perhaps, a wanted man attempting to avoid being recognized? The thought unsettled her. She would have to find a way to bring the subject up with him at some point.

He hadn’t been in church for religious purposes since he was boy, but he found he still remembered enough to follow along with the responses and he had guessed that simply sitting there next to Christine was not what she had been wanting him to do when she had asked him to come to church. Besides, maybe if he followed along with everyone else, he would draw less attention to himself and be able to go unnoticed.

Christine looked at him curiously as he made the sign of the cross along with the rest of the people in the pews. There was so much she didn’t know about him, despite having talked to him so often for so long.

The priest moved on to the sermon, a short one but based on the evils of lying and how wicked a sin it was and where the eternal destination was for those who practiced such a thing. Half way through the sermon Erik glanced at Christine again, and found she had pinned him with the most doleful stare he could have imagined. He shifted uncomfortably, wondering if perhaps she had spoken to the priest beforehand and requested this particular topic or if he just had the spectacular luck of running into a coincidence like this.
Finally it ended and he breathed a sigh of relief. He moved to stand so he could leave before the others in the chapel walked past him, but Christine whispered to him to wait.

Wait? His eyes widened, disbelieving. What on earth was there to wait for? But, she had asked him, so - he sat back down.

His anxiety grew as the handful of people began to make their way to the doors that were just behind the pew he and Christine were sitting on. He was about to be seen-

He slid down to his knees, bowing his head and resting his trembling hands clasped together on the back of the pew in front of him, his face completely hidden by his arms. For all appearances he looked to be the very portrait of a man deep in prayer. He was afraid that he was giving Christine the impression that he was pious when really he was only a monster, but it couldn’t be helped. Perhaps if he actually did say a prayer while he was down on his knees, he would be a little less ashamed of himself, but the only words that could come to mind were *Dear God, please don’t let anyone see me*, which he supposed might be a sort of a prayer.

Christine watched him with confusion, uncertain if he was having a moment brought on by the sermon but not wanting to interrupt him regardless. She waited for the handful of people to exit the chapel before standing and making her way towards the corner where a number of candles were kept on a long table.

Erik, hearing that the chapel was now empty except for Christine, looked up to see what she was doing. In the midst of his anxiety to leave before being discovered, he had forgotten all about her long-held habit of lighting candles on Sundays as she prayed. He had seen her do so on various occasions - it had been in front of one of those very candles that he had first heard her whispered plea for the Angel of Music.

He watched now as she lit one and paused a moment over it, then lighting a second one and pausing over it as well. It was the third candle that left him wondering what it could be for. One for the soul of her papa, one for the soul of Mamma Valerius, and one for-? He tried to imagine who or what it could be for, but came up blank each time.

The thought that it could be for him never crossed his mind once.

She opened her eyes and looked down at the little flame as it slowly melted the white wax. It was difficult to reconcile the thought of the man who had hid in her dressing room with the thought of the angel who was supposed to have been watching over her, but she knew without doubt that regardless of how she felt about him she didn't want him to end up in perdition. She knew, too, that it was not a choice that was up to her, that it would be up to him to sort that out for himself, but she also knew that it was going to be a frequent subject in her prayers from now on.

Her prayers finished, she pulled a few coins from her pocket and placed them in the alms box, then turned and saw him still kneeling while he watched her. He stood up with only minor difficulty, and accompanied her to the exit.

"Thank you for waiting for me, Erik," she said softly.

He nodded. Hearing his name said by her voice was a sound he marveled at - it was soft and sweet, like everything else she said, and when she said his name there was no trace of disgust or disappointment to it like he had so often heard from others.

"I'll see you tomorrow morning, then? For my lesson?" she added.
"The same time as always, Christine. I want to use the room with the piano in it instead of your dressing room, however. It's high time you had some accompaniment."

But despite how well their Sunday had gone, things were rough again by Monday morning. Being in the room with her as she sang was not all he had romanticized it to be - it was frequently awkward and despite the room being larger than her dressing room it felt rather crowded as well.

Her warmups were shaky, and he continually stopped her and made her start over. She seemed suddenly incapable of things she had excelled at previously, and it was irritating and frustrating to both of them.

"Christine," he chided as he turned from the piano, trying to keep from snapping at her. "You've done this exercise a thousand times before and never had this problem. You need to focus on what you're doing."

She scowled. She was losing patience with herself and his tone certainly wasn't helping her feel better.

"I'm trying, Angel, it's just I've never had to sing with a man in the room with me before and it's very distracting."

She spat the former title with all the vitrol of an epithet, and she saw his jaw clench at it.

He turned back to the piano without another word and banged out the melody once more, using a little more force than was strictly necessary, waiting for her to being again.

She managed to hold it together and get through the rest of her warmups. When it came time to work on the songs from the upcoming show, he abandoned the piano and instead watched her, occasionally pacing the room as he listened. She had seemed to recover from her earlier problems and was no longer as shaky. Her shoulders, however, steadily found their way up with a tension that would do her no favors. He moved from behind her to the side of her to brush his hand across the top of her shoulder, but before he could even get close to doing so, she caught sight of him and his outstretched hand. She stopped signing entirely, taking a step away from him, her arms instinctively going around herself as thought to protect herself from him, a flash of panic across her face.

He jerked his hand back and quickly moved away from her, instead sitting once more on the piano bench, his hands firmly gripping his knees.

"Your shoulders are too high," he said tightly. "You need to let them relax more than that."

"Yes, Erik," she nodded, and tried to let her shoulders drop.

He stayed on the bench after that. He was embarrassed and irked all at once, the two emotions mixing together and blackening his mood. Had she thought he was trying to grab at her? Clearly she still didn’t trust him, but really he had only himself to blame for that. He shouldn’t have reached for her so suddenly, either, but it had only been an innocent gesture and yet she reacted as though he were some sort of scoundrel. It was a moment that was going to eat away at him for some time, he knew.

She began the song again only to hit a sour note less than halfway through.

He clicked his tongue and glanced behind him. Her shoulders were tense again. She knew better than that.
“Really, Christine, you’re doing abominably today. I don’t know what’s gotten into you.”

Was it truly him? Was he so awful to be around that his mere presence caused her to revert to her old bad habits that she had broken so long ago? He felt inadequate, as though he had failed her, and though a small part of his mind cried out at him to stop, he was taking it out on her when he knew it wasn’t her fault at all. Snapping at her made him feel like it wasn’t entirely his fault, made the ache in chest better for a moment, but he knew he’d be feeling terribly guilty after the lesson was through.

He had never snapped at her before, when he was her Angel.

He heard a soft sniffle and turned to face her.

A few tears rolled her cheeks.

“Christine,” he admonished. “Pull yourself together.”

She hated this. It was nothing like it had been before. Perhaps trying to continue lessons had been a mistake after all.

The sight of those tears made him supremely uncomfortable, especially since he knew they were caused by him.

She scrubbed a hand across her face and frowned.

“I’m trying my best, Erik.”

“No, you aren’t,” he said coldly, his own mind screaming at him with every detached word. “Sloppy posture and halfhearted warmups are not your best. You aren’t even trying, and you flinch from me when I try to help you - you obviously don’t trust me. I’ve done everything you asked of me and this is what you give me in return?”

He turned from her again, hating himself for speaking to her so. She was a pure, delicate flower, and he was trampling upon her kind soul just because of a bad lesson. How many days had she spent pouring her soul out to him in song, practicing relentlessly to improve? And now when things went sideways he was so quick to heap criticism upon her in an attempt to salve his own bruised ego.

“No, you haven’t.”

The words were just barely spoken, but spoken all the same.

“What did you say?”

“I said you haven’t done what I asked you to do,” she frowned, blinking back the rest of her tears and clenching her fists.

She could tell he was in an awful mood, and part of her realized the wisest choice would have been to remain silent and excuse herself from the lesson and try again a different day, but she couldn’t stop herself. How dare he berate her for flinching? She couldn’t help it! How dare he sit there and speak of trust when he didn’t even trust her to know who he was?

“You said you’d be honest, but you’re lying to me even now.”

His brow furrowed, unsure of what she was talking about.
“What he devil are you talking about?” he demanded.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” she shot back. “You claim to want to be honest about everything, but you’re still hiding.”

He turned away again, and for some reason it infuriated her. He couldn’t just turn away and pretend she wasn’t there!

“This lesson is over, Christine,” he said, knowing that both of their emotions were running too high to continue getting any work done. He didn’t notice her marching up behind him. “Go get some rest and perhaps we will discuss this at a later time.”

But she didn’t want rest. She wanted the truth.

Who was this man who had pretended to be her angel for so long? Who was he really? How dare he continue to hide after promising her honesty?

From the corner of his eye, Erik noticed her small hand reaching up to him, but his mind refused to realize what was about to happen.

He didn’t have time to stop her when she reached up and snatched his mask away.
Her anger and frustration were quickly forgotten as a wave of terror crashed over her. She had truly thought that he was wearing the mask as a disguise, to keep himself from being recognized - she hadn’t even considered that it might be something like this. *Never* this.

She stumbled backwards, turning away and gripping tightly to the back of a chair, wondering if she was about to faint. There was a pounding pressure in her head and her hands felt numb, a cold sensation running down her arms and legs. The world swayed a little, blurring out of focus for just a second before it became all-too-real once more.

He had thrown a hand up over the side of his face, but he had been too slow. She had seen. She had seen *everything*.

“Christine!”

He wanted to scream and rage, wanted to call her a prying Pandora and curse her, but all that came out of his mouth was a choked sob.

“Why?!”

She desperately wanted to explain herself, wanted to tell him that she had only meant pull away what she thought was hiding his true identity, needed to tell him that she never meant to unmask his disfigurement so she could gawk and embarrass him - but while her mind raced with a hundred thoughts, her lips stayed frozen and her tongue refused to obey.

Had he realized her intentions he could have stopped her before she ripped the mask off - but it was so unexpected from her that even now he could scarcely believe that she’d done it. A numb haze settled over him and reality ceased to feel real, as though he had found himself the punchline of some sick joke.

Christine was a sweet girl, far too sweet to have done something like this, or so he had thought. Had anyone else put their hand that close to his face, he would have broken their wrist. But he had trusted dear little Christine. Christine would never pull the mask off, he had been sure of it - or, perhaps, he had only wanted to believe that that was the case. He had clearly been wrong, and it stunned him into near speechlessness, leaving him only able to repeat one word.

“Why? Why?”

She was silent, her shoulders more tense than ever and shaking slightly. She couldn’t bear to turn and look at him again, but she could hear him crying quite loudly.

Her legs were quivering and she didn’t trust them to hold her up. She badly wanted to dart from the room, but she was terrified that if she turned around even the slightest she would *see* again.

“T’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she whimpered.

Oh, how she was sorry. His heart-rending pleas of *why* were making her feel sick. She never would have touched his mask if she had known, but he had never told her. She felt incredibly stupid for not realizing sooner.

Erik sank to the floor, all dignity gone. He wept openly, trying to keep the ruined side of his face hidden with a badly shaking hand. The only thing he wanted more than to grab his mask and flee
was to go back in time and prevent any of this from ever happening.

His mask - where was it?

He blinked through tear-blurred vision, trying to see where it had fallen.

But that was the problem - it hadn’t fallen. Christine was still gripping it tightly in her far-too-pale and trembling hand.

“Christine,” he choked. “Please, my mask...”

He crawled forward, feeling like a lowly worm, then felt even worse when she tensed up even more as she realized that he was approaching her.

She looked down at the contents of her hand with half dazed eyes. She had forgotten she was even holding it, especially with how her hands felt so strange. She stared at the white material for a moment, but all her mind’s eye saw was what had been behind this mask.

It had been awful, and it had been made all the worse for its sheer unexpectedness. Another wave of cold fear hit her. She couldn’t stay in that room any longer - she needed to get out - now. Her heart felt as though it were going to beat right out of her chest.

Just when he thought his entire heart had already been broken, Erik found yet another piece of it that shattered as Christine unceremoniously dropped the mask on the ground behind her as she escaped the room.

He flinched at the slam of the door in Christine’s wake, crawling on elbows and knees to where the mask lay, picking it up and putting it back in place, although there was now no one else in the room. He didn’t have the strength to get up off the floor, instead opting to stay there a while - at least until he could stop sobbing.

Christine ran and ran. She finally ended up in one of the costuming rooms, falling into a pile of fabric and bursting into tears, putting a hand over her mouth to try to quiet herself.

She was so ashamed of how she had acted - both in tearing off his mask and how she had treated him afterwards. She had left him crying on the ground, not even asking if he was okay, barely even apologizing to him.

The words of the Persian drifted back to her, and they all made sense now.

*He’s not like you or me... a very abnormal life... he’s not used to having friends... his lack of social skill is an unfortunate side effect of...*

Of his face. Erik hadn’t been able to live like everyone else because of his face.

Everything else fell into place, too - why he hadn’t simply approached her as a man wishing to tutor her in the first place, why he didn’t have any other students, why he had to pretend to be a ghost to make his money, how he had tried so hard to hide in the chapel, his own words about how he didn’t leave the opera house.

She thought back to him as he had stood before her, too shy to even look in her direction as he said, *I only wish to be your respectful friend.*

She cringed in on herself. She hadn’t been a very respectful friend to him.
What made it all the worse was that even now she didn’t think she could go to him and check on him - her legs still felt like rubber and her face was tingling from breathing too quickly. She knew that it must be terrible for him too, that he must be going through something horrible at that very moment just like she was, if not far worse - but still she couldn’t gather the strength to go see him.

She lamented her lack of courage, both in how she had panicked and fled and also in how she couldn’t bring herself to return to him. She hated how even as he was suffering she still found a way to make it herself and her feelings.

She had reduced him to tears and hadn’t even bothered to tell him why.

Why.

That cry was going to haunt her just like the image of his ravaged face would.

His face. She shivered.

They had both been so mad, just before. Over what, she could scarcely even remember. It didn’t seem to matter anymore, not after what had just happened. She pulled her knees up to her chest and sniffled. She wished she could apologize to him, wished there was some way to make it up to him.

Had she been the first to treat him so crudely? Or had others torn his mask away before? No, likely she was just another in a long line of brutes who had treated him shamefully. The stark betrayal she had seen in his eyes came back to her. And then she had run away like a child, dropping his mask on the ground. What if it was fragile? Had she broken it in her carelessness?

It seemed an eternity before shame and concern at last won out over fear. She stood and made her way back to the room with the piano, but once she pushed the door open she found the room was empty.

She stood there and bit her lip, not sure what would happen now. She slowly made her way back to her dressing room, at a loss of what to do.

She realized, now, that perhaps things were nowhere near what she had first thought they were - maybe he hadn't been trying to trick her by saying he was the angel - maybe he had been trying to reach out in the only way he knew how. Wasn't that almost what the Persian had said? She could still be irked over the mess with the false angel, but she thought she understood it a little better now.

Guilt washed over her once more. She could consider them even now, she thought sadly. He had crushed her girlhood hopes of being guided by the Angel of Music, and she had likely shattered what little trust he had left in other people.

She only wished she could speak with him, but she had the terrible feeling that he might not want to speak to her ever again.
Chapter 12

Christine stood on stage and waited for her cue with the rest of the ballet girls. Her eyes kept wandering to Box Five. Was he there? Was he watching? Her mind, too, wandered to earlier that moring and what she had done to him.

Erik was indeed in Box Five, watching the rehearsal and frowning. He caught sight of Christine and frowned harder, reaching a hand up to feel that his mask was still on. He quickly looked away.

Would she tell people now? Tell them of the horrifically disfigured Opera Ghost who was only a man? Would she shudder and cringe as she told them about how she stole the mask right off the beast's face, only to find that he only had half of a face?

Their lessons were over for good now, certainly. There was no way she would come back to him. He resolutely pushed away all thoughts of whether or not he would want to continue lessons with her if she did come back, because he knew that was not a situation he would ever find himself in.

He stared at the figures on stage, trying hard to purge from his mind the image of her face when she had seen him. She had turned so pale, and she had been shaking so hard after she had turned away. She couldn't even bear to look at him as she had run from the room - really, he was quite lucky that she hadn't taken the mask with her when she left. He touched the mask again. She had said that she was sorry - yes, sorry that she had seen the true face of the monster who had pretented to be her angel.

Every so often he noticed that she'd look over to where he sat, and it filled him with dread and a strange longing. He knew that she couldn't see him, of course, and perhaps that was why she was looking. Was it morbid fascination that caused to glance at his box so? Terror, perhaps? He sighed. For that matter, what had brought him here? There was nothing for him here anymore. No student to keep an eye on, not even a production to give notes to the managers about, for he surely couldn't keep up the ghost act much longer.

Perhaps it was a farewell that brought him here. One final show to watch on the stage of the Opera Populaire before he left it forever. There would be other buildings to haunt. There would have to be.

The rehearsal went well, and he mused on how good a show it was going to be. What a shame he would not be able to see it finished, but he was already creating an itinerary in his head. There was nothing tying him to France anymore, but he had been so many places already - and while he had enjoyed aspects of each place he had visited and lived, many of them where filled with bad memories. He would go to America, maybe. He had never been there before. New York, perhaps. He had heard interesting things about it.

He watched as the performers trickled off stage and the lights were dimmed. He lingered to savor the last moments spent there. Carlotta left the stage first. He wouldn’t miss her. He looked back at Christine, who happened to be looking up at him. He would miss her, he thought. Miss what they had before he stepped through her mirror and ruined it all.

“Christine, the rest of the girls are going out to dinner at that new place just around the corner! Come with us!” Meg tugged at her hand, drawing her attention away from Box Five.

She frowned.
“Not tonight, Meg. I think I want to stay just a little longer and practice on my own.”

Meg’s face fell.

“Are you sure? You’ve been so distracted all night... Don’t you think a break might help?”

Christine shook her head.

“It’s because I’ve been distracted that I need to work for longer,” she explained.

“Well, alright... But if you change your mind, you know where to find us!”

Her friend left and Christine looked back at Box Five again.

She went through the motions of practicing the steps from the ballet number, casting little looks his way every now and then.

Soon she was the only one left in the auditorium. She stopped dancing and simply stood.

His heart was pounding in his chest. He should leave, he told himself, but her gaze pinned him there like a butterfly to a board.

She sighed deeply and her eyes slid closed before she began to sing. It was a song from the show they had just been rehearsing, Carlotta’s song, actually - but when she sang those very same notes Erik’s heart soared in a way it never did when Carlotta sang.

His grip on the armrests of his seat relaxed as he listened to those beautiful notes pour forth, the tension in his body leaving. Travel plans no longer mattered in that moment - all that existed was Christine and music, and that was enough.

Her song ended and she opened her eyes, looking expectantly in his direction.

He tilted his head as he watched her. She was waiting. Waiting for him?

She grew slightly nervous. What if he wasn’t there? What if she was simply staring at empty box seats?

He held his breath. What was he supposed to say? What did she want from him?

Hesitantly, she started another of Carlotta’s songs from the show - this one a duet. Her voice wavered a little, and she was nearing the part where the male voice was supposed to join her. She took a step closer to the side of the stage, nearer to Box Five.

There was no one else around to hear them, Erik thought to himself. And even if there was, he was leaving soon anyway so it didn’t matter.

Without missing his cue, he joined his voice with hers.

Her face lit up and her voice grew stronger.

Her original plan had been to coax him into speaking to her by trying to get him to comment on her singing, but when that hadn’t worked, her last resort had been the duet - after all, he had never denied her in the past when she had asked him to sing for her. She had butterflies in her stomach at the sound of his golden voice filling the theater and wrapping around her own crystalline tones. She loved singing, and she had loved singing for her Angel, but what she had always loved the most was singing with her Angel, and she was happily surprised to find that that very same
pleasure extended to singing with Erik even though he was only a man.

Erik was unable to take his eyes off her as she stood there in the low light of the stage, her hands clasped to her heart as she sang, staring up at the space where he was. If he was to leave France tomorrow and never see her again, then he wanted to remember her just like this. She looked almost... happy. She deserved to be happy.

Their song reached its conclusion and the last echoes of that strange, sweet sound faded off of the walls.

A cloud of desperation passed over her countenance - she was afraid that he would leave now that the song was over.

“Erik, I’m so sorry for how I treated you this morning,” she pleaded. “I was perfectly beastly to you, and I’m so ashamed.”

Erik stayed silent.

“I thought,” she hesitated, biting her lip as she searched for the words to explain. “I thought your mask was just another way you were trying to trick me. I never thought that perhaps there was some other reason. I didn’t mean to expose your face like that and upset you.”

Silence.

“Are you alright?” she asked. “I never even went back to check on you, that was terrible of me.”

Erik didn’t know how to respond. He had promised not to lie, and he was loath to break a promise to Christine, but he also didn’t want to burden her with the amount of hurt she had caused him.

“Your singing was lovely, Christine,” he finally settled on saying around the lump in his throat. “You’ll surely be prima donna one day.”

Her brow knit at the tone of his voice and how he had avoided her question.

“Of course I will, on a day brought here all the faster thanks to your continued help in the future, yes?”

“I’m sure you’ll make it there all on your own,” his voice was cold, but it had be or else he feared he’d break down into tears again.

“So you’re leaving me, then?”

“Perhaps. There are too many bad memories in Paris, now.”

now

Christine frowned.

“Because of me,” she said softly. It wasn’t a question.

She lifted her eyes once more to inky blackness that was Box Five.

“I almost left because of you, you know,” she told him. “I thought I had lost everything, but I found I was wrong. There was still so much for me here - hopes and dreams and goals - I just couldn’t see them at the time. Perhaps- perhaps it’s similar for you, too.”
He laughed mirthlessly.

“What hope is there for someone like me? What could I ever hope to accomplish, looking as I do?”

Her words pained him for many reasons, not the least being finding out that she had nearly left on account of him.

“It’s never wrong to hope,” she repeated the words Raoul had told her not that long ago. “And I’ll tell you what you can accomplish if you stay here, you’ll have crafted the finest voice in all of Paris.”

“Are you certain you can stand knowing that your angel wasn’t even a man, but only a monster?”

his voice was tinged with bitterness but her words about hope set his heart racing - it was as if she’d heard his very thoughts about giving up on hope.

She flinched and shook her head.

“Don’t talk about yourself like that.”

“Well it’s the truth, isn’t it?” he goaded her. “You saw for yourself. You went running from the room in fear of me, not able to even look at me.”

He paused, the memory still fresh and painful, but he bit back any hint of tears.

“I am a monster, and you are frightened of me,” the words carried more of an accusation than he had intended.

She nervously picked at her fingernails, glancing away. She wanted honesty from him always, and she knew that meant that it was only fair that she be entirely honest with him as well.

“Our face frightened me,” she said softly, but just loud enough for him to hear. “But you do not frighten me, Erik.”

She looked at where his voice was coming from, her gaze certain.

“You are not your face,” she said simply.

Any response his surprised mind could have come up with was choked in his throat, his tongue seemingly to have forgotten how to move.

you are not your face

How many times had he so desperately told himself those very same words, hoping that they could possibly be true? Words he had never heard before from another soul, words that seemed to be proven false by every person who had ever seen his face - nearly every person, that is. She had seen his face, and she had run, yes - but then she came back, expected him to still teach her, and she still treated him like the man he feared he wasn’t. No one had ever come back to him after seeing that ghastly sight, or if they did, it had been to drive him away with violence, because only a wicked creature could possibly look like that.

With that simple sentence, those five solitary words she had spoken so genuinely, Erik knew he could never leave the opera house and set out into the world all alone.

Fate had linked him to Christine Daaé forever.
Chapter 13

Much of the hurt Erik had felt at Christine’s unmasking of him had been soothed by how she acted towards him in the empty theater, though a few aches of betrayal still lingered. He would wonder, every now and then, if that’s how it had felt to her when he stepped through the mirror, and he swiftly pushed those thoughts down.

He paced anxiously in her dressing room (where they had agreed to meet for her next lessons, neither one eager to return the room where she had unmasked him), waiting for her to arrive. His nervous excitement to start the lesson, however, was squashed as she walked through the door.

She, too, had been looking forward to the lesson, eager to work hard and improve. She opened the door to her dressing room, and he turned to face her.

Fear pooled in the pit of her stomach and her legs turned to lead.

Intellectually, she knew there was nothing to be frightened of. This was Erik, for goodness sake! Her respectful friend! Simply a man, a person no different than her.

But this was also the first she had seen him since she had seen him, and deep in her mind there was something that wouldn’t let her forget her previous terror so easily - that awful day had caused the sight of her strange tutor to be linked with the feeling of fear. She couldn’t help her reaction even though she didn’t want it to happen. Horrible guilt stole over her as she quickly looked away from him.

The sight of her turning pale and trembling as soon as she saw him was almost enough for Erik to send her away. She truly did fear him, then, regardless of what she had said on stage. How easily she had said those words that night - after all, she hadn’t been able to see him in the darkness! Now, when she was before him, it was a different story.

He turned away from her, facing the wall instead.

She saw his motion from the corner of her eye, and as her initial fear began to fade her cheeks started to burn from embarrassment. He had noticed her reaction, then.

“Start with your usual warmups,” his voice was professional, masking the hurt behind it.

She began her warmups, and much to her dismay, her voice was shaky. Perhaps the fear hadn’t left her entirely.

He noticed, he surely did, but he made no comment on it, probably because he had guessed the cause. If he reprimanded her, he thought, that would surely only add to her distress.

The lesson went rather dismally, and though it was better than the previous one, not very much was accomplished.

“You did well, Christine,” said at the lesson’s conclusion. “I will see you in two day’s time.”

He left quickly though the mirror before she could say anything.

Her heart sank. She hadn’t done well, and she knew it. He knew it, too, but clearly he wasn’t going to comment on it. Was that how it was going to be, now? How was she going to improve if he didn’t give corrections? Had he been afraid that if he pushed her too much she’d grow angry at him
and snatch his mask away again?

She sat down at her vanity and stared miserably into the mirror. Did he feel that same crash of panic over him when he saw her, too? After what she did to him? She bit her lip. They had made up, or so she had thought, yet still each of them continued to be haunted by the choices the other had made.

At her next lesson, she was ready for the feeling of anxiety that came over her when she saw his tall figure and stark white mask. She took a deep breath before entering her dressing room, her heart beating fast in frightened anticipation, and turned the doorknob. She stepped inside the room, closed and locked the door, and then hid her hands behind her back, squeezing them tight into fists so he wouldn’t see them shake.

“Good morning, Christine.”

“Good morning, Erik.”

He wouldn’t look at her, and she noticed.

He knew that she was still frightened - knew that she probably would be for quite some time - and he couldn’t quite bring himself to see that fear etched across her face. She was afraid of him, but she loved singing, so apparently her love had won out over the fear she felt.

“Christine,” his voice was hesitant and unsure. “Would you- would you prefer if I was behind the mirror again?”

Her brow furrowed. Did he think it would be easier if she didn’t have to see him?

“No, Erik - I don’t mind.”

He nodded and began the lesson.

Did she mind? It felt horrible to say that she minded his face, especially when she couldn’t even see it. While she minded it a very little amount, the thing she minded more was how wrong it felt to even have him there. For so long she had been used to that voice as a heavenly visitor, and to now see him as a human and to hear that voice coming from him - it felt so strange, and her mind would often wander from what she was singing. There was a sense of wrongness about it that had nothing to do with having a man alone with her in her dressing room.

Beyond that strangeness, or perhaps because of it, she still felt a little peeved. Two years was a very long time to keep up a lie like that. She glanced sidelong at the tall, dark figure that seemed so out of place, so improbable in existence, and frowned slightly. He had his reasons, she knew that now, but it didn’t make the lie any less of a lie. He had been treated terribly his entire life because of his face, and she felt much sympathy for him, yes - but that did nothing to soothe the loss of her Angel or ease the pain she still felt over it. She wondered if that made her selfish. Should all be forgiven simply because his life had been awful? But she already had forgiven him, hadn’t she? Just because she forgave him didn’t mean all of her bad feelings would magically disappear. She sighed. Still, him hiding behind the mirror now would do nothing to help anything.

Erik kept as much distance as he reasonably could from her. He justified the reason behind this as not wanting to unnerve her with closeness, but he couldn’t deny that another large part of it was not wanting to be close enough for her to reach his mask again. It unsettled him, still. He had never thought in a million years that she would have done that to him, and the realization that he had misjudged her was one that left him sickly disoriented. What else might he be wrong about? He
had thought he knew her better than that. But really, there was nothing else she could do to him, was there? She’d already unmasked him, so any danger had already passed... hadn’t it? In light of how he had missed the possibility of her pulling off his mask, he suddenly wasn’t sure.

The lesson plodded on, making slightly more progress than the previous one yet still not as much as before when he was only an angel. It was awkward now, for many reasons, and neither one knew if it would ever not be awkward again.

After their stilted goodbyes Erik went down into his home and wandered aimlessly for a little while. He used to jump right into composing after lessons with Christine, being inspired by her voice, but now her voice was not what it used to be - nothing was what it used to be - and he simply wasn’t in the mood to compose anything. He finally settled down on the couch with a cup of tea and a book, and somewhere along the line he must have dozed off, slipping into a dream.

He was in the lesson with Christine again, except her voice wasn’t the shaky, choked thing it had been earlier - no, it was vibrant and lush and everything he knew it could be. He was playing the piano, some tune he’d never heard before but it seemed so right and he knew just which keys to press but also had no idea what was coming next until he played it. Christine sat next to him on the piano bench and smiled up at him even as she sang. He smiled back at her. This - this is what their lessons should always be, he thought. He stopped playing, having reached the end of the song, and she stopped singing, though he could still hear music coming from somewhere.

He looked over at her and her smile grew bigger.

“Do you know what, Erik?”

“What?”

“I have a surprise for you!”

“Oh?” he asked eagerly. “What is it?”

She cocked her head playfully and giggled.

“Well if I tell you, it won’t be a surprise anymore, silly!”

“Ah,” he nodded. She was right, of course.

“Do you want to know what it is?” she suddenly grew serious, her smile disappearing.

The music had stopped. He felt uneasy. Everything seemed to be going too slow but he couldn’t figure out why.

“What is it?” he asked.

The smile returned to her face. From out of nowhere she pulled out a knife and plunged it into him. Erik woke with a gasp, shaking.

He was no stranger to nightmares, but this had been the first to feature Christine as an aggressor. He didn’t dare go back to sleep after that. Christine had always been the one to soothe the horrors in his mind, not the one to cause them. Everything had changed, truly.

During their next lesson he mused that although the dream had seemed so awfully real, the thought of her pulling a knife on him was almost as realistic as her actually smiling at him - he hadn’t seen
her smile once after he stopped being angel. She no longer avoided looking at him, but there were no more grins or laughs or extra talk beyond what was required for the lesson. He missed it dearly, but he didn’t think he’d ever get it back. He had chosen and now he had to live with that - there was no going back to how it was before.

After the fifth lesson Christine no longer felt any fear around him. She felt irked at times, and sad during most of it, but she managed to sing nonetheless.

Just managing to sing would not do for Christine Daaé, however.

It was at the end of their tenth lesson after she had unmasked him that she brought it up just before he was about to leave.

“Erik, wait-“

He sat back down on the piano bench, wanting to leave but unable to deny her the request.

She took a deep breath, gathering her nerve.

“We need to talk, Erik.”
Chapter 14

Now that she had him there, waiting and listening, she faltered.

Erik kept his gaze neutral, shifting it towards the wall when he saw how difficult it was for her to say whatever it was she had wanted to talk about.

The previous night he had accidentally fallen asleep again and had another dream about her. They had been singing on stage together, he couldn’t even remember what they had been singing, but he could remember how glorious it had felt. It had been in the middle of a duet, their choreography bringing them close together on the stage, close enough to touch, when suddenly out of nowhere she moved the gentle hand that had been placed on his shoulder up to his face. In one swoop she had pulled off not only his mask but his wig too. The music had turned discordant and the audience had reacted with screams and terror - but the worst had been the look on Christine’s face as she clutched his mask and wig, haughty and disgusted. She had then whispered that she hated him, and in that moment he caught sight of the gendarmes waiting in the wings, rifles raised and their fingers on the triggers.

The imagined echo of the rifles firing still rang in his ears as he waited for her to speak.

She wrung her hands a little as she started to speak her mind.

“The ballet mistress had a new step for us all to learn, she wanted it to be in the show coming up. We all worked so hard on it, but everyone kept struggling with. She insisted that we could get it perfected in time, but... Well, as you know, it just wasn’t working out. She cut that whole piece of choreography, had to start over from the beginning with something else. It alls flows so much better now, don’t you think?” she glanced up at him shyly.

He gave a single nod.

“Yes.”

He had noticed (without much interest) the change in choreography for the ballet girls. Had she really wanted to discuss ballet?

“Do you ever wish you could start over from the beginning?” she asked softly.

*Every day*, he nearly said. He merely nodded again, clutching his hands on his knees.

“Sometimes if something isn’t working, you have to get rid of all of it so you can start over and then maybe what you put in its place will flow so much better than what you had before,” she continued.

She paused.

“I don’t think this is working for us, is it?” she frowned a little.

He swallowed hard. It wasn’t working, but it hurt to hear her it say it. Was this her way of telling him that she wanted to work with a different teacher?

“No,” he said faintly. “No, I suppose it’s not.”

“You know, I can’t help but wonder, sometimes... How long are we both going to feel so badly
over everything?"

He looked at her quizzically, tilting his head.

She frowned again.

“I can see it in how you look at me - how you don’t look at me,” she said. “I’m sure it’s the same with me, too. We’re both stuck in the past, aren’t we? We’re both replaying in our minds how it all went wrong.”

He couldn’t look at her. It was true. Hurt compounded by hurt, the fact that it haunted her kept him up at night and the pain she felt because of him then made her lash out at him - perhaps they were better off apart, after all. He blinked back the tears.

“What exactly do you propose we do, then?” he asked, his voice a little thick.

“We start over, I think.”

He looked up, surprised.

“How?”

Could such a thing be possible?

“Well,” she took a deep breath. “We can’t move forward if we’re stuck in the past all the time. I think that we’re both very sorry for what we did--” she glanced at him guiltily. “--and I think neither one of us will ever do anything like it again, so I think that maybe- maybe the best thing to do is to just forget it ever happened?”

“Just pretend everything is fine, you mean?” he asked skeptically. “A lovely idea, but I hardly think that will work.”

She shook her head.

“We are both performers, are we not? This could be just another part to play, another role to slip into. We could pretend that we are just normal people--”

The words were out before she could stop them. Her eyes widened.

“Oh-“ she stuttered. “Oh, I didn’t mean- oh Erik, I didn’t mean it like that-“

“I know you didn’t, it’s alright,“ he muttered, nervously touching his mask to reassure himself it was still on. Normal - what a novel concept for him.

“Yes, well, we can pretend that none of those things ever happened. We’ve both apologized, there’s no need for either of us to keep repeating it all in our minds all the time. It’s past, it’s done. We must move on, I think.”

“If only it were that easy,” he sighed.

“It can be,” she insisted. “But it won’t work if we’re always treating each other so strangely.”

She sighed and gathered her thoughts.

“You can’t keep looking away from me and putting distance between us as though I have the plague, Erik. And you have to be a normal teacher again - even if that means telling me I’ve done
terribly. I promise I don’t mind your face. I’m not scared of you.”

He let her words sink in and he slowly nodded.

“I will try, Christine, if you wish it.”

She bit her lip and glanced away.

“And I can’t keep feeling sorry over losing something I never really had,” she added softly. “I’ve forgiven you, did you know that? I don’t think I ever told you. I’ve forgiven you for the lie, and now I want to forget it. Don’t we both deserve to forget?”

Erik hesitated. Christine deserved to be able to forget, but did he? Shouldn’t he have to live with that regret forever? He hadn’t intended to hurt her with with the lie, but regardless of his intentions, he had hurt her all the same. Why should he get to pretend that never happened?

She twisted the fabric of her skirt nervously before continuing.

“I- I know you haven’t said anything, and I understand if the answer is no, but- do you- do you forgive me for ripping off your mask?”

Her voice was quiet and sorrowful, a wavering thing, and it pierced Erik with compassion for the poor girl. She really was upset with herself over it, he could tell.

“Christine,” he breathed. “Oh, Christine - I haven’t said anything about it because I didn’t consider it to be something that requires forgiveness - of course you have my forgiveness, Christine, you’ve always had it.”

Her shoulders relaxed and she dropped the fabric of her skirt. She gave a little sigh.

“Thank you, Erik.”

He looked down at his feet, embarrassed. He hadn’t realized his forgiveness meant so much to her, or he would have let her know far sooner. He had been hurt by it, but after the initial anger had faded, he hadn’t been angry at her for it. It had been understandable, especially after her explanation of her reasoning, and after all, who in that same situation could fault her?

They were both quiet a moment, thoughts lingering on forgiveness and what it meant for them, until Christine cleared her throat and the noise pulled Erik’s gaze up to her.

“So we start over, then? From the beginning?”

“He looked down at his feet, embarrassed. He hadn’t realized his forgiveness meant so much to her, or he would have let her know far sooner. He had been hurt by it, but after the initial anger had faded, he hadn’t been angry at her for it. It had been understandable, especially after her explanation of her reasoning, and after all, who in that same situation could fault her?

They were both quiet a moment, thoughts lingering on forgiveness and what it meant for them, until Christine cleared her throat and the noise pulled Erik’s gaze up to her.

“So we start over, then? From the beginning?”

“From the beginning,” he nodded.

She swallowed nervously, feeling just a little bit silly. She took a few brave strides towards him.

“How do you do, Monsieur - my name is Christine Daaé.”

She thrust her hand out to him and he stared dumbly at it, taking far too long to realize that she meant for him to shake her hand.

His eyes darted nervously from her outstretched hand to her face. Well, it would be rude to refuse her...

He stood up and slowly extended his hand, uncertain. Christine truly wanted to share something as intimate as a handshake with him? It was fraught with implications. What a way to start over, he
thought a little dizzily.

He took her hand in his, squeezing it gently. She looked him firmly in the eyes as she squeezed back. He released his grip quickly, not wanting to overstep a boundary of politeness. Her hand lingered just a second longer, resting on his in a way that made his breath catch in his throat.

“I hear you are a vocal instructor, Monsieur-?”

Erik felt rather silly. He hadn’t realized that this was what she had meant when she spoke of ‘starting over from the beginning’. But still, if this was what she wanted, he supposed he owed it to her.

“You may call me Erik,” he quickly supplied. “And you have heard correctly. I have also heard you onstage and your voice is quite good, I must tell you that it would be a great honor to be your instructor, if you would allow?”

He felt a little pang as he said the words he should have said two years ago instead of telling her he was the Angel of Music. But Christine was right - there was nothing to be done about that now.

“That sounds quite satisfactory, Erik. Would tomorrow morning be a good time for you? We would meet right here, of course.”

“Indeed - I am looking forward to it, Christine. I will see you in the morning.”

Feeling like a fool, he bowed to her before finally yet gracefully escaping through the mirror. Should he have bowed? He wasn’t sure. Meeting new people was not his strong suit. Manners and etiquette were often so hard to grasp and he was never quite sure if he was doing it right. Still though, he knew enough to know that a handshake implied a certain level of closeness was to be expected from the relationship in the future - one did not shake the hand of a mere acquaintance or stranger, especially if the pair involved consisted of a lady and man. She hadn’t needed to offer her hand - yet she had done it anyway.

But perhaps even more wondrous was the fact that she hadn’t shied away when he had touched her. It seemed almost too good to be true - did she truly not see him as a monster, then? She didn’t find him so horribly repulsive? By the time he was out of the walls of the opera house and down in his home, however, doubt had begun to creep into him. She could have been pretending that feeling his hand around hers was not disgusting to her, after all. He wasn’t sure why she would have offered it in the first place if she was secretly shuddering with revulsion at it, but he couldn’t quite make up his mind on the matter.

What he tried to focus on instead was the look on her face that he was certain had been real. Open and honest, she had looked at him as though he were a person - even knowing what lay beneath the mask. She had looked him in the eye, and true to her word he hadn’t seen any fear there. It was not the look of a girl who was secretly plotting to murder him, not the look of a girl who would unmask him onstage and order the gendarmes to fire at him, and he clung to that thought.

He fell asleep for only a handful of hours that night, his dreams blessedly mundane.
They both felt oddly nervous and formal the next morning. Every now and then one of them would feel the facade slipping - a moment of self-loathing on his part, or a flicker of longing for her Angel again, but that feeling would be swiftly pushed down once more.

Erik had been convinced that her idea would not work at all, and she had her own private doubts on the matter as well, but surprisingly the lesson went much better than the previous ones - it almost felt normal.

She made progress with the songs she needed for the show, he didn’t flinch away from her gaze or try to hide himself away in the corner, and she managed to not let her eyes linger on his mask.

It seemed to work, so they continued on in that manner, meeting several times a week if her schedule allowed for it, sometimes in her dressing room, sometimes in the room with the piano. She found she much enjoyed having musical accompaniment, and she only wished every now and then that he might sing with her as well, but for whatever reason he avoided duets for her practices.

They settled into their new roles rather easily - Erik was strict when he needed to be, but he often found reason to give her praise as well. Christine was still an ideal student and while they never quite on friendly terms as they had been before, they were at least polite to each other. A 'good morning' here and a 'have a nice day' there, it was all just fine - but Christine still found herself missing the easy camaraderie that they used to share.

How strange, she mused to herself, that she should be able to get along so well with a supposed heavenly being yet struggled to make conversation with a man here in front of her, even though they were one and the same.

She hated to admit it, even to herself, but she was afraid that maybe underneath of it all she was still a little mad at him. Perhaps mad was not the right word - annoyed. She thought about this for a long while and finally realized that it wasn’t him she was annoyed at - it wasn’t even how she had lost the Angel of Music - no, it was how she had lost a friend and didn’t know how to get him back even though he was right in front of her.

In as much as it was possible, she had considered the Angel a friend. She had spoken to him on nearly every subject, and it pained her to not have that ability anymore. He had always managed to make her laugh with his dry wit and occasional sarcasm. She felt like she hadn’t laughed in ages.

Perhaps it would up to her to repair that connection between them - but every time she began to say some little story that had happened earlier or ask a question not related to music, something always stopped her.

Had he thought her silly all that time? Telling her angel about her day as though he cared? If anything, it should have been more embarrassing when he was an angel, because surely an angel wouldn’t care one fig about things like that.

But something stopped her all the same. After all - he never asked her how her day was, or if anything interesting had happened. Was he waiting for her to bring it up? Or was he just not interested? So she kept silent.

Erik, in turn, dearly wanted to speak to her about anything - anything at all, but he didn’t quite know how. It had been so easy to talk to her when he was behind the mirror. But now - now it was
different, somehow. More vulnerable, more open to being judged. So often at the start or end of lessons he’d have some morsel of small talk ready to go, only for it to die on his tongue as he thought about how he’d feel if she didn’t reply or was no longer interested in talking about those things.

The lessons themselves were going nicely, and he was hesitant to do anything that might upset that delicate balance. He supposed it was almost like having a regular job like a regular person - he showed up on time and taught her and then left and went back home. Wasn’t that how normal people had jobs? But still, being around Christine was his only true human contact - he missed being able to talk. He liked having a job, but he was certain he’d like having a friend even more. He knew, however, that if he messed up any further and was no longer allowed to teach her, he would be utterly alone again. He had learned his lesson the last time - better to be content with what little he had than to attempt to reach for something more. And after all, if Christine wanted to talk with him, well, wasn’t she fully capable of starting a conversation?

Lessons filled the empty days and the days turned to weeks turned to months. A new normal had been achieved, and their lessons went smoothly. It remained formal between them, despite the odd intimacy of the situation.

Several months into the new arrangement, Christine could stand it no longer.

She arrived to her dressing room quite early, sitting down in her chair and tucking her legs under her, a carefully chosen book in her hands. She held up in front of her as though she were reading it, but in truth she was too nervous to really see what was on the page. She chided herself for her silly nerves - but she couldn’t help how she felt. They had talked about books quite often before, and she hoped they could return to that.

Erik knocked and she called out for him to enter. He came into the room and Christine made a show of lingering for just a moment longer in her chair, eyes glued to the pages, before she stood and placed the book as obviously she dared on her vanity, glancing expectantly at Erik.

He waited patiently for her to be finished, tilting his head just slightly to read the title of the book. It was one that he’d read before, one he’d enjoyed, too - and he very nearly asked her what her favorite part was so far, but then he remembered what had happened the last time they discussed a book.

“Ah. A good book,” he nodded towards it.

Christine very nearly jumped right into her thoughts on it and how much she loved the redemptive story arc of the main character, but she paused for the briefest of seconds and Erik continued speaking.

“I have a new set of warm up exercises I believe will help you greatly,” he started, as though he’d never mentioned the book at all. “We will still keep some of your old ones, of course, and add these in as well.”

She nodded, biting her lip. She’d missed her chance. But still, it was something, wasn’t it? It was the closest they’d come to actually talking about something other than music or their sorry situation ever since he’d become a man to her.

She tried again at their next lesson, nearly flaunting the book in a manner that seemed horrifically comical, but all she managed to pull from him was a slightly puzzled look. After the third try and the book didn’t draw any response, she decided she’d have to resort to drastic measures.
She could still remember that lovely day that felt so long ago, when she had received a pink knitted shawl from Meg on her birthday. She had been delighted with gift, wearing it nearly constantly until the weather became too warm. She had, of course, worn it to her lesson with the Angel, and he had commented on it, calling it charming and asking where she had gotten it from. Perhaps, she thought now, perhaps it would take some new piece of fashion to draw his attention and his conversation.

First she borrowed some bangles from the costume department, but their clinking and tinkling noise and bright sparkles didn’t so much as draw a second glance from him, even when she gestured needlessly and excessively throughout the lesson.

An elaborately curled and twisted hairdo garnered no reaction whatsoever, not even with the rhinestoned hairpins she had carefully placed across it.

Out of the numerous things she wore in hopes of a reaction, it was the flower crown that came the closest to fulfilling the purpose she’d set out to accomplish. The flower crown was not like the dainty little ones she used to make with her friend Raoul in childhood - this one was a large, gaudy thing, oversized and piled high with lavender and forget-me-nots and bluebells. She had hope for moment as she walked into the piano room and Erik turned to greet her, only to be momentarily struck dumb by the sight of what was on her head. His brow furrowed in confusion and he frowned. She had truly thought he was going to ask about it, but instead he merely turned to the piano.

“I have a new piece I’d like you to learn, Christine. I think you’ll like it.”

She had resigned herself to their fate. They were teacher and student, not friends. But hadn’t he said anything that he wished to be her friend? Perhaps he had changed his mind after she pulled his mask off.

Erik, for his part, couldn’t figure out why the girl kept coming to lessons wearing such outlandish things. Some of them bordered on the ridiculous. A tiny part of him wondered if, in fact, she was trying to get his attention - did she want him to comment on what she was wearing? But that made no sense to him - if she wanted to talk to him, why didn’t she just talk? He shrugged it off as some feminine mystery. Who could understand the minds of women, really? She probably had her own reasons for dressing so, and they probably had nothing to do with him at all.

Christine eventually gave up. She knew it was silly and could likely be remedied by simply explaining to him that she missed how they used to talk, but she was too embarrassed to bring it up. She wanted it to be natural, not something that she had bring up and ask for.

It seemed nothing would change in that regard, either, until the most unexpected thing happened to put a crack in the wall they had unwittingly built between them.

Oddly enough, it was all thanks to La Carlotta.
They were halfway through a lesson in the piano room, right in the middle of a song when Erik heard the strangest sound. Surely that wasn’t coming from Christine? He stopped playing abruptly, turning to look at her incredulously.

She stopped a moment after he did, concern creasing her brow. Why was he staring like that?

Suddenly the noise came again and Erik’s shoulders sagged with relief. It was the sound of a dog barking just outside the door - a problem, of course, but not as bad a problem as whatever horrendous thing would have been happening to her voice to make it sound like that.

Christine quickly cracked the door open, peeking outside. It was Carlotta’s little dog, one she was often seen carrying around and pampering. Normally Carlotta’s maid looked after the dog, but on a number of occasions it had managed to find its way out of Carlotta’s dressing room or otherwise evade whoever was supposed to be watching over it. Christine for the life of her couldn’t remember what, exactly, the little dog’s name was - it was some involved Italian name, and Carlotta always said it with such an affected accent that Christine could scarcely understand what she was saying, except to know that the name was several syllables long. She stooped down to grab the dog that was looking up at her expectantly, and brought it inside and locked the door once more.

Once inside, however, it continued to bark. She tried to shush it, to no avail. It finally wiggled out of her arms and began to turn in little circles on the floor.

“Take it back outside, Christine,” Erik said anxiously, watching it as it continued to bark. “Someone is going to come looking for it and they’ll find us.”

“Erik! We can’t! What if Joseph Buquet finds it? You remember what he said last week when the poor little thing ran on stage - that if he caught it again he’d cook it in a stew!”

Christine shuddered at the memory of it, how the little dog had only wanted to be near its mistress who was up on stage, unaware of how it was ruining the scene they were rehearsing, and how angry Buquet had been when it tried to bite him after he had attempted to shove it offstage, inciting Carlotta’s wrath.

“I highly doubt the man is going to turn the beast into a soup,” he waved a hand dismissively. “Let it find its own way back to Carlotta.”

Christine ignored him, much to his dismay. She sat down on the ground, petting the little dog with both hands.

“The poor little lost dear,” she crooned, reverting back to her native Swedish.

“Don’t you want to finish your lesson, Christine?” he tried.

The dog turned and licked at her hands, and she cooed delightedly.

Erik sighed. He knew when he was beaten.

The creature suddenly turned its beady eyes towards him, realizing that Christine was not the only person in the room. It wriggled from her grasp yet again and trotted up to Erik, barking.
“Do you like dogs, Erik?” the words were out before she even realized that she had asked them.

“I do not not like dogs,” he answered, reaching down to give the thing a pat on the head since it seemed so intent on gaining his attention.

It jerked its head back, growling a little at his cold touch, but then changing its mind once again, sniffing at his hand and deciding to lick him.

“Ohh,” she placed her hands over her heart. “It likes you!”

He grabbed it, and it struggled to get away but he placed it on his lap and once his cold, bony fingers weren’t inadvertently digging into it anymore, it calmed.

“I must admit, this creature is not altogether terrible... Perhaps I will keep it,” he gave it a scratch behind its ear, and its tail wagged wildly.

“Carlotta will know it’s missing.”

He shrugged.

“We can blame it on Buquet. Tell her that he really did eat it, after all.”

“Erik! No! That’s terrible,” she put her hands over mouth, scandalized, but then dropped them to her lap and his heart skipped a beat to see the smile that was on her face.

It was the first smile she had given him since he was no longer an angel.

“Imagine it, Christine - the great Carlotta’s little dog, spirited away by the Opera Ghost himself. It would only be a fitting punishment, you know.”

“It would bark at all hours,” she said, scooting closer until she was on her knees next to the piano bench where he sat. “You would scarcely get any work done.”

As if to confirm her accusations, it barked.

“But look how much it likes me - it’s probably glad to be free of Carlotta. All those barks are probably it saying ‘thank you for saving me from that awful squawking woman’.”

She giggled, and Erik knew he had never heard a sweeter sound.

“She’ll look for it, it’s like her baby - she won’t rest until she finds it,” she gently petted the little dog in Erik’s lap.

“Well she won’t look for it if she thinks Joseph ate it,” he scoffed.

“Joseph would deny he ever did such a thing.”

Erik raised an eyebrow.

“And doesn’t that sound exactly like what someone would say after they stole and cooked a precious pooch?”

She giggled again and shook her head disapprovingly, but she couldn’t hide the mirth in her eyes. Erik sighed, putting on an air of weariness.

“I suppose we will have to return it to its rightful - if truly awful - owner. You have worn me down,
Christine.”

They sat in a comfortable silence for a few moments, only the snuffling noises from the little dog making any sound in the room.

“I’m quite fond of dogs, actually,” Erik said quietly.

Christine looked up, surprised.

“Oh?”

He nodded.

“A dog will never treat you poorly because of your face.”

Her heart twisted at his words. Poor Erik. It pained her to think of the kind of life he had known, all because of people’s ignorance and superstition.

She stood up from the floor and sat next to him on the piano bench.

“Why don’t you get a dog, then?” she offered gently. “Unless you already have one?”

“No,” he shook his head. “That wouldn’t be terribly realistic. I’m not the type to keep a pet... My home is simply not set up for it. No fresh air or sunlight... An animal couldn’t live like that.”

Her brow furrowed as she listened.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

He froze, realizing what all he had said.

“Where- where do you live?” she asked again.

He didn’t meet her eye, keeping his gaze fixed on the dog that was content to lounge across his knees.

“I live in the opera house,” he said simply.

She nodded, pushing a stray curl behind her ear.

“But... Is there no window that sunlight comes through? Do you live more towards the middle of the building, where there are no windows?”

He hesitated.

“I live underneath the cellars, Christine.”

She was quiet a moment. Underneath the cellars?

“I didn’t know there was anything underneath the cellars,” she finally said.

“Most people don’t - that’s why I live there.”

“Oh.”

She felt terrible. He had mentioned things before, things to the effect of letting her know that he lived on the premises, but for some reason she had always assumed that he lived upstairs, perhaps
near the managers offices or the like. A nice room with a big window, well furnished. Something nice. But this? *An animal couldn’t live like that.* But what about a man? Could a man really live like that?

She bit her lip. As sad as it made her to hear the truth about how dismally he lived, she was quite touched that he trusted her enough to tell her, and she was thankful that they were finally talking.

“Don’t you miss the sunlight?” she asked in a weak voice.

He smiled grimly.

“I was not made for the sunlight, Christine.”

It hurt to hear him talk so. He should be allowed to be a man like any other, not made to feel as though he didn’t belong up above in the world because of his terrible face. It was so unfair.

He gathered up the nearly sleeping dog and extended it to Christine, suddenly changing the subject.

“Now, do wish to return this beast to its proper location?”

She took the dog from him and stood up, cradling it to her chest. Her melancholy was chased away as the dog awoke and began to lick her chin.

“I’ll take it back to Carlotta before she comes looking for it,” she started for the door, but stopped just before leaving.

“Erik?”

“Yes, Christine?”

“I missed this,” she said simply, softly, a ghost of a smile playing across her lips. “Thank you.”

He nodded slowly.

“I missed this, too.”

The smile bloomed across her face at his admission like a rose in the sunlight.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Erik.”

“Until then, Christine.”
The wall between them had been irrevocably torn down by Carlotta’s dog. At the start of their next lesson, he asked how returning the dog had gone, and she told him of how huffy Carlotta had been that her dog seemed to like Christine.

They made small talk here and there, nothing too big but still more than had occurred in quite a while. It was a few lessons after the incident with the dog that Christine suddenly remembered something on the verge of falling asleep one night.

The scene entered her mind from what seemed a great distance, pictures floating through a haze and words drifting across a choppy sea.

Erik standing near the mirror, his eyes plaintive.

Her own self stumbling back, shaking and crying, and then running away from him.

_I hate you!_

Her eyes flew open. She had apologized for pulling off his mask, but she had never apologized for saying she hated him. Had she?

Her heart ached. Had he gone this whole time thinking that she still hated him? Oh, poor Erik. She shifted uneasily on her thin mattress. She would have to tell him first thing in their next lesson.

She watched him anxiously that next evening as he stepped through the mirror and shuffled through some staves he wanted her to read.

“Erik,” she said suddenly.

He paused and glanced at her.

“Erik, you know I don’t hate you, right?”

“It’s alright, Christine. I understand,” he said in a kind voice with a sad smile, and she was afraid that he seemed to be implying that it was alright if she hated him.

“I’m sorry I told you that I did. I realized last night that I never said I was sorry. I don’t hate you, truly I don’t.”

He nodded a little, his face looking as though he didn’t believe her but had chosen to pretend. He handed her a few of the papers.

“These are the pieces I was telling you about,” he changed the subject. “They’ll be a stretch for you, but it gives you something to work towards.”

She stifled a sigh. How could she make him believe her? After her lesson was finished she made a point of staying and talking with him for longer than normal, asking him more personal questions about the kinds of music he liked the best and how his composing was going instead of their typical topics of weather and the like. He seemed a little surprised at first, but he stayed and talked and it was nice.

She figured the only way to get him believe that she didn’t hate him was to show him that she didn’t hate him - clearly her apology was not enough. Building on what they had started after she
had taken the dog back to Carlotta, she continued to try to spend extra time with him either before or after their lesson, and it seemed like it was working.

After that, they often talked on any various topics that came up. They didn’t always have time to stay and chat, depending on what Christine still had to get done that day, but any frostiness or awkwardness had fallen away and they both felt like they could breathe again.

The situation far exceeded either one’s hopes, in fact - they both found it easier to talk to each other now that they were only people, and the mutual agreement of complete honesty made it easier to be open with other and to trust.

Christine found she felt a little less alone in the big opera house - she had friends in the company, of course, but politics abounded between all the performers, regardless of if one was a leading star or a mere ballet rat, and Christine liked the feeling of knowing that at the end of the day she had one person who was utterly, entirely on her side no matter what.

Erik found Christine and her singing began to consume more and more of his thoughts and attention, and he found that it was not unpleasant. What else did he have to do with his time besides brood on the unfairness of the world? But now he had Christine. He had grand plans to plot out for her, extensive lesson plans to formulate, obscure and unusual pieces he could find - and new, unheard of pieces he could write! - for her to add to her repertoire that would help her stand out in auditions. She had told him she wanted to be the finest voice in Paris, but he knew that she was selling short with that goal - and that with his help she could become one of the finest voices in all of Europe.

With so much to occupy his mind, he had left much of the Opera Ghost business behind him - though of course he put in whatever appearances he needed to ensure his twenty thousand francs a month. But pranks and threats were mostly uncommon now.

The opera house held auditions in the winter, and Christine had worked hard on her song choices with Erik for months. The fateful day drew near, and when it finally came she found she was terribly nervous. It would be her first audition since she had begun working with her tutor, the first one Erik thought she was finally ready to try. She dearly wished he was there with her, at least somewhere where she could actually see him. She knew he was probably in the shadows of Box Five or lurking someplace nearby, but it still wasn’t the same as if he was there.

When it was her turn to sing, she faltered in the beginning but mostly managed to save the rest of the song. Her nerves had gotten the better of her, and she was disappointed with herself. She hung around the backstage for a while as the others sang, glancing here and there, wondering if Erik was there or not. Would he be upset with her? She was upset with herself. She knew she could do so much better, but now she’d have to wait months until there was a possibility of another audition.

She finally turned and left, deciding to go to her dressing room in the hopes that he might be there instead. If he was going to chide her, better to get it over with, she assumed.

Erik was not in her dressing room, but it appeared that he had been quite recently - a white envelope and a white rose were carefully placed on her vanity table.

She picked up the rose, noticing that all the thorns had been meticulously removed. She breathed in the scent of it as she opened the fancy envelope and read the note inside.

Christine,

Your Maestro is well pleased with all of the effort and dedication you have put into your audition. There will be time enough at a later date to go over what needs improvement. For now, simply
enjoy the moment and take pride in what you have accomplished.

She looked at her mirror and smiled, uncertain if perhaps he was still there. Feeling a little better and comforted by his words, she left her dressing room and went to go find Meg to tell her how it had gone.

On the way to the ballet rooms, she happened to pass one of the directors who had been at the rehearsal.

“Mlle Daaé, was it?”

She stopped and nodded politely.

“I just wanted to congratulate you on your audition tonight - I know you hit a few rough patches here and there, but when you were good your voice was heavenly. I’m sure with effort and practice you’ll be getting understudy roles in no time at all.”

Her cheeks colored, unused to being noticed and remembered.

“Thank you, Monsieur,” she curtsied. “Your words mean so much to me.”

They parted after a few more formal words to each other, and Christine felt like she was floating.

when you were good, your voice was heavenly

Those words, combined with Erik’s note, erased nearly all of her disappointment in how she had performed.

She told Meg about the director’s compliment (but not about Erik’s note) and the two discussed the audition for a while longer. Those same words were still buzzing in her ears that night as she went to sleep, and even still in the morning as she dressed for church.

She had dropped the request for Erik to attend church services with her after she had found out about his face and realized how uncomfortable being in a room with other people made him feel. As such, she had resumed her usual habit of three Sundays a month at the church that was several streets away from the opera house.

She was embarrassed to admit that her mind was wandering terribly that Sunday morn, but a thought had occurred to her sometime between the last evening and that morning, and she was consumed with turning it over in her head until it made sense and she was certain of it. She was only half listening to the words of the priest as she stared up the stained glass illuminated by the weak sun, figures of angels and saints glowing dimly.

She had a lesson scheduled with Erik for that afternoon, and she set off for it as soon as she had finished with her prayers. Her smile grew wider as she entered the room with piano in it, seeing that Erik was already there and waiting. She quickly unwrapped her scarf from around her neck and face and peeled off her coat, slinging it across the back of a chair.

“Good morning, Christine,” he greeted her.

“Good morning, Angel,” she replied a little breathlessly, her heart still beating fast from her journey.

He flinched and looked unhappy, quickly turning to face the piano instead of her. She hadn’t called him that since their big fight that had ended with her stealing his mask. Was she mad at him? Was
She making fun of him?

“Have I done something to displease you, Christine?” his voice was tight and ashamed.

She frowned and turned to look at him as he sat on the piano bench, his hands fidgeting nervously as he avoided meeting her eye.

“No,” she said slowly. “What’s the matter, Erik? What’s wrong?”

He swallowed hard, unsure of what to say.

“It’s just- you haven’t- called me that since...”

“Oh,” her shoulders slumped a little.

Of course he didn’t know her own private thoughts, the ones that had occupied her mind ever since speaking with the director. Of course he still associated that name with the last time she had used it, with how she hurled it at him so viciously even though it had been so long ago.

“No, it’s alright,” she assured him, and hesitated before continuing. “I’ve been thinking. I’ve been thinking a lot quite recently, actually.”

It was only the shy quality to her words that kept Erik from panicking too much. She was hardly ever shy around him - and if she was angry with him she certainly would have let him know without any pretense.

“And I was especially thinking while I was in church today,” she said sheepishly. “And I realized something.”

She glanced up at him, biting her lip. He still wasn’t looking at her, but she could tell he was listening intently. They had never talked very much on religious subjects so she was uncertain of what, if anything, he believed in - but she felt she needed to explain her train of thought to him so she figured she might as well put it out there.

“I know it must sound terribly silly, especially if one doesn’t believe in those sorts of things, but... I have been thinking, maybe, that there are times when we ask for things, that we pray for things, and it seems that they don’t show up. That our prayers have gone unanswered, or that the answer is no. But what if- what if a prayer did get answered, but just not in the way one expected? And we spend so long looking for what we expected that we miss out on what actually arrived?”

She twisted her hands together.

“I was so upset when I found you weren’t an angel, Erik. But... when I prayed for the Angel of Music to finally appear to me, I wanted someone who would help me fulfill my dream to sing, just like my father promised me. And I know that you’re only a man, but Erik - that was you. That was you all along.”

Erik’s voice caught in his throat. He turned to look at Christine, who was looking at him with such shining eyes and a kind smile, and he realized she was telling the truth.

“I understand if you’d prefer I not call you Angel again, but I didn’t mean any harm by it. You’ll always be the Angel of Music to me, Erik.”

He cleared his throat, trying not to weep.
“You can call me whatever you like, Christine,” he finally managed.

She smiled and nodded.

“Thank you. And thank you for that nice note, and the rose. They were lovely.”

He was too overwhelmed to formulate a coherent response, so he changed the subject.

“I believe it is time to go over what was lacking in your audition, Christine.”
Madame Giry glanced about at the walls of her little office and took a deep, peaceful breath. She blessedly hadn’t heard from the Opera Ghost for weeks. It felt like his absence had added years to her life - her poor, old nerves could finally rest. When she had heard from him last, he had made relatively few demands, and he had been far more patient in how he spoke to her. She had no idea what had caused such a change in him, but she was grateful for it all the same. Perhaps his soul had nearly completed whatever unfinished business it had here, and was almost ready to move on. If not to Paradise, well, then, at least to someplace where he couldn’t bother her anymore. Madame Giry looked forward to that day. She always felt a little guilty at that thought, and whenever it would appear she would quickly wish that he was headed to Paradise and not somewhere else, mostly because she was a little uncertain of whether or not he could read her thoughts or see what she was thinking. Still, surely the Ghost knew he was not easy to deal with, and she could be forgiven for hoping for the day when he didn’t speak to her anymore if she was also hoping that he found eternal peace as well.

The holidays were nearly there, and Christine had finished with all of the gifts she’d be giving except for one. She’d been giving them to her friends as she saw them, and today her and Meg’s schedules had finally lined up so that they could spend some time together.

She crept into the old storage closet with a large bag in hand, grinning when she saw that Meg was already there, sitting on an overturned bucket. They had been coming to this closet for years to gossip and escape from prying eyes, and the little room was filled with hundreds of memories.

She greeted her friend with a hug before pulling up a wooden crate to sit on - in times past the floor would have sufficed, but they were nearly ladies now and a lady simply could not sit on the dusty old floor while she made fun of her coworkers and recited nasty gossip and vulgar stories - ladies had class, so they made due with whatever they could find to sit on before diving into a conversation.

“I brought you your Christmas present,” Christine’s eyes sparkled with a hint of mischief.

Meg clapped her hands together excitedly, and Christine pulled an enormous box of cookies out of her bag.

“Oh! Christine!” Meg’s eye went wide.

Christine bit her lip, trying to contain her grin, and then pulled out a second box filled with chocolate.

“Christine! Oh, you shouldn’t have!”

Christine laughed.

“No, really-“ Meg squirmed a little. “You heard what the ballet mistress said-“

“Well, the ballet mistress isn’t here right now, is she?” Christine answered primly before rolling her eyes. “I don’t give a fig about what she said to you, you’re nowhere near overweight for a dancer, you look perfectly fine and a cookie - or five - isn’t going to kill you.”
Christine opened the box and took a bite of a cookie.

“Besides,” she said around her mouthful. “I would still love you even if you were fat, you know. You could be the fattest person in all of Paris you’d still be my best friend and a charming, lovely young woman because you’re Meg, and nothing will change that, especially not something as inconsequential as weight.”

Meg covered her face with her hands, embarrassed, but Christine could still see her smile underneath. She let her hands drop and shook her head, finally reaching for a cookie.

“Oh, ok, you convinced me. But if come next practice I can’t fit into my leotard and they cancel my contract, I am going to blame you.”

“That’s a risk I’m willing to take,” Christine said as she opened the box of chocolate.

She knew that Meg had been in quite a mood over the ballet mistress’s comments during the fittings for the new costumes in regards to making certain that the costumes would still fit by the time they had finished being made from the measurements that were being taken. Ever since then she had been terribly careful about what she ate, not allowing herself any sweets or snacks. Christine thought it was absolutely ridiculous that the ballet mistress had put such a thought into Meg’s mind, and was determined to not let her get carried away with restricting herself.

She was pleased to see Meg enjoying herself as she tried the treats that Christine had brought her. It was the happiest she had seen her in weeks, and she thought Meg always deserved to be happy.

“Have you seen Raoul lately?” Meg asked, curious.

“No, he’s not even Paris at the moment. I don’t think I’ll get to see him at all during the holiday, probably not until well into the new year,” Christine frowned. “But we’ve been writing letters still.”

“Love letters,” Meg sighed dreamily.

“Meg! No!” Christine made a face. “It’s not like that between me and Raoul, I’ve told you that before.”

“It might not be like that for you, Christine, but I’ve seen how he looks at you,” she teased, then lowered her voice. “He wants to make you his Vicomtess and father a dozen children with you.”

Christine pantomimed gagging and Meg laughed.

“He’s going to be sorely disappointed, then. I don’t even want to think about marriage until I’m prima donna, let alone think about children,” she shuddered at the thought.

How many promising young singers had Christine seen get sidetracked by romance? How many bright careers ended because of a marriage or a child? She had sworn to herself that that would never happen to her, that she would put herself and her own dreams first no matter what. She reasoned that if a man truly loved her as he ought, he would agree to wait until she had achieved what she set out to achieve before marrying her. She knew Raoul was sweet enough to agree to that, but she wasn’t entirely sure if she wanted to marry him. He could easily provide for her, yes - but Christine wanted more than financial stability from a spouse. She knew she didn’t feel about him how she wanted to feel about a husband. Would she eventually? She wasn’t sure. She might feel that way in the future. But for now she had enough on her plate to worry about without wifely feelings added to the mix.
“Well, I think that might come up sooner than you think - the director was right, your voice is heavenly. You’ll surely be the prima donna before you’re twenty five, I’d bet money on it,” Meg told her.

Christine felt a shiver go through her. She was turning twenty in a handful of months, and while twenty five sounded so far off, she knew it would arrive quickly. She also knew that Meg was right - if she continued putting in the effort she had been and Erik continued teaching her, then becoming prima donna within that time frame was certainly attainable.

“What did you get Raoul for Christmas, anyway?”

“Cuff links,” Christine smiled, shaking her head a little. “He keeps losing his. Hopefully he’ll keep track of these better than his last pair.”

“I’m sure he’ll like them,” she nodded thoughtfully before leaning in close. “But not as much as he’d like it if you gave him a son.”

Christine shrieked and threw a cookie at her before they both dissolved into giggles.

“While we’re on the topic,” Meg said after their laughter had subsided, her face turning crimson. “Have you seen Dmitry?”

“Who?”

“The new dancer who just started here for the upcoming season. He’s terribly handsome,” she fidgeted.

“Oh.”

Christine truthfully had barely noticed him, being more concerned with her own dancing whenever she was in the studio. A handsome face alone had never been enough to turn her head, and since she had never had reason to speak with him, she had formed very little of an opinion about him.

“I don’t think I’ve talked to him yet. What’s he like?”

Christine fished around in the bag as she listened to Meg talk about Dmitry. She pulled out a piece of wood and a small knife, and began to whittle.

Meg knew Christine could multitask perfectly, and kept telling her about the way the new dancer had been glancing at her during warmups the other day and the butterflies she felt whenever he had looked at her. Christine nodded along, pausing every so often and asking questions, making little noises to show she was still paying attention.

“I doubt if anything will come of it, though,” Meg sighed.

“Why’s that?” Christine frowned.

“I think Colette likes him too, and I’m not good with that sort of thing... I just know he’ll pick her over me if that’s the case... And if he’s going to scorn me like that, then I don’t even want to try!”

Christine looked up from her whittling.

“Boys are more trouble than they’re worth,” she shook her head and went back to her project.

“That’s easy for you to say, Christine - you’ll have a career that can pay bills. What about me? I can’t dance forever... I’ll never be a prima ballerina. I’m just not good enough. My career is an
hourglass that’s swiftly running out of sand, and what will I do then?” she shrugged. “A husband could provide stability and safety. And an income.”

Christine raised an eyebrow.

“Then I highly suggest a husband that isn’t also a dancer.”

Meg snickered.

“Perhaps you’re right on that account.”

“You never know, perhaps you’ll be the one to end up with Raoul,” she poked her friend in the arm. “The Vicomtesse Meg de Chagny! That has a ring to it, doesn’t it?”

Meg groaned loudly, but her cheeks were pink.

“What’s that you’re working on?” Meg nodded to the little wooden creature in Christine’s hands.

“It’s a gift,” she held it up. “It’s almost done, too. It’s going to be a horse.”

“Oh, it’s darling!”

Meg has always admired Christine’s many talents, strange skills that she had picked up from her father and various places across her travels.

“Who is it for?”

Christine hesitated a moment. She had no wish to lie to Meg, but she also couldn’t reveal the truth about Erik. A delicate business indeed, that fine line between fact and fiction.

“It’s for my voice teacher,” she said, a little shy.

“Ah! I knew you were doing something different!” Meg brightened. “Do you think he’d teach me, too?”

“No, I don’t think so. I’m quite sorry, Meg, but he’s mostly retired,” she felt it was mostly accurate, because surely Erik had, in a sense, retired from a regular life. “He’s really only teaching me as a favor to my father.”

Well, she thought ruefully, they were practically the same age - surely Erik and her father might have been friends if they had known each other when he was alive.

Besides, it was the closest description she could hit on without telling her the embarrassing story of how she had taken the Voice to be that of an angel. But Meg seemed satisfied with her answer, so she left it at that.

Her carving took a few more days to complete, and then another couple days to finish all the layers of paint. It was done just in time for their last lesson before Christmas.

Christine entered her dressing room to find a large pine bough across the top of her vanity mirror, a garland of holly strung over the door, and a vase of assorted red and white flowers on her table. The whole room smelled fresh and crisp, and there were pine cones placed strategically and delicate paper snowflakes hung from the low ceiling. She was delighted, turning immediately to face the large mirror behind her, which Erik quickly rolled back.

He entered the room and pretended like he didn’t notice anything different.
“Don’t think I’ll be easy on you because it’s the holidays, Christine, if anything you’ll need to work harder to make up for the days you’ll be missing,” he warned her, pacing the little room.

She tried to bite back her grin as her eyes darted back and forth between his aloof figure and the decorations that could have only been placed by him. He was her Herr Drosselmeyer, her dark magician who had conjured a winter wonderland for her, and she was Clara, enraptured by it all.

Suddenly the spell was broken as she remembered.

“Oh! Before we begin - I have something for you.”

Erik stopped dead in his tracks. Whatever could she possibly mean?

She produced a box tied with a ribbon and held it out to him, smiling widely.

He stared at it for a moment, uncertain of what exactly he was supposed to do, before he hesitantly reached out and took it from her. He simply stood there, staring down at the package that was now in his hands.

For him?

“Open it,” Christine urged him.

He sat down in one of the chairs, and carefully undid the ribbon that was holding the lid on. There was a mass of tissue paper inside, and once pulled out it revealed a carved wooden animal underneath.

This was for him?

He gently picked it out of the box and held it up. It was a horse, painted a shiny red with a carefully detailed saddle painted in colors of white and orange and blue and green.

“It’s a Dala Horse,” Christine explained eagerly.

He looked from the horse to her, interested.

“It’s a Swedish tradition. My papa taught me how to make them. It’s been a while since I’ve made one, but I think it turned out pretty good overall. It’s supposed to bring you good luck.”

“You made this?” Erik asked, his mind feeling like it was moving too slow to keep up.

She put her hands behind her back and nodded, suddenly feeling bashful. He acted like a man who’d never been given a gift before.

“I made it just for you,” her eyes traced the pattern on the threadbare carpet.

Christine made this for him?

He swallowed a few times, unsure of what to say or do.

“Oh, Christine... It’s lovely. Thank you, my dear.”

The syllables of the term of endearment tasted strange in his mouth, words he’d never said before, but they were out before he could stop them or think the better of them. Christine’s cheeks turned pink as she found she quite liked to be called that affectionate name, but Erik didn’t notice as he was once again absorbed in studying the little horse.
No one had ever given him a gift before. He supposed, perhaps, that the mask his mother had made for him when he was small counted as a sort of a gift, but she had given him that because she couldn’t bear to look at him. No one had ever given him a gift that was for him alone, a present for the sake of his own enjoyment of it. It was a terribly novel concept, and he could scarcely believe it.

The little horse, just the right size to fit in his long hand, seemed magical. It wasn’t particularly lifelike or detailed, and from a technical standpoint the paint was quite simple, but this was something that used to be a plain chunk of wood until Christine’s marvelous little hands had worked to bring it to life, sculpting it into the animal it now was, lovingly and painstakingly picking the colors that would adorn it until it looked like how she had envisioned it in her clever mind, and she had done it all for him, all while thinking of him, and if that wasn’t magic, Erik didn’t know what was.

He ran a finger across the glossy paint.

“Red is my favorite color,” he told her.

Her smile widened and she felt warm inside. She was happy that she had given it to him after all - there had been occasions that she wasn’t certain if she should give him a gift or not, if it was overstepping their boundaries or if he would even like the horse if she did give it to him. But he seemed to truly enjoy it, and that pleased her to no end.

They somehow got through their lesson, Erik’s mind still in a haze.

“I’ll see you again after Christmas, Christine,” he said at the end of it, picking up the box that held the Dala Horse. “I hope you have an excellent holiday, and thank you again for the very thoughtful gift.”

“Thank you, as well,” Christine nodded towards the decorations.

Erik paused as he was about to step through the mirror, staring at the paper snowflake nearest him.

“Why, Christine,” he said gravely, but his lips were twisting into a mischievous smile. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

She giggled a little.

“Goodbye, dear. Until next time.”

“Goodbye, Angel.”

Christine could not account for the way her heart fluttered when he called her that, completely unaware of the similar feeling she stirred in him when she called him angel.

All the way back to his house on the underground lake, he clutched the box close to his chest as though it were an expensive, precious treasure. Once settled inside his house, he set the box and ribbon aside on a shelf (they were part of the gift, too, he couldn’t just throw them away) and sat down once more to examine the carving.

He turned it over and over in his hands, in the same way his mind turned over and over the curious new concept of receiving a gift. He sighed.

Christine was truly a never ending fountain of forgiveness and kindness and blessings. To think that after everything, she could still smile at him and call him an angel and now - now she had
taken the time to make something to give to him. And not just any old random thing - this little horse was a part of her culture, a part of her heritage, something she had made with the skills her beloved papa had taught her, and she had seen fit to share all that with him. He was overwhelmed by just how touching it was.

Before he went to bed that night he set the wondrous little horse on the stand above the keys of his organ, where he would be able to look at it each day as he composed and played, a place where he’d see it often and think of her.

Chapter End Notes

The Nutcracker ballet did not exist until the 1890’s which is like ten years after this story takes place but time means very little to me and also I guess they still would have had the story that the ballet was based on
New Year’s came and went, and the departure of the first month and a half of the year brought the arrival of a much-anticipated visitor.

Erik heard the gossip and chatter about it, of course - a vicomte was going to be in attendance to the show that evening. He paid it little mind, thinking that it had little to do with him. Before Christine, perhaps, he would have schemed to somehow extort a little extra money out of the situation, but he had promised her. He would have paid much closer attention to it all had he known that his dear student was going to dinner with said vicomte after the show.

Christine barely had a moment to herself in her dressing room before the knock came at her door.

“Little Lottie?”

“Come in,” she called, picking up the white rose that had been left on her vanity.

Erik had been here, but she presumed he had already left - he almost never stayed after leaving a rose when the performance was over, and if he was lingering, well, he would leave soon enough once he saw Raoul.

Raoul entered the little room, beaming.

“You were magnificent tonight!”

She laughed.

“I was in the chorus,” she teased. “How could you even tell my voice apart from the girls?”

“Oh, I could always pick your voice out of the crowd, Christine,” he said warmly, and she couldn’t help the flush that crept across her cheeks.

“I have to change before we go to dinner, would you give me a few minutes?”

“Oh, Raoul! Thank you!”

She took the roses from him and he exited the room, allowing her to change out of her costume and into her dress for the evening.

The roses were truly lovely, and she couldn’t help but let her mind wander to Meg’s words from before Christmas. Did he really feel that way about her? Surely not, they were just friends... Weren’t they? It’s not as though he had asked to court her. It was just dinner.

And what a dinner - Christine so rarely ate at restaurants, especially not ones as fine the one Raoul took her to. He regaled her with tales from when he was away, described the sea in such a way that made Christine long to see it, and ordered plate after plate of food.

“What have you tried caviar before?”

She shook her head, and Raoul flagged down the waiter to order some.
“I think the worst thing about being on a ship for so long is the food,” he wrinkled his nose. “It’s the same food over and over! But the sea - oh, there’s nothing like it, Christine. It’s so beautiful.”

“It sounds just lovely, the way you describe it.”

“It is,” he nodded. “It’s dangerous, too, when the storms come up so quickly, but honestly I love it.”

He paused for a moment, looking down at the mostly empty plates adorning the table.

“Except for the food,” he grinned, and Christine giggled.

“Is food the only thing you miss?”

“No, of course not! I miss France,” he nodded decisively. “And- and you.”

Christine nearly choked on her champagne, her shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

“Raoul!” she cried after she managed to swallow her drink. “You’re too much!”

Raoul straightened in his chair, smoothing down the collar on his jacket. He smiled a little awkwardly. Laughter hadn’t exactly been the reaction he was aiming for.

The waiter brought their caviar and Raoul showed her how to spoon some out onto a little piece of toast.

She eagerly took a bite, then made a face.

Raoul took a bite himself.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” he asked around the toast in his mouth.

Christine brought a hand up to her mouth, trying not to spit it out.

“Oh, it’s- it’s something,” she said, still attempting to chew but her efforts being continually thwarted by how the tiny orbs seemed to go everywhere in her mouth except between her teeth.

Raoul chuckled.

“You’ll get used to it, trust me. It can be a bit of an acquired taste.”

Christine smiled politely, not sure of how to tell him that it wasn’t particularly a taste she wished to acquire.

But after the caviar there were seasoned chicken wings and crab legs and pasta covered in cheese and slices of chocolate cake and bowls of sherbet and the rest of a bottle of champagne, until Christine thought for certain she couldn’t eat another bite for days and she feared that Raoul would catch a scolding from his older brother for having spent so much money.

“I’m only back for such a short time, you know,” he said as put on his coat and scarf in preparation to go outside. “I find I wish to spend as much of my time as I can with you, Christine. Would you take a walk with me?”

“Of course, Raoul. I’d love to,” she wrapped herself in her hooded cape and they stepped outside.

Once out on the sidewalk, Raoul put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close as they
walked. If the action was just a little more than what would strictly be classified as brotherly, Christine decided to overlook it. It felt nice, anyway, and it was rather chilly out still.

They walked that way for a while until they came to a park where they decided to sit on a bench. The sun had set long ago, and the stars were twinkling overhead. They sat close together, and if she scooted a little closer to him to lean her head on his shoulder as she peered upwards at the heavens, well, it only seemed natural in the moment.

Raoul glanced at her, entranced by how the starlight sparkled in her eyes, the way the cold air made her cheeks and nose go pink. She was so beautiful. He squeezed his hand on her shoulder a little, and couldn’t help but notice how she shivered at the action.

In a moment of sudden boldness, he leaned over and kissed the side of her mouth.

It was a fleeting, impulsive thing, gently placed, and his face flushed as he looked away afterwards. Had he the courage to look at her, he would have seen that her face had turned just as red as his.

It was not her first kiss - it was not even her first kiss with Raoul, although Raoul had been her first kiss so many years ago. (It had taken place in the gardens of the Comte de Chagny, when a nearly eight-year-old Raoul had given a slightly baffled but very flattered seven-year-old Christine the best approximation of a kiss on the lips as he could muster before grabbing her hand and dragging her before his father and her papa who were on the porch discussing music, declaring with all the certainty that only a childlike mind can devise that he and Christine were going to get married one day. It was a declaration that was only met with good natured laughter from both of their fathers, causing Raoul a great deal of confusion and hurt. Why didn’t they believe him? At least Christine hadn’t laughed - she had looked surprised, but she had nodded acceptingly to his plan.)

This kiss under the sliver of a crescent moon in the park, was, however, her first kiss that had brought such feelings with it, and it came as somewhat of a surprise.

Butterflies. Strange butterflies, not quite like the ones she got before going on stage - not quite like any she’d had before. They were warmer, somehow, and they seemed to spread out through her body more. They felt gentle, in a way, but at the same time not, and the contradiction confused her. It almost reminded her of something she had seen the previous summer, when the traveling circus had come to town. There had been a contraption in the Tent of Technological Wonders, a thing called a Climbing Arc that seemed to only be two copper wires sticking straight up - until a switch was flipped and suddenly a burst of white-blue electricity climbed its way up the wires with a crackling noise that was both exciting and frightening. Christine and Meg had stared at the strange thing for the longest time, electricity going up and up, over and over, and it had quite imprinted itself into her memory.

Perhaps these butterflies were made of copper, too - perhaps there was electricity going through their delicate wings, and that was why she could feel those sparks with every flutter and flit.

She blamed it almost entirely on the champagne they had during dinner, though truth be told they hadn’t even finished the bottle between the two of them. But it had to be the champagne, the champagne and the way the breeze rustled the leaves in the trees and made the sweet smelling flowers nod, the way the stars twinkled and the thin moon glowed - all of those things had conspired together against her to bring about this new sensation. All of those things... and Raoul. Raoul holding her around the shoulders, Raoul’s warm hand on her arm. Raoul’s soft lips.

While she was sure that the blame lay mostly on the champagne, she couldn’t help but feel some of it was Meg’s fault, too - surely she wouldn’t have been even thinking such things to begin with had...
Meg not been filling her head with the Vicomte’s supposed undying love for her. She though again of Meg’s description of how she felt whenever Dmitry looked at her, and she wondered if this had been what she was talking about. She rested her head on Raoul’s shoulder as she pondered it.

The feeling faded, as did the night. Raoul escorted her back to the opera house, and they parted with the assurance that they would meet as often as they could for the rest of the week that he was in Paris.

Christine climbed the many stairs leading to the entrance, having insisted that he need not actually take her inside. She doubted anyone would still be up at that hour, but still she didn’t wish for any gossip to spread if they should be seen together so late at night.

They met nearly every day for the rest of the week, sometimes for dinner, sometimes for a walk, and sometimes for only a few moments in between her rehearsals. He kissed her again, on occasion, and sometimes she felt the butterflies afterwards but not always. A kiss on the hand, gentlemanly and refined, hardly seemed reason for them to appear. A kiss on the cheek was more likely to bring them about. She was secretly glad that she didn’t feel them all the time when she was around him - while she did consider it a pleasant feeling, she could scarcely imagine how she would get on if she always felt like that. It muddled her mind and confused her words, and she counted herself lucky that it was a fleeting sensation - and pitied poor Meg who was probably getting nothing done in ballet class if that was how she felt all the time around Dmitry.

At last the week was over, and Raoul was preparing to leave once more. She accompanied him to the shipyard to see him off. He gathered her close and hugged her tightly, an embrace she returned with equal fervency. He let her go and took both her hands in his, bringing then up to his lips and kissing them.

“You know I care for you a great deal, Christine,” he told her.

She nodded.

“I care for you too, Raoul. Stay safe on your expedition, and write me lots of letters, okay?”

“I promise you, I will.”

She watched as he dragged his luggage up the ramp with him, and waved as the ship pulled out of the dock. She continued waving, as did he, until she could no longer pick him out in the crowd of people on the ship as it sailed into the distance.

She sighed and turned to begin her journey back to the opera house. She would miss him, of course, but she had plenty to busy herself with in the meantime.
Chapter 20

It was two days after Raoul had left that Christine next had her lesson with Erik. In those two days she had been quite busy with ballet practice - she would have been a little sheepish to admit that she had barely thought of Raoul as more than a passing though since he had left. She certainly hadn’t thought any more on the feeling of butterflies.

Erik paced the room with his arms behind his back, a frown on his face as he listened to Christine sing.

“No, something’s wrong,” he stopped her. “You’re missing out on the depth you could be getting - your breathing is too shallow.”

He moved behind her for a moment, the fingertips of a splayed hand briefly touching her back just below her rib cage.

“You should be breathing from all the way down here - let your diaphragm expand more.”

Christine’s mind froze, only half taking in what he was saying. That touch, that inconsequential, professionally offered touch, had awakened the butterflies.

It was as if in that briefest of moments, her spine was the copper wire and his hand was the switch, causing the white-blue feeling to shoot up her back - and just like when she had first seen the Climbing Arc, it was exciting and frightening all at the same time.

Her eyes darted to him, seeking understanding, but she found seemingly none. He had continued his pacing and was in front of her again, though he was looking at the floor as he often did when he was fully focused on hearing her voice.

She swallowed hard. Surely - surely she was mistaken. This was Erik, for heaven’s sake! She didn’t feel those kinds of things for him... did she?

“Keeping that in mind, please try the piece again from the beginning,” he said.

She furrowed her brow.

“I- I don’t think I understand,” she told him, her face a picture of questioning innocence, and it was true - she didn’t understand. Oh, she understood about breathing just fine, but that wasn’t what she was after.

“Breathe from where, exactly, Erik?”

A question asked purely for the scientific reasons - for the testing of a hypothesis, for the pursuit of knowledge - there was nothing untoward or lewd about seeking knowledge!

But to her utter disappointment, Erik merely turned his own back towards her and pointed out the area he was talking about. He began a long and detailed explanation of which muscles connected to where and the process of breathing and how it might be manipulated to produce a better quality to the voice.

Christine pressed her lips into a thin line. She didn’t care about the Latin names for each muscle or whatever he was going on about. She only cared about figuring out why his touch had made her feel like Raoul’s kisses had. If he touched her again, would she feel it again, also? She desperately
wanted to know, but it seemed she wasn’t going to get the chance to find out.

She watched him carefully the rest of the lesson, but nothing seemed different. Had it been a mere fluke? Could the butterflies happen from surprise? Perhaps she had merely been surprised to feel a hand on her back. He seemed completely unaware of the feelings he had stirred in her, still obliviously wrapped up in the music they were practicing.

The lesson went as normally as nearly every other lesson did. He seemed to be his regular self, and she didn’t think she was being any different, barring what she had felt earlier. They finished the lesson and he bid her farewell, and it wasn’t until she was well on her way back to her dormitory that she realized that he hadn’t even called her my dear, and was surprised and rather stricken to find that the thought of not hearing those words sent her into a pout.

She lay in bed that night and twisted the sheet between her hands, nervously pulling at a loose thread. Her mind was too full of thoughts to go sleep, though she had been in bed for over an hour now. What on earth had happened during her lesson?

She wished she had someone to whom she could ask questions. Mamma Valerius had seen fit to prepare her for what lay ahead of her, letting her know in a frank conversation what any future husband would expect of her once they were married, and what she could expect of that as well. Her Mamma Valerius has always answered her questions, although at the time she had precious few that she had considered to ask. She certainly had no questions about that aspect of it all - and any gaps in the knowledge that Mamma Valerius had bestowed upon her were easily learned from listening to the other girls backstage at the opera house.

It wasn’t about the physical that Christine had questions - no, it was about the emotional. Meg was the only one she trusted enough to completely open about it to, but Meg was a year younger than her and barely knew any more than she did about it all. She could ask Sorelli, perhaps - she was always kind and almost motherly to the other girls, and she was a little older and had a lot of experience in matters of the heart. But just how many questions could she ask before curiosity and suspicion grew about the man - or men - she was possibly having feelings for?

She squirmed a little under the blankets. Did she have feelings for Erik? That felt so wrong, somehow. Perhaps a better question was, did she have feelings for Raoul? If she could put a name to what she felt for Raoul, it would be easier to understand what she felt towards Erik.

She enjoyed Raoul’s company. He was funny and charming, sweet and kind. She liked him. But did she love him? She didn’t think so - not in a particularly romantic way. She might one day, it was highly possible.

But if she enjoyed his company and got butterflies when he kissed her, and she wasn’t in love with him but might be in future - then logically, what stood in the way of saying that she might also one day fall in love with Erik?

It took Raoul kissing her to make feel those electric feelings - all Erik had to do was brush his gloved hand across her back for a fraction of a second.

She swallowed hard. Her mind protested every time the thought came up. Erik was so... Erik. It wasn’t necessarily the thought of Erik that made it sit so uneasily with her - she did like Erik as a friend and mentor - it was the thought that she shouldn’t like Erik as anything more than what he already was.

She still didn’t know if the feeling she had during the lesson was a mere anomaly or actually how she felt. What if that feeling didn’t really mean anything? What if it was just how one felt when
certain things happened, like being kissed? What if it had nothing to do at all with either Raoul or Erik?

She buried her face in her pillow and let her mind wander. Erik? She would try to think about this logically.

The first confusing thing about it was the fact that he was old. She didn’t know how old, exactly, but he was surely old enough to be her father. She was going to be twenty next month. Was it okay to feel those kinds of things about someone who was so much older? She knew of plenty of married couples that had rather large age gaps between them - and some of them seemed quite happy. But just because something had been done before - even done with good results - that didn’t always mean it was right.

It seemed right - normal - to think of herself having feelings for Raoul. They were practically the same age, they had plenty in common, they had known each other since they were children. Feelings for him would be expected - and accepted - by most people, she didn’t have to wonder if anything was unorthodox there. Would her having feelings for Erik be so widely accepted? Erik wasn’t even accepted by society - how would she fare any better in the world if she loved him? Maybe there was something wrong with her that made her feel that way with Erik.

Was she bad if she felt those things for Erik? Was it bad of her to even think about feeling like towards him? He was practically a criminal! And yet, he was so sweet to her... After he had stopped lying to her, of course. Did that make her wicked to feel that way about him when there was so much stacked against him, so many reasons that she shouldn’t? She didn’t want to be wicked.

Raoul was handsome and well-off. If she did like him as more than a friend, no one would be surprised in the least. Raoul had so much to offer! If anything, most people would be confused why she didn’t already feel more for him, all things considered. But what would people think if she had feelings for Erik? What did Erik have to offer, besides his training for her voice and his company? He lived in a cellar, he was a recluse and disfigured, and whatever money he had was gained through underhanded means.

She groaned to herself. She didn’t want to feel feelings for either of them. Raoul was her friend, and Erik was her friend. Couldn’t it just be left at that? She huffed. How dare Raoul kiss her and make her feel things! She made up her mind to have a discussion with Sorelli soon. With that decision settled, she firmly reminded herself that no feeling would ever truly matter until she was prima donna, and finally she fell asleep.
Chapter 21

But when Christine awoke that morning, she suddenly had her doubts. She passed by Sorelli’s door and kept walking, feeling too shy to bring it up.

She could handle this on her own, she reasoned. There was no need to drag others into her silly nonsense.

The company was about to launch into a rigorous rehearsal schedule, anyway - she wouldn’t even be seeing him past their lesson that day for nearly an entire week. The new production had received several bad reviews on opening night, and despite the Vicomte de Chagny telling everyone how wonderful the show was, ticket sales had waned, so the directors wanted to rework a number of scenes. It would be difficult but not impossible, though it would leave Christine with precious little free time, so she and Erik had decided to forgo lessons until she was comfortable with the new staging.

He had chosen a new room for them to have their lesson in, one he said the acoustics would be better in. She found the room, recognizing it by the thin red ribbon he had tied around the doorknob. She turned it and carefully opened the door, peeking inside.

The room was one towards the outside of the building, and as such it had windows on one wall - tall windows covered in lacy curtains that still let the sunlight through. It was slightly dusty inside, one of the many rooms in the opera house that got little, if any, traffic - one of numerous rooms used to store things that weren’t being used and hadn’t been used in years, but would surely be used again eventually and thus had to be kept somewhere. This particular room seemed to house a large number of filing cabinets and drawers, and she assumed they must all be filled with scripts and sheet music from productions past.

“Alas, I could not manage to drag a piano here for you,” he sighed and waved a hand. “A room with lovely acoustics, wasted by the managers who insist on filling it with paperwork. A tragedy, truly.”

She smiled a little.

“If they had never wasted it, we might not be enjoying it right now.”

He considered this.

“Perhaps you are correct. Perhaps it also time to begin.”

Christine began, and was surprised at how much different her voice sounded in the room.

After she warmed up and finished the first two songs from the show and listened to his corrections, Christine stifled a yawn.

“Oh, I’m sorry - I’m not used to standing in the sun for so long, it’s making me sleepy,” she explained.

“Ah. I thought perhaps I was boring you?” his tone was serious, but she could a hint of a smile underneath.

“No, you could never bore me.”
“Hmm, is that so? I believe you thought otherwise that entire month that I wouldn’t let you work on anything other than scales.”

“Erik!”

She laughed at his joke, and he found himself involuntarily returning the smile. The sunlight poured in from the windows, gently filtered by the lace curtains, illuminating the motes of dust that floated past and highlighting the soft curls of her hair. His heart ached at how perfect, how angelic she looked in the moment, and like a ghost haunting the corners of his mind, the words of the Daroga suddenly came back to him from over a year ago.

*Do you love her?*

Did he? He had to turn away from her and force his lungs to draw breath.

She was so precious to him. He cherished every moment spent around her. He worried over her wellbeing, indeed he cared far more about her than he cared about himself. He thought he would never tire of hearing her thoughts or opinions or little stories about her day. Was that love?

Erik couldn’t say. Love was not a feeling he was used to having for anyone, and certainly no one had ever felt it about him. How was he to know?

He turned to glance back at her. She was still smiling, still looking at him with such kindness and warmth. He managed a meager smile of his own and he cleared his throat.

“We’ll work on your third song in the show, shall we?”

She nodded and they resumed the lesson, and though he was mostly able to block the thoughts on the matter from his mind for her lesson, they came crowding back into his brain on his trek back home and lasted far into the evening.

Did he love her? Did he? He briefly considered asking the Daroga his opinion on it, but swiftly shoved that thought down as unacceptable. Erik was not entirely certain how these things worked in actual fact, though he had some idea garnered from books and stories - and he thought, much to his giddiness and mounting horror, that perhaps he did love her.

Did she love him? She couldn’t possibly. She overlooked his numerous flaws and graciously chose to forget his many wrongdoings, but that wasn’t love... was it? No, surely not. She loved singing, not him. That’s why she was here, after all - to learn to sing.

Erik could not love Christine Daaé - or rather, he did love her, but he knew that he should not be allowed to love her. It was a relationship doomed before it even started, there was no way it could ever work out even if she did love him in return.

She was so young, for one thing, and he was... not. He wasn’t certain how old he was exactly, but he had a feeling that she’d more than likely be a widow before she was even out of her forties. She should be with someone her own age, someone she could go through her entire life with, someone who could build a future with her.

Practical thoughts aside, he was her mentor. She trusted him with so much of herself, trusted that he would look out for what was best for her and her career. In a position of such power, of authority, there were any number of vile ways he could take advantage of the situation - take advantage of her - and the thought of doing that made him feel sick to his stomach.

He might look the part of the monster, but that was a role he would never play. Christine would
never learn of his feelings towards her, not if he could help it - it simply wouldn’t be fair to her otherwise. He would protect her from his own beastly self, his own hideous longings. She may have mistakenly continued to regard him as an Angel, but the truth was that she was the angel, and as such she deserved only the very best things in life - and there was no possible stretch of the imagination that could ever include the affections of a disfigured old man in that list.

He determined to carry on as though nothing had changed - a determination that was unfortunately challenged at their very next lesson a mere week later, and he was horribly dismayed and disgusted to find out just how deep his wickedness ran.

From a scientific viewpoint, perhaps one could point to any number of factors that might have contributed - maybe it was the new costume that she hadn’t had time to change out of, and the way one could see her nearly bare legs almost up to her knees or the way the neckline plunged far lower than any of her previous costumes had. Perhaps it was the way her cheeks were rosy and her breathing hard from the way she had run off the stage in order to be on time for the lesson, a condition that unfortunately only accentuated just how tightly her corset was drawn and just how low the neckline really was.

But Erik was loath to let any of the blame rest on poor Christine - he knew that the fault lay not with her or her costume but entirely with himself and his own awful thoughts, with how he had been obsessing over her and the idea of being in love the whole past week, and that that was why he was suddenly faced with a mortifying problem he had thought he’d left behind with his youth.

“I’m sorry I’m late, Erik, rehearsals ran long,” she told him as she caught her breath, leaning up against the door she had just closed and locked. “I came as soon as I could, I thought they would never let us leave! But I’m ready now.”

She looked at him expectantly, and he tried his very best to keep his gaze on her face and not parts lower.

Her smile faded as she took in the ashy color and strange expression of his face.

“Erik, are you alright? You look like you’re going to be sick,” she fretted, and took a step closer.

He desperately wished he was wearing his cape so that he could cover himself with it. Instead he quickly turned and awkwardly sat at the piano, crossing his legs. He hoped she hadn’t noticed, and prayed she didn’t come any closer.

“I am quite fine, Christine,” he said tightly.

He grabbed the sheet music off the top of the piano and placed it over his lap for good measure, pretending to study it while he cursed his wicked body’s betrayal.

Erik missed many things about being younger. He missed how he hadn’t seemed to need so much sleep, he missed the way his knees didn’t crack when bent too deeply, he missed how his back had never ached after walking for a long distance, but he had never missed this. He bitterly regretted that out of all the bygone things that had escaped him over the years, this was what insisted on coming back.

“We’ll go over your songs from rehearsal, but I wanted to try a new one today as well,” he aimed for an airy tone and missed by a long shot.

Christine furrowed her brow as she watched him awkwardly perched on the bench, not entirely convinced that he wasn’t ill in some way.
She suddenly remembered something.

“Ah, Erik - I’m actually not quite ready for my lesson, I’m sorry,” she bit her lip, unsure of how to word it. “Would you give me just a moment to step aside and fix my costume?”

He looked up from the staves, momentarily confused.

She ran a hand down the front of her bodice.

“I’m afraid I shan’t be able to breathe properly,” she explained in a squeak of a voice - she had felt the laces digging into her the entire time she had been singing on stage, yet she hadn’t been able to find a spare moment to fix it. She didn’t mind not singing her best during a dress rehearsal, but she wanted to be at her absolute best for her lesson.

He grit his teeth and waved her away. This girl would be the death of him, he knew it.

She quickly walked to the back of the room, behind a large piece of stage scenery, and once she was certain she was out of view she began to tug at her corset laces, letting them loosen as much as was possible in that particular dress. She reminded herself to tell whoever helped her dress next time to not pull them so tightly. She felt a little embarrassed to have to do this so close to Erik, but quick changes backstage were nothing new to her - modesty was in short supply when one was a performer. Still, she regretted that she hadn’t had time to loosen them before her lesson.

Erik shifted uncomfortably on the bench, tapping his restless fingers on the piano and trying to hum to himself - anything to try to cover up the sound of what he knew for a fact was Christine undressing in the same room as him, the sound of fabric rustling and laces sliding, and he tried to swallow against the lump in his throat.

Finally she appeared again after only a few long, torturous moments.

“I apologize for the interruption,” she said. “I am quite certain I am ready now.”

He gave a brief nod.

“Begin,” the words came out a little harsher than he intended, and he launched into playing the piano with a heavy hand.

Christine blinked, and began to sing through her warm ups.

To his immense relief, by the time she had finished with her warm up exercises the need to keep his legs crossed had faded. He paused a moment, trying to decide if he wanted her to work on the new piece first or if they should go ahead with what she had been singing in the show - and in that moment of silence Christine piped up with a question that had been in her mind the entire time she was warming up.

“Speaking of breathing properly,” she began. “I was rather hoping we could over what you were talking about the other day. It was quite interesting, but I’m afraid I’ve forgotten parts of it... Could you show me again about where I’m supposed to be breathing from?”

Erik turned and looked at her incredulously. Poor Christine, a portrait of innocence, staring at her tutor with absolutely no idea what kind of a letch he was. But he couldn’t leave her question unanswered, either.

“You must be careful to not keep your breathing too high,” he said shortly. “You should feel it from your back.”
Her brow furrowed.

“Where on my back?”

He stood and grabbed the sheet music to carry with him, just in case it would need to be strategically placed once more.

Christine closed her eyes as he made his way behind her. Her plan had worked. This was it. This was the moment of truth. There was nothing untoward about it, it was practically scientific when it came right down to it - she would finally know for sure if it had been a one-time thing only or something more. Her shoulders tensed in anticipation, her mouth felt dry-

“From down here,” came Erik’s clipped voice behind her.

She squeezed her hands together, ready to feel him touch her, and then- and then-

And then Christine opened her eyes at the contact, confused, her lips parting in surprise.

She turned to look at Erik, who was swiftly moving back to the piano bench. He had touched her, but not in the way she had been expecting.

She looked with dismay at what he held in one hand - a few pages of the sheet music rolled up tightly. He had gently swatted at the area on her back in question - where she had expected to feel his lithe fingers, she had only received a tap with the tube of papers, and she was highly disappointed.

“I do hope you’ll remember this time, I won’t be going over this again.”

Her question had been asked with all the innocence in the world, and it was only light of his newly discovered despicable feelings towards her that he realized that in one of their previous lessons he had touched her. He truly hadn’t thought anything of it at the time, but now...

Now even the most well-intentioned of reasons to touch her seemed to take on a sinister new meaning.

He had only just come to terms with loving her, he did not know how to cope with the thought that he desired her as well. For any other man, it might be seen as a normal occurrence, it would be expected if desire and love went hand-in-hand together, it could be an understandable reaction as an expression of the love he felt for her - but Erik was not a normal man, and never would be anything close. For Erik, it could only be seen as something shameful, something that branded him as the terrible beast he knew he was, and he hated it. Hated that he felt those things for her, hated that his face kept him from being able to live a normal life and be a normal man, hated that he knew deep in his soul that Christine could never return any sort of feeling for him.

He was dimly aware that he had told her to start with the songs from the show. His fingers found the correct keys by muscle memory alone and he was barely even listening to how she was singing - his mind was too consumed with self-loathing.

Christine shifted on her feet as she sang. All she could see of Erik was his back as he played accompaniment. It was the same music he’d played dozens of times, the same tune, the same melody, but there was something different to it this time, something dark, and it made her feel uncomfortable. She wished he’d just look at her, just once. He was acting so unlike himself, it worried her.

He hit a sour note and stopped, blinking down at the piano. It had surprised him out of his cloud of
negative emotions, but only for a moment. Should he keep going or start over? He couldn’t even remember how far into the song he had been.

“Erik-“

“From the top,” he nearly growled.

She lowered her eyes to the floor and started over.

She went through the rest of her songs with no correction from him, and while part of her was pleased about that, she also feared that perhaps he found so much of it wrong that he simply didn’t have time to correct it all - the new opening night was only a few days away, after all.

They reached the end of her last song in the upcoming show and Christine watched, confused, as he placed the cover over the keys and gathered his sheet music once more, preparing to leave.

“I thought you had a new piece you wanted me to work on?”

“I think you have quite enough to work on, don’t you?” he snapped as he rose from the piano bench, and Christine took a step backwards.

Erik never snapped at her, except for that time they had been fighting.

“Are you mad at me?” she finally asked in a small voice, stopping him from leaving through the secret exit.

He had been about to leave without even saying goodbye, and it stung.

He froze, turning back to look at her. His poor Christine, standing there and wringing her hands, looking so hurt by how he had acted. He hadn’t realized that his hatred towards himself had inadvertently hurt her, too. He certainly hadn’t meant for that happen. His mind scrambled for an apology that would make sense, one that didn’t consist solely of Erik is a wretched excuse of a man, and in the attempt to do so while comforting and reassuring her, he didn’t even notice a certain word that slipped out.

“Oh, Christine- Christine, no. I could never be mad at you, sweet. I just- there’s a lot on my mind at the moment, that’s all. You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m sorry.”

She nodded a little, still a bit hurt, but believing him due to his mournful tone.

“Are you sure you’re alright, Erik?”

“I’m-“ he looked away.

“I will be fine, Christine,” he said softly.

“Is there anything I can help you with?” she offered, uncertain that he was telling the truth about being okay.

He smiled sadly.

“No, that’s alright. You’re so kind to ask, though, but I’m afraid there’s nothing to be done.”

“Are you sick?”

He gave a mirthless little laugh.
“In a way.”

She feared he was about to leave again, but he merely hesitated in the secret doorway.

He had let his own pathetic problems interfere with her lesson, and he swore to himself that he would never let that happen again.

“Your voice was excellent tonight, Christine. We’ll hold off on working on any new pieces until after this re-staging business settles down. You should feel quite confident going into the next show. I want you to get plenty of rest between now and then - you have nothing to worry about in regards to your voice, you’ll do quite fine. I’ll be watching the performance, and we can talk about it the day after, okay?”

“Okay,” she nodded, then adding- “Thank you.”

“Get some rest, Christine,” he said kindly as he left.

She still fretted over it to herself as she made her way back to her dressing room to change into her normal dress. Was he ill somehow? It always worried her so much when someone was sick, ever since her papa had never recovered. It didn’t matter if it was only a sniffle or light fever - she knew how quickly something seemingly minor could turn into something serious.

She didn’t want Erik to be sick. He didn’t deserve to suffer any more than he already had. She replayed his last words to her over and over, straining to remember if anything about him had seemed off or telling of an impending or lingering illness. She worried over his health for so long that it wasn’t until after she had changed and was leaving her dressing room that she remembered what he had called her.

_I could never be mad at you, sweet_

Sweet. He called her sweet.

Christine was not a young woman who lacked in affectionate friends. She was used to being called pet names, used to having a number of people who loved her and cared for her and was used to hearing them tell her so.

So when she thought of Erik calling her sweet, she simply couldn’t account for the way her cheeks turned pink and she felt a peculiar warmth radiating through her.

It was the final straw. She needed to talk to Sorelli.
Chapter 22

Christine knocked on the door of Sorelli’s dressing room.

“What is it?”

“It’s Christine,” she fidgeted nervously. Was she making the right choice?

“Oh! Come in, dear.”

Christine entered, taking a deep breath. The perfumed air of the dressing room smelled of lilac and amber, and it helped her to calm down. There always seemed to be a deep, abiding peace that settled around Sorelli wherever she went, and her dressing room was no exception.

It was then that Christine noticed Sorelli was putting on makeup, but she knew there was no rehearsal that day.

“Oh, did I catch you at a bad time? I can come back later if you’re getting ready to go out somewhere.”

Sorelli smiled at her in the mirror.

“No, it’s alright. Did you need something?”

Christine clutched her hands in the fabric of her skirts.

“I was hoping we could talk for a bit, and that maybe you could give me some advice.”

“Oh course,” she nodded, gesturing to the plush ottoman next to her. “What did you want to talk about?”

Christine sat on the ottoman, taking a moment to watch how Sorelli brushed the powder over her face. Her jet black hair cascaded over shoulders, contrasting with the pale yellow silk of her dressing gown. Christine had always thought her quite beautiful, and she counted herself lucky to know her - not just for how she looked, but for the kind heart she also possessed.

“Well,” she started, her face already turning red. “I was out with- oh, Sorelli, can you keep a secret?”

Sorelli grinned.

“You know that I can, Christine. Go on.”

She bit her lip and nodded.

“Well, I was out with- with a boy... and when he, ah, kissed me, I felt like- like butterflies, you see.”

Sorelli’s look softened as she glanced at her in the mirror.

“You like him.”

“Yes,” she agreed - she may not love him, but she did like him. “But then something else happened. Later on, when I was with my tutor... I felt the same way. But-“
She squeezed her hands together to keep them from trembling.

“But my tutor is not a boy,” she finished quietly.

Sorelli considered this.

“Your tutor is a girl, then? That’s okay too, Christine.”

“No, I mean- he’s a man - he’s old.”

Sorelli chuckled, and Christine felt her heart squeeze - was Sorelli laughing at her? Was there something strange with how she felt after all?

But then, just as if she’d read her mind-

“That’s not so strange, dear.”

“It’s not?” she squeaked.

“No, of course not. You’re not the first, trust me,” she rolled her eyes playfully.

“Oh,” the relief was in her voice was nearly tangible. “I was a little worried... It didn’t seem to make very much sense.”

“Love typically doesn’t make very much sense, I’m afraid.”

Sorelli sighed, a far-away look in her eyes, and she didn’t notice how Christine seemed to freeze up.

“Love? Do you think- does that really mean I’m in love then? With- with both of them?”

Sorelli turned from the mirror and looked at her for the first time.

“It doesn’t have to. It doesn’t have to have to mean anything if you don’t want it to. You can’t help how you feel, but you can help what you choose to do about it,” she turned back to her vanity mirror, pulling a delicate brush out from a drawer and applying a pale green eyeshadow.

“For example,” she continued. “Say you realize you do have feelings for this tutor fellow. Then say maybe you realize he’s been setting you up this entire time! Maybe you’ve only been having feelings because he’s been manipulating you into doing so. Well, then you have a choice - not an easy choice, of course - but just because you have feelings for him doesn’t mean you should stick around in a bad situation, or that you have to stay with him.”

Christine frowned a little. Yes, Erik had technically manipulated her in the beginning when he said was an angel, but her current feelings weren’t being manipulated - at least she didn’t think so. Of course it would be difficult to tell if he actually was still manipulating her, but he really had always been respectful of her, and he had never said or done anything that would have seemed out of place if it had been Raoul or Meg or any other friend who did it.

“But,” Sorelli caught her eye in the mirror again, a little smile tugging at the corner of her lips. “Say you realize that everything is quite organically occurring, and you’re actually passionately in love with your tutor. You have a choice there too.”

Christine dropped her gaze down to her shoes, unable to hold Sorelli’s eye any longer. She wouldn’t count herself as passionately in love - even just saying in love felt quite a bit of a stretch - but her words caused more dread than excitement in her. She swallowed a few times before she
could get her voice to work.

“What if- what if my choice is one that doesn’t make a lot of sense to other people? What if it’s a choice no one approves of?”

Sorelli paused.

“I suppose,” she said slowly. “That depends entirely on the reason they don’t approve.”

For the briefest of moments Christine felt entirely silly and as though she were wasting Sorelli’s time. Was she seriously so concerned over a brief sensation that she was already fretting over an imagined and highly improbable future? But still, she forged on, taking a deep breath.

“Because he’s... not handsome... or rich... or very young. And if I had a chance to be someone who was, but passed that up in favor of him, people would think I was crazy.”

Sorelli was quiet, so Christine went on.

“He treats me so nicely, and he hasn’t done anything wrong, but-“ she lowered her voice to a whisper. “People are so terrible to him, even though he doesn’t deserve it. And I’m- I’m afraid, I suppose, of how they’d treat me too - of how they’d treat us, if we were together. I certainly wouldn’t be accepted into the same circles I would be otherwise.”

“Then that is the choice that sits before you,” she said gently. “Would you rather have the approval of the upper class, or be with your love?”

Sorelli stared at herself in the mirror and smiled sadly.

“Can I tell you a secret, too, Christine?”

Christine nodded eagerly. Anything for Sorelli.

“Do you know who I’m going out to see?”

“Who?”

“Philippe. Even after everything,” she gave a little mirthless laugh and shook her head. “I guess I’ve certainly made my choice, haven’t I?”

Christine didn’t know what to say. She hadn’t known they were still seeing each other. Raoul’s older brother had been quite insistent that he would never marry a performer, would never marry below his station, and despite the fact that he held great affection for Sorelli, he had sworn to her that they could never be anything more than what they were - nothing more than clandestine meetings and weekend getaways to places where no one knew who he was. It hurt Christine to think about it, about how much Sorelli loved him - and about how much he loved her too, and how his title as Comte prevented him from being to pursue her in the fashion that she deserved. Perhaps that was not entirely true - perhaps it wasn’t his title that prevented him from doing so. Perhaps it was his own fear of sullying the good name of de Chagny that kept him from marrying her.

“I’m sorry,” Christine offered, and she was.

Sorelli swiped her red lipstick over her lips and put on a brave face.

“Don’t be,” she said. “It was my choice, and I made it. I stand by that. And if one day I should change my mind and make a different choice, well - then I’ll stand by that one, too. Make your
choices boldly, love. Good judgement mixed with your heart’s voice can typically steer you in the right direction, but you can’t give way to fear. Fear will only box you in, make you second guess yourself. I have no doubt you’ll pick correctly when the time comes, Christine. You’re a smart young woman.”

Christine nodded as she listened. She hoped Sorelli was right.

“So tell me,” the playful smile had returned as she began to twist her hair into a clip. “Where does Christine Daaé’s heart lay? The handsome young boy or the elderly gentleman?”

Christine wrinkled her nose.

“I said he was older, not elderly,” she laughed.

Her laughter quickly faded and she bit her lip as Sorelli waited patiently.

“Honestly? I think my heart lays with being on the stage,” she said with a sigh.

“Like I said, a smart young woman,” Sorelli winked at her. “It sounds like you’ve made your choice, too.”

“Yes, I suppose. I really don’t want to be involved with anyone until I have a settled career.”

“Take your time, if you can. Remember that you don’t owe anyone anything. You should be true to yourself in all of your choices - don’t let the opinions of others get in your way,” she paused, a wicked little grin suddenly forming on her face. “And while you’re taking your time, enjoy yourself a little - let yourself feel those feelings without having to worry about what they mean for the future. Two men making you blush and feel butterflies - why, count yourself twice as lucky for the time being, and simply enjoy it while you can!”

Christine’s face turned a little red, but she couldn’t help but smile at her advice.

“If you say so,” she managed, and Sorelli laughed.

They parted with a hug, and Christine was glad that she had talked to her.

It was a topic that Christine’s mind turned to often whenever she had a spare moment during the next few days. Although she felt Sorelli’s advice was good and she was thankful to have it, Christine felt as if perhaps she had been making a mountain out of a molehill. She had determined to not focus on any possible future with either one of them - the only future she wanted to focus on was her own. If there was anything that was between her and either one, well - surely it would occur in its own time, and her obsessing over whether or not something was there wouldn’t help matters. Though, of course, it was hard not to obsess just a little bit.

Raoul liked her. She knew that much. She wasn’t as clear on what Erik felt for her. Not that it particularly mattered, but still.

She realized that for all they had talked and discussed, she really didn’t know terribly much about his personal life. He lived in the cellars and rarely ever left, mostly due to the terrible way people treated him because of his face - and his mask. He was a musical genius- he wrote and composed and sang. He seemed quite clever and very well read, too. But surely that wasn’t all there was to him, was there?

She couldn’t imagine him having lived his entire life under the opera house. If she had to guess, she’d say he was somewhere in his mid to late forties. Had he had a whole life before he came to
the Opera Populaire? Did he have any family out there somewhere, some siblings or cousins? Or what if he had a family of his own - had he ever been married? If he was forty-eight or even fifty, it wouldn’t be too far outside the realm of reason that if he had been married and had a child, that child would actually be older than Christine (only by a few years, perhaps, but still). She frowned. She didn’t like that thought, so she tried to push it away in favor of other, less disconcerting thoughts.

Unfortunately, the thought, once realizing it’s unwelcomeness, only expanded itself.

What if she had made a great ninny out of herself by assuming that Erik had meant his little names for her as anything other than a fatherly gesture?

She began to construct an elaborate story in her mind of an Erik that had lived normally - looked normally - for a long while, getting married, settling down, having a daughter, only for some dreadful accident to happen one day, one that cost him his wife and their daughter and forever marred his face... And what if Christine reminded him of his own daughter? What if when he called her my dear he was picturing his own little girl from so long ago?

She sighed. It was speculation, all of it, but she had nothing else to go on. It felt equally likely that he thought of her as a daughter as he did- anything else.

It was confusing even to her, since she adamantly didn’t want anyone’s attentions complicating her life for the time being - but she did rather hope that he didn’t think of her like a daughter, like a child. She supposed that was silly of her, but like Sorelli had said - she couldn’t help how she felt about it.

At her next lesson, she wanted to bring it up, wanted to talk to him about his life before, but she couldn’t figure out how. It all seemed dreadfully rude to bring up - have you ever been married, Erik? Has your face always looked like that?

She paused a moment after greeting him, finally settling on asking what he thought of the restaged show instead.

He pressed his lips into a thin line, and took his time thinking about it.

“I think that you are performing your role to the best of your ability, my dear - which is to say that you are doing excellent. You have memorized all of your new choreography flawlessly.”

“Erik!” she laughed. “That’s not what I asked! What do you think of the show, not me.”

He arched his visible eyebrow and straightened out the collar of his jacket before running his hands down the lapels.

“Well,” he said aloofly. “They can’t all be winners, Christine.”

Christine put her hands over her mouth to keep from laughing.

“Yes, you are terrible!”

“No, Christine, the show is terrible - Erik merely calls it as he sees it.”

She dissolved into a fit of giggles while Erik remained looking as unaffected as ever.

“Perhaps if a certain ghost had been taken seriously, they would have had a better production,” he sighed.
She rolled her eyes.

“You can’t just threaten them into running whatever you want.”

“Obviously not,” he said, his tone dark.

She tried to look stern, but her giggles hadn’t entirely gone away yet.

“But the new choreography helped, didn’t it?”

“The same songs now with two different versions of blocking? I am afraid that means there is now only more of it to hate.”

“Let’s talk about something else, Erik,” she said, shaking her head.

“Let’s begin your lesson, I think you mean.”

Christine’s many questions about how she felt towards him and what he felt for her began fade as the weeks went by. The new show’s run was eventually cut short, and the performers were given a small break - three weeks of vacation time - until the managers and directors could come upon an agreement about what show to produce next and pinpoint exactly what went wrong with the previous one.

Christine found she didn’t need to fret over what might be or could be and what was there or not - because she knew that she and Erik were friends, and that was enough for her. She kept up her regular correspondence with Raoul, because they were friends, too. Friendship was important, and she cherished both of them.

“Have you even heard of this new opera they’re talking about putting on?” Christine asked from her perch up atop her vanity table, her legs dangling down, unable to reach the floor.

“Of course,” Erik replied. “I was the one who suggested it.”

He was sitting on the little chair that was situated in front of the vanity table - not terribly close, he had moved it back enough to give her room, to not crowd her in, but still close enough that they could talk easily. They were nearly equal in height in this situation, with her only a inch or so taller. It felt odd, she thought, to not have to look up at him when they were this close - but she wasn’t complaining.

She narrowed her eyes at him.

“Suggested?”

He shrugged innocently.

“They were not harmed, Christine,” he paused. “Not permanently.”

She gaped at him.

“Not physically harmed,” he protested. “I merely sent a strongly worded letter - I assure you they will get over their bruised egos and hurt feelings once the money starts coming in.”

“Erik,” she chided him.

“I merely want what’s best for the opera house, and clearly they can’t be trusted to know what’s best.”
He crossed his arms and met her stare head on.

“Besides,” he added. “Did you know that this production will have a supporting role that would be excellent for you?”

Christine froze, the gentle swaying kick of legs abruptly stopping, her face expressionless.

“Did you mention me in your letter?” she asked evenly.

“No. I know how you feel about that.”

She nodded. It was something that had kept her up at night at times, far more than any worries about boys or feelings - Erik was in a position to boost her career with very little effort on her part. If she asked him to, he could pull a few strings - or drop a few chandeliers - and the managers would be forced to make her the prima donna. Was that how she wanted to achieve her goals? She didn’t think so - but sometimes she thought about it. She had, however, specifically asked Erik not to use his Ghost shenanigans to force the managers to promote her. When she earned a role, she wanted to know that she had earned it. But still, she knew that politics played a large part in the theater world - would it really be so bad to use a connection to get a job? It might be something she would consider later on, but for the time being she didn’t want to think about doing it - she would work hard and become a great singer, and if by then she still wasn’t allowed to have roles that her singing warranted, well, then the Opera Ghost could step in.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

“I truly think you have a good chance of being cast in the role, though. It would be just challenging enough to stretch your abilities, but still one you could reasonably perform. We could even work on some of the songs today, if you’d like to try that.”

Christine was about to reply when there came a knock on her door.

“Christine?” a voice called out to her. “Who is that in there with you?”
Chapter 23

Christine and Erik froze, both frowning hard at the door.

She recognized the voice of one of the younger ballerinas, little Jammes. Christine was grateful the door was locked, as she could hear the young girl rattling the doorknob, trying to turn it.

"There's no one here, only me, you silly goose," Christine finally settled on saying to her.

The rattling stopped.

"But I heard a man talking," Jammes insisted.

"You are quite mistaken, I'm afraid."

Jammes was quiet for moment.

"Then can I come in?"

Panic flashed across Erik's face as he looked incredulously at Christine.

"No! You can't come in!" her voice sounded a little more worried than it should have been. "I'm-I'm not dressed, you see."

Erik scrambled off of the chair and rushed for the mirror, his heart pounding in his throat. He had been keeping his voice low as he always did, but who knew how long Jammes had been standing there? She could have been pressing her ear against the door for all he knew, not that it truly mattered - he was on the verge of being discovered and that was all that did matter.

"Just- just give me a moment, dear," Christine told her and jumped down from the table.

Erik’s hands were shaking as he rolled the mirror back into place, hiding him from view.

Christine stared at the mirror anxiously as she walked to the door and unlocked it. She pulled the door open, revealing little Jammes standing there, peering into the room with wide, curious eyes.

"Silly little goose," Christine said again, smiling and trying to calm her racing heart. “I’m the only one in here, you see? But what brings you here? Did you want something, dear?"

Jammes nodded and Christine let her come in, careful not to glance at the mirror lest the girl follow her gaze and look there herself.

“I thought for sure I heard a man’s voice...” she said as she walked in slowly, taking her time to look in every corner and peek under the table before looking curiously at Christine.

Finally convinced that they were the only ones in the room, she turned to Christine.

“Sometimes the other girls have men in their dressing rooms,” she said seriously.

Christine made a face that something between a grimace and a nervous smile.

“Did you need something, Jammes?” she reminded her.

Jammes sighed and hung her head.
“I messed up my ballet slippers, and I can’t ask the ballet mistress for help because she’ll get really mad and I can’t get new ones because I can’t afford them and I don’t how to fix them,” tears started to form in the corner of her eyes as she pleaded her case to Christine, staring at the carpet.

“Oh, Jammes... It’s okay. Where are they? Maybe I can fix them.”

Jammes pulled the shoes out of her satchel she had hanging from her shoulder and handed them to Christine.

The ribbons were torn and tattered, the pink silk was stained with mud as grass, and the stitching was coming loose in several places. Christine gasped. Jammes had only recently earned her pointe shoes, and they were the little girl’s prized possession.

“Jammes! What on earth did you do to them?”

Jammes finally started to cry, and behind the mirror Erik cringed. He always felt so uncomfortable watching others cry.

“Oh, Jammes, dear, don’t cry, it’s alright! I can fix them! But really... How did this happen?”

Jammes sniffled a few more times and rubbed the backs of her hands over her red, watery eyes.

“My cousin took me on a picnic, and I wanted to show her my new shoes and how I could stand on my toes in them, and I guess they got muddy from the grass down by the river where we were playing. I didn’t know they would get that bad, honest!”

Christine sighed a little and gave the poor girl a hug.

“It’s alright, dear. But this will take me a while to fix. Can I hold onto them and give them back to you tomorrow?”

Jammes nodded, and after a few more words of comfort from Christine, she left. Christine watched her walk down the hallway before she closed and locked the door.

It was only once the door had been locked for a few moments that Christine glanced back at the mirror. She walked up close to it, and Erik opened it, putting a finger to his lips to warn her from speaking.

He stretched a gloved hand out to her, unsure of how else to let her know without speaking that he wanted her to follow him into the mirror.

Her eyes flickered from his hand to his eyes, and she reached out to take his hand.

He was certain that his heart skipped a beat when she placed her hand so trustingly in his. He helped her to step up into the hidden recess behind the mirror before sliding it shut.

His hand was cold - or rather, his glove was cold, Christine surely thought his actual hand couldn’t be that cold, could it? - and she suppressed a shiver as that very same chill seemed to creep up her wrist and arm as he closed his hand firmly around hers.

It wasn’t until she heard the tiny sound of the mirror latching shut that she blinked at her surroundings, almost surprised at where she was.

“She might come back to listen,” Erik whispered, and Christine had to suppress another shiver. “We certainly can’t do your lesson here, now.”
She frowned.

“But I wanted to go over the new songs from the show you were telling me about,” she said as quietly as she could.

Erik stared at her for a long moment. He should tell her that they’d wait until another day and use a room that wasn’t so likely to be overheard in, but-

Oh, Erik was a wicked man, he knew that. It was a terrible idea, truly - he shouldn’t bring it up, not ever, and yet-

“We could do your lesson in my house.”

Her eyes widened.

“We could?”

He nodded slowly.

“We could. Do you wish to?”

“Yes,” she didn’t hesitate in the least.

“Is there anywhere else you’re expected to be this afternoon? I only ask because it’s a bit of walk there, you see, and will take a fair amount of time to get there and then return.”

“No, nowhere,” she shook her head eagerly, already excited to see where he lived. Would it make her sad? Would it be dark and dismal, maybe a rat or two? She certainly hoped not, but seeing where he lived felt like a way to get to know him better, and she did so want to get to know him as more than just her tutor.

A little nagging voice in the back of her mind completely surprised her. It was highly improper for her, a single woman, to be visiting the home of an unmarried man all alone. She found herself annoyed at the voice that told her this, though the words did give her pause for only a moment. She was already doing something highly improper by having him in her dressing room with her - something that had slipped her mind long ago and only just now had been remembered when they been in danger of being discovered.

Yet for all the supposed impropriety, there was truly nothing improper going on. It was a shame that no one else would likely see it that way. Her face burned at the thought that innocent little Jammes might accidentally tell someone that Christine had had a man in her room with her, and she supposed if someone mentioned it to her she’d have to go along with that story. But the fact remained that nothing even close to untoward had happened between them (she supposed her attempts at coaxing him into touching her back were the only things that could possibly be considered as bordering on inappropriate, but even then Erik had remained a gentleman about it - perhaps a little too much of a gentleman, in her own secret opinion). It was with that in mind that she decided she could trust him. It would surely be no different than doing their lesson in any of the other rooms in the opera house, she reasoned. Never mind that this room - his “house” - was several stories below the cellars.

House. What a curious term to use, she thought. What on earth could it look like?

“Very well,” he looked away from her.

Surely he couldn’t be blamed too much for something she wanted to do, could he?
“Is there anything you wish to bring with you? A shawl, perhaps? It does get rather cold, I believe.”

She hesitated. She didn’t feel like she needed a shawl, but Erik did know the cellars far better than she did.

“Perhaps so, if you think I should,” she agreed, and started to turn back to the mirror.

“Oh, no, allow me, my dear.”

Erik stepped down from the raised ledge nimbly after pulling back the mirror. He picked up a shawl she had hanging on a hook on the wall, and easily stepped back up into the secret tunnel. He carefully draped the knitted wool across her shoulders, taking care not to touch her as he did, thankful that the dim light hid the slight shake in his hands, his lips pressed firmly together as he crossed the ends together in front of her.

“Thank you, Erik,” she looked up at him. “Oh! I should leave the ballet slippers here.”

“No need. Take them with us, I have needles and thread and home, you can fix them there if you like.”

“Oh. Okay. If you don’t mind,” she clutched the little shoes to her and prepared to set off into the unknown.

They rounded the corner and Erik stooped to pick up a small lantern, turning the light up a little higher. It wasn’t long until Christine realized why it was needed. The pale light that barely filtered through the mirror was quickly left behind, plunging the tunnel into complete darkness if not for the lantern. She pulled the shawl around her a little tighter. Erik eyed the motion.

“Are you cold already, Christine?”

“Yes,” she lied.

“Hm.”

Erik often felt cold, or nothing at all really - he wasn’t the best judge of what would feel cold or not to other people. He knew that the tunnels, so far away from the sun, would be chilly, but was surprised to learn that they were so cold so quickly.

She took a little step closer to him, closer to the lantern, and Erik assumed she had misjudged the distance between them - a mere accident. She was afraid of the dark - a shameful secret to she tried her best to keep to herself - and was also afraid of letting him know. She glanced up at him. What must it be like to live one’s life in such darkness? Constantly surrounded by shadows? She shivered a little and his concerned gaze found her once more. Perhaps, he thought to himself, perhaps he should have recommended that she bring her coat instead of a mere shawl.

The path began to twist and turn and there were steep, narrow staircases, some going straight down and some in tight spirals. It all seemed to go on forever, and she marveled that he was able to keep it all straight in his mind.

“You walk this path every time you come up for a lesson with me?” she asked, incredulous. She had had no idea of the effort he had been expending.

He shrugged a little.
“Mostly. There’s a few other ways up and down, but none that would be suited for your use,” he said, then paused. “We’ll have to go across the lake. I doubt you’d be up to going down the rope.”

“The rope?!” she squealed.

He nodded absentmindedly.

“Yes, a rope. A very thick rope with strategically placed knots, and a number of ledges in the stonework if one needs a rest - it’s like a chimney of sorts, though of course no smoke goes up it. It’s a good twenty feet tall, probably.”

“Twenty feet?” she parroted. “You go up and down that?”

“Sometimes, when I don’t wish to take the extra time to cross the lake.”

“Well- well, what happens if you slip and fall?”

He stopped walking, turning to look at her in the light of the lantern. Judging by the look of fear etched into her face, she wasn’t looking for an actual answer of what would happen should he fall from twenty feet up.

“That is why I take care not to fall,” he said simply, and began to walk again.

They walked on in silence for a while longer, Christine too afraid to ask any more details lest they be too macabre - she hated the thought of that long rope, of how easily it could end in disaster. Who would ever think to look for him, or even know where to look? He could be there for days, with a broken leg - or worse - and no one would ever know or come for him. It was a highly distressing thought. Her teeth worried at her lip. She knew he must have been using that rope on a regular basis for several years at the very least, and nothing bad had happened yet. But still, he was only a human, and humans were prone to error - a slip of a hand or a misstep of the foot, that would be all it took.

“Erik?” she asked softly.

“Yes, Christine?”

“Will you show me where the tunnel with the rope is? Where the bottom is, I mean.”

Erik hid his look of puzzlement. Why would she want to know that?

“Of course, Christine,” he glanced at her, curious. “May I ask why?”

She stuttered and stammered, suddenly flustered for some reason.

“J-just in case, you know,” she shrugged.

How could she tell him that she wanted to know where to look should he ever not show up for a lesson?

He raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

Erik knew that for a woman, there was an inherent danger in going to a man’s house all alone with him. Even if he knew quite well that he would never pose any kind of threat to her in any way, he was quite aware that her agreeing to go with him involved on her part a great amount of trust (or a great amount of naivety). She trusted him to keep her safe and unharmed, so he only saw fit to likewise trust her with a few of his Ghostly secrets - the locations of his underground entrances and
exits being some of them. If she would one day use that knowledge against him, well - there was little he could do about that. He trusted her more than he had ever trusted anyone in his life, except perhaps the Daroga, though he rather resented the man even if he did save Erik’s life that one time.

It was as they approached the bank of the underground lake that it all suddenly seemed too real for Erik. He tried to swallow, but found it difficult because his mouth was far too dry.

He knelt down and pulled on the rope that moored the little gondola to the shore, dragging the boat closer. Feeling terribly ungentlemanly, he didn’t offer her his hand to help her into the boat, fearing that his icy grip would only make her even colder. But she seemingly didn’t even notice, stepping down into the gondola gingerly as soon as it was close enough.

She sat down in the boat, keeping as still as she could as Erik stepped into it and began to untie the rope after affixing the lantern to the hook on the front end. She had been suddenly struck with the fear that she would move and somehow cause the little boat to capsize - Erik would surely never forgive her for that. His mask would probably sink to the bottom, and both of their clothes would be ruined... They’d catch ill because of the cold and the damp, and maybe even the boat would sink, too... Assuming, of course, that they both didn’t simply drown on the spot.

He grabbed a long pole that had been on the shore - Christine hadn’t even noticed it when they came upon it - and began to use it to push the little boat along the water. The ripple of the water echoed off the stone walls in the most unusual way.

Despite her fear of capsizing them all, Christine began to fidget just a little. She had sat down towards the front of the boat, which meant she was closer to the lantern, but it also meant that Erik was behind her. In the darkness that spread across the lake, everything felt oddly still, and had it not been for the sound of the pole striking the stone bottom of the lake and the ripple of water, she could have almost believed that Erik had disappeared entirely. She dared not look back, not even if she had felt more steady - she feared glancing behind, looking and knowing how much darkness lay behind them, feared fully seeing just how much darkness pressed in on them from every side. She refused to look back, and instead kept her eyes on the lantern, staring at the little flame until the brightness of it made her eyes water and blink.

Erik watched her as he steered the gondola. The path, already so familiar to him, needed very little of his attention, and he found his mind beginning to wander.

Christine was going to be in his house. Christine. In his house.

This was bad, this was bad, this was bad, but still Erik continued to steer them ever closer to his home. He hadn’t planned this at all, but once he had blurted the idea out, there was certainly no turning back.

What would Christine look like in his home, he thought giddily. He collected a great many things that he enjoyed, and he wondered what it would be like to have her there in the midst of all his instruments and books and art. Would she fit right in, or would she seem out of place? She was no mere doll, of course - it would not do to forget that. But still. He wondered.

Just when Christine felt she couldn’t stand the silence any longer, she caught sight of the end of the lake and breathed a sigh of relief. Another bank was swiftly approaching, and she could almost make out the strangest sight just in the distance from the shoreline - an actual house.
Christine honestly didn’t know what she had been expecting, but despite his having called it a house, she certainly hadn’t been expecting an actual house so far underground.

He tied the boat to a ring in the stones of the dock, and Christine scrambled up from where she was sitting, causing the whole boat to rock back and forth just slightly. Erik stepped up with a more practiced, graceful manner, and he took the lantern with him before motioning for Christine to follow him.

Her eyes were constantly drawn back to the little house, which for all appearances seemed to truly be a normal little house like what one might find anywhere else. Their first stop, however, was not the house but something a mere dozen yards away from the house. True to his word he showed her where the tunnel with the rope was, and she examined it anxiously.

“Will you show me where the top is, too? Later, I mean.”

“Of course, if you wish.”

The rope looked sturdy enough, but it did little to ease her worries.

“Is it easy to steer the boat, Erik?” she surprised him by asking as they made their way to the house.

“Anything is easy if you do it enough, I suppose.”

“Do you think I could do it myself?”

“I can’t imagine why you’d want to, but I assume you could eventually get the hang of it,” he shrugged.

“But I suppose if you take the route with the rope, you leave the boat here by your house...”

He frowned. What was she getting at?

“Is something on your mind, Christine?”

“No,” she said quickly.

He was confused but left it at that.

As they approached the front door he fished a keyring out of his pocket and left the lantern by the doorstep, and Christine wondered what the other half dozen keys on it were for. He unlocked the front door before pausing and glancing behind at her.

“Christine,” he said carefully. “You know you can leave at any time, yes? Just say the word and I will take you back upstairs immediately, no questions asked, okay?”

“Okay,” she nodded.

He pushed the door open, holding it for her. She went inside, and he followed her, locking the door
behind him, hoping that she wouldn’t be frightened by all the turning deadbolts sealing her in the house with him. He turned and saw she was watching him, waiting for him to show her where to go past the little entryway. He took a deep breath, trying to straighten this jacket. She just kept staring at him with those trusting eyes, and truth be told he was quite flustered by it all. Now that he actually had her in his house, he didn’t know what to do with her.

“To the sitting room,” he said stupidly, and then he remembered that Christine had no idea where the sitting room was.

“Right,” he nodded as though a question had been asked, but one most certainly had not.

Feeling like the greatest boor who ever lived, he walked past her in the hopes that she would follow him. A glance behind told him that she was in fact following him, and he relaxed just a little.

Christine was surprised by the entryway, which had holes in the walls with wires sticking out of them. It looked rather like what some of the places in the opera house had looked like when they installed the new electric lights, and she wondered if Erik was outfitting his home in a similar fashion.

They passed a room that Christine only got a glimpse of, but her eyes widened at it. It was filled with all sorts of things, but in the middle on a large table looked to be a large dollhouse that was suspiciously similar to the opera house. Erik glanced back again, concerned when he saw Christine pause outside that doorway.

“What’s that?”

“Come along, Christine.”

She scurried to catch up with him. He led her into a room that had a fire going in the fireplace, a couch and various bookshelves full of titles that Christine longed to linger over and discover what her maestro liked to read about in his spare time. The walls that were not covered in bookshelves had a green striped wallpaper, and the room was lit with gas lamps.

But to one side of the room was a piano - and Christine stared at it, suddenly filled with nostalgia. The intricately carved spindly legs, the delicate inlay on the cover over the keys, the pale polished wood that seemed to shine - Christine had seen many pianos in her life, but this one looked just like one she’d thought she’d never see again.

Erik noticed her staring at it and it pulled his from his stupor of not knowing what to do. He waved her to the couch.

“Sit, sit, my dear - it’s been a long journey and you need your rest. Would you like me to play for you?”

“Oh, would you?” she sat down, placing Jammes’ slippers next to her, her eyes still on the replica of the piano from her childhood.

He sat at the piano bench with a flourish, lifting the cover off the keys and immediately jumping into playing. It was a cheery little song that Christine had heard many times before, but hearing it played by him was like hearing it in a way she’d never heard before. Halfway through he deviated from the original song, adding in his own changes to it, rearranging parts and making it come alive, adding depth to it in a way she didn’t know was possible.

He finished the song and paused afterwards, not sure if he was merely considering what to play next or if he was waiting to hear her opinion of it.
“It’s a lovely piano,” she said wistfully. “And you play it so wonderfully.”

Erik ducked his head, feeling unaccountably shy. He knew he was an expert at the piano, but hearing Christine say it made him feel bashful for some reason.

“My mother played the piano,” she said. “She had one just like that, with the carvings on the legs.”

She smiled a little at the memory, and Erik turned on the bench to face her.

“I’m sure she was quite excellent,” he offered.

“Oh, I suppose,” her smile faded, and she looked away. “I never even knew her, or got to hear her play. She died a few hours after I was born. Papa said she was a beautiful musician, though.”

Erik simply watched her, noticing the pained look on face, wondering if perhaps she ever blamed herself for her mother’s death in the same way he blamed himself for ruining his own mother’s life. It was a heavy burned for a young heart to bear, he knew.

“I’m very sorry, Christine.”

She blinked against the unwelcome sting in her eyes and tried - and mostly failed - to laugh.

“It’s alright,” she said. “You know- you know sometimes I really miss her, isn’t that silly? How can you miss someone you never even knew? I’m terribly silly, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t think you’re silly at all, Christine,” he said softly.

He longed to sit next to her and pull her into his lap, to wipe away every tear of hers and sing to her until she felt better, to press kisses to her forehead until her little smile returned, to murmur sweet words to her until she’d never call herself silly again, but instead he continued to sit on the bench, unmoving. He stilled himself with the image he often drew to mind nowadays, with the memory he’d call to mind whenever he needed to be grounded in reality before his thoughts got carried away - he brought to the front of his mind the all-too-painful time that her tears had been caused him, the time that she had run from him while shouting the declaration of her hatred towards him.

She hated him once. She might hate him again in the future. She might even still hate him now, in some secret part of her heart. She hated him, and he would not take her into his arms and give her all the more reason to hate him, no matter how tender the emotion behind it or how well intentioned his actions.

She rubbed at her eyes.

“Thank you,” she said, and she sounded like she meant it.

“What about you?” she blinked at him. “Do you have any family?”

He hesitated a moment.

“Not that I know of,” he frowned.

“Oh, I’m sorry-“

“No, it’s alright. My mother died some time ago, but by then I hadn’t seen her or spoken to her since I was quite a small boy. It- it was not a loss for me, when I learned of her passing.... Just as I am sure she felt that it was not a loss for her when she found I had left.”
Christine looked somber as she listened to him.

“Was she- was she cruel to you, then?” she asked quietly.

He sighed. Christine was a sweet girl, far too sweet to hear the reality of his childhood and how his mother had hated him despite how desperate he had been for her approval. He smiled sadly. It hadn’t been his intent to upset poor Christine, but it also was not his intent to lie to her.

“She was,” he agreed. “She was not a cruel woman, I do not think... But she was cruel to me. She was widowed young after an accident, and I was the only child she ever had - the only child I know of, that is. I left when I was still very young, and I do not know if she ever remarried after I was gone. Perhaps somewhere out there I have a half brother or sister... Perhaps they have also found someone to marry and have children with... There could be any number of nieces or nephews out there, I suppose, but I don’t know them, and they shall never know me, either.”

He paused a moment before adding, “And it is better that way, I think. If they never know.”

Christine bit her lip at how sad he sounded.

“I’m sorry that you feel that way,” she tried, searching for some words that might comfort or cheer him but coming up with nothing.

He shook his head.

“It doesn’t matter. She probably never married again, anyway. After me, life seemed to have stopped for her. She didn’t keep track of time anymore, or celebrate holidays. She used to have portraits done every season, but not- not after me. When I left, I hoped that my absence might change that, but... I am uncertain if it did.”

Her brow furrowed. He had said it twice now - when he left - and she still didn’t quite understand what he meant. Surely he didn’t- 

“Erik,” she asked in a small voice. “What do you mean when you say that? That you left?”

He waved a hand in a small flourish.

“I just... left.”

“You ran away?”

He nodded.

“Oh,” she sighed. “Well where did you go?”

His jaw tightened and turned away from her on the bench.

“I will tell you if truly wish it, Christine, but that is not a story I enjoy telling.”

“Oh!” she cried, realizing she was being rude. “I’m sorry, never mind then. I didn’t mean- I didn’t-“

“It’s alright, Christine,” he glanced back at her, his expression softening. “You’re a good girl, I know you didn’t mean any harm. Would you like to hear another song, my dear?”

“Yes, please,” she settled back on the couch and he immediately began what she certain was supposed to be a sweet sounding song, but after their conversation it was tinged with sadness.
She shifted a little on the couch. How she wished she could join him on the bench, put her arms around him and rest her head on his shoulder. A hug from a friend always made her feel better when she was sad, and she didn’t think she’d ever known anyone as sad as Erik. He was always so quick to say kind things to her, to tell her she was sweet and good and compliment her. But who had ever said such things to him? Had anyone ever told him he was good, or had he only been scolded as a child?

She hugged her knees close to her, watching his back as he played. She couldn’t imagine her life without her papa - she would have been lost without him. What kind of life had Erik known, on his own when he was still so young, all by himself in the entire world? No one to make sure he had a warm blanket when it snowed, no one to cook him soup when he was sick, no one to hold his hand when he was scared, no one to tell him stories before he fell asleep? Her poor heart couldn’t bear it. Poor Erik.

The song came to a finish and he sighed. The melody had been sad, too sad - he hadn’t meant to make it so, but he was certain that Christine could also tell that he had let his emotions seep into his playing. He turned to her suddenly.

“I have a picture of my mother, somewhere - would you like to see it?”

She nodded, uncurling her legs from under her.

“She lived in a rather rural little town, but she attracted the eye of a quite wealthy man, and as such she was able to afford to commission an artist to paint her quite often,” he explained as he rose from the bench and headed towards a closed door at one side of the room.

Erik opened the door and searched for a few minutes in the closet, and Christine could hear the sound of boxes being moved around. He emerged a moment later holding a small frame. He stared at it as he walked it over to Christine.

“My mother,” he said, holding it out to her as he sat on the other end of the couch.

Christine gasped at the delicately painted portrait of the young woman.

“She’s beautiful,” Christine breathed, then blushed a little as she began to notice that the woman in the painting actually looked rather like herself.

“She was,” Erik agreed.

“Is this really what she looked like?” Christine tore her eyes away from the image to look at Erik. “Are there any photographs of her?”

She knew that painters often took a bit of artistic license, or perhaps the subject would request to be portrayed a certain way with a flaw or two glossed over and hidden.

A smile played at Erik’s lips.

“You flatter me, my dear, but no - I’m afraid this was rather before photography was around. Erik is a bit on the older side, you see, and this was her last portrait, done a few months before I came along.”

She nodded gravely.

“But this is how I remember her looking,” he added.
He left out the part where her face had never worn this sweet, angelic smile when he was around as it did in the portrait, that she was still beautiful when he knew her but that her face had always been twisted into a scowl or etched with a frightened revulsion as she looked at him - a revulsion that, as a very small child, he had never quite realized was directed at and caused by him, not until he was a little older and understood that the monster in the mirror was his own face and then - then he understood, he understood and he had been crushed. He did not tell Christine all that.

“You can imagine her disappointment in me, then,” was all he said, softly.

Christine pursed her lips as she stared down at the young woman who looked so much like her, but was not her. Bright eyes and sparkling smile, wavy hair in cascading curls, finely embroidered dress. Christine remembered her own horror at first seeing Erik’s terrible face, and she tried to imagine that twisted flesh in infant form. She tried to imagine what it would be like to find she was expecting a child, to wait nine long months with a head full of hopes and dreams for that child, to know that her child would be the only piece of her departed husband she’d ever have, her only connection to her beloved, and then suffering through labor and finally, finally reaching for her baby from the midwife, and then-

That same horror she felt when she first saw him.

But Erik hadn’t asked to exist. He hadn’t asked to look as he did. Christine could understand disappointment, and even fear at first, but she couldn’t understand a mother not loving her child. Especially not over something like that. His mother hadn’t done anything that warranted or earned such beauty, just as baby Erik hadn’t done anything to deserve such a face. Fate was a mere coin toss, and it could be cruel at times, but that did not mean that the people affected by its cruelty had to also be cruel in return.

With that in mind, Christine thought that perhaps she had no right to judge her. Perhaps she didn’t know the extent of what it was like. As Erik had said, it was so long ago, in a little rural town, probably filled with superstition. What would it be like for a young widow to have a child like that? Was she shunned by the rest of the town? Did they whisper about her whenever she walked into a room? Had little Erik been seen as a portent of doom? Sitting here in comfort and safety, it was easy for Christine to say to herself that she would love her child even if it had a face like Erik’s, but if she were suddenly in his mother’s place and time, would she still find it so easy?

Her thoughts became distracted by the how and why of what would lead to the reality of her imagined scenario, and the only possible reason she would ever need to be truly concerned over having a child that looked like Erik was one that made her cheeks feel too warm.

She handed the painting back to him, smiling kindly and hoping that the images that were in her mind a mere second ago weren’t too clearly written on her face.

Erik’s heart skipped a beat to see her smiling at him. Ever since their long ago agreement to pretend that the things in the past had not happened, he was never quite certain if, in all the times she was so kind to him, she was pretending or not. Did she truly hold some sort of distant affection for him? Or was she merely being polite, the same way that she’d smile and say hello to a stranger on the street, only to have forgotten all about them as soon as they were out of view? He was deeply ashamed to admit that to him, it didn’t matter. He’d take whatever she saw fit to give him, fake smiles, feigned interest, politeness for politeness’s sake - and just like a beaten dog at her feet, he’d lap it up and beg for more.

“What was that room we passed before we came in here?” she suddenly asked, changing the subject.
“Ah, that. It is my work room.”

“What kind of work do you do?” she was curious.

He shrugged.

“All sorts. Just things, here and there. Would you like me to get you some tea? I’m afraid I’ve been a terrible host in not offering sooner,” he fretted, standing up.

“Tea would be lovely, thank you,” she replied.

He quickly left to prepare the tea, and Christine found herself alone.

work room

What a terribly vague answer he had given her. She was plagued with curiosity about it and all the things she’d glimpsed inside. Surely... surely she’d have time to sneak just another peek at it and then return here to the couch before he finished brewing the tea.

She tiptoed out of the room and down the hallway before creeping inside to get a closer look at that dollhouse she was wildly curious about.

It truly was a very large dollhouse, or what looked to be a dollhouse, at least - a scale replica of the Opera Populaire, and she marveled at the intricate detail. She carefully approached it and brought her face very close so that she could admire it. She let out a little gasp at what she found inside.

It truly must have been a dollhouse of sorts, because it had little dolls inside. Carefully carved figures were strategically placed inside - she could see little Andre and Firmin in the managers’ office, a miniature Madame Giry holding a letter behind the concierge desk, a tiny Carlotta painted with a scowling face was standing backstage, and in the audience - in Box Five, to be exact - was a small Erik, complete with miniature mask covering half of his otherwise brooding face. She grinned at how he watched the little stage, his bright eyes staring down, and she followed the doll’s gaze to the stage, only to gasp again.

It was her, a little Christine doll, her articulated joints allowing her arms to be lifted up and hands outstretched as though she were basking in the applause of a full house after a glorious performance.

Christine - the human Christine - had always wanted a dollhouse when she was a child, but due to how often she and her father moved, her having one had never been feasible. She had constructed one, once, of a small little crate that someone had tossed into the garbage, just a simple house with one room and three walls and a ceiling - but it had been far too small to fit the only doll she owned, so she simply had to pretend. It was still more of a house than she and her papa often lived in.

She leaned in closer to get a better look at the Christine doll. Her tiny doppelgänger had a radiant grin and a little wig of gloriously curly hair, her makeup was applied perfectly and she seemed to very nearly shimmer and glow. Christine had never seen a doll as fine as this - it was the most delicate and exquisite creation she had ever seen. Oh, was this how Erik saw her?

In the kitchen, Erik finished preparing two cups of tea - one with extra lemon - and took them back to room they had been in, which was now surprisingly devoid of Christine. He frowned at the stillness, stopped in the doorway. How the devil could he have lost her already? He quickly left and began to search for her. Had she tried to flee him? Was she trying to escape? His heart ached at the thought. Hadn’t he told her that he’d take back up whenever she wanted? She didn’t need to run from him like that.
She examined the finely stitched dress the doll was wearing. It didn’t seem to be a costume she had ever seen before, and it was most certainly not a dress she owned in real life. The skirt had layers and layers and the bodice was cut with fluted ruffles and there was the most delicate lace at the sleeves. If Christine didn’t know any better, she’d say the dress almost looked like a wedding dress...

She squinted her eyes, trying to make out if the little doll version of her was wearing a ring or not, but before she could tell if her other self was truly married (to whom? How absurd) a soft noise in the doorway drew her attention. Erik stood there staring at her, holding a teacup in either hand, bemused.

“Your dollhouse is magnificent,” she whispered with awe and envy.

“It’s not a dollhouse, Christine,” he sounded terribly put out. “It’s an architectural model.”

He entered the room and set the tea cups on a table before showing her how the model opened up, giving view to each new slice as another part was pulled to the side.

She watched with unbridled wonder as he showed it off, a work of spectacular genius, in her mind. The retort that had been on the tip of her tongue - *if it’s not a dollhouse why are there dolls in it* - died as she took in all the myriad details.

“How did you ever find such a thing, Erik?”

He glanced at her.

“Find it? I made it.”

“Made it? All by yourself? Whatever for?”

“It’s an architectural model, as I said. It was to show what the opera house would look like after it was completed - a way to convince those with the funding that all their money would be worth it.”

Christine stared at it a while longer.

“Did you get it from the architect who built the opera house?”

He turned to her, eyebrow raised.

“I *am* the architect who built the opera house.”

Her eyes widened.

“Oh,” she breathed. “I had no idea.”

A thought suddenly occurred to her, and she played with her fingers nervously.

“Were- were you very young when you started building it?” she asked shyly.

Construction on the Opera Populaire had started twenty or so years ago, she knew - what she didn’t know was how long it might take one to become good enough of an architect to construct such a building.

He frowned. He realized she was hinting at wanting to know how old he was, but even he didn’t know that.
“A little older than you, I’m sure... I couldn’t have been out of my twenties, I don’t think.”

She nodded slowly.

“I see,” was all she said.

Erik was glad that her questions were focused on anything other than the doll he’d created of her - a doll he’d certainly never intended her to see, especially not in that dress. Perhaps she hadn’t noticed. He turned the model building about until the scene with the Christine doll in the wedding dress he had designed was safely out of her view. Her attention was now drawn to all the various items on the room instead of the dolls, and he was grateful - until he wasn’t.

In his haze of unthinkingness, he had forgotten that his house was in no way prepared for visitors of any kind. As such, there were numerous things lying about that he would have otherwise packed away before Christine could catch sight of them.

She was staring at the marble bust in the corner, but it wasn’t the carved figure that caught her eye, no - it was the wig placed over it that made her curious as she looked at it. It looked practically exactly like Erik’s hair, and she knew she shouldn’t stare, but she simply couldn’t help how her eyes slid over to Erik and settled on his hair. His face was blank but his shoulders were stiff, and she looked back at the wig - the spare wig, that is, and she had a realization.

“Oh,” she said it so quietly she didn’t even know she said it out loud.

Why did he wear a wig? She thought of why he wore the mask, and her mind suddenly shied away from the thought of what might be under the wig and tried to think of other things. She didn’t need to know what was under the wig.

She turned to take her teacup off of the table and inhaled the steam coming off of it.

“This smells wonderful, Erik. Thank you for making it.”

His shoulders relaxed.

“You are quite welcome, my dear. Come, let’s take a look at those slippers that belong to your little friend.”

Chapter End Notes

Erik, probably: THEY AREN’T DOLLS, CHRISTINE - THEY’RE ACTION FIGURES
Chapter 25

He rustled through a drawer in the work room and pulled out a small container, taking it with him as he walked Christine back to the sitting room with their tea.

She sat down on the couch again, sipping at her drink, and Erik examined the ballet slippers.

“I have special solvent that will get stains like this out, I’ll be right back,” he told her.

She nodded and picked up one of the shoes. The little container he had placed on the couch contained all kinds of threads and various sizes of needles, and she found some suited to the work that needed to be done. She hummed a little to herself as she threaded the needle and began to repair the stitches around the edge of the shoe.

It was that scene that Erik walked in upon, his breath catching in his throat.

Christine, sitting on his couch, her cup of tea cooling on the table next to her, consumed in her domestic task, humming the very song he had played for her just earlier.

How right she looked there in his sitting room, as though it were her room too.

He had worked so hard to make his house a home for him, and though it felt comfortable and he enjoyed it, he realized that none of his own efforts could ever compare to the simple act of having Christine there with him. Christine in his house made it a home far more than anything else could.

His hand squeezed tight around the glass bottle of cleaner, his feet unwilling to take another step.

How right she looked there in the little house that could be her home as well. How wrong it felt to trap her underground, a sweet little bird in a grim stone cage.

He forced his feet forward and sat on the couch with her. If he was a little closer to her than he was the previous time, she didn’t notice, or at least she didn’t comment on it.

He unstoppered the bottle and poured a little of the liquid onto a small towel before rubbing it over the stains on the slipper, and Christine watched with interest as it bubbled and fizzed.

A grin came across her face as Erik continued to clean the slipper, and he couldn’t help but notice.

“What’s so funny?” he asked, frowning.

Christine stifled a giggle.

“Jammes is terrified of you, you know - there are certain hallways she refuses to down because she thinks the Opera Ghost will get her.”

“Hmph.”

“So I was just thinking of the look on her face if she ever knew who it was who helped to fix her shoes,” her smile widened.

His frown deepened.

“Perhaps she should have taken better care of them, then,” he grumbled, and Christine laughed.
“Thank you, though, Erik - those stains would have been terribly difficult for me to get out,” her lips quirked. “Perhaps a note from the Ghost would convince her to not wear them outside anymore.”

“You shouldn’t tease, Christine,” he said dryly. “Especially when you know that it’s within the realm of possibility that I just might do that very thing.”

They worked in silence for a little while, exchanging the shoes once they were each finished with the one they were holding.

“Did you build your house yourself?”

He nodded.

“I did, for the most part. Although it’s not really finished, not truly - there are always improvements to be made, you know.”

“Like the lights?” she ventured, and he paused.

“You’re a very attentive one - yes, like the lights. I’m in the process of switching over to electric. The kitchen is already finished, and the entryway is next. Eventually I’ll probably switch every room over to electric.”

“Why did you stop being an architect?” she finally posed the question that had been eating at her ever since learning he had designed the opera house.

He continued to scrub at the slipper as though he hadn’t heard her, though she knew that he had by the tightness in his jaw. He was silent for so long that she began to think he wasn’t going to answer at all.

“I got tired,” he said after a while. “Tired of dealing with people, tired of the stares, of the questions. Just... tired. Of everything. I had decided that the Opera Populaire would be my last work, so I included a small area that I could live in, and I fully intended to simply disappear, become a ghost. And for so long I did,” he dared a glance at her, then added softly. “Until you.”

She was staring intently at her work, at the little shining silver needle darting though the pink silk, but Erik knew she was listening closely.

“I hadn’t realized, I suppose, how lonely solitude could become,” he continued. “Even though it was what I had constantly wished for when I was younger - to be left alone.”

“Do you ever think about going back to it? To architecture?”

“Not really,” he admitted. “I haven’t had reason to, I suppose.”

He hesitated a moment, weighing the wisdom of continuing.

“Sometimes,” he said haltingly. “Sometimes I think about designing a house to live in somewhere up there, in the countryside, perhaps. And I think that if I did, maybe I would do architectural designs again so I would have an honest income.”

He suddenly fell silent, not telling her the part of the daydream where he lived above and out in the world because he had a wife, a pretty little wife who needed sunshine and fresh air and a husband who didn’t live in a sewer.
“But there’s no point to doing that, not really,” was all he said to conclude it.

And really, without a wife, there was little point to the whole idea. It had been something that would float through his head once every few months, but it had been appearing to him with increasing frequency once he had realized his feelings towards Christine. But she would never be his wife, so they would never have need of a house to live together in, so there was no point - even though he had already drawn up a design for a house he thought would please her.

“You still could,” Christine insisted. “There’s plenty of point. There’s nothing keeping you here underground - you could move anywhere you wanted to.”

He smiled a little. His poor, naive Christine.

“Of course there’s something keeping me here,” he teased her gently. “Who else would train your voice, my dear, if Erik was traipsing about in the forest and drawing blueprints?”

Christine narrowed her eyes at him, but she was smiling.

She was about to retort that she could easily visit him in the forest to still take her lessons, when he pulled out his pocket watch with a look of near panic on his face - his own words had suddenly reminded him of why, exactly, Christine was even in his home in the first place.

“Christine!” he cried, looking at the time. “Your lesson!”

He held the watch out for her to look at. The shoes had taken longer than either of them had realized.

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry to have imposed on you so long, Erik-“ she began.

She didn’t have the faintest clue what else he would have been doing with his day, but she wasn’t so presumptuous as to assume it would revolve around her, or could simply be put on hold because she wished it.

“No, no, my dear, I am sorry for keeping you so long. You only wanted to do your lesson,” he said mournfully.

She had only wanted to learn the new songs, and instead he had spirited her away to his underground lair and made her listen to his music and his pathetic stories, showing her a portrait of his mother as though she cared about those kinds of things. He was an old fool.

Her brow furrowed.

“Can we still do the lesson? Maybe just a short one, if you still have time?” she asked, concerned. “I understand if you don’t, though - have time, that is.”

Erik stood and walked over to a bookshelf, placing the bottle of solvent on one of the shelves.

“We can do as long of a lesson as you’d like, Christine,” he murmured, still not facing her. “Provided you don’t mind tarrying so long in the house of a monster.”

A look of hurt flashed across her face, but he didn’t see it. She looked down at the newly repaired and clean pointe shoe in her hands and frowned. Why did he have to talk about himself like that?

“No,” she said in a small voice, fiddling with the shoe. “I don’t mind staying so long, because I don’t think I’m in a monster’s house.”
He turned to rebuff her thoughts, but as soon as she caught his eye, she smiled weakly and added, "I don’t think a monster could choose such tasteful wallpaper."

Her comment threw off his train of thought, and he glanced at the wallpaper in surprise. She laughed a little at that, but Erik noticed her eyes still looked sad. Perhaps, he thought, perhaps her denial of the truth was what she needed to continue her lessons, a way to rationalize it. She couldn’t truly believe her own words, could she?

Still, he nodded a little and found the space on the shelves that held some of his sheet music. He pulled out a particular book of music, and flipped through the pages, handing her some.

"These are the songs that would be yours, if you get the part," he told her.

She looked them over with great interest, and when she had seen all of them she handed them back to him and stood, smoothing out her skirt.

"Will you play them for me? So I can hear them and get a better feel."

"Of course."

They ended up going through each song twice, once with Erik playing and singing so she could know what they were supposed to sound like (she was terribly glad that his back was to her, so he couldn’t see how hard she had to bite her lip to stifle her giggles at how odd it sounded to hear him sing such feminine lyrics - perhaps it wouldn’t have been so strange had he not chosen to sing several octaves higher than his normal voice. She hadn’t been expecting it, and had nearly burst into laughter when he started), and then he played it again and she tried to sing it as best she could.

Erik offered little critique during the lesson, instead letting her simply get used to the new songs. There would be time for memorization and perfection later. They discussed the role for a little while, and after what turned out to be a lesson of typical length, Christine gathered her shawl and Jammes' slippers as he prepared to take her back above once more.

It was as they were about to walk out the door that suddenly Christine's stomach growled. Erik paused, and she looked away in mortification.

"Christine," he chided. "When was the last time you ate?"

Her face turned red.

"Dinner last night, I suppose," she mumbled.

He closed the door and locked it again, pointing her in the direction of the kitchen.

"That won't do at all, Christine. Let's get you something to eat right now."

She followed him back to his kitchen. Had she known, at the time, to turn his own question back on him, she would have found that he hadn't eaten in three days, but she had no way of knowing such a thing. He felt just fine on that amount of food, but he simply would not stand for poor Christine to go hungry - she must eat.

He gestured to a tall chair on the other side of the counter in the kitchen, and began digging around in the pantry. She sat and waited for him.

"Why did you skip breakfast, my dear?" he asked gently.
Was she not able to afford enough food? He would see to that. Was she concerned with her appearance and on a diet, as so many of the other ballet rats were? He would have strong words with whoever made her feel that way. Was she ill? He could make a great many potions and and cures - he could heal her, and if not, he could fund a visit to a real doctor and pay for her treatment there.

"I just didn't have time, really," she shrugged a little.

"What do you mean? You had all morning."

"Well... I didn't sleep too well last night, so I wasn't able to get up very early. Then I had ballet practice right after I woke up, and I had to change out of my leotard before our lesson, and then Jammes-" she shrugged again.

"Why didn't you sleep well?"

"The other girls in the dormitory can be so loud," she sighed. "And sometimes my bed just isn't very comfortable. I suppose I don't often get a good night's sleep, really. I have a lot on my mind, typically."

"You are running yourself quite ragged, sweet," he frowned as he placed a plate of bread and cheese and salted meat in front of her.

He watched as she ate the food, and a thought occurred to him. He didn't like it, but he felt it had to be said.

"Perhaps we should cut back on your lessons."

"Oh, Erik, no! No, I don't want to do that!" she cried.

"But you need your rest, Christine, and you can't skip meals like that. It's not good for your health, and if you aren't healthy you won't be able to reach your full potential with your voice."

"I'm fine, Erik! Just- just a little tired is all," she pouted.

He shook his head.

"I'm not taking any chances, Christine."

She picked at her bread, rolling tiny pieces into little balls before putting them in her mouth.

"But I'll miss you," she finally mumbled, casting a doleful look at him.

He furrowed his brow. His heart sped up at those words, but he knew she only mean that she would miss his instruction, not him.

"It's not forever, you know. We'll aim to meet three times a week, not five like we have been."

"Four times," she protested.

"Christine," he huffed. "I am not negotiating with you on this."

"Four," she pleaded with him.

He rolled his eyes and turned away.
"Please, Erik - four times a week and I promise I'll make time for food and sleep and everything else - and if I don't, if I can't fit it all in, then we can do three times a week. Please."

He sighed heavily but relented. It was a heady thing, to be wanted. He was unused to it.

"Four times," he nodded. "But you must take care of yourself. If you are not averse to it, I would think we should continue your lessons here, for the most part - it offers much more privacy. Especially now that Jammes might be listening."

She nodded eagerly.

"But," he continued. "there will be days where a lesson can only be accommodated upstairs - you might not alway have time for the trip here, or you might not feel up to so much travel. We will decide as we go, yes?"

Christine beamed at him, and he found himself returning the smile as well, despite his better judgment. It felt like he had lost, in a way - but could he ever really lose when he was still spending the majority of the days of week with her?

Still, he felt guilty that he hadn't taken her needs into account before this. It was practically his own fault that she had skipped breakfast - everyone in the opera house was so demanding, the ballet mistress, the managers, the directors, everyone wanting the performers to give their best without any thought for the rest of the numerous people also demanding their best, and he had been no better. He must do better in the future, must make certain he was not asking too much of her and that she was doing well.

For her part, Christine was oddly happy. She felt so strangely at home in the little house by the underground lake, something she hadn't been expecting at all. It was almost cozy, really, and she was pleased that she'd get to spend more time in it. She was also pleased she’d still be spending time around him. It was an unlikely friendship, perhaps, but she truly did enjoy his company.

There were times, when they were together, that she managed to forget he was a genius and he was simply her friend - it was impossible to forget his genius when they were in a lesson, of course, but when they were simply talking over a plate of snacks and a cup of tea, it felt so natural and normal. There were times when she even managed to forget his mask.

She’d think sometimes on the Persian’s words to her, so long ago. Erik was a humorous man, and very kind to her. He could hold a conversation well, most of the time, though he did have a few odd habits. She often wondered what he would have been like had he had the chance to live normally - without years of solitude and torture and anguish. If he was this warm and sweet with her after all that he had been through, what would he have been like had he grown up surrounded by friends and family, well cared for and loved?

So they began to have their lessons at his house, not always, but at least twice every week. When their lessons were upstairs, every noise made them jump and pause, afraid that they had been found out. How much easier it was to simply disappear for a handful of hours when they had the chance, to not have to worry about anyone or anything else in the world, to sit on his couch and rest her feet (he would insist, even though she rarely felt tired from the walk), or to sit in the kitchen as he prepared food for her, to listen to him play his compositions for her - much easier, indeed. Much more enjoyable.

Even the trips through the tunnels were becoming enjoyable, swiftly transforming from something silent and ominous to another chance to talk with Erik, the light of the lantern almost cheery and the drip of the water almost relaxing. Almost.
Things settled into a comfortable routine, and she always looked forward to the times she could spend in his house (and with him) - in fact, she nearly looked forward to it almost as much as he did, though of course neither one knew this.

Things were going well, until one day they weren’t.
Chapter 26

It was destined to happen, really - for as well as they got along, they both had quite strong wills and a fiery passion in the soul, both quite stubborn.

It had started during one of her trips with him in the tunnels when Erik had asked her how her day was going, and she began to tell him about the morning she had spent with Meg and Colette.

“Oh!” she said suddenly. “That reminds me, I forgot to tell you - Raoul is coming back.”

Erik nodded absentmindedly.

“I’m afraid that means I’m not going to have much time to do lessons this coming week - I’m not going to have any time for lessons, actually.”

“What?” he was now paying sharp attention.

“Well, I want to spend as much time with him as I can while he’s here - it’s only for the week, Erik.”

Erik’s mind was reeling. Who the devil was Raoul? She had mentioned the fellow before, he was sure, but he never considered him in the light he was now viewing the matter. He was some street urchin, probably, scraping together enough pocket change to buy an opera ticket so he could gawk at Christine up on the stage. She shouldn’t be hanging around boys, that was a distraction and she needed no distractions while she was training her voice. It simply wouldn’t do, and it most certainly had nothing to do with the fact that Erik preferred to keep her all to himself (how could he pretend that he was anything more to her than a stuffy old tutor if she was courting some boy? How could she ever possibly enjoy his company once she had a true man to compare him against?).

“I don’t think you should, Christine.”

She frowned.

“I think I should,” she retorted. “He’s a dear friend of mine, and he’s so often in faraway lands. I barely ever get to see him. I don’t think a week off will make much difference for my voice.”

*a dear friend of hers*

He swallowed hard. The stakes were suddenly higher.

“But I am your teacher,” he stubbornly reminded her. “I know what’s best for your voice.”

She turned an incredulous eye towards him.

“Goodness, Erik - what’s going to happen to my voice in a week’s time? Is it going to dissolve into nothing? Is my throat suddenly going to cease to produce sound? All because of a week of no practice? Not even a week! We only meet four days out of the week as it is - this is *four days off* that I’m talking about!” she threw up her hands.

He was losing her, and it terrified him. She wasn’t his, he knew that, but he had assumed she would be around him a while longer still - but if this boy, this Raoul were to enter the picture, he’d surely steal her away from the stage - and from Erik. He shouldn’t press the issue, he knew that too, but his mind was flooding with panic and it was overriding his common sense.
“You’ll have two days off, and that’s final. That’s very generous, I think, considering you shouldn’t be going out at all.”

He regretted the words as soon as they were out, but there was no taking them back, no way for his mind to deescalate what was happening.

“What is that supposed to mean, I shouldn’t be going out at all?” she stopped short. They had reached the bank of the lake, but she refused to step down into the boat as Erik did.

“You’ve never cared that I went out with friends before,” she continued. “It’s never been a problem before now.”

“It’s different now,” he hated the petulant tone to his voice, but he couldn’t stop it.

She stared down at him, bewildered, as he stood in the boat with his hands tightly wrapped around the gondoliers pole.

“Different?” she parroted, then hesitated and softened her voice. “Erik, if you have a good reason why I shouldn’t go with Raoul, please tell me.”

He resolutely refused to look at her, and remained silent.

She placed her hands on her hips.

“Is there a reason or isn’t there?”

There was a reason, but definitely not one he could tell her, and he hated that he had brought it up, hated that he had reason to bring it up, and most of all hated Raoul for daring to exist on the same earth as Christine.

“Get in the boat, Christine,” the words echoed off the stone walls, the tone of them sounding more demanding than he knew he ever had a right to take with her.

Her eyes widened and she dropped her hands to hang limply by her sides.

“Erik, I’ll listen to you if you have a good reason, but if not then I’m going to spend my week with Raoul.”

“I won’t have you gallivanting about with some boy,” he spit the words out.

“Galliva- Erik what on earth has gotten into you?” she took a step backwards.

He ran a hand over his face a gave a short, sharp sigh.

“We will discuss later, Christine. Now get in the boat so we can do your lesson.”

“No.”

“No?” he finally looked at her.

Her mouth was set firmly, her hands balled into fists, and she looked angry enough to make Erik realize that he was treading on thin ice.

“No, I’m not getting in the boat,” she raised her voice. “I’m not doing any lessons next week and I’m not doing a lesson today, either!”
She turned on her heel and stormed off, down the tunnel they had just come from.

Erik stood dumbstruck as he watched her leave. What had just happened? Any minute now, any minute she would return and they would go to his house and everything would be normal again. She’d agree that he was right and Raoul wouldn’t even factor into next week. She would return him any minute now... wouldn’t she?

Seconds ticked by.

“Christine!” he called out, but there was no answer.

Panic ripped through his chest and he felt like he could no longer breathe. What had he done? In his fear of losing her to the boy’s charms, he had driven her away, and now he really had lost her. What a wretch he was, to treat her like that and demand things of her. The tunnels weren’t safe - he had boobytrapped them in places - she was going to get hurt! And when she did get hurt, it would be all his fault, all because he had behaved an unmannered, jealous boor.

He scrambled to grab the lantern from the front of the boat and step back up into the shore, and then he chased after her.

“Christine!”

She heard his voice ring out distantly behind her, and she broke into a run. She wished the tunnels weren’t so awfully dark, but there was no way she was going to turn around and ask for his help or go back on her word of not having a lesson. Why couldn’t he have just listened to her? Why did he have to act like that? It had been so unlike him.

She slowed her pace to a fast walk, a little uncertain of what exactly lay ahead in the tunnels since she was unable to see. Soon she could hear the sound of Erik’s footfalls echoing down the tunnel - it sounded like he was running, and she still kept forging ahead but she was too afraid the dark to run again.

The light of the lantern eventually reached her as he caught up. She had gotten farther than he would have thought, pushing ahead with her chin tilted up defiantly and her shoulders stiff and one hand trailing across the wall so she wouldn’t lose her way.

He ceased running and slowed until he was walking right next to her. He looked her up and down in the lantern light, but she seemed to be unharmed. Very angry, but unharmed. He said nothing, continuing to walk beside her and look at her worriedly.

She shot a harsh glance or two at him, never slowing past her fast walk.

“Are you here to drag me back to your house and make me sing even though I don’t wish to?” she asked hotly.

He flinched.

“No. I am here to escort you back upstairs, since that is where you wish to be.”

They went on in silence for a moment longer. She was grateful for the light, but she couldn’t bring herself to thank him.

It was their first true fight since the one that had ended so badly. She hated it, and hoped that it wasn’t a sign of things to come.
“Forgive me, Christine,” he said finally and lowered his eyes. “I should not have spoken to you like that.”

“That’s right, you shouldn’t have,” she retorted.

He fiddled with the lantern uncomfortably, uncertain of if this was, perhaps, the last time they would be walking through the tunnels together.

“You aren’t my keeper, Erik,” she continued, glancing at him again. “I am my own mistress - no one decides my actions but me. If I wish to take time off, I shall. And how I spend that time is up to me and me alone.”

He nodded.

“I don’t need someone to tell me what to do or who I can see or where I can go. Not you, not anyone. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t so again in the future.”

He stifled a sigh of relief at her words of the future.

“Of course, Christine. I forgot myself. I won’t do it again.”

She gave a little nod.

“See that you don’t,” her tone was anything but harsh, but the words still struck him to his core.

He dared a glance at her, and found she was looking him without any of her previous anger, with what he almost might call fondness, and he realized then and there that if he ever did lose her, if they ever were to part on bad terms, it wouldn’t be because of the boy or anyone or anything else - it would be because he himself had driven her away. He would have to be vigilant, then, that he didn’t have any outbursts that might upset her into leaving.

“You know that I’ve always taken your advice into consideration and you know that I try my best to follow your direction as my tutor, but - it’s important to me, Erik, that I’m the only one who gets to decide the course of my life,” she said softly. “There’s enough people out there - enough men - who would seek to decide my life for me, or to control my actions, or remind me of what they think my place is, and I don’t want you to be one of them.”

His brow furrowed, considering her words.

“What men?” he asked suddenly.

He would have words with these men, and he would bring his Punjab Lasso, as well. Just in case.

She sighed.

“I didn’t mean it like that. But, well - I’m often told that men wouldn’t want a performer for a wife. As if I’d care so much about being someone’s wife! But it’s difficult, you know - everyone has an opinion on how a girl should live nowadays, and they aren’t shy to speak up when you step outside what they think is proper. Being a singer, it seems, is not very proper after all. And if they aren’t giving advice, they’re making assumptions about what one might be doing, as if it were any of their business in the first place! It’s just - it’s stifling, Erik,” she explained. “And you’ve never been stifling to me before, and I’d be terribly disappointed if you were to start. I don’t need you to fully understand my reasons or my point of view on this, but I do need you to accept that that’s how it is for me and I need you to support my decisions.”
Erik listened to her as she told him all this. He had never really given much thought to how Christine was treated outside the opera house - he had, perhaps foolishly, assumed that for the most part her life would be easy. Easy to deal with people, easy to get along with others, just... Easy. She certainly didn’t face the kinds of difficulties he would face out there - but perhaps she faced a good deal of difficulties anyway. He had a lot to think about, now. Erik knew all too well what it was like to have one’s life controlled, to have to no say in the plotting of his future - his childhood in the circus and then as a young man in the service of the Sultana had seen to that, and he would never forget that oppressive feeling. Did Christine feel controlled like that? By society? By him, now? He hadn’t meant to make her feel like that. She didn’t deserve it. She had always seemed so strong in her convictions about how she lived her life, so happy with her choices, that he had never stopped to think that she might be troubled by the expectations of others even as she defied them.

“I will try to keep that in mind, Christine,” he said quietly.

They reached the mirror in her dressing room and Erik undid the latch for her, rolling it back. He tried to hide the sadness he felt deep in his soul - if he hadn’t let his jealous fear get the best of him, hadn’t snapped at her and tried to order her about, they could have been down in his home having tea at this very moment. It hurt, but it was his own fault.

She stepped down into her dressing room and smoothed out her skirt before turning to look up at him. He struggled to find words to speak.

“Enjoy your week with the boy, my dear,” he said gently. “I’ll see you the Tuesday after next, for our lesson?”

She smiled.

“Thank you, Erik,” she said sincerely. “I’ll see you then.”

He gripped the side of the mirror’s frame as he watched her leave her dressing room. He had learned an important lesson in dealing with Christine Daaé, but he wished terribly that the last moments they had together before she took her leave of him had been more pleasant. He didn’t think they had been apart this long since she had fled the opera house after he had revealed himself to her. He was going to miss her so much, even though he knew she would be returning. He stared after the closed door and sighed before turning and locking the mirror once more, returning alone to his silent, empty little house by the lake.

Christine walked down the hallways of the opera house, a little at a loss of what to do. She had already set aside several hours to spend with Erik, but suddenly she found those hours were freed up for other use. Perhaps she shouldn’t have stormed off so and canceled their lesson, but she hadn’t known how to impress upon him how serious she was about it otherwise. She was pleased, though, that he had seemed to understand, even giving her his approval before they had parted (though, of course, she had fully intended to spend her week with Raoul regardless of if he had approved or not).

She wished, of course, that she had been able to give him advance warning - maybe he would have taken it better had he been eased into the idea that she would be taking time off - but the truth of the matter was that she herself hadn’t even found out that Raoul was returning until she had received his letter the previous day. She surely would have told Erik sooner had she known sooner.

Still, she was rather irked at how he had responded at first. She wondered, for a moment, what she would have done had he insisted and stood his ground on thinking that she ‘shouldn’t be going out at all’. Would she have ceased lessons with him altogether, if that had been the case? It made her a little sad to think it, but she felt she would have. She valued her freedom too much to barter it away
like that, tempting though it would be. What use would it be to sing like the most beautiful of birds if she was also in a cage? She was terribly glad that he had relented on the matter, and she dearly hoped he wouldn’t do it again. It wasn’t just about better learning how to use her voice that made her glad she could continue with him - she was glad that she would still be able to keep his company, too. She would miss him if she was no longer doing lessons. But - she would miss him and be free, that much she was certain about. Painful though it would be, she didn’t want to trade her freedom for anything. She would find a way to achieve her goals with or without him.

She pushed such dreary thoughts from her mind and decided to take a walk by the Seine.

Erik, meanwhile was taking a walk by the bank of the underground lake - or rather, he was pacing near the lake, his mind consumed with replaying what had happened earlier.

Christine was not like the other opera divas, she was not a girl prone to fits of fancy or storming off, theatrics or dramatics - and that’s what so unsettled him about what had happened. When she had turned around and left, she wasn’t just pulling an act. She had been serious.

His deceit had not driven away. His face had not succeeded in driving her away. No, she had still returned to him after all those things. But this - this was what would cause her to leave him. He swallowed hard.

He had assumed, he supposed, that she would simply listen to him, that she would take him at his word and follow what he told her. He was, after all, her teacher, and she had always listened to him in the past.

For a brief moment he wanted to blame her seeming sudden rebellion on that boy’s influence, but his rational mind told him that he had, in fact, overstepped his bounds.

He sighed.

It was the off-season at the opera, and although the ballet rats still had to practice (Christine included), there were no upcoming performances or rehearsals, so Christine had been right in saying that a mere week off would not be too harmful, and they both knew it. With his lack of any proper reasoning, of course he had overstepped his boundaries with her, just the same as if he had sought to control any other facet of her personal life that didn’t relate to singing - it simply wasn’t his place.

But even still the panic would come back at intervals, bubbling up in his chest until he thought he couldn’t stand it.

He stared miserably out across the dark water. He was losing her.

He thought, briefly, of asking the Daroga for advice on it all, but quickly dismissed the idea. The Daroga was a meddling old fool, even if he did give good advice... sometimes. He could just picture how it would go - Erik would spill his heart out to him and he’d probably sit and nod serenely like an idiot, pretending to be sage and wise and then he’d say something that had no practical use at all, not at all what Erik was looking for. He still remembered one time in Persia when the great loon had stood there on a balcony with him, looking out across the sea of sand to the horizon where the sun was setting, and how the Daroga had started to wax poetic about the nature of love - how it was like a flower in the field that you had to admire from afar, how if you attempted to possess it for yourself it would wither and wilt like a cut flower in a vase - and Erik had truly thought the man had lost it. (What use did Erik have for love?) At least the Daroga had probably thought it was poetic - Erik had thought it was a great load of bunk at the time.
He scrambled to his feet. That was it! Flowers! Women loved flowers, that was the general consensus on the matter. He would give her flowers.

He had already apologized, yes, but he was still haunted by the thought that perhaps he had planted the seed of discontent in her - or perhaps she had been wavering for a long time about whether or not to leave him, and now he had helped her to make up her mind. What if- What if she didn’t even come back after the week with Raoul? What if she and he ran off and got married and she just didn’t return at all?

He clutched the wall of the tunnels while the world spun nauseatingly around him.

No, no - she couldn’t leave him like that - it couldn’t end like that!

He took a tremulous breath, trying to calm the racing of his heart.

A voice in his head screamed at him to follow her, to see where she was going and what she was doing - if he shadowed her during her week off, he’d surely know for certain if she was planning to leave him, and he could find a way to stop her.

But no - no, he couldn’t do that, he realized. He couldn’t stop her from leaving without making her his prisoner, and how could he do that to her? She truly would hate him, then. He would hate himself if he did that to her - if he trapped her underground, he’d never see her little smile anymore, her pretty hair would grow dull and her complexion pale, she’d waste away into nothing, nothing but hate and spite and bitterness. He couldn’t do that to his poor Christine. He would just have to trust her, difficult though it would be - trust that she would return, and if she didn’t- well, he would just have to trust that she knew what was best for her, and didn’t he want what was best for her? And how could he have thought he was what was best for her?

He pushed off of the wall, sniffing a bit. A week without Christine. It seemed so long already, but not as long as a lifetime without her would feel.
Chapter 27

Madame Giry didn’t even notice the envelope that was in the stack with all the others, never gave a second thought to where it might have come from or if the handwriting looked dreadfully familiar.

She glanced at it - it was addressed to Christine.

It wasn’t so unusual, Christine often got letters. She set it aside and continued sorting through the mail. The task of delivering that particular letter was assigned to her daughter, who held it one hand and knocked on Christine’s dormitory door with the other.

“Christine! You got another letter!”

Christine quickly opened her door, interrupting her preparations for her day with Raoul.

“From who?”

Meg shrugged.

“Doesn’t say. I bet it’s from your Vicomte, though. I bet it’s a marriage proposal!” she teased.

Christine wrinkled her nose, but took the letter. Her heart skipped a beat as she looked at it - she recognized the handwriting.

“It’s not Raoul’s handwriting,” she told Meg. “It’s probably a fan letter... or a bill.”

“It’s always bills and never marriage proposals,” Meg sighed, before eyeing Christine’s hair. “Are you wearing your hair up today?”

She nodded.

“We’re going to be seeing Philippe, so yes. I thought it was more... refined,” she patted her hair nervously.

“Well I think it looks lovely. Finish getting ready, and I’ll see you later, okay?”

Meg took her leave and Christine had barely closed her door before she was quickly opening the envelope.

“Please look in your dressing room before you leave, if you have a moment to spare”

She raised an eyebrow, her curiosity piqued. She finished pinning up her hair before going to look in her dressing room, wondering what he could have left there.

She cautiously opened the door and peeked inside before going in. The room looked the same as always, but the vase she kept on her vanity was now filled with white roses, and in between the blooms was a little card folded in half. She plucked it out and opened it, noticing that none of the roses had any thorns.

There, in that elegant scrawl she knew so well, were two words - simple words, but words that meant the world to her, and she put her hand over her heart as she read them.

I’m sorry
Was he still worried over it? Was he still thinking about what she had told him?

She bit her lip and looked back at the mirror, wondering if he was behind it. She had no way of knowing that he was currently in his home, sitting before his organ as he had been ever since finishing the delivery of the roses and trying to composing something, anything, to take his mind off the boy.

She tucked the note into her pocket and took the vase of roses with her back to her bedroom, placing it on her nightstand. She wouldn’t be in her dressing room very much at all the coming week, but in her bedroom she’d see them every night. She lingered over them a moment longer before finishing dressing to meet Raoul.

A mere hour later she stood nervously at the train station. She glanced about at all the people there, some waiting like she was, some hurrying by.

Raoul’s train arrived with a hiss and clatter and he was one of the first to come rushing out.

She couldn’t help but smile at the determined look on his face as he scanned the station, looking for her. She raised a hand up and waved. He quickly spotted her, a grin breaking out across that face she had missed so much.

He made his way over to her, pushing past the crowd, and when he reached her he threw his arms around her, crushing her to himself. She sighed happily as she leaned into his embrace. He lingered there a moment, letting his eyes slide closed. He inhaled deeply - she smelled of vanilla and roses, and he wished he was able to comb a hand through her hair, but curiously enough, she had worn it up for some reason.

He pulled back, beaming. He missed his family, of course he did, but she was the only one he wanted to greet him at the station and he was so glad she had come. Her expression mirrored his own.

“I’ve missed you so, Lottie,” he said fondly.

“I’ve missed you too,” she gave his shoulders a squeeze. “And to answer the question in your last letter, yes I can spend the week with you. It is the off-season, after all.”

“Wonderful!” he cried. “Let’s not waste a moment longer!”

They set off, him dragging his suitcase behind him, until they were accosted by a footman with a little carriage sent by Philippe.

“Monsieur le Vicomte, your brother has sent me to escort you back to the de Chagny mansion,” he told him with a little bow.

Raoul handed him his suitcase.

“Here,” he said. “You can take this back for me. But tell Philippe that I am currently busy seeing the grand Parisian sights with an even grander lady, and will not be returning just yet.”

Christine blushed prettily at his words and he grinned.

“And tell him that we will both back for dinner!” he added, and Christine’s eyes widened.

The footman hesitated, as Raoul’s orders were different than the orders from Philippe, but he nodded and took the suitcase.
“Oh, Raoul,” Christine said as the carriage drove off. “Are you very certain that you want me to accompany you at dinner? I thought I would merely be spending the afternoon with you and then taking my leave once you were back home. Are you sure you don’t want dinner to be just you and your family?”

“You are like family to me, Christine,” he glanced at her, a brief look of concern sweeping across his face. “No one is going to change my mind on that.”

He reached his hand out to take hers, squeezing it reassuringly, his smile returning.

“Of course I want you beside me at dinner.”

She sighed a little, but she was smiling as well.

“If you’re very certain, I suppose. But remember we have the whole week, I cleared my entire schedule beyond what was required of me at the opera - with that much time together I’m afraid you’ll get bored of me!” she teased him.

He looked her up and down, his fingers carding through her own.

“I could never be bored of you - never,” he said in a solemn voice.

She looked away, a blush creeping across her cheeks. Her hand felt hot in his grip, and she didn’t think it was purely her imagination that people were giving glances in their direction, but instead of pulling away she squeezed her fingers around his a little tighter. And why shouldn’t she? They weren’t doing anything wrong. They had often walked hand in hand as children. If such a gesture took on a different meaning now that they were both adults, well, that could hardly be helped.

They stopped in an ice cream parlor and settled themselves at a little table in the corner where they could have some privacy. They discussed his latest adventures and how his training was going, and then she filled him in on what was going on at the opera.

“You don’t have to stay for dinner if you don’t want,” he said suddenly, looking at her a little guiltily. “I know I didn’t ask you if you wanted to before I sent word to Philippe.”

She dug a little hole in the round ball of ice cream, then mashed the removed piece against the side of her dish, watching as it melted.

“I do want to have dinner with you,” she said truthfully, keeping her eyes on her dish. “But do you think Philippe wants to have dinner with me?”

He ran a hand through his hair, frustrated.

“I don’t care what Philippe wants, I only care what you want.”

She looked up at him, her lips quirking in a smile.

“How scandalous,” she whispered, and the words brought a small smile to his lips as well.

He leaned in conspiratorially.

“I’ll tell you what’s really scandalous, Lottie,” his eyes sparkled with mischief.

She narrowed her eyes at him, her smile growing wider.

“What?”
“We could run away together.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. We could buy a boat and sail away together.”

“Where would we go?”


“Oh?”

“We could go to Sweden, and start a new life. No one would know who we are. We could just leave all this behind - all the judgement, all the expectations, all of it.”

She took a bite of the ice cream, letting the spoon linger in her mouth a moment, savoring the feel of the cold steel contrasted with the taste of sweetened cream as it melted across her tongue. She knew his words were merely little jokes, but she knew also that it was entirely possible - he knew how to sail, how to navigate. He certainly had enough money to buy a boat. Sweden. The North. She shivered.

She met his gaze and saw that beneath his usual mirth that there was a vulnerability, too - perhaps these weren’t just jokes after all. Her heart beat faster. What would it be like to see her native land again, she wondered.

She took the spoon out of her mouth.

“What do you think of that, Lottie?”

“Hmm... When would we embark on this daring escape?”

“Tonight - right now even! There’s nothing stopping us,” his tone was fierce, serious, and she had no doubt that if she said yes, he would march to the docks that very moment and procure a boat for them.

“Raoul, my silly darling, we can’t possibly go tonight - you’ve already told Philippe we’re coming over for dinner.”

His face had fallen when she refused, only to pick up again when he realized she was joking with him.

“But Christine - don’t you see? That’s the best part about leaving tonight! Just picture Philippe waiting for us!”

He mimed pulling out a pocket watch and tutted at it, adopting the affected voice and mannerisms of his older brother.

“What’s going on? What’s this all about?” he said in a near perfect mimicry of Philippe. “These youths are at it again! No respect at all!”

Christine burst out in laughter, letting her spoon clatter into her dish as she covered her face with her hands.

“But don’t you want one last French meal before we go North?”

He considered this.
“A woman after my own heart,” he sighed dreamily, and she giggled. “Alright, we can go
tomorrow morning... after breakfast, of course.”

“You don’t even speak Swedish,” she pointed out.

“Well, no, but you do.”

She rested an elbow on the table and propped her chin on her hand. He was unflappable.

“You’d rely on me to do everything? You’d trust me like that? I would be the one making all the
decisions about everything.”

“Oh course I’d trust you like that. Besides, you could teach me Swedish. I’m sure I could learn
eventually, you know.”

Christine pushed the rest of her ice cream around her dish, a little flustered by the conversation. It
was all entirely plausible. They could actually do it, if they wished to. He seemed to want to. Did
she want to?

She missed Sweden. She hadn’t been there since she was a little girl. She missed it, and the offer to
see it again was sorely tempting. But she knew without doubt that if she left Paris for good, she
would miss it too.

She stirred the now melted ice cream a little faster, two different flavors mixing together until she
couldn’t tell one from the other.

She had lived the majority of her life away from her home. Home. The word sounded odd and
strange, the way all the French words had at first, so confusing and different from her easy Swedish
that flowed from her mind like water in a river. Was Sweden really home? Could it be her home, if
she gave it the chance? Would France ever feel like home? She had lived there far longer than
she’d lived in Sweden, and it still didn’t feel home. Maybe no place would ever feel that way to
her.

She frowned down at the muddled cream in her bowl, tasting a spoonful of it just to know what her
efforts had produced.

She missed Sweden and she’d miss France. Was it possible to love two places at the same time?
How could someone live like that, constantly missing one or the other? She couldn’t have both.

She looked up at Raoul and thought of her singing career, of Erik, and sighed. No, she couldn’t
have both.

Raoul raised an eyebrow at her dish of mixed and melted ice cream.

“Is it good like that?” he asked, curious, and began to mix his own.

She chuckled and shook her head.

“It’s awful. Really terrible.”

“Oh.”

He didn’t bring up the subject of running away again. As much as he wished it were possible, he
knew she wanted to remain at the Opera Populaire until her career had taken off - it would be a
hassle and a struggle to get started at a new company currently. Once she had leading roles under
her belt, then she could apply for more positions with a greater likelihood of receiving them. Perhaps one day they could go to Sweden, but not today. He steeled his resolve - no one would make them feel badly about the time they spent together, not the other noble families, not the gossippers at the theater, not even his own brother. As long as Christine was happy to be in his company, no one else’s opinion mattered.

After the ice cream parlor they went in a few shops, mostly just browsing, but something in one of the stores caught Christine’s eye.

It was in the antique shop, a place filled with numerous curiosities to marvel over, that she saw it - a little harp of sorts, small enough to be held in both hands, with rusting wires and an intricately carved frame. She picked it up, and upon examining it she discovered that the carvings on the sides were in fact little winged figures - angels.

Raoul watched her from behind another tall shelf of odds and ends. She was so lovely, more lovely than he remembered, if he was being truthful with himself. He watched as she looked through the organized clutter on the shelves, stopping on one item in particular. Her smile lit up her face as she looked closely at the strange object, and Raoul felt his heart twist. Her smile was so beautiful. She should always be smiling, should always have reason to smile. One day, if she let him, he’d devote his entire life to her happiness.

“What did you find?” he asked, walking up next to her.

She jumped a little, as though she’d forgotten he was in the store with her.

“Oh! It’s a harp, you see. I think I’m going to buy it,” she glanced shyly away from him, clutching the harp to her chest.

Did that little harp really make her so happy? He smiled.

“Here, let me buy it for you,” he offered.

“Oh, Raoul, no! Really, it’s alright,” she shook her head.

“Are you certain? Let it be my gift you.”

“I can quite afford it, it’s alright,” she insisted.

“You don’t want a gift from your dear Raoul?” he teased.

She squirmed a little, shifting from foot to foot, her smile turning odd.

“It’s- it’s not for me, that’s why,” she finally told him.

“Ah, I see. And whom is so lucky as to receive a gift from Christine Daaé, if I may ask?”

She glanced up at him. He looked simply curious - had he looked jealous she wouldn’t have told him at all.

“My voice teacher,” she looked away again, her face turning pink.

“Oh, I’m glad to hear you found one to work with,” he remarked as they made their way to the front of the store to pay for the harp. “Where did you find this one?”

“Um,” she bit her lip, digging in her purse for the money to pay. “Well, you see...”
She received her change and thanked the shopkeeper, holding the harp tightly as they walked out the door.

“It’s actually the same tutor I’ve been working with all along, you know,” she couldn’t look at him.

His face went blank. He remembered that day she had cried on his shoulder, heartbroken over her supposed angel.

“You’re still working with that cad?”

“Raoul!” she finally turned to him, dismayed. “He’s not a cad! I know he lied to me terribly, but that’s all in the past now. He’s a good man.”

She paused.

“At least, he’s good to me,” she added softly.

She didn’t know if Erik could truly be considered a good man, but although they had their occasional disagreements, he had never given her reason to worry for her safety in his presence and he really was good to her.

“Well, do you suppose I could meet him?” he asked hopefully.

She hugged the harp and looked away, her countenance troubled.

“No, Raoul, I’m sorry but that’s just not possible.”

“Why not?”

“He’s- he’s a bit reclusive, you see...” she tried to figure out how explain it to him without giving away more than Erik would want her to, but then she realized there might not be any other way around it.

“He’s, ah, he’s terribly disfigured,” she added quietly, hoping Raoul wouldn’t ask her for any more details past that.

“Oh,” he breathed. “Oh, I understand, I think. Well, I won’t press the matter, then.”

“Thank you.”

“If ever there comes a day you change your mind about him, though—“

“I know, Raoul - I’ll let you know,” she smiled a little, touched that he was so concerned over her wellbeing.

They walked in comfortable silence for a while, and Christine became lost in her own thoughts. She let one hand drop from the harp and stray to her pocket, where she grasped at the little card that was still there. Erik certainly wasn’t perfect, but he was trying to be better, she could tell that. Still, the strangeness of how he had acted weighed on her.

Why, after she had just finished telling him about a morning spent with friends, would he become so upset about her spending time with another friend? If she didn’t know any better, she’d say he had been jealous of Raoul. But why on earth would he be jealous? He wasn’t jealous of any of her other friends... Except...

Except all of her other friends were girls.
She swallowed, finding her throat was feeling a little too dry. Was he jealous of Raoul because he was interested in her? Oh, no - no, it couldn’t be that, could it? He’d never given any other indication that he felt that way about her. This was self-flattery, surely - Erik couldn’t be interested in her like that. The man was a genius, after all, and while Christine didn’t think herself dull, well-she certainly didn’t expect a genius to be romantically interested in her. Still... he was lonely. It might not be too far fetched to assume he held some sort of feeling towards her - not love, not necessarily, but merely an intense interest in her or a close kinship perhaps. He was probably worried that if she spent too much time around boys she’d get distracted from her goals and then he’d no longer have a student to teach anymore. She smirked a little. He had nothing to worry about there.

Anyway, if he felt something for her, it couldn’t be helped. He hadn’t come out and said anything, hadn’t done anything (other than his outburst) to make her think he was interested, certainly hadn’t seemed to think anything was owed to him. There was nothing she could do about it until he saw fit to confess how he truly felt. Until then- well, things would just go on normally, she supposed.

Christine asked to take the harp back to the opera house, and Raoul called them a cab so they wouldn’t have to walk. They spoke of more pleasant subjects on the ride over, and once there Raoul loitered around in the lobby while Christine went up to her dormitory.

She placed the harp on her nightstand next to the roses - she would give it to Erik when she saw him next week. Then she dropped to her knees and pulled a small parcel out from under her bed, wiping the dust off of it before tucking it under her arm and setting off for the lobby once more.

Underneath the ground, Erik stood up from the organ bench and rubbed at his eyes, which felt dry and irritated. He supposed it was because he hadn’t slept at all the previous two nights, nor had he had any naps in between. He sighed heavily and walked into his kitchen, intending on making a cup of tea.

He opened the cupboard and made a discovery. He was out of groceries.

The lack of food didn’t disturb him too terribly, he knew he could sneak up and steal a few things here and there from the opera house kitchens. What disturbed him was the fact that he was practically out of tea. That simply wouldn’t do.

In all the fuss of the day before, he had entirely forgotten to leave a grocery list in the alley on the Rue Scribe side of the building - his typical method for procuring sustenance. Without a list of what to buy and a little envelope of money, the beggar that he paid to shop for him wouldn’t have bought him anything and also wouldn’t be back until next week to look for another envelope and list.

Erik’s heart dropped. He would have to go to the market himself if he wanted anything. He couldn’t really go without tea - he hated drinking plain water and often it was the only thing close to a meal he’d have, not to mention it helped keep him awake lest nightmares set in.

He set about dressing to go above, muttering to himself. He hated going outside, but it seemed it couldn’t be helped. The opera kitchens didn’t even keep tea.

He pulled his hat down as far as it could go before stepping out into the garish late afternoon sunlight, his heart beating in that funny way he hated, high in his throat and far too fast and off tempo.

He was coming around the front corner of the building, trying to blend in with the scant amount of people still milling about when he saw the two of them.
Chapter 28

He froze.

Christine and the boy were coming down the stairs.

They were smiling at each other, talking about something that he wasn’t close enough to hear. She stumbled a little, her eyes going wide in surprise as the heel of her shoe caught on the stairs. Erik was afraid she was about to fall, but the boy reached out and steadied her, concern written across his face. She smiled up at him, and the boy relaxed but still held onto her hand. They reached the bottom of the stairs, and Erik hid his face against the wall, desperately hoping they wouldn’t look in his direction. He counted to ten slowly in his mind before daring to look again.

They were still hand in hand, their shoulders practically touching as they approached the carriage on the street. The boy opened the door for her and helped her step up into it before he climbed up himself. The door closed and the carriage pulled away.

Erik watched as it went down the street. His hands clutched the corner of the building and his knuckles were even whiter than they normally were. He stared at the street they had departed down, even though he couldn’t see them anymore.

He was foolish, so foolish. That would never be *him* in the boy’s place, he would never help her into a carriage or walk hand in hand with her. How could he have ever dared to dream otherwise?

He blinked against the stinging in his eyes. He couldn’t just stand there forever, leaning against the opera house in the shadows like a child hides behind its mother’s legs. He pushed off the wall, letting his hands fall into fists at his side as he stepped out onto the sidewalk, willing himself not to cry in public. There would be time enough for that when he got back home.

At least the boy had treated her nicely, he thought. He seemed respectful enough, and Christine certainly looked happy enough around him. They had both looked happy, actually, although Erik didn’t care one fig about whether or not the boy was happy. Christine was all that mattered.

She could never be happy like that with him. Oh, she might enjoy their lessons, enjoy having her feet by the fire in his home, enjoy how they shared music together - but he was too deficient of a man to ever truly make happy. He couldn’t even go to the store to buy tea without it being an ordeal. He squeezed his hands tightly at the thought - had he not kept his nails so short for playing piano, they surely would drawn blood from his palms.

She should be with the boy because the boy could make her happy in ways that he could not. It was only logical - never mind that deep ache in his chest at the thought.

A monstrous thought had occurred to him when he first saw the boy on the stairs - how easily the boy could disappear. People fell into the Seine all the time, did they not? Who could tell the difference between an accident and... not an accident? The boy could easily have an accident.

But then he had seen the look Christine’s face - Christine’s heavenly smile, glowing up at that *Raoul*, and he knew in that instant that he could never, *never* harm a hair on the boy’s head because if he did, Christine would never forgive him, ever.

It was a relief, in a way - he hadn’t committed such an atrocity in probably thirty years, and never without orders to do so or in self defense. So the wretched boy would live on, he would probably court Christine, and they would likely marry. She would probably have his children, too - a thought
that set a wave of panic and grief over him, but he knew it was for the best. Her having Erik’s children was an even worse thought - she didn’t deserve the burden that any child of his would be. His touch would only curse her.

He kept his head down as he walked to the store, trying to find the right pace that would get him there swiftly but also not draw attention - though he could still feel the stares directed at him regardless.

He entered the little shop and the bell above the door jingled, alerting the shopkeeper. She turned around behind the counter, but in the midst of her practiced greeting she stopped with a small gasp, her face going white.

Erik lowered his eyes as he approached the counter carefully.

“C-can I help you, monsieur?” she stuttered.

He pointed to the size of container he wanted, and then to which jars held the types of tea he wanted.

“Two of each, please,” he muttered, not looking at her.

She quickly measured out the tea leaves with shaking hands.

“Anything else, m-monsieur?”

Erik could barely think in the store - it felt like the walls were closing in on him. His eyes frantically scanned behind the counter. Did he need anything else? He certainly didn’t want to come out again. He pointed at a loaf of bread and pulled out his wallet.

“How much? For everything?” his own voice sounded strange to him.

She told him the total and placed the amount on the counter and grabbed the paper bag filled with his groceries before practically running out of the store.

He clutched the grocery bag to him and walked back to the opera house, his long legs taking even longer strides, his thoughts buzzing far too loudly.

He would never have anything with Christine beyond what they already had, that much was clear. And from the fiasco of the previous day, it was also clear that the more he tried to prolong their time together, the more he attempted to keep her by his side and restrict her contact with others - the more she would view him as a cruel jailor and strive to flee from him.

It seemed so counterintuitive, went against everything his awful mind was screaming at him, but he could tell that if he wanted her to keep being around him, he needed to be willing to let her go. He would have to let her go one day - eventually she wouldn’t need (or want) any more lessons, she’d have no more reason to come to his little house, she’d just be gone from his life entirely. That was out of his hands entirely - she would leave him eventually. But as to what he would do in the meantime, well - he had a choice.

He could scheme and plot and come up with ways to sabotage the boy and any others who might come after him, trying to keep her in his grip for as long as he could, and be just another person who thought they knew what was best for her - or he could be her respectful friend, like he’d promised, and follow her wishes in regards to what she wanted, and perhaps in doing so she’d want to stay around him for just a little longer and he could cherish every moment spent thus.
He sighed as he put the tea away in his cupboards before brewing a cup and tearing off a piece of bread to eat. It was a lot to process. But he’d had three years around her, hadn’t he? Three years more than he could have hoped for, three years more than he deserved. And she had agreed to see him next week, so perhaps he wasn’t entirely on the verge of losing forever right at that moment. If she came back after her week with the boy, then it could be presumed that she’d stay a little while longer, especially since the boy would be off to who knows where, safely away from Christine.

He drank the tea slowly, dunking the piece of bread it before eating it. He had a week without Christine Daaé, and at some point in the future he’d have the rest of his life without Christine Daaé, so he supposed he’d better learn to cope with that fact without going to pieces over it.

After his odd meal was finished (he should have asked for biscuits, not bread - why had he asked for bread? He could never think properly when shopping), he began work on some home repair projects in the hopes that they could clear his mind.

In the carriage, Christine tried to hide the parcel from Raoul.

“Do you remember that your favorite author had a new book that came out recently?”

Raoul thought for a moment.

“Yes, that’s right - I haven’t had a chance to pick up a copy yet, since I’ve been away.”

“Well,” Christine drew the word out. “You know how sometimes celebrities come to shows at the Populaire?”

“Yes?”

“Guess who came to our show a few months ago.”

“Oh, Lottie, did he really? Did you get to meet him?”

“I did! And that’s not all, either-“

She handed him the parcel, and he eagerly unwrapped the paper.

Inside was a copy of the book he had been looking forward to reading.

“For me?”

She nodded.

“Look inside,” she urged.

He opened the front cover, his eyes going wide as he read the inscription - Christine had gotten the author to write a little note inside for Raoul and he had signed his name as well.

“Christine, this is amazing! Thank you!”

He jumped up and placed a kiss on her cheek.

He spent the majority of the ride to the mansion asking her every question he could think of about what the author had been like, and she did her best to tell him and not leave any detail out.

Christine felt slightly nervous as they approached the de Chagny mansion. She patted her hair, hoping it hadn’t fallen down too much. She looked out the window and frowned at what she saw
there - there were two other carriages in front of the mansion.

“Is Philippe having anyone else over tonight?”

“I’m not sure,” Raoul looked out, puzzled.

They were greeted by a doorman and ushered inside, where they found that two of Raoul’s sisters and their husbands were also in attendance for the evening.

“Raoul!” Philippe called out. “Welcome back! And who is- oh.”

Philippe’s face fell just slightly when he saw Christine. He had been hoping that perhaps Raoul truly had found a “grand lady”, as the servant had said in his related message.

“Christine again.”

Raoul put his arm around her shoulder and steadily met his brother’s gaze.

“Yes, Christine.”

Philippe sighed.

“Well, let us take your, er, coat, Christine,” Philippe told her. “And you can join us for dinner.”

Christine could feel the eyes of Raoul’s sisters on her as she removed her coat which had baffled Philippe on account of the fact that it was a cross between a cape and coat - a new style, a little eccentric, perhaps, but she had thought it was fashionable. The servant she handed it to hung it on the wall next to two perfectly normal, ordinary coats, and Christine gave his sisters and their husbands a shy smile as she greeted them. They nodded politely, but not warmly.

At the table, they each asked questions of Raoul and things seemed to settle into a comfortable state, except for the fact that they all seemed to be ignoring Christine (Raoul, who was sitting next to her, glanced her way every now and then, trying to include her in conversation).

The serving maid refilled Christine’s water glass, and while doing so Christine caught sight of a colorful bracelet on the maid’s wrist, mostly hidden by her long sleeves but revealed when she reached for things.

“Your bracelet is lovely,” Christine whispered to her, and the girl’s eyes went wide with surprise at being addressed.

“Thank you, mademoiselle,” she smiled.

The conversation at the table paused, all eyes turning to Christine, except for Raoul, who steadfastly ate on as though nothing were out of the ordinary.

The maid took her place at the side of the room once more, eyes downcast, but still smiling from the compliment.

Christine glanced from face to face at the table and picked at her food.

“So, er, Christine,” one of the husbands asked. “What’s it like at the Opera Populaire? I’ve never been, but I’ve always wanted to try it.”

His wife turned and stared him, her face blank except for a hint of disapproval, and she asked-
“Try what?”

He choked on his drink.

“Th-the Opera, I mean. Try- try going to the opera,” he sputtered.

Christine twirled her fork around in the noodles on her plate nervously.

“It’s quite interesting, I suppose,” Christine said. “There’s a lot of work that goes into each production. I think that’s something a lot of people overlook, how much effort and toil and skill there is to make something like that.”

She stabbed at a piece of meat, glancing across at him.

“It’s not just a bunch of pretty girls to stare at on stage,” she added.

He fidgeted under her words.

“Of course not!” he laughed nervously. “There’s men on stage too!”

The other husband frowned across at him.

“You stare at the men?” he asked.

The first man’s face turned red and he hunched over in his chair, putting a hand over his eyes.

“Why do I even try,” he muttered, his wife’s disapproving gaze still focused on him.

Christine almost - almost - found it in her to feel bad for him.

Philippe cleared his throat, trying to regain control of his dinner party.

“I hardly think the opera house is a fitting topic for dinner discussion,” he said. “Raoul, tell us where you’ll be off to next.”

Raoul scowled at his brother. How dare he consider Christine’s profession inappropriate? Especially considering how often Philippe himself went to the Populaire - and not for the opera. There was nothing lewd about singing or acting on stage, regardless of what took place in the wings, and it irked Raoul to no end that she had to be constantly reminded that her job was considered indecent.

“They haven’t told us yet,” he replied, sullen, but not because of the uncertainty of where he and the rest of his crew were going.

The conversation moved on, and Christine remained silent through most of it. Had she known his entire family was going to be there, she might have refused to come, after all.

Finally it ended, the dessert finished and the plates cleared away, and Raoul escorted her out to the front porch where a carriage was waiting to take her back.

“I’m sorry about dinner, Lottie,” he whispered.

She smiled, fondly but a little forlornly.

“Raoul, you’re one of my dearest friends, and if anyone thinks they’re going to change that, they’ve got another thing coming.”
He hugged her and said goodbye, knowing he would be seeing her again in the morning.

She sighed as she settled herself in the carriage, preparing for the long ride back to the opera house. She had been truthful to him - their continued rudeness and haughty attitudes were not going to change her relationship with Raoul, but that didn’t mean that it still didn’t sting to have them behave so.

The next day would go much better, she was certain.

She was nearly exhausted when arrived in her room that night. She changed into her nightgown and nestled herself beneath her many blankets, staring up at the roses on her nightstand. They were so lovely, and smelled so sweetly... White roses, symbols of innocence.

She blinked sleepily, thinking to herself how lucky she was to have two men - her Vicomte and her Angel - who didn’t think less of her simply because of what her career was. She drifted off to sleep with a smile on her face.
Chapter 29

Erik stood on the threshold of the room he referred to as his guest room (though he had never had any guests in it) and eyed the furniture it contained.

It was his mother’s furniture, things that had been passed down to him when she was gone - not because she had wanted to leave him anything, but because there had been no one else to take it.

In truth, he didn’t think his mother would have wanted to have it. She had never let him in her room, let alone let him sit on the sofa or at the table, so he couldn’t say what, exactly, had possessed him to keep all of her bedroom furniture. Perhaps it was how normal it all looked. He had overheard her once, when he was a small boy, as she cried to her only friend in the village about how the child would never be able to live normally, never have a normal life (and how, by extension, neither would she). Perhaps it was a little bit of spite that made him keep it - or perhaps it was a desperate grasp at a denial of her words.

This room was normal, was it not? A perfect room, perfectly normal.

How could he be so abnormal if his house had such a normal room?

He rarely ever went in this room. He rarely had reason to. But a mad thought had occurred to him, the same way feverish inspiration often appeared for his compositions. He had to see the room for himself, to imagine it in fuller detail. His eyes scanned the room. He could see it so clearly, yet even as he knew it would be impossible, he still turned on his heel and went to grab the necessary tools.

At de Chagny mansion, Raoul watched until Christine’s carriage was out of sight. He turned and went back inside, finding Philippe waiting for him.

“Raoul, Raoul,” he sighed. “Come, let’s have a talk.”

Raoul’s heart began to race. He knew what his brother likely wanted to talk about, but still he followed him to Philippe’s private sitting room.

He sat down in one of the high backed leather chairs as Philippe poured two snifters of brandy for them.

“You know I’m proud of you, don’t you?”

Raoul glanced up, surprised. This wasn’t what he had been expecting.

“I’m very proud of your life choices, Raoul - all except for one.”

Raoul clenched his jaw. This was what he had been expecting.

“I’m not going stick my nose into your personal business - what you do on your own time is up to you, that’s not my concern,” he paused. “But when you bring a girl from the Populaire to dinner, that is my concern.”

“I knew her before the Populaire, you know,” he scowled, repeating an oft repeated sentiment.

“I know. But where do you think everyone else knows her from?”

Raoul looked away, refusing to answer, and Philippe felt his annoyance growing.
That famous de Chagny stubbornness - always an asset, until it wasn’t.

“I won’t allow you to court her, you know,” he snapped.

“Well we aren’t even courting, so there,” Raoul shot back. “So you have nothing at all to worry about, do you?”

Philippe huffed. He had promised their father on his deathbed that he would always look out for little Raoul, always guide him in the way he should go - but the foolhardy boy always seemed so set on doing whatever he wanted. Philippe has been that way, too, once upon a time - until he had been forced by his father’s untimely death to become the Comte at the tender age of fourteen. Reality had fallen heavy on shoulders that hadn’t even finished growing, and it was times like now, in the sitting room with an angry Raoul, that such responsibility made him feel old before his time - yet also, curiously enough, made him feel as though he still had no idea of what he was doing, had no control over the world around him or even over himself.

He rubbed a hand over his face.

“If you’re not courting, what on earth are you two doing?”

Raoul became flustered.

“We’re- we’re friends,” he stuttered. “We’re very good friends, but- but we’re not courting. She doesn’t want to, not yet at least - she just wants to sing.”

Philippe chuckled darkly.

“A vicomte, turned down by an opera singer. Yet still you chase after her even as she scorns you.”

Raoul crossed his arms. It wasn’t like that, was it? Christine hadn’t scorned him... She just didn’t want to court him, and he didn’t mind just being her friend for now.

“Do you know why she won’t court you, Raoul?” he asked suddenly. “It’s probably because she has patron at the opera. She probably has three patrons at the opera, and that’s why she won’t court you, because she’d have to give all that up.”

Raoul downed his brandy in one go. The sickly sweet liquid burned his throat and made his mouth tingle but did nothing to ease his anger.

“Is that really the kind of girl you want to marry?” Philippe needled him. “An impure girl? Who knows how many men she’s-“

“I don’t care if she’s had every last man in Paris!” Raoul’s shouted, his face going red with embarrassment when he realized what exactly he had said. “I love her!”

Philippe scoffed.

“You might as well court a girl from a brothel, Raoul. She’s a strumpet.”

“Is that what you think of Sorelli?” Raoul countered hotly. “Do you think she’s just a strumpet?”

Philippe sat forward in his chair and pointed an accusatory finger at his brother.

“You leave Sorelli out of this! It has nothing to do with her!”

“You love her but you refuse to marry her because you’re too scared of starting a scandal with the
other nobles, and you’re only mad at me because I’m not!”

“I said leave her out if this!” he hissed. “I will not see you end up like Adele, damn it!”

“Happy? You won’t see me happy? Because that’s how she is, not that you would even know!”

“You know perfectly well what I’m talking about, what happened to her.”

“What happened to her? What you did to her! You’re the one who cut her off and cast her out! You’re the one who did that to her!”

Raoul threw his snifter at the wall (but not the wall behind Philippe, because even though his blood felt like it was boiling he didn’t want the glass to accidentally cut his brother).

Philippe didn’t even flinch as the glass exploded across the wall. Raoul stared at the small splash of brandy left on the wallpaper for a moment before he burst into tears, as though he saw his own hopes and dreams mirrored in that shattered glass on the floor.

Philippe stared at his brother sobbing into his hands, and he sighed wearily, leaning back in his chair.

“I love her, Philippe,” Raoul pleaded from behind his hands.

“I know,” he replied tiredly, soothingly. “I know.”

Muffled crying and the tick of the clock was the only sound in the room for a long, long moment.

“It’s late,” Philippe finally roused himself from his stupor. “I’m sure you’re very tired. Go to bed, Raoul.”

Raoul stood and quickly left the room, leaving Philippe to himself, still staring at the now-stained wallpaper, his thoughts consumed by the sister he had disowned, the lover who he feared could never be more than an ill-kept secret, and the young woman who had sat at dinner and taken their shameful treatment in stride.

The next morning was awkward, stilted.

Raoul didn’t come downstairs until after breakfast had been finished, only to find that Philippe was still at the table, drumming his fingers on the wood and staring at a covered dish. He brightened visibly when he saw Raoul pause at the doorway.

“Ah! Raoul, come eat with me,” he waved to him to approach, but Raoul stood his ground. “I saved some especially for you, and I made sure it’s still hot. Come, sit, sit.”

Raoul turned his red-lined eyes away from his hopeful brother.

“I’m not hungry,” he said flatly, and Philippe’s shoulders sagged.

Raoul hadn’t slept well after the fight, although he truly was quite tired from his journey. He hated fighting with Philippe, but it seemed nearly every time Christine was brought up, they simply couldn’t help it. He loved his brother, he really did, but he couldn’t reconcile the man who had disowned their sister for supposedly disgracing the family name with the man he knew - hoped - his brother truly was. Would Philippe disown him, too, if he married Christine?

“Where all are you going today?” he tried again.
“I’m going to see Adele. I’m taking Christine along, too, actually.”

Philippe scoffed.

“Don’t be like that, Raoul, I thought we were done fighting.”

Raoul’s brow knit. He had been telling the truth - did Philippe think he was saying it to start a fight?

“I’m sorry, Philippe. I don’t want to fight, either.”

Philippe nodded.

“It’s alright. Go have fun today. I’ll see you tonight? Or will you be, ah, attending business somewhere else this evening?” he ended the question with a devilish smile, but the innuendo was seemingly lost on Raoul, who merely shook his head and replied.

“No, I’ll be back tonight.”

Philippe narrowed his eyes and pressed his lips into a thin line. The boy was a sailor on shore leave, for goodness sake - he expected him to want to spend a few nights away from the mansion... unless...

“Bringing anyone back, perhaps?”

Raoul looked confused and slowly shook his head.

“No, just me.”

Philippe sighed. He was nearly certain that this had something to do with Christine as well. Maybe he truly was in love with her - the boy certainly didn’t seem to even spare a glance at any other girl.

“Well... have fun, I suppose,” he finally settled on saying.

Raoul left with a nod.

Once outside, he was awfully glad that it was a sunny day - perhaps he could explain his stinging and red eyes as due to the brightness. He didn’t mind Christine knowing that he had been crying, but he didn’t want her to know why he had been crying - oh, yes, I have been crying. Why, you ask? It’s quite simple, really - I want to marry you but my brother thinks you’re a tart. It simply wouldn’t do at all.

The carriage stopped in front of the tea house they had agreed to meet at. Christine was already there, but didn’t see Raoul yet. He had a moment to watch her.

She was so beautiful that sometimes he found it difficult to think around her. He loved her so much. He didn’t care what Philippe thought.

Philippe.

His words from the previous night echoed back to him. Did Christine really have a patron at the opera? He felt a funny twist in his chest at the thought of that.

Many of the girls at the opera had patrons - quite a lot of them had to. When Mamma Valerious had passed away, she had left Christine a good deal of money, so Raoul had assumed that she likely didn’t need the financial support of a patron like some of the girls did.
But maybe it was different for Christine. Maybe she didn’t want to just get by - maybe she wanted to save up for the future. Maybe something had happened to the money left to her and she needed more.

Or maybe it was completely different for Christine. Maybe she wasn’t like the rest of the girls, finding herself with no other choice but to cater to the whims of any man with spending money so she could afford to eat and live and get by. Maybe she didn’t have a patron - maybe she had a suitor, or a beau. Maybe there was someone whose company she enjoyed - thoroughly enjoyed. Philippe was right - she’d have to give that up if she were to court Raoul, and clearly she didn’t want to.

Christine turned and glanced in his direction, her eyes lighting up as she waved to him. Her smile was infectious, and he found himself returning the grin as he waved in return.

He sat down at the table she was sitting at, a cup of tea already in front of him.

“Black tea, is it still your favorite?” she asked him.

“It is,” he smiled. “You know me so well, Little Lotte.”

Her hair was twisted into a loose bun, and her dress had a delicate lace frill around the edges of her sleeves. To Raoul’s eye she seemed to radiate a kind a purity. The rest of Philippe’s words darted through his mind, and he shoved them away. As if there could ever be anything impure about Christine. She was pure because of the soul she possessed - her kindness, her generosity, how thoughtful she was. Her purity had nothing to do with whether or not she had been with anyone in that way. He had half a mind to march right back to the de Chagny mansion and tell his brother that he did want this kind of a girl for a wife, but he refrained.

The title of vicomte had always held a weight that pressed down on every relationship Raoul had ever had - friends, family, strangers met in passing, every single interaction with every person was affected by his title... almost every person.

Every person but Christine.

He still remembered the day they met, would never forget it.

His father, who had been trained well in music as a lad, had been fascinated by the traveling violinist, and after having seen several of his performances he had invited him to his mansion to discuss music. They had met in the parlor, formal as always. The Swedish musician, his little daughter holding tight to his hand, had bowed respectfully and greeted the Comte and the young Vicomte (Philippe and their sisters, being somewhat older than Raoul, had been otherwise engaged with a tutor at the time, and had not been present).

Raoul’s father struck up a conversation with the man, and to Raoul the event was yet another stuffy ceremony that he could scarcely see the point of - until the little girl, just the same age as him, or perhaps a little younger, turned her bright, curious eyes to him. A smile came over her face, and she loosened her grasp on her father’s hand to confidently stride closer to Raoul.

“I’m Christine,” she had said boldly. “Who are you?”

Her father had been embarrassed, apologizing profusely and chuckling lightly.

“Christine!” he had chided her. “He is a vicomte, you must address him as such.”

Her little brow had furrowed and she bit her lip, thinking hard as she looked Raoul up and down
appraisingly. She then looked up at her father, seeking understanding.

“Papa, what’s a vicomte?”

Raoul had known right away that he liked her.

He didn’t have very many friends - he wasn’t permitted to go school like a normal little boy, he had tutors and no classmates to confide in or play with. He had his brother and his sisters, of course, but they were family and had to be friends with him. He had no little playmates to frolic with, and he often felt quite lonely. The other children, when he did have chances to be around them, would often shy away from him, perhaps warned by their parents to not upset the child of a nobleman. There were the children of other nobles, too, but Raoul found them all insufferable, too spoiled or haughty to really find common ground with. He would never forget being shamed by a little boy just a bit older than him who had mocked him because Raoul’s parents didn’t own as much land as his own parents did - Raoul had taken a swing at the boy because of it, and though he had missed by a long shot, he boy set up a great fuss. Raoul’s father had begged him to explain his actions - why had he tried to punch poor Albert? - but he had steadfastly refused to answer, unwilling to relive the burning shame that he didn’t even understand (what did it matter who owned how much land?), and he had been soundly punished for his seemingly unprovoked violent intent towards the other boy.

Raoul had tried, once, to run away from home, thinking that he could start over somewhere else where no one knew he was a vicomte - but he had made the mistake of telling his nanny farewell before leaving, and so his brother had rushed out into the street, grabbing his arm harshly and pulling him back to mansion as Raoul cried and cried over both the failure of his brilliant plan and the horror he felt at how close he had been to actually succeeding in such a horrible idea. (“Why are you so stupid?” Philippe had scolded him as he marched the child back home. “You’re so stupid, Raoul - don’t know how much we would miss you?”)

But Christine never judged him for being a vicomte - she didn’t even know what a vicomte was! Despite her father explaining what it meant, she still didn’t seem to fully grasp the concept, or perhaps such things as nobility and titles meant very little to her. Either way, their fathers had formed a sort of friend - a kinship, nearly - over music, so Christine and Raoul found ample time to play together. They would run through the garden and play hide-and-go-seek among the flowers while their fathers mulled over sheet music and compositions, or else they would spend hours in Raoul’s playroom reading fairy stories and building castles out of blocks as their fathers discussed funding Gustave Daaé’s musical endeavors.

Raoul didn’t have to secretly wonder if Christine was looking down on him for how much his family owned (she didn’t even seem aware that his family owned anything other than the mansion - how could someone own a tree? she had asked once, when he’d told her of the orchard his family managed). He didn’t have to worry over polite manners or etiquette or protocol around her - and she never fidgeted around him as though he were a prince or someone special. With Christine, he didn’t have to be reminded that he was a vicomte. With Christine he could simply be Raoul.

As he had gotten older, he noticed the difference all the more. Girls would show an interest in him, only for him to quickly realize they were more inserted in his title (will you become the Comte one day? Does that mean your wife will get a title, too? How much will you inherit?). It was the same with many boys, too - he found himself often shunned or else plied with false flattery. For the longest time he had tried to hide the fact that he was a vicomte when he first enrolled in the navy, and he had managed to do so for a little while. He had made friends in the navy, mostly before they knew who he was, and most remained his friend even after - though some who had before found nothing of interest to talk to him about suddenly became quite fascinated by attempting to strike up
a conversation with him after his identity was revealed.

But through it all Christine had remained his dearest friend. Just being around her made him feel better. He had said a few times, when he was but a boy, that he intended to marry her - a vow that entailed something he hadn’t even been scarcely aware of at the time. All he had known at that point was that to be married meant that you spent all of your time together, and he wanted to spend all of his time around Christine Daaé. When he was a bit older his father had explained to him the function of a wife, and Raoul had been mortified to find out about the whole concept, about this bizarre thing everyone had been keeping secret from him (he could see, now, why it was a secret). He was terribly glad indeed that Christine was away with her father as he toured Europe during that summer when he had been told of such things, because now that he knew how the world worked, his mind would begin to wander (did he still want Christine as a wife? Did want to- with her?) and it never failed to bring a bright red blush to face. He was uncertain at first, but as years went on the thought became a little more welcome until finally one day he had realized that he only ever wanted to feel - to do - those things with Christine, not with anyone else. There had never been anyone else he wanted to spend his life with other than her.

He was certain of that, even now as he sat across from her as they sipped their tea. He wanted to marry Christine Daaé. Did she want to marry him? He wasn’t certain. He didn’t want to override her will with his own, he knew that too. If she never wanted to marry him, well - perhaps she’d still let him be in her life somehow. To bask in the shadow of her presence was still better than to not be around her at all. If she didn’t want him in that way, perhaps she’d still want him as friend. He hoped she’d always want him as friend, no matter what.

They didn’t linger long over their tea - they had places to be.

He pushed his now empty teacup back and rubbed his hands together, eager for the visit that was awaiting them, his angst of the previous night nearly forgotten.

“Now, are you ready, Lottie?”

She nodded, grinning.

“Of course.”
Chapter 30

Adele had warm greetings for them both. Hugs and handshakes all around, and she was quite pleased that Christine had come with him.

“Christine, I hope things are going well at the opera house for you.”

“Thank you, Adele. They are,” she smiled.

“And Raoul, I can’t wait to hear your stories, I know you have so many of them! But I’m afraid they’ll have to wait until I finish up in the kitchen.”

“Do you need any help?” Raoul offered.

“Oh, no, thank you, though. Dinner will be ready soon, and Pierre should be back at any moment. Would you look after Maddie until I can get everything finished in the kitchen?”

It was a few moments before they heard the sound of small feet running down the hallway.

“Uncle Raoul!” the little girl cried as she ran to him. “Uncle Raoul, do you remember me?”

“Of course I remember you, little Madeline!” Raoul laughed as hugged her. “Now, you must tell me something important.”

The little girl looked up at him solemnly and nodded.

Raoul leaned down on one knee to be level with her and asked seriously, “Do you remember your Aunt Christine?”

Maddie looked at Christine and nodded vigorously, then suddenly stopped, a look of wonder coming into her eyes.

“Christine is my aunt?!” she squeaked, and Raoul laughed again.

“Of course she is, silly goose!”

“Raoul!” Christine couldn’t help but smile as she swatted at him. “Don’t tell her that, what if she repeats it in front of Philippe?”

Maddie looked back and forth between the two of them.

“Who’s Philippe?” she asked innocently.

Christine’s face fell. Had the little girl really not seen her uncle in that long - or not at all? She clearly had a good memory, able to remember Christine from her week spent there so long ago...

Raoul glanced away, jaw tight, before trying to smile again for his niece.

“Come,” he said, rising. “Let’s go for a walk in the garden, shall we?”

Raoul and Christine each took one of Maddie’s hands and set off the little garden in the backyard. They walked through it together, Maddie pointing out which flowers had recently bloomed and what she had named each butterfly that gently alighted on the blooms.
Once the entire garden had been explored, Maddie stopped suddenly.

“I’m hungry,” Maddie sighed. “I want it to be dinner time.”

“It will be soon,” Christine promised her. “You just have to think of something else, and the time will fly right by!”

“Will it?”

“Of course!”

“I know just the thing!” Raoul snapped his fingers. “Christine, why don’t you sing for us? Could you?”

She blushed a little but nodded.

She hummed a bit to warm up her voice, and Raoul and Maddie settled themselves on the stone bench in the middle of the flowers. She ended up picking a song she had known for a while, one she knew she could perform well. She didn’t have to give it her all, since her audience was only a few feet away, but she found the notes rolled out as easily as those of any little songbird that could be found nearby. She closed her eyes for a few moments, lost in the song.

It felt like the world had stood still, as though all of creation had paused to listen to her sing. It was moments like that that made her certain she was on the right path for her life. How could anything ever compare to singing? She opened her eyes, taking in the blue sky with puffy clouds floating lazily by, turned pink and orange by the nearly setting sun, watched how the trees swayed to a rhythm no one else could hear. Everything in nature was where it should be, and so was she.

Christine glanced across at Raoul with his niece on his lap, at how they both watched her with such sparkling joy, and she felt her heart twist just a little at the scene. That could be hers, if she wanted it. That could be her husband and their child. They would watch her up on the stage in a similar fashion. Or would they?

It would already be enough of a scandal if a vicomte married a former opera singer - how much worse would it be if she kept singing? If she kept singing even after having a child? Someone else having to watch the little vicomtes and vicomtesses while Christine attended rehearsals and performed. It was unheard of. Would Raoul even agree to it?

She balled her hand into fists around the fabrics of her skirts, trilling her notes at just the right place.

She didn’t want to have children, she knew that much - not for a long time, at least. It was one of the biggest reasons she adamantly refrained from certain activities that were commonplace at the opera house, though she knew that once she was married she might not have much of a say in that anymore. Things had a way of happening even when precautions were taken, she knew that very well from a number of girls who had to leave the stage.

It was probably a given that she’d have at least one child sooner or later after getting married, and she wasn’t entirely adverse to the idea - but even still, she wanted to sing. She wanted to be on stage. Of course she would love her child, of course she would spend long hours tending to it and raising it and loving it - but she couldn’t imagine a life without sharing her music on stage. Did becoming a mother mean she no longer had a life of her own, outside of raising her child? Did that make her selfish, to still want time and space to devote to her passions, was she selfish because she didn’t want to give up every last thing about herself and instead become lost in the title of
‘mother’?

Surely in a world that demanded and expected so very much of her, she could be forgiven for being just a little selfish in how she lived her life.

She finished her song on a soaring note, and Raoul and Maddie clapped for her.

Maddie jumped down off Raoul’s knee and ran up to Christine, throwing her arms around her.

“A princess!” the little girl cried. “You’re a princess!”

Christine laughed as she hugged her back.

“That was amazing, Lottie,” Raoul said breathlessly. “You’ve improved so much, you must have worked so hard.”

A little smile quirked at the corner of her lips.

“I have been well taught,” she said playfully.

Raoul had to agree. Clearly the strange tutor she had was a genius. He was still a little miffed at how the man had treated her in the beginning, but he trusted her to know what she was and wasn’t comfortable with. Christine was a woman who stuck to her principles, and he knew that if she felt something wasn’t right, she would say so - she wasn’t the type to forgo her ideals in exchange for fame or fortune.

“Do you think dinner is ready yet?” Maddie asked.

“Wait right here,” he told them. “I’ll go check.”

With Raoul gone, Maddie turned to Christine and asked her questions about her singing - the little girl was convinced her ability was a sort of magic, but Christine tried to explain that it was not truly magic, just lots of practice and a very good teacher. Maddie had nodded, frowning, and Christine was about to ask if she actually understood or not when Raoul arrived again.

“Alas!” he sighed. “Dinner is not ready yet! However,” his eyes sparkled with mischief. “I did ask your mother another question, and she said yes - do you see those flowers right over there, Maddie?”

Raoul pointed to a larger patch of flowers in the corner. She nodded.

“I have something to show you!” he cried triumphantly, and marched over to the flowers.

He plucked a handful, and sat down on the ground before beginning to weave the stems together. Maddie watched, fascinated, and squealed with delight at the finished product - a little flower crown, perfectly fitted for her.

Christine sat down carefully next to him, trying to not get her skirts too dirty - though she knew, of course, that no one in the little family would think less of her if she did. Maddie sat in between them and they both showed her how to make chains out of the flower stems, and helped her to make crowns for her mother and her father.

By the time they had finished and the trio had marched into the house, each adorned with a crown of flowers, dinner was being set on the table. Maddie ran up to her mother and presented her with the crown she had made for her. Raoul handed the other one to Peirre, who chuckled nervously and
reluctantly placed it on his head - he was not enthusiastic about wearing it in the least, but his
daughter had made it and a vicomte had presented it to him, so he presumed he could not refuse.
Adele was delighted with hers, and she beamed at her family as they all gathered around the table,
each one wearing matching flower crowns.

Madeline tugged at her mother’s skirts to get her attention.

“Maman, Maman - Christine can sing!” she insisted.

Adele smiled.

“I know, dear. She’s a very good singer, isn’t she?”

“Her teacher has magic powers, did you know?” her little brow furrowed, recalling her own
interpretation of her conversation with Christine in the garden.

Raoul choked on his drink. Christine froze. Her eyes darted across to Raoul, who looked baffled.

“Madeline!” Christine laughed nervously. “That’s not what I told you!”

Adele and Pierre, who didn’t know the story of the Angel, thought it was amusing.

“I’m sure he does, Maddie, in his own way,” Adele told her, and grinned at Christine with a little
shrug.

Dinner that evening was everything dinner with Philippe should have been but wasn’t. Christine
was an equal participant in all the conversation, and there was laughter and stories all around.

Sitting there with them all, Christine truly felt like she was a part of a family. She regretted that it
couldn’t be like that with Philippe and his other two sisters. Her heart twisted a little at the thought
- Adele and Pierre and little Madeline should have been there at the de Chagny mansion with
everyone else. How wonderful it would have been, everyone all together.

She spared a troubled glance at Raoul, how happy and carefree he looked. Philippe had practically
disowned his sister for marrying a commoner - how much worse would he do to Raoul if he
married a stage performer? Would he strip him of his title, his inheritance?

She pushed the thought from her mind. Tonight was a happy night and there was no place for
worry. Tonight was simply dinner with Raoul and his family, and that was enough - worries of
angry brothers and lost fortunes were for another, distant, day.

It was late after the dinner was finished that they all said their goodbyes. Hugs were exchanged all
around, and Christine’s heart melted when little Maddie hugged her and proclaimed “I love you,
Aunt Christine!”

She left with the promise of procuring tickets for them when the opera season started back up, so
that Madeline could see her ‘aunt’ on stage.

The carriage drove off into the night, the bumpy ride and darkness outside doing little to help how
sleepy she felt. She ended up dozing off a few times on the ride back, curled up to Raoul next to
her on the seat. There were definitely no thoughts of Philippe and his judgements there in the little
carriage - the only things there were the sounds of horse hooves on cobblestones and the feeling of
how warm Raoul was and how comforting his arm around her shoulders felt, how safe and content
she felt there with him as the clear moonlight shone in through the window on the door.
When the carriage arrived on the step of the opera house, she sleepily bid Raoul farewell, smiling as he pressed a kiss to her cheek. She stepped out into the chilly night air and shivered a little, looking up at the roof.

The rest of the week was spent with Raoul on his various visits to his favorite places, restaurants, stores, and meeting a few friends. They saw Adele one more time, and unfortunately Christine had to see Philippe one more time as well and it was just as awkward as ever. The week went faster than she thought it could, and before she knew it she was seeing him off at the docks.

She waited politely in the crowd, unseen by Philippe, who was currently patting him on the shoulder and saying something Christine was too far away to hear.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to stay until you get on the ship?” Philippe frowned.

“No, it’s fine,” Raoul quickly assured him. “Just bringing me was enough.”

“You’ll write to me, won’t you?”

“Of course I will.”

Raoul hugged him one last time, an embrace Philippe lingered on. He missed his little brother more than he would say, but he knew it was for the best. Still - he often missed having him around. If there was one other silver lining about his brother’s expeditions, beyond the experience he would gain, it was that he was safely away from Christine.

“Stay well,” he told him as they parted.

Raoul watched as Philippe got back into the carriage and left, and then he turned to scan the dock for Christine. She appeared at his side as soon as Philippe’s carriage was out of view.

“Christine, I’m going to miss you,” he hugged her. “I’m sorry I won’t be here to celebrate your birthday with you.”

“It’s alright, Raoul. I’ll miss you too, though.”

She walked him to the edge of the gangplank, and he paused a moment, looking up at the ship, before he turned to Christine and kissed her on the lips, not caring who might see. When he pulled away he grinned that boyish grin she loved so much.

“You know the offer to run away together still stands,” he said. “I’d love to see Sweden with you.”

Her eyes sparkled.

“I’ll keep that in mind, Monsieur.”

The ship’s horn blew and Raoul quickly went up the gangplank, turning to shout his goodbyes to Christine, who waved to him.

When the ship was out of view and on its way to its destination, she began her journey back to the opera house. Although quite fun, the week had been tiring, and she suddenly felt its effects. She had ballet practice the next day, and her lesson with Erik the day after. Life was back to normal.

She slept in as long as she could in the little cot, and somehow managed to get through practice and then returned to another night of semi-restful sleep. Then it was the day she had been looking forward to. The harp from the antique store in hand, she made her way to her dressing room.
She sat dutifully on her chair in her dressing room, holding the little harp in her lap. Her lesson wasn’t for another quarter of an hour, but she had nowhere else to be at the moment. It seemed the same held true for Erik, who rolled back the mirror after she had been sitting for only a few minutes. She wondered, for a moment, how often he arrived early and simply waited for her to show up. Did he sit on the floor of the tunnel sometimes?

“Good morning, Christine,” he greeted her warmly.

She smiled as she stood and held the harp out for him.

“Good morning, Erik - this is for you.”

He cautiously took a step towards her, towards the apparent gift she held out for him.

She was reminded of the times in her childhood spent near the forest, when she would stand at the edge of the woods and hold out a carrot or an apple to entice the wary deer that lived there to eat out of her hand. They, too, held that same look of nervous surprise in their eyes when they saw her offering something to them.

She bit her lip to hold back the grin that was surely forming as her mind connected the similar traits between them - long legs, hesitant steps, big eyes, a creature that could surely hurt her if it chose but was in fact more frightened of her than she was of it.

“I was in the antique store with Raoul when I saw this and it made me think of you,” she explained as he took it.

“You thought of me? When you were out with the boy?” he could scarcely believe it, that he might have occupied space in her mind when she had so many other more pleasant subjects she could focus on - but here was the seeming proof of her words.

Christine caught the hint of doubt in his voice.

“Of course I thought of you. I think of you every day, you know,” she frowned before adding- “Don’t you think of me?”

His eyes met hers with a mix of guilt and hope. Of course he thought of her every day - every hour - but it was different for him. What else did he have to occupy his mind with that was pleasant and nice to think about? Christine could think of anything in the world, and yet still her thoughts turned to him?

“Of course,” he quickly supplied, and began to examine the harp.

He sat down in one of the chairs, his attention becoming absorbed in the little instrument. He plucked the strings and made adjustments to the tightness, then plucked them again. Christine smiled as he was consumed with the project.

“The strings are a little rusty,” he muttered mostly to himself. “But that can easily be fixed.”

He examined the carved sides, observed the angels, and glanced at Christine for a moment. His sight back on the harp once more, he plucked out a tune that sent shivers down her spine. Even when rusty and unused, it still was capable of producing a beautiful, haunting sound, and Christine hoped he would play it for her once it was fully fixed.

“It’s a good instrument,” he said. “Thank you, my dear.”
Her face turned pink, but she said it anyway.

“You’re quite welcome. It’s a good musician who holds it.”

He paused and narrowed his eyes.

“But still the instrument must be capable of what the musician asks of it.”

“Erik!” she laughed. “Just accept the compliment!”

He tucked the harp into his jacket.

“No.”

She rolled her eyes and made a show of sighing.

“Such a stubborn man. Will we be going downstairs for our lesson today?” she asked.

He nodded, rising from his seat and motioning for her to follow.

“You had ballet practice last night, did you not?”

She nodded.

“Did you miss the other ballet rats?”

He didn’t have the courage to ask the second part of that question - *did you miss me?*

She squirmed a little.

“I suppose. I didn’t think I was gone that long, but did you know a new trend has already swept through all of the dancers?”

“Oh?”

“I hadn’t even heard of them, but they’re all the rage now, apparently - little colorful charms on a necklace. I swear nearly every girl has one now. I’m afraid they rather teased me when I didn’t even know what they were!”

“Hmm. Are they ugly?”

It had been Christine’s - and Erik’s - personal opinion that several of the latest trends that had taken the opera house by storm were rather unflattering. The previous one, various feathers tucked into their buns, had been one in particular that Christine had rolled her eyes and gagged over - and yet not two days later when she met Erik in her dressing room after ballet practice, his lips had quirked into a smile and he laughed that dark chuckle of his... because Christine had forgotten to remove several peacock feathers from her hair after practice. "Peer pressure, my dear?” he had said, tilting his head. Christine had clawed the feathers out as she fumed and pouted. "Oh, shut up,” she had snapped, her cheeks crimson, and Erik had laughed even harder.

“No, that’s just it - they’re quite lovely! There’s so many different ones - little birds, or seashells, a snowflake, a leaf, a fan, a flower. And there are some that are initials, or even symbols - a little star, or a heart. And so many colors! They’re very darling,” she frowned.

“Do you think you’ll be following suit?” he asked, curious what shape she would choose.
She looked away into the shadows of the tunnel, a little embarrassed.

“No, I don’t think so,” she murmured. “I’m on a budget.”

“Ah.”

Erik thankfully did press the matter further. Christine had nearly fallen over when Meg (who had purchased a shiny pink and gold heart) had told her how much they cost - nearly four times as much as she’d have expected such a small necklace to be. She supposed she could afford one if she truly wished it, but she knew to do so she’d have to go without in other areas for quite a while.

“How has your week been?” she asked kindly.

“Busy,” he replied.

She looked at him with interest and for whatever reason he couldn’t fathom, it seemed she wanted him to elaborate.

“Home improvements, you know. They can become quite consuming.”

“What all did you get done?”

“Oh, you’ll see it when we get there.”

And she certainly did - she gasped when he opened the door, revealing the new electric lighting in the entryway. The little lamps glowed brightly, but not so brightly that it hurt her eyes after being in the dark tunnels.

“It looks wonderful!” she exclaimed, turning in a little circle to take it all in.

“I decided to forgo electric lighting in a few rooms, but I did extend the wiring to each room should I ever change my mind.”

He led her to the sitting room, one of the ones he had chosen not to light electrically, and she agreed with his decision to not do so - the room felt more cozy when the only light came from the fireplace and the gas lamp flames.

“Did you enjoy your week with the boy?” he finally asked, once they were settled in his house.

“I did,” she smiled.

For a brief moment he wanted to ask what, exactly, they had done all week, but was afraid of overstepping his bounds again. The only thing that had kept him from simply following her as she went wherever they had gone was the thought of the betrayed look on her face should she found out.

But she continued, saving him from eternally wondering or having to ask.

“We went to see his sister in the countryside - I always enjoy seeing her so much more than seeing his brother, you know. Those dinners with the Comte are always so awkward,” she paused, frowning. “He makes me feel so out of place at times.”

But Erik didn’t hear the rest of what she had said.

“Comte?” he parroted hollowly. “Why did you have dinner with a Comte?”
Christine tilted her head a little.

“The Comte de Chagny... Raoul’s older brother,” she explained slowly. Did he really not know? Had she neglected to tell him before this?

“Raoul is... Raoul is the Vicomte de Chagny, then?”

Christine nodded, not understanding the stricken look on Erik’s face.

“Monsieur le Vicomte Raoul de Chagny,” he breathed. “Oh.”

He turned away from her. His mind was spinning.

He absentmindedly tried to appear as though he were doing something - something other than descending into horror, that is. He flipped through a few papers on his shelves, moved this little knickknack to there, patted his hands on the spines of some books.

“Oh,” he said again.

Vicomte?

Christine had been out with a vicomte? How did she know a vicomte? Was he- was he her patron? He certainly couldn’t ask her that, he knew better than to even bring that up.

Christine watched him curiously as he set about his pointless little tasks, wondering what was going on in that odd but brilliant mind of his. Her thoughts from earlier in the week drifted back to her. Was he jealous? How strange, she thought.

Erik smoothed down the front of vest repeatedly, trying to gather the presence of mind needed to do or say something.

A vicomte. He hadn’t known.

Christine couldn’t marry a vicomte... could she?

She certainly should, if she got the chance, he knew that much. Christine deserved to be kept in luxury. Silk dresses and ruffled hats and charming little shoes and only the finest stockings. She could have a good life, as a vicomtesse. A comtesse, one day, perhaps. She could sit out in the sun and look out across all the land her husband owned and drink ice cold lemonade and never have to worry about anything ever again.

Erik could not sit in the sun, but his wretched soul was not so immured in shadow that he would try to prevent her from doing so if she were given the chance. She likely wouldn’t be able to sing, afterwards, but she would be safe, well cared for and provided for. She should always be safe and cared for, he thought.

He turned to her suddenly.

“Would you like anything, my dear? Some toast or a bit of fruit, perhaps?”

Christine frowned a little as she shook her head, her concerned eyes resting on his hands. When he had spoken, his tone was sweet and gentle, but his hands twisted in each other’s grasp and squeezed and pulled at the finger joints with such a vehemence that she was afraid he was going to hurt himself.

“No, I’m fine, thank you. Perhaps after our lesson, though?”
“Of course,” he nodded.

Whatever strange mood had seemingly seized him during their discussion of Raoul thankfully melted away during her lesson. After having been away from practice for a little while, the lesson ran long, though neither of them seemed to mind. When it finally ended, he offered her anything from his kitchen and this time she accepted.

A little while later they both sat on the couch and drank their tea, a plate with a little sandwich on it in front of Christine. She lingered over the small meal, wanting to stay downstairs with him as long as she could that day - she had missed him.

After the food was finished and the theater gossip all discussed, Christine stretched and yawned.

“Oh, I’m so tired today, I don’t know what’s come over me.”

“You worked very hard in your lesson today, I’m not surprised,” he paused before adding dryly- “And not to mention how your vicomte has been dragging you all over France this past week.”

Christine giggled, and Erik breathed a sigh of relief - right after having said it, he had begun to fear she would get offended, that she would feel he was unkind to the boy. But she seemed to take it as the joke he had intended it, and he smiled a little.

She leaned back on the couch and sighed.

“I hope you don’t mind if I rest here a little while longer? I simply don’t feel up to the journey above at the moment.”

Erik tried to swallow around the lump in his throat. This was it - the opportunity he hadn’t truly believed would ever come. The room suddenly felt too hot, as though the little fire in the corner had grown and taken over the entire room.

“You are always welcome to stay as long you wish, Christine.”

He stood up, going to bookcase, not to actually look at the books, but just so he wouldn’t have to face her when he said his next words.

“In fact, you could even spend the night here, if you liked.”
Chapter 31

Christine pressed her lips into a thin line, unsure of what he was offering. Spend the night? What did that entail? Spend it with him? In his bed? Was that what he meant? Perhaps he really had been jealous of Raoul, after all.

His pulse was pounding in his ears, his face rather red. He turned to glance back at her and saw that careful look of guarded caution on her face.

“In my guest room,” he rushed to add. “I have a lovely guest room, you know - a-and it locks. The door. It locks.”

He turned away from her again, mortified that he had even brought it up. How could he have voiced this shameful thing? A young woman, staying the night in the house of a man who was not related to her - it flew in the face of propriety! But the timing had seemed so right, she had mentioned she was tired, and didn’t know when such an opportunity would come again...

Though he’d never admit it, the past week he had watched the entrance of the opera house every evening to see if Christine had returned at night or no. And each night the boy had dropped her off on the steps and she’d return to her little dormitory to sleep. She’d never stayed the night with the vicomte.

Of course he knew that her not staying the night didn’t necessarily mean anything - he had accidentally stumbled across enough couples (and occasionally trios) in the opera house during the days and afternoons to know that things didn’t only happen at night. And he also knew that if Christine was doing things with the boy, if she had chosen to do so because she wanted to, then that was entirely her prerogative and decision. But still - he had watched, from the roof, every night. Not because he thought that where she spent her nights was any of his business, but because he simply wanted to reassure himself that she was returning. He knew it was irrational, but he strongly felt that if Christine returned to the Populaire each night, then it meant that she wasn’t planning on eloping with the boy or quitting her singing. Obviously she still might be planning on marrying him or leaving even if she did return at night, but still-

He would work on projects all day long yet even still, every so often the thought would appear in his mind - Christine is never coming back - and he would work even harder to try to drown it out and prove it wrong - how could she be gone forever when he had written an aria for her sing? How could she never be coming back if he had prepared an entire list of new songs she would learn for her next audition? How could she never return to his little house if she hadn’t even seen the electrical lights finished? - and then every evening he would creep up to the roof and stare down at the road with silent despair until the carriage arrived and let her out. Each night she’d return to the opera house, and once she was inside he’d be overcome with guilt for having doubted her - and for having spied on her. Of course she would return to the stage, she loved singing more than anything. And since he just so happened to live under the stage, of course she’d return to him too.

No, Christine had never stayed the night with the boy. But she might stay the night Erik.

“It locks from the inside,” he hastily explained. “Once you lock it from the inside, there’s no key or anything that can be used to open it from the outside. It would be quite impossible to get into, once it’s locked.”

It was true - he had spent a while in her absence reworking the door to the guest room to have such a lock. In the midst of rewiring the entryway, he had been shocked with an image as surely as if it
had been the very electricity running down the wire and sparking in his hands - Christine, sleeping peacefully, curled underneath the fluffy blankets on the big soft bed in his guest room. He had hastily abandoned the wiring, nearly running to the guest room so he could look at the bed and picture it greater detail. Yes, he could see it even clearer then - her long hair curling behind her, her dark eyelashes fanned across her cheeks, her little hand on the pillow next to her face.

He had set to work immediately.

He was nowhere to be found in that fantasy - he certainly had no right to be there, and besides, it was a purely innocent dream. He knew she often had trouble sleeping, she had told him so herself. But down here - down here it was quiet and peaceful and she could slumber undisturbed by anything else in the world. He only wanted her to be able to feel well rested - he knew from experience how awful it was to get no sleep.

But looking at her now, he could tell she still didn’t quite know what to think of his offer, and it pained him - he knew he must have come across as some sort of lecher, even though he truly hadn’t intended anything of the sort.

“Not tonight,” she said firmly, unable to meet his gaze. “Perhaps another time?”

He nodded, watching how she nervously picked at the pillow she had placed protectively on her lap.

“It was just a thought, Christine,” he frowned. “You don’t have to stay if you don’t wish to...”

He added, softly, “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.”

She finally looked up at him and gave him a smile. He wasn’t sure if it was just his own paranoia, or if it truly didn’t look all the way genuine.

“The sandwich was lovely, thank you for making it for me. You’re always so thoughtful, Erik.”

“You’re quite welcome, my dear.”

“I believe I’m rested enough to go back up, now.”

“Certainly,” he nodded, but it did not escape his notice how quickly she had recovered from her fatigue.

He led her upstairs once more, still feeling awkward over the whole thing, though it seemed that she had blessedly chosen to ignore that he had ever mentioned it all.

She wondered about it that night as she tossed and turned on her cot. The springs were digging into her sides again, and the stuffing had lumped up in numerous places. She sighed. The mattress was hardly that old, either - it hadn’t even been a year since she had bought it.

Having been brought up for much of her childhood in poverty, she now hovered between wanting to buy every luxury she could and feeling immense guilt for the luxuries she did buy. She knew the money from Mamma Valerius would not last forever, and her dear Papa had left very little behind for her. She was not on the verge of going broke, but she knew from experience how quickly situations like that could arrive - a splurge here and there added up far faster than one realized. Her salary from the opera was rather meager, though it did pay for some of her expenses. She lived with the fear in the back of her mind of what would happen to her should she one day find herself in need of money. There were options, but none of them pleasant. She hated the thought of having to ask Raoul for money (she knew he would, unhesitatingly, and would never ask for anything in
return, but it felt wrong to her to accept money for nothing - and what could she possibly give him in return?) but she knew with a certainty that she would do just that before she ever enlisted the assistance of a patron. But Christine Daaé also knew how easy it was to suddenly find oneself in the position of doing something one had sworn they’d never do. Her Papa had often taken odd jobs here and there, some rather demeaning (especially for a talented violinist) - but he had never had to do anything like what a patron would ask of her.

It wouldn’t be so bad, perhaps, if the patron was someone like Raoul - someone sweet and considerate. Some of the girls had quite good arrangements with their patrons. Philippe had started out as Sorelli’s patron, and it had grown to something more between them, though she supposed Philippe did still pay her. But for every girl who didn’t feel a deep dread about seeing her patron, there were three that would disappear for an afternoon and come back not wanting to talk about it, or had to use makeup to hide bruises, or would ask for accompaniment on outings due to the fear of running into one of the former patrons alone.

She rolled over onto her back, but it was just as uncomfortable.

It wouldn’t be so bad to have Raoul as a patron, though something about that scenario made her want to cry whenever she thought of it.

She flopped to her side with a huff.

This was the best mattress they made for such a small frame. She could technically afford a better, softer mattress - but in order to do so, she’d have to buy a new bed frame. She’d already shamefully splurged on two new dresses, she couldn’t truly justify the price of a new bed frame and mattress - and besides that, a bigger bed wouldn’t even fit in the little room she occupied. She could rent a bigger room in the opera house, but she definitely could not afford that, let alone any room that wasn’t in the Populaire.

An awful thought appeared in her head, and she scowled in mortification that her own mind would think of such a thing - *what if Erik could be her patron?*

He made a good amount of money from the managers, he would certainly be gentle, and she trusted him... Think of the money she’d save by living with him!

Her scowl deepened. Truly, she hadn’t known the depths of her own deviance until now. What a terrible thought.

But what if Erik already considered himself her patron? What if he intended to collect his perceived due after so many free lessons? The icy grip of fear clutched at her heart. What if that’s what he had been getting at when he had offered for her to stay overnight?

But no, he had been quite adamant about telling her that the door to the guest room locked.

She rolled into her stomach, burying her face in her pillow (but keeping her head turned just enough that her nose could still reach air). She squeezed her eyes shut as a tear or two escaped them.

She didn’t want her childhood best friend or her teacher to give her money in exchange for the use of her, to pay to be with her like that. It felt awful to her, somehow, but she couldn’t even put it into words in her own mind. It wasn’t even the thought of being with either of them in that way - embarrassing or awkward, maybe, but she could cope, could stand to think of it happening. But to be paid for it? That made it feel so different. Besides - it was just another of life’s little cruelties that the one thing that could continue to fund the pursuit of her art was also the one thing that could
surely shatter her future on the stage - what use would she have for grand plans onstage that needed funding if she were to conceive a child?

It firmed her resolve to spend another night on the lumpy cot in her cramped little room. She would save her money and pray that should she ever one day find herself engaging in carnal acts with Raoul or Erik or anyone else, it would be because she wanted to and not because she needed to.

It was a stance she hoped to keep, but all the same, when she woke up and rubbed at the sore muscles in her back and sides, she couldn’t help but wonder just how soft the bed in Erik’s guest room actually was.

Her lesson was that morning, and Erik hesitantly stepped into her dressing room, as though he feared she’d order him to leave at any second. After his awful offer the previous night, who could blame her?

Ah, but the dear girl was too forgiving - that was her fatal flaw, in Erik’s eyes.

“That is up to you, Christine. We do not have to go downstairs if you do not wish, it is entirely up to you. I am just as fine with working here, if you’d rather.”

She frowned a little. Was he still flustered over his invitation to stay the night? She had left rather quickly, but he had surprised her, that’s all! Surely the proof of his intentions towards her were in his actions - he hadn’t really meant anything by it at all.

“I would rather go downstairs, if you don’t mind,” she told him.

Ah, sweet, forgiving Christine. She acted like nothing had happened, like he hadn’t made her uncomfortable at all! She did her lesson in his home, and even stayed for a cup of tea afterwards. She looked him right in the eye and talked as though everything was fine!

Erik agonized over it the rest of the day. Was he taking advantage of her sweet nature? Maybe she simply didn’t know how to act when she was uncomfortable, maybe she just found it easier to pretend everything was okay.

The company was gearing up for the new season. The director was working on stage blocking, and as such had requested that all of the cast be in attendance. Though he had yet to pick the lead and supporting roles, he wanted a feel for how the show would go.

Erik was not in his usual box seat that afternoon. He was instead up in the flies, watching the performers backstage as they waited for the director to need them. He watched Carlotta’s antics for a little while, how she fussed and cooed over her little dog which rested on a silk pillow and occasionally wagged its tail, but his eye was drawn to Christine, who had wandered off a little to be on her own.

She stretched her foot against the wall, and Erik recalled that she had mentioned it was bothering her lately. The ballet mistress had given her a series of stretches to incorporate until it felt better, and Erik was glad that she was diligent in doing so.

It was only a moment later that she was approached by one of the stagehands. Erik narrowed his eyes. It was that Joseph Buquet fellow, and he didn’t care for him at all.

Erik’s heart sank as he watched the man place a hand on her shoulder. She jumped, surprised. His poor Christine. She looked vaguely uncomfortable, and Erik wondered if she ever felt
uncomfortable like that around him, as well.

She turned her back on Buquet, but he was insistent and walked around to face her again.

Erik moved closer, but couldn’t catch whatever they were saying. This insolent boy. How dare he? She obviously didn’t want to talk to him. Erik felt a little stab of guilt - maybe there were times she didn’t really want to talk to Erik, either, but she had allowed it, just like how she wasn’t moving away from the stagehand. Was he just as pushy as Buquet?

Christine frowned and shook her head, turning from him again. She definitely looked upset now, and Erik’s fingers traced the rope he kept coiled in his sleeve for emergencies.

He was loath to reveal himself in such a way to the entire company - but he knew from experience that Christine was too kind a girl to really stand up for herself. She had stood up to Erik on occasion, it was true, but she had always come back to him as well. Was she incapable of truly standing up for herself? She certainly couldn’t actually enjoy Erik’s company that much she’d still stay around him - no, he was a wretched creature, so it must be some sort of flaw on her part. Too meek, too understanding. Too kind and gentle. He would have to intervene here, because he feared she would not do so even if she wanted to.

Buquet pulled a little bag of francs out from his pocket and shook it, placing one hand on her lower back.

She jerked back from his touch, took a wide stance, and slapped him hard across the face with the back of her hand.

Erik stood dumbstruck. His sweet, innocent Christine had just slapped a man in the face.

The ballet girls stopped their chatter at the resounding echo of her knuckles cracking across his cheekbone - they turned to watch just in time to see her flip her hair behind her and stalk towards them, her eyes still shooting daggers at Buquet. They pulled her into their little circle and gave glares of their own to Buquet, who now looked shamefaced, a hand pressed to one side of his face where a red mark was already blooming. Under the judging eyes of the ballerinas, he fled the stage.

Erik didn’t understand. He had never seen Christine react like that to someone - she had certainly never acted like that towards him.

Two thoughts occurred to him at the same time - first, that he needed to keep an eye on this fellow just in case an accident was required, and secondly, that perhaps he wasn’t quite such a repulsive gargoyle in Christine’s eyes.

He needed to check on Christine, and he needed to talk to the Daroga.
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone for your comments! They seriously brighten my day and everyone’s support of my stories means a lot to me :’)

The Persian man sat in the audience, watching the director attempt to block out movement as the orchestra practiced. He hummed along with some of the music. He really did enjoy the theater, though at this point he wasn’t quite certain if he loved it because he always around it or if the love of it had come first - before tailing Erik had become his unofficial career.

He sighed happily. The new production was going to be spectacular. He was quite grateful that the managers allowed him to go wherever he pleased whenever he wished - and they should, after all, considering how much he paid them for the opportunity. As such, he was the only person in the audience. Or so he thought.

A Voice in his ear caused to jump ungracefully.

He twisted in his seat, looking behind him. Erik crouched there in the row just behind him, hat tipped low to hide the white mask, a serious look on what was visible of his face.

“*I need to speak with you,*” The Ghost hissed.

“You’re going to give me a heart attack one day,” the Persian whispered harshly. “Then you’ll be sorry, won’t you?”

Erik arched an eyebrow.

“And just why would I be sorry?”

“Because then you won’t have anyone to ask for advice on your love life,” he snapped.

“I do not have a *love life,*” Erik sputtered, as though the very idea of such a thing was offensive to him - but despite his denial his face turned red.

“Well, what do you need to talk to me about?”

Erik sat sullenly, refusing to answer, too embarrassed now to say that it was about Christine.

“Well?”

“Tell me about Christine,” he said and pouted, crossing his arms - the man was right, he *didn’t* have anyone else to ask about his pathetic semblance of a love life.

The Persian’s brow furrowed.

“What the devil am I supposed to tell you that you don’t already know? Don’t you still tutor her?”

“She slapped a man, Daroga,” he said ominously. “I saw her do it.”
“Oh? Who?”

He had aimed for nonchalance, but Erik narrowed his eyes at him anyway - he knew the man only wanted to know so that if something happened later on - say, if a body should turn up and a certain red rope was involved - he would know what had happened.

“That’s not important, Daroga - as always, you’ve missed the bigger picture.”

“What is?”

There was silence from behind him for the longest while.

“Why hasn’t she slapped me?” he finally asked softly.

The Daroga shifted uncomfortably.

“Erik, if you want the girl to slap you, that’s something you need to bring up with her - what you two do in your private moments is not my business-“

“Not like that, you great oaf,” he snarled, then paused. “I mean- I’m _me_. I thought she was just pretending to like being around me, or perhaps she was simply too polite say anything, but...”

He shrugged helplessly.

“I do not understand,” he whispered.

The Daroga sighed. He hoped he wouldn’t regret the words he was about to tell his old friend - after all, there had been a time that Erik’s enormous guilt and shame had kept his darker impulses in check. Although, he supposed, it was that very same self-loathing and hatred of who - of what - he was that had driven him to be capable of atrocities in the first place.

“Erik,” he said carefully. “Have you ever considered that you might be too hard on yourself? Just sometimes?”

“What does the Daroga mean by that, exactly.”

It felt a statement, not a question.

“You’re so bent on seeing yourself as the monster, Erik, that you can’t even understand when someone sees you as anything else.”

Erik was quite.

“Maybe Christine hasn’t slapped you because she hasn’t had reason to, have you thought of that?”

Erik was at a loss for words.

“Christine is no wilting flower, you know,” he continued.

The Daroga knew this for a fact - he didn’t think he’d ever forget the day he’d seen (not to mention overheard) her verbally accost one of the patrons who had said something to make one of the other girls cry. The man had been quite pale at the end of it, and the Daroga had to admit that even he was a little taken aback as well, though he knew that he had no reason to be on bad terms with her and thus would never be on the receiving end of such a scolding.

“I don’t think she’s the type to be polite for politeness’s sake, not when she’s uncomfortable in a
situation. At least not from what I’ve seen.”

“But Daroga,” he pleaded. “How can she not be uncomfortable around me? How she could she possibly be honest in how she acts towards me? She treats me... she treats me like a normal man, I think.”

“Well then behave like a normal man,” he scoffed. “You are capable of that, aren’t you?”

Erik scowled at the back of the Persian’s head, hoping he could feel his great distaste for him.

“If she treats you like man, Erik - then the only one clinging to the facade of the monster is you.”

There was silence behind him for so long that he turned to glance back. He expected him to be gone, but he was still there, crouched down and looking pensive.

“You don’t think she hates me?” he whispered.

He sighed again.

“I can’t say for certain what she feels, Erik.”

Silence again. When Erik spoke next, it was so quiet that he almost missed it.

“Am I?”

The Daroga frowned. Clearly Erik had been having a conversation in his mind again and had expected the Daroga to keep up.

“Are you what?”

“Capable,” he muttered, eyes downcast.

“Of behaving normally?” he glanced behind. The Daroga wasn’t certain of the answer to that, but for heaven’s sake, the man could at least try.

A terrible thought occurred to him - perhaps this was Erik trying to behave normally. Perhaps all the oddity and bizarreness he found he could expect from the man was the result of his utmost effort to be normal, and if that were the case, who knows what he was really like when he was not pretending? The Daroga felt a little lightheaded and nauseous at the thought.

But Erik shook his head, reminding the Daroga for all the world of a scolded schoolboy.

“Of being normal. Of being... not a monster.”

The Daroga thought over his next words carefully.

“I think that you are capable, if you so choose. Perhaps not entirely normal, but- you don’t have to be a monster. That’s a choice you have to make. And I think you are capable of making the right one.”

“What if she’s faking, Daroga? What if-“ he swallowed hard. “What if she truly thinks me a monster but she’s only pretending otherwise? I’d look a right fool trying to be a normal man when all the while she’s laughing at me behind my back.”

The Daroga mulled this over.
“That could be. But consider this - what will she think of you if she’s being genuine, and you’re rebuffing her opinion of you at every turn? Which option, at the end of all this, would you rather live with - that you tried your very best even though she didn’t see it, or that someone actually saw something in you and believed you were capable of more but you refused that until finally she changed her mind?”

A long silence.

He glanced back again and caught sight of Erik trying to creep away. He frowned. Maybe he was expecting too much of him, after all. Hopefully he didn’t end his lessons with Christine in such a fashion.

“Erik,” he said tiredly.

Erik paused mid-creep.

“Aren’t you even going to say thank you?” he was irritated now - he hadn’t been able to focus on anything on stage.

Erik stayed in that terrible crouch that made the Daroga’s knees ache just to look at, and without turning around, he asked a question that was often on his mind when he thought of the Daroga.

“Would you still be around me if your pension wasn’t at stake, Daroga?”

The question hung heavy in the air.

After the Shah had ordered Erik executed, the Daroga had helped Erik escape and found a body to pass off as Erik’s. He had then retired, receiving a pension that had ensured he’d never have to worry about money again - but that pension and good standing in his home country was dependent on his last job having been done - executing Erik. Should the Opera Ghost go off the rails and somehow draw enough attention to himself that Persia should notice... The Daroga would be the one being executed for his deception. And how could an executed man receive a pension?

“Yes.”

The answer surprised both of them.

The Daroga liked to think it was true. If things had been different, if it had ended better in Persia, perhaps he wouldn’t have sought Erik out after he retired, perhaps he would have gone someplace other than France for his retirement. Perhaps he would have been fine to let his acquaintanceship with Erik fade into the past. He couldn’t say for certain. Fate had decided that this was what his future would hold, however, and to his mind it was pointless to think about the way things might have been. But he did know one thing for certain, and also that maybe Erik was asking not this specific question - but maybe he was looking for an answer to a certain other question. Maybe Erik didn’t want to know if he would still be around him otherwise, maybe he merely wanted to know if the Daroga thought him a monster.

“Erik, I saw your worst sins, and I still saw something in you worth saving.”

And this, at least, was true.

“Do you think I would have gone to such trouble for you if I didn’t care about you? If I didn’t think you deserved to be saved?”

Erik sucked in a deep breath. He didn’t like talking about their time in Persia, and this was the
closest they had come to talking about it directly.

“If could see that way back then, in the midst of all that, how much more do you think Christine sees now?”

Erik blinked hard and cleared his throat. He would not cry in front of the Daroga, he would not.

It was suddenly too much for him.

“Thank you,” he croaked out and tried to continue his escape.

The precarious crouch he was in didn’t last, however, and when he was halfway away from his destination of sinking into the shadows, he fell forward on his knees, his hands breaking his fall before his face could meet the ground. The Daroga quickly looked away, pretending he hadn’t seen. The Opera Ghost had been practically benevolent lately compared to his past behavior, but essentially falling on his face in front of someone was definitely the sort of thing to awaken his ire again.

Erik opted to crawl the rest of the way to the shadowy side of the auditorium, cringing. He dearly hoped the Daroga hadn’t seen, but couldn’t risk pausing to look back. He would simply pretend that he hadn’t seen, and if the old fool brought it up later, well, he would deal with that then. First, he needed to get back to Christine. He had left her! What if Buquet came back?

But Buquet was back at his post when Erik arrived backstage once more. Christine had strayed from the group of dancers once more, though this time she hadn’t gone as far. He threw his voice down to her, and she glanced around, trying to see where he was but also trying to not draw attention.

“Nod if you’re alright, my dear.”

She leaned down to check the ribbon on her pointe shoe, nodding as she did - but the look on her face said otherwise. He frowned.

“Meet me underneath the box seats.”

She looked around herself, stretched a little, and milled about for a moment before slipping away to stand in the shadowy wings that were overhung by the box seating. Erik appeared at her side suddenly, but she didn’t startle.

“What did Buquet want from you? What did he say?”

Her face turned red. How was she supposed to speak about such delicate matters with him? And she certainly couldn’t repeat the vulgar words Joseph had used!

“He, um, he wanted... wanted to pay me for, ah- t-things,” her voice wavered.

“What things?” Erik was confused.

“Just things, Erik,” she scowled, and made some vague gestures with her hands, her face turning even redder.

He frowned a little, his eyes suddenly going wide when he realized what her hand gestures were reminiscent of. He embarrassingly hadn’t even realized it was something of that sort, or he wouldn’t have pressed the issue with her.
“Oh! Oh- oh, Christine...”

He paused for a moment. Should he offer to kill him for her? He would do it, if she asked. Hadn’t he seen with his own eyes how Christine had repeatedly said no, only for Buquet to continue to insist? He surely deserved the lasso, and what’s more, Christine deserved to feel safe from grabbing hands.

“I’m so sorry. Are you sure you’re alright, Christine?”

She nodded, looking out across the auditorium, crossing her arms in front of her.

“I’ll be okay.”

“But he put his hands on you.”

“I don’t think he’ll try it again. And if he does...” her eyes lit up. “Maybe the Ghost could-“

“Anything, Christine,” he said seriously, his grip on the lasso tightening.

“Could scare him a little.”

“Oh. Yes. Yes, scare him...”

Erik cleared his throat.

“Thank you for checking on me,” she said softly, as she turned and looked at him.

In the dim lighting his amber eyes seemed to glow, and it was strange and thrilling to her.

He thought back to the conversation he had just had with the Daroga - was she really being genuine? It seemed so, but was that only because he wished to believe it?

“Of course. Are you sure you’ll be alright?”

“Yes,” she paused, wrinkling her nose. “But aren’t the paint fumes a little strong?”

He looked up to the stage. That fool of a director had insisted on the new backdrops being painted in the lighting they would displayed in, so he had made them be dragged up on stage. And she was right - they were strong.

“Hmm,” he glared at the wet pain on the big panels of wood and the various prop pieces that were being worked on. “It is.”

“I don’t know why they couldn’t wait until after the performers are gone,” she rolled her eyes.

“Do you feel like you need fresh air?”

“No, I don’t think so. It’s just annoying.”

She made to leave.

“Christine-“

She paused and looked back at him.

“Yes?”
“Do you make a habit of slapping men?” there was a hint of humor to his voice, a bit of curiosity.

She smiled a little, her eyes sparkling as she replied.

“Only when they make a habit of being monsters.”

She took her leave of him and made her way backstage once more, settling into the group of dancers.

Erik stared after her, wondering at her choice of words.

“Christine!” Meg cried. “I was about to go looking for you, I didn’t see where you went!”

Meg pulled her friend into the circle and cast a suspicious eye all around, as though Buquet were still lurking.

“I’m fine, Meg,” she assured her, patting her arm. “I just stepped away for fresh air.”

Meg sighed.

“Oh, I know - it’s awfully strong, isn’t it?”

“Christine, what are you doing for your birthday?” Alexis piped up.

All eyes turned to Christine, and finding herself the center of attention, she felt suddenly shy.
“My birthday is in two weeks,” Sonia said. “I’m going on a trip to Greece!”

“Oh, I went to Austria for my birthday last month,” another girl nodded.

“Christine, are you going anywhere?”

“Yes, are you doing anything fun?”

“Oh, of course I am,” she hoped her words held a conviction she did not.

In truth, she hadn’t planned anything. She had been so busy, first with Raoul, and then with gearing up for the new production. Hearing the other girls talk about their fancy getaways made her envious, and she suddenly wanted to do something special.

But what could she even do? Ice cream with Meg and a few others had been a favorite when she was younger, but that seemed rather childish now. A trip was more suitable for a young woman her age, or a day at a spa - but the other girls who took trips were able to do so because they had boyfriends or patrons who paid for the expenses. She couldn’t afford a trip out of France - she could barely afford a trip out of Paris.

The other girls oohed and aahed.

“Where are you going?”

“Yes, where?”

She looked down, bashful, and smoothed her hands over her tulle ballet skirt.

“Just out,” she said demurely, her face tinged pink.

The girls giggled, assuming the color in her face was indicative of the secret suitor that several of them were convinced she had - but in actuality it was because she was embarrassed over her lie.

“Oh, will you be away for the night?”

She smiled a little and looked up at the ceiling.

“Oh, I knew it!” Colette squealed. “Oh, is he very handsome?”

She looked off to the side.

“Hmm,” was her only reply.

Colette heaved a dreamy sigh before shoving Sonia’s shoulder.

“I told you she was seeing someone!” she giggled.

Christine kept smiling politely, her eyelashes lowered. On the inside she was screaming at herself - now look what she’d done! She’d have to find someplace to stay overnight for her birthday, and she couldn’t afford that! But she also couldn’t afford not to - if she stayed in her dormitory for her birthday night, the other girls would never let her live it down. They’d tease her relentlessly for having pretended. She might be able to make up a story about a secret beau who had dumped her
on her birthday - thus stranding her with no fancy trip away. But what if they found out that was a lie too? That would be even worse!

She’d stay with Adele, she told herself. Yes, that could work. No one would have to know, and Adele wouldn’t mind the sudden imposition.

A sandbag dropped from the flies, landing much too close to a prop that was being sanded down.

Shouts and exclamations went up, as did an enormous cloud of dust.

Christine and the other girls started coughing, and scurried off to find an easier place to breathe. Christine shot a parting glare up to the flies, and caught sight of Buquet there. Petty revenge for her having embarrassed him in front of the company, she supposed, and coughed again.

But the next day she realized it wasn’t so petty after all. She awoke with a cough that still lingered, and a sore throat from the paint fumes.

She groaned and put her hands over face. She had a lesson with Erik tomorrow!

She quickly dressed and made her way backstage, hoping she might catch a glimpse of him. She heard a gentle footstep behind one of the curtains, and moved to look behind it.

But it wasn’t Erik, and she gave a little gasp.

It was the Persian man.

“Oh, good day, Monsieur,” she quickly collected herself.

“Mlle Daaé, it is good to see you again,” he replied with a little bow. “Are you, ah, looking for someone, perhaps?”

“I am, in fact,” she smiled. “Are you, as well?”

“It seems we hold a similar goal,” he returned her smile. “I was just about to head to Box Five, would you like to join me? I believe I saw some movement in there a moment ago.”

They ascended the stairs together, and he motioned for her to knock, which she did.

“Erik?” she called quietly.

The door swung open.

“Christine,” Erik breathed, standing in the doorway. “My dear, what are you doing h-“ he caught sight of the Daroga behind her. “The devil do you want, Daroga?”

Christine’s eyebrows flew up. She had never heard his tone go from so sweet and tender to so childishly petulant before.

“I merely wanted to see that you were well, Erik.”

“I’m well,” he said flatly, then looked back down at Christine.

“Come in, my dear,” he held the door open for her, and she entered.

The Daroga made to follow her, but Erik put his hand on the doorframe, blocking him from entering.
“You were not invited, you great booby,” Erik hissed poisonously, before placing a hand in the middle of the man’s chest and roughly pushing him backwards.

Once he was out of the doorway, Erik slammed the door, locking it for good measure.

He turned on his heel and faced Christine, his features softening.

“What can I do for you, sweet?”

Christine gaped at him.

“How could you treat him so shamefully?”

“He’s a meddling old ninny, Christine,” he muttered, straightening his jacket and not meeting her eye. “He has no right to be in here, he knows that-“

Christine coughed into her hand, and he paused mid sentence.

“Christine- no lesson tomorrow,” he said firmly. “Not until that cough clears up.”

“That’s what I wanted to tell you,” she frowned. “I can’t sing like this.”

He nodded.

“Quite right, my dear. Take some time off and feel better.”

She nodded her head, and lingered in the box - and even though Erik thought the conversation had run its course, he was not about to send her on her way again. No, she could stand there and stare at him all day if she wished, he was not about to cut short their time together.

She cleared her throat nervously and her hands fidgeted.

“Erik,” she started, eyes darting to him and away. “There’s, ah, there’s a restaurant that sells this soup that’s so wonderful... and I know you don’t go to restaurants, at least I don’t think you do, but- but I can get the soup to take home, and I was wondering...”

She pushed a stray curl behind her ear, staring down at her feet.

“Would you like to eat soup with me?”

Erik was as still as a statue. Eat soup with her? What?

She lifted her gaze to his blank face. She had bungled it, she knew, and tried to explain.

“Tomorrow, I mean. Instead of our lesson. We could have it in my dressing room, or I suppose we could even have it in here. I know it would probably get cold by the time we took it to your house,” she frowned. “But I think you’d like to try this soup, really.”

It made no sense to Erik - most things that had happened that day made no sense to him.

If she treats you like a man, then the only one clinging to the facade of the monster is you

“That... would be quite lovely Christine,” he attempted a smile, hoping she wasn’t having a go at him.

But her face lit up and she grinned at him, and how could ever say no to her when she looked just
like an angel?

“May I ask something?” he frowned.

“Of course.”

“Why?”

It was her turn to frown.

“What do you mean?”

“Why do you still want to spend time with me, if not for a lesson?”

There was an undercurrent of vulnerability in his voice, and it made her heart ache.

“Because you’re my friend,” she said simply. “Because I missed spending time with you when I was away all week. I like spending time with you, did you not know that?”

“Oh.”

She bit her lip as she waited for him to say something - anything - else, but it seemed he was done talking.

“Well then, I suppose I’ll see you tomorrow at our regular time? Is in here okay with you?”

That seemed to pull him from his reverie.

“Yes, of course. That’s fine,” he hesitated. “Do you- do you need money for the soup? I’m sure you normally wouldn’t be buying two lunches...”

“Oh, no, don’t worry about that! Besides, I’ve eaten so much of your own food in your home, you’ve always been so kind - but please let me take care of this meal.”

He acquiesced, although he didn’t agree (he should be the one providing for her, after all, he had piles of ill-gotten money and she was on a budget).

They said their goodbyes and Erik peered outside the door, looking this way and that to make sure the nosy Daroga wasn’t outside spying on him (he wouldn’t put it past him), he swung wide the door so Christine could leave.

He sat in silence a while after she had left, contemplating.

They had eaten together a number of times before, that was nothing new. But it had always been because her lesson had run long and she needed a meal afterwards, or because she needed a moment to rest after her journey underground, and what better way to rest than with a little snack? Christine was not like him - she was a normal person who needed to eat several times a day to feel well. It was purely out of necessity that she ate her meals around him or in his home... wasn’t it?

He was suddenly unsure. Did she truly wish to spend her free day, her extra day that she didn’t have to be in presence - did she really want to eat lunch with him when she didn’t have to?

But she had asked, hadn’t she?

He was baffled by it all - she had even said that she enjoyed spending time with him. What an odd concept, almost unbelievable, really. But... she had said it, and he didn’t think she was being
completely false.

He suddenly remembered what else she had said - *because you're my friend* - and he was hit with a wave of affection for her that nearly overwhelmed him, a warmth in chest that spread across him, threatening to consume him entirely. He stood and made his way back home, intent on finding something else to occupy his mind lest he die of love for the dear girl.

The next evening, after a tedious day of waiting around on stage while the director bumbled through the libretto, she walked as fast as she could to the little restaurant, her cheeks glowing as she put her money down on the counter. She couldn’t help the little flutter in her chest at the thought of their impending lunch together. She swiftly returned to the opera house and knocked on the door to Box Five and he let her in.

The chairs in the box seats could be moved any way one wished, so two were pulled up next to the table and Christine settled their food in front of each of them.

“This is my favorite soup to have when my throat doesn’t feel it’s best,” she told him, and handed him a small wooden spoon. “It always helps me feel better. It’s an Italian recipe.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Whenever I think of Italy, I think of Carlotta.”

“Ew! Erik!” she laughed. “Don’t ruin it for me!”

“Now, now - it ruined it for me, too, my dear.”

He took a taste.

“But I must admit, it is good.”

“I knew you’d like it,” she smiled as she stirred hers.

They talked on matters of no real consequence until Erik asked that fateful question-

“What do you have planned for your birthday coming up?”

She paused, then ducked her head.

“Nothing, really.”

“Oh, Christine - that won’t do. You should do something fun. Birthdays come but once a year.”

She squirmed.

“I was going to-“

She was about to tell him about staying at Adele’s, about how that came about, but she cut herself off.

She wouldn’t need to go all the way to Adele’s.

Erik had a lovely home, did he not?

And he *had* offered.
“Erik.”
She looked down at the table, propping her elbow on it and resting her chin on her hand.

“Erik, what are you doing two days from now?”

His brow furrowed, unable to see what she was getting at. He shrugged a little.

“I don’t think I’m doing anything. Why?”

She chewed at her lip before looking him in the eye and straightening up.

“I was thinking, that is, if you aren’t too busy and didn’t mind, maybe- maybe I could stay the night with you for my birthday?”
His eyes widened as he froze with the spoon in his mouth.

“I-in your guest room, I mean,” she stammered.

“You can stay in my guest room whenever you wish, Christine,” he rushed to tell her, not meeting her eye and hoping that somehow she would miss the blush of color across his face. “Of course you can stay for your birthday.”

He hesitated.

“Are- are you quite sure, though? That’s really what you want to do for your special day?”

She fiddled with her spoon, shrugging a little.

“It’s not a very special day, I’m afraid,” she sighed. “I’m not really doing anything special to mark the occasion - all the other girls were bragging about their fancy trips, but I’m not able to do anything like that... But they, er, somehow got the idea that I would be going away on a little trip, anyway. I’d feel so silly staying in my dormitory.”

It was only after she said it that she suddenly felt silly for even having said that to him - what if he got mad at her? What if it upset him that she was only using his generous offer of the guest room to avoid the other girls?

But he nodded understandingly, and didn’t seem upset in the least.

“Well,” he said conspiratorially. “They’ll never guess the truth of the matter, I believe.”

She smiled sadly at him. Anyone else, upon hearing her reasoning, might have been offended at seeming to be her second choice, but not poor Erik - or if he was offended, he didn’t show it.

“But,” she said. “Staying with you will make the day plenty special. I don’t need anything else.”

Erik was quiet. He was pondering over a different world, one where he looked like everyone else so that he could whisk Christine away on a fantastic journey, one that would put all the other girls’ trips to shame, the kind of trip Christine deserved. She had traveled as a child, he knew that, but now he would take her to vineyards in Italy, and snowy town squares in Russia, and balmy jungles in the Far East where they would see elephants and tigers and all the other animals she’d only ever seen in a cage.

But he was no better than that tiger down at the zoological garden - he was trapped, unable to leave. He couldn’t give her that wonderful trip any more than that tiger could finally roam free in its native home.

He sighed a little. Christine deserved so much, and he was able to give so little.

She started a bit at his sigh. Was he offended, then? She shifted a little.

“If my throat feels better by then,” she offered. “I’ll sing for you.”

He was pulled back from his gloomy thoughts.
“Of course, sweet. Only if you feel better.”

They finished their soup and talked of this and that, although Christine thought he seemed rather distracted throughout the rest of the meal.

Before they parted they made arrangements that he would meet her at secret entrance on the Rue Scribe side in the early morning, and he would escort her downstairs where she would stay until the later part of the evening the following day - plenty of time for the ballet rats to think she’d been swept away by some mystery suitor.

When she left he went immediately down to his home - there was so much to do to prepare her room.

He stripped the bed of the sheets and blankets that had sat there for ages, intending on washing them, but swiftly realized that they were terribly old - he couldn’t even remember how old. That would never do. He dumped them to the bottom of the lake and set out to buy new linens.

He hated going outside, he truly did - but this was for Christine, so he found it was quite necessary.

He brought the new sheets back, but dragged the mattress off the frame first to shake the dust off it (what if a spider lived inside of it, and crawled out and frightened poor Christine? He wouldn’t have her be frightened of anything in his house!). When he thought it seemed fresh enough he replaced the mattress and stretched the sheets over it, placing the soft blankets on top. Newly purchased pillows were fluffed and settled with the utmost of care, and then his attention was turned to the old rug on the floor. Why was it so old? Why was all of his furniture so old? The thought made him uncomfortable.

He took the rug and strung it up outside his house, and he smacked it with the rug-beater until there were no more clouds of dust coming off of it. He repeated a similar course of action with the draperies on the walls, and when that was finished he dusted every surface he could find in the room, polished all of the wood and swept the floor.

The room was spotless and awaited her arrival, but still Erik fidgeted and fretted over her upcoming visit. She had never seen the guest room before (the room that he was already starting to think of as Christine’s room instead of the nebulous term guest room) and he hoped she liked it. What if she thought the furniture too old fashioned? What if he hadn’t cleaned it well enough?

But soon enough the day arrived and he found himself immaculately dressed as he stood in the shadows and offered his gloved hand to help her into the tunnel.

She smiled shyly at him, nervous, as she clutched the carpet bag she had packed earlier. She was dressed finely, too - her going-out overcoat and her gloves and a hat, her hair pinned up and her lips painted an appealing shade of pink.

She was still blushing slightly from the curious looks the other girls had all given her as they had watched her walk out of the dormitories with her carpet bag, all dressed up and headed who-knew-where with who-knew-who. A few girls had called out to her, well wishes and hopes for an enjoyable journey, and she had simply ducked her head and blushed all the more.

She didn’t like to talk about her personal life like that - the fact that she barely had anything at all to even talk about had nothing to do with it. She assumed even if she was going out with someone, she still wouldn’t want to talk about it. So she hadn’t said anything at all, and let the girls wonder and come to their own conclusions as they saw her leave the opera house.
She glanced up at him as they walked down the dark tunnels, biting back a funny little smile. What a pair they made, she thought. Both dressed so beautifully as though they were off to somewhere grand, when the only place they were going was a glorified cellar in what could rightly be called a sewer.

“Forgive me,” he started off as they began the trek to his house. “It’s still rather early, you know. I’m afraid I’m not quite up to conversation at the moment.”

She nodded sympathetically.

“It’s alright,” she assured him.

Much of the trip was spent in silence, but true to her word, she didn’t really mind.

Her mind was buzzing with enough thoughts to occupy her attention, anyway.

It was to be the first time she’d stayed overnight in a man’s house alone with him. In some ways it felt like a big step in her relationship with him (whatever that relationship actually was), but in some ways it only felt like a natural extension of what had already come before it - she’d stay entire afternoons with him, had meals with him in his home after and tea before lessons, why should she not simply linger there a little longer?

She squeezed her hands around the handle of the carpet bag, the evidence that it would not be quite so simple as that.

She wouldn’t just be staying in his house, she’d be undressing in his house, wearing her nightclothes in his house.

She twisted the handle around a little.

If she thought hard enough about it, she could imagine that since he lived in the cellar of the building, didn’t that mean that technically all of the opera house was his home? Didn’t that make the entire building simply extra rooms in the house he lived? Why, if one looked at it that way, there were dozens of girls who stayed overnight every night, undressing and dressing in his home - herself included. Talk about scandalous.

She huffed a little laugh at the thought, but stifled herself quickly, eyes darting to Erik, afraid he’d ask what was funny, and she certainly couldn’t explain that to him!

But he hadn’t even seemed to notice her laugh, he barely seemed to register anything as he stared out across the lake and mechanically poled the gondola across.

She spared a moment of concern for him - he didn’t look entirely well, and he hadn’t blinked in quite a while. His movements were stiff as he tied the boat to the dock, and his key rattled in the doorway as though his hands were unusually clumsy.

“Erik,” she ventured as they entered his home. “Are you feeling all right?”

He hesitated before answering.

“I am not a normal man, Christine,” he said quietly. “And as such, I do not often stick to the schedules of normal men, either. I am afraid, my dear, that I don’t often sleep at normal times. There is no sunlight down here, as you know, so even though it is morning up above, I feel as though it’s far past the middle of the night.”
She frowned as she thought over what he had said.

“Oh! Oh, poor Erik - it’s quite past your bedtime, then, isn’t it?”

His mind was not so slow as it reacted to her words, the tips of his ears coloring as she fretted over him as though he were a child to be taken care of. It was not an entirely unappealing scenario playing out before him, though he regretted that any action of his would cause her pretty face to frown like that.

“You must be terribly tired. How long have you been up?”

He couldn’t lie to her, so he opted to not answer at all - is his agonizing over making sure his house was presentable for an overnight guest, he had neglected to sleep for at least two nights. Luckily, she was undaunted by his lack of response and continued to talk.

“You simply just go get some rest, Erik.”

He shook his head stubbornly.

“No, no - I would be quite remiss to have a guest and then retire to my room. Besides, it is your birthday. I should be doing something for you…”

His eyes scanned the room distantly, as though he was looking through the walls and observing his entire house.

“Would you like me to play for you?”

She pouted.

“I’d like you to sleep, Erik. Please - I don’t want you to feel poorly on my account. I’d much rather you rest.”

“Let me show you to your room and get you some breakfast first,” he sighed.

He led her to the doorway of the guest room and opened the door for her, setting foot inside only to show her how the lock worked and swiftly stepping back outside. She placed her carpet bag at the foot of the bed, looking around with wide eyes.

“It’s lovely,” she said, and he smiled.

“Come, let’s get you something to eat, dear,” he ushered her back down the hallway and to the kitchen.

He lit the samovar and began preparing tea for her, and then set about making her some food.

Once it was finished, he took it to the dining room where he set a place for her and sat down in the chair next to it. She sat down, thanking him.

“I believe, if you do not mind too terribly, that I will retire for a while after all.”

She looked up from her food, surprised.

“Don’t you want anything to eat?”

He shook his head.
“The house and everything in it is at your disposal, sweet. You may go wherever you wish and use whatever you please - there is more food and drink in the kitchen as well, and you may have whatever you like. Only,” he paused. “I only ask that you not enter my bedroom, Christine.”

He looked down at his feet, his voice suddenly quiet.

“I must remove my mask to sleep, and I do not wish for you to be frightened.”

She nodded solemnly, and he looked up again.

“I will see you in a little while, my dear. Enjoy your breakfast,” and he stood to leave.

“I hope you sleep well, Angel.”

She smiled at him so sweetly, so kindly, that his sleep deprived mind caused his hand to raise - the start of a movement to cup his hand to her cheek, a gesture of the affection he felt for her - but he suddenly caught himself, horrified at what he had been about to do, and let his hand drop to his side where it clenched into a fist. He turned and left the room without another word.

She watched him go, just a little disappointed - a feeling that surprised her a bit. She had thought for certain he was going to touch her face or her hair or perhaps her shoulder, but either she had misread him or he had thought the better of it.

Christine felt a little lonely in the dining room all by herself, but she was glad Erik was going to get some sleep. When she had been pressing him to go rest after they first arrived, she had nearly let slip the comment, you look awful - but she managed to bite it back in time, knowing that it would surely hit a sensitive spot with him, despite the fact that she only meant he looked exhausted. The poor man.

She finished her breakfast and washed the plate in the sink, carefully drying it afterwards. Erik typically made a fuss about her not having to do dishes when she ate with him, but Erik was currently asleep, and she wanted to do whatever she could to ease his burdens, even if it was as simple as washing a dish.

Her dish clean, she was suddenly at a loss of what to do next. She had no idea how long Erik would sleep for - with the way he looked, she wouldn’t be surprised if he didn’t wake until tomorrow.

She decided to return to her room. She found that the door on the other side of the bed led to an ornate bathroom, and she wondered briefly what it would be like to take a bath in the large tub. She walked back into the bedroom, and pulled her few articles of clothing out of the carpet bag and spread them across the bed. Her dressing gown she hung in the empty wardrobe, along with her dress for the next day.

Into the dresser she placed her folded nightgown, a fresh set of bloomers, and new chemise, her face a little pink as she closed the drawer.

Her task done, she wandered the little house. It was deathly quiet inside, and she walked as softly as she could, afraid to disturb the silence. She glanced at the closed door that she knew led to Erik’s bedroom, thought of him sleeping inside, probably tucked under a number of blankets on a soft mattress, his mask off so as to not chafe the sensitive skin there.

She couldn’t help the little shudder she gave as she thought of his unmasked face, even as she was lanced with compassion for the difficulties he had dealt with his entire life because of it. She wasn’t frightened of that face as he thought she might be - but all the same, it had been a little
gruesome to see.

She walked past his door, past the eerie silence that emanated from there too, and made her way to the sitting room where she searched his tall bookshelves till she found a title in a language she could read that looked interesting, and she sat down to read it.

She wasn’t certain how long she had read for, but she ended up halfway through the book, which was several hundred pages long in its entirety. She rubbed at her eyes and stretched, stiff from sitting for so long. A little walk was what she needed, so she stood and walked and eventually found herself in his work room.

She approached the so-called architectural model and peered inside the windows of it, hoping to catch sight of the lovely Christine doll that lived there. Her little self was sadly nowhere to be found, nor was the tiny Erik - though she noticed the Carlotta doll was sitting on the front steps of the opera house for some reason. Unable to remember how, exactly, he had opened up the doll house - the model - and afraid to accidentally break it, she was unable to find the whereabouts of her other self. She stared at the Carlotta on the steps, her little arms crossed, her face painted in a permanent scowl, and Christine smiled at her.

Did Erik act out scenes with them? Did he throw his voice like she knew he sometimes did, to make it appear as though they were actually talking? Did he use that awful falsetto of his that made her nearly burst with hysterical giggles every time she heard it?

She smiled wider just thinking of it.

She caught sight of the harp she had given him on one of the worktables, the strings in the process of being replaced, and, as she looked closer, the chipped paint had been repaired as well. It made her terribly happy to know that he was enjoying it enough to give it a place among his own creations and personal projects.

She turned her focus to the many drawings tacked to the walls, and to the ones left in piles that she carefully sorted through - charcoal sketches of people (among the many on the table, she found one of all the ballet rats preparing for a rehearsal on stage - each one was captured perfectly, and she stared for a long time at the rendering of her there in that group, holding to Meg’s arms and leaning forward, grinning mirthfully at something just off the edge of the paper. The other girls all held various looks of boredom, except for Meg, who looked like she was in on the secret Christine seemed to have), watercolors of landscapes (some places she had been as a child, places that made her heart twist with nostalgia, and some places she never seen before that made her long to experience them - had Erik really been to all of these places himself? He must have, because she didn’t think he could have captured them so perfectly otherwise), and architectural blueprints which she studied very closely, trying to understand the layout of how the house would look in real life once it was built.

There was one in particular she liked - from the outside it looked unassuming, a normal house, but on the inside it held many rooms in a curious layout, unlike any she’d seen before. It would be exciting to live there, she thought. Something about the design drew her in right away. The little boxes and semicircles and hexagons that outlined the walls had little words written in them, some with question marks, as though the label of what each room would be was still up for debate - wife’s apartment? library part 2? indoor garden room (skylights + plenty of windows, the scrawled note under the name read)? guest room? parlor for parties? - two rooms in particular had been named only for the name to scratched out, the first was “nursery?”, and the second was “shared apartment?”, although after the second one had been crossed out, the same name was written below it again, this time with two question marks after it.
She heard a small rustled by the doorway, and looked up to see a slightly less tired Erik standing in the doorway.

“This is such an interesting house,” she said, holding the design up.

His heart, still sluggish from having been asleep, suddenly began to pound uncomfortably in his ears.

“Oh?” he came closer, desperately hoping it wasn’t the design he was afraid it was.

She nodded.

“It looks so full of possibilities. It would be exciting to live there, I think.”

He peered over her shoulder, and the blood drained from his face when he saw which one it was.
Chapter 35

She had no way of knowing, of course, that this was the house he had designed for her - for them, the house he came up with in the hopes that should she ever become his wife, they could live in together. There was no marking anywhere on the paper to signify that it was Christine and Erik’s house, no words or notes to give that away - but Erik knew, Erik knew of the long hours he had poured into creating a house that might please her, of the sleepless nights he’d spend shamefully imagining a life with her, of how he dared to picture those things with her there by his side...

His very soul burned with shame as he looked down at the life he had planned out so meticulously, at the audacity of designing a bedroom that they would share as though she’d ever want something like that with him. She was naively innocent of the whole thing, but he - he was not.

He closed his eyes and fervently wished that she had never seen the plans - if for no other reason than the fact that she had said aloud that she liked them, liked the thought of living there - that was something he could have done without hearing.

She liked the house, yes, she liked it on paper - but just like fairy story that had been her favorite (had he ruined that story for her? He never thought to ask before, if she’d ever been able to look upon the tale of the little bird and the sad princess again and not feel the stomach-churning punch of betrayal from his actions) just like that story she had held so dear, he knew that she would not be so receptive to the actual fact of it in real life.

On paper it might delight her and send her imagination soaring, but the reality of it before her would only serve to make her tremble and cry.

He opened his weary eyes.

When he had been a very small child, on occasion his mother would become irritated at his constant, quiet presence, and send him outside to play in the woods with Sasha, the dog.

There had been a time that he had been chasing Sasha and laughing, only for her to suddenly turn and start to chase him - a favorite game of theirs. They took turns chasing each other, his laughter ringing out and her tail wagging, both so lost in the game that neither one noticed the steep ravine until it was too late.

When he managed to return home, he was crying and Sasha had her tail between her legs - his arms and legs had been scratched badly by the tumble, and his neck and shoulder ached terribly. Sasha had a few scratches a well. His mask had been lost somewhere in the sticks and stones at the bottom of the ravine, and though he had searched and searched, he was unable to find it until finally he was overcome by his injuries and his fear and had given up on finding the mask.

His mother had scowled at him as he approached, taking a step back.

“Go up to your room,” she had snapped at him.

Erik had hesitated a moment before turning and painfully going up the stairs to the attic. He hadn’t wanted to go upstairs - all he had wanted was to be held and told he would be all right (did that pain in his neck mean he was dying? He didn’t want to die!) but he knew better than to ask for that. The last time he had reached for her as though to hug her, she had very nearly shoved him to the ground, and he knew that if she pushed him now, it would hurt very much since he had already fallen once that day.
So he had settled on the blanket on the floor in his small room, crying quietly to himself, scared and alone.

Sasha had come in to lick at his scrapes and rest her furry head on his knee, and he hugged the dog like he wished he was able to hug his mother.

It had been a little later that his mother had set a brown bottle and few clean cloths outside his doorframe.

“Use this to clean your cuts,” she had told him.

“Can you help me, Maman?” he had whispered uncertainly. “Please, I’m scared.”

She frowned and shook her head, not quite looking directly at him.

“No, I can’t help you. I’m busy, I have to make a new mask because you were careless with yours,” she snapped before quickly leaving.

He rose on shaky feet to retrieve the bottle and cloths, pouring some out and wiping it down his bloodstained arms and legs. It stung, and made his eyes water again, but he kept at it until he had cleaned them all. He turned with a sigh towards Sasha, carefully picking through her fur for her own cuts, and pressing a clean cloth to those. She growled a little, but she trusted him.

He had fallen asleep that night with his head pillowed in Sasha’s fur, the blanket wrapped around them both.

When he had awoken the next morning, his neck and shoulder hurt less, but the healing scrapes and cuts felt itchy.

“Erik!” his mother called sharply.

He followed the sound of voice and met her in the sitting room. She held out a newly made mask to him, not looking in his direction. Her hand trembled just slightly.

“Thank you, Maman,” he said politely as he took it from her - he always tried his very best to be polite to her, because maybe then she wouldn’t cringe when he addressed her, and maybe, just maybe, she would finally smile at him.

She glanced at him after he had put it on, her frown deepening. He was scratching at the cut on his knee.

“Erik, no!” she scolded him.

He froze. What had he done? He wasn’t even doing anything!

“If you keep picking at it, it’ll never heal!” she told him.

He had nodded, and wrung his hands in anxiety. Never heal? How awful.

He kept her words in mind over the next week or so, but even still, he found he couldn’t help but pick and scratch at them. They itched! How could he help that? Sometimes he scratched too hard, too deep, and he would bleed just a little. He would burst into tears at the sight of that, and pray rosaries and beg and plead with the saints for forgiveness of his wicked disobedience, uttering promises of never picking at them at them again if they could please just heal and not itch, but no matter how fervent the prayers or how earnest the intention - it would itch, and he would scratch,
and sure enough they took ages to heal because of his fidgeting hands.

He looked down at the blueprints from behind Christine.

This house was the scratch for the itch that was his obsession with Christine. It only served to hurt him deep in his soul, but he couldn’t stop, and he had long since given up on praying.

“Do you truly like it, Christine? You aren’t just trying to flatter your tutor?"

“No, it’s very lovely! I mean it!”

He paused. No good could come of it, and yet-

“Would you like to live in a house like that?”

She looked back down at the design.

“Of course - it’s quite charming.”

She looked up at him, eyes sparkling, full of innocence as she asked, “Who is it for?”

_for you, Christine_

He studied her face a moment.

“It’s not for anyone, sweet. Just something I came up with.”

It wasn’t a lie, not really. Those imaginary selves he had constructed - happy Erik and his sweet little wife, Christine, living up in the sunlight, together - those two didn’t really exist, and never would. It was just something he had come up with.

She looked a little disappointed. It made her feel sad that no one would live in that house, that it would never be more than what it was - lines on a paper.

“It’s just pretend?” she asked, regretfully.

“Yes,” he echoed. “Just pretend.”

How close to the truth she had come without even realizing - just pretend.

“Come, my dear, tell me what you’d like for lunch,” he turned to go to the kitchen Christine followed him.

He had scratched the itch too hard, had drawn blood this time, and he regretted it. He truly hadn’t expected her to even notice those plans, not out of all the others he had lying around. If he had known, he would have hidden them away with the embarrassing doll he had created of her in the even more embarrassing wedding dress he had crafted for her. But something about those plans had drawn her like a moth to a flame, like an Erik to a Christine - and she had certainly noticed. He supposed he should feel flattered, or perhaps proud, that without her even knowing his intentions with the design she was so taken with the house he had created for her, a testament to how well he knew her and knew what she would like out of a house, evidence of his excellent skill in architecture and planning - but all he felt was hollow and a little sick. He had only meant to ease the itch, he hadn’t meant to make himself bleed.

He showed her everything in the kitchen and she ended up picking simple things to eat, even though he had quite a lot of variety and could have made almost anything.
“Are you sure this is all you want?” he tilted his head, curious.

She nodded, looking down.

“I can make you anything, Christine. It’s okay to ask.”

“I don’t want to impose,” she said shyly.

He shook his head.

“You’re never an imposition, dear. Now are you very certain this is all you want?”

“Mhmm.”

He set the table for her, and this time when he sat down, he stayed as she ate.

While his mind was almost always buzzing, an accusing voice constantly taunting him, there were times - like now - that he was able to forget himself, times he almost felt like what he assumed normal people felt like. Sometimes it was when he lost himself in music, sometimes it was when he was consumed with designing a building, but mostly it was when he was talking to Christine. Though there were very many times that being around her only served to bring his deficiencies into sharp contrast, he often found he could lose that little part of his mind that haunted him with his sins just by talking with her. It didn’t matter what the subject was, in fact, it was often over something trivial that he seemed to lose it the most.

“You’ve traveled quite a lot, haven’t you?” she asked picking at her food.

“I have. Not for ages, but - I’ve been many places.”

“Have you ever been to Greece?”

He ran a hand over his hair and leaned back in his seat, lost in memory.

“Briefly. Why do you ask?”

“Hmm... Doreen said she’s been there,” she hesitated. “Is it nice?”

“The beaches were nice, from what I remember, but I wasn’t there very long.”

She frowned, as though this was not the answer she was looking for.

“Did Doreen enjoy it?” he asked.

“I don’t know, I didn’t ask,” she said peevishly, and he chuckled.

“It’s bad manners to not ask your friend how her trip was, my dear,” he leaned his elbow on the table and she shot him a small glare.

“She’s not my friend.”

His eyebrow raised and he smirked.

“Oh-ho, what’s this? Is Christine jealous?”

She pressed her lips together and rolled her eyes.

“No! No, it’s just- we aren’t friends, that’s all.”
“Why ever not?”

She opened her mouth to answer, but shut it again, and repeated the motion a few times, squirming a bit on her chair.

“Papa always told me that if you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.”

“And?”

She leveled a look at him.

“And I have absolutely nothing to say about Doreen.”

Erik laughed at how deadly serious she looked about the matter, and after a moment a smile started to tug at her own lips as well.

He didn’t think he would ever get enough of how she made eye contact with him, how she’d look right at his eyes as though they weren’t oddly colored, how she never lingered her gaze on his mask, acting as though his face looked just like any other person’s. It amazed him every time, and when she treated him so normally, he found it easy to forget that he wasn’t normal.

He turned the conversation with the Daroga over in his mind. Sooner or later he would have to trust that she was being honest with him, that she wasn’t pretending too much when she seemed to be comfortable around him. Perhaps he could let his guard drop just a little more often when she was there, perhaps it was okay to forget he was a monster every now and then.

They gossiped for a while longer, discussing places they both been in the past (though Christine had been quite young during many of her travels, and didn’t remember some of the locations very well) and which of the ballet rats had been where, and though he tried to cajole her into speaking badly of the performers she didn’t like, she resolutely refused to do so - but her facial expressions as he mentioned certain people spoke plenty.

“Well, my dear, since you are already here, would you like to do a lesson, perhaps?” he offered when the gossip had come to a lull.

She shook her head, twisting her napkin in her hands, a small smile on her face.

“No, no lesson - but,” she bit her lip, unaccountably shy. “Could we just sing together, maybe?”

Her answer surprised him, and he smiled.

“Of course, Christine.”

He loved to sing duets with her, for very many reasons, in part because she seemed to truly love singing with him as well. He couldn’t take her on exotic vacations, couldn’t take her on walks in the sun, but this he could give her - he could give her his music, his voice.

It was the closest he’d ever get to touching her, he thought - and the closest he’d ever come to receiving a touch from her. He loved the way their voices entwined and merged, the sound of them together so intimate and warm and unlike anything else. It felt like an embrace, like a kiss, and sometimes that thought filed him shame, as though he were taking something from her and she didn’t even realize it, so he didn’t often choose to sing with her. But looking at her now, at how she beamed at him between verses, how her eyes shone and her cheeks were pink - how could she not be feeling the same as him? After all, she had been the one to ask him to sing with her.
He played song after song, sometimes ones she would choose, and some that he picked, and he didn’t think he had ever spent an afternoon so gloriously.

Would they sing like this every day, if they were married?

He pushed the thought from his mind. She had only just turned twenty, and she should be singing for crowds of adoring fans - not for an ugly old man, adoring though he may be. He would tuck away the memory of this shining day to remember when there were only clouds in his sky - clouds and rain and fog and no luminous Christine (the sun his world revolved around) in his life anymore.

Christine didn’t know why Erik so rarely sang with her, all she knew was that she wished he sang with her more often. His voice was ethereal, an experience. She felt absolutely electric whenever she heard it, and she loved it. To hear that rich voice as it soared on the high notes and to feel the deepness of the low notes - it felt like champagne bubbles across her skin, and she had to suppress a shiver.

She closed her eyes and let her mind wander as the song reached the point where only Erik was singing. Her mind pulled up the fantasy she often entertained herself with at night when she couldn’t sleep.

They were no longer in Erik’s sitting room, no - they were onstage together, in costume, surrounded by a lush set and beautiful lighting. The orchestra swelled and crashed and spun out all around them, and the audience sat in rapt attention of the prima donna and the primo uomo, and even though she could picture it all in crisp detail, she was still hazy about whether or not he was wearing a mask. But the mask didn’t matter, not really - when he sang, when she pictured him on stage with her, he was pure and whole, and nothing else mattered but the two of them.

She opened her eyes and joined back in the song without missing her cue. Erik was watching her, something tender and nearly inexpressible in his eyes as his hands flew over the keys as though they weren’t even a part of him, as though they belonged to some automaton that had been trained to play the piano perfectly.

The song came to a crescendo and ended, and both were silent a moment, the only sounds in the house their faint breathing as they caught their breath and the likely imagined echoes of their song fading from their ears.

“I think I need to sit down a moment,” she said, her shyness coming back now that there was no music to focus on.

He nodded and pulled out his pocket watch as she sat in the chair with a slight huff - and it was no wonder she was tired, they had been singing for hours. His eyebrows raised at the time. They had been so lost in themselves, as though the world around them had fallen away, and it was surprise to realize how long they had passed in such a way.

“Do you feel alright, my dear?” he asked anxiously.

She smiled sweetly at him.

“I feel just fine, Erik. A little tired, that’s all.”

“You should have something to drink, you’ve been singing so long, and just after having a cough, too!” he fretted over her, standing and making his way to the kitchen, only to quickly stop and pull a footstool over to her chair for her. “Here, put your feet up, dear. You should rest them.”
She set her feet up on the stool he had so solicitously placed for her, a smile playing across her features at his tender concern for her.

He hesitated in the doorway once more.

“You may remove your shoes, if they pain you,” he quickly ducked out of sight, hopefully before she saw his face turned red - but it wasn’t just his curiosity of seeing her scandalously bare feet - she had been standing for several hours, and as he had placed the stool he had noticed that her shoes had a rather tall heel... Surely it couldn’t be comfortable for her.

Sure enough when he returned from the kitchen, her little shoes were placed to the side of the stool, and her stockinged feet rested on the cushion. He handed her a cup of tea and hoped the color in his face was not too obvious. His eyes darted around the room, suddenly unwilling to take more than a glance now that the sight he had previously wished for was in front of him.

“Thank you, Erik,” she said gratefully. “You always take such good care of me.”

She smiled down into her teacup. It was true - she knew it wasn’t just because it was birthday that he was being so nice to her. He was almost always so thoughtful towards her, it made her feel warm inside, made her think of how her Papa had cared for her and then how Mamma Valerius had doted on her. It made her feel loved.

She gave a little sigh as his words from the other day floated back to her - how confused he had been when she wanted to spend time with him outside of a lesson. Even after everything, he still doubted that she truly considered him a friend. If only she knew how to make him see, how to make him feel the way he made her feel. Yes, there had been unpleasantness towards the start of it all, but hadn’t they moved past that? She really did think of him like how she thought of Meg or Raoul - and clearly he thought highly of her as well. She was there with him of her own free will, and she knew she didn’t have to be, she knew that very well. Erik seemed to be the only one who didn’t know it - he still seemed to think she was forcing herself to endure being around him because she only liked his teaching. That couldn’t be farther from the truth in her mind - she liked him as well, and she always looked forward to their time together, not dreaded it. But like the Persian man had told her, dealing with other people was not Erik’s strong suit. She supposed all she could do was continue to be kind to him, and hope that eventually he would understand in time.

“Erik,” she looked up from her tea, curious. “When is your birthday?”
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

it’s time for everyone’s favorite - a trip down Traumatic Memory Lane!

Erik’s shoulders stiffened at her words. His birthday?

He didn’t know when his birthday was, for no one had ever told him.

He had broached the subject just once with his mother when he was little, but of course he received no real answer from her. Why would she want to mark the day her life was ruined?

The conversation had a been a result of a desperate bargain his mother made with him - if he promised to not try any more “science experiments” (the speed with which his last project had caught flames had surprised even him) for the rest of the month (an eternity without science!), and he promised to be very good, then she would take him into town where he could see the church with the organ like the one in his book about music.

She had only made the bargain because she thought he surely couldn’t hold to it, but to her dismay he had been extra good and sure enough, he had not come close to setting any fires or causing any harsh vapors or any other kind of mischief, accidental or otherwise. She dearly wished to go back on her word so she wouldn’t have to take him, but she knew with a certainty that if she didn’t stick to what she had told him then he would never listen to her again.

The month ended and she felt a sinking dread as little Erik practically bounced to the door, his horrible eyes shining with excitement. It had been ages since he was allowed to go outside where other people might see him.

Her dread only grew as they approached the town and people paused as they walked by. She could feel the weight of their stares, their judgements. Their eyes turned from the little boy in the mask to her, narrowing in suspicion.

They passed a few mothers who were also out on walks with their children, and to Erik they all looked quite happy - he hadn’t seen anyone his age in so long, but these children paid him no mind, each too busy with their own little world, each holding their mother’s hand as they walked and smiled.

Erik glanced up at his mother. He wished she’d let him hold her hand. As much as it was exciting to be out in the town, it was all a little overwhelming, too, and he wished he had a comforting hand to hold to remind him that it was okay and he was not there all alone.

But he soon forgot all about that as they entered the hushed solitude of the church. Erik had never been in a church before, although the town priest often visited their home and brought books for Erik to read and talked to him, and Erik was quite diligent about keeping up with his prayers.

His mother breathed a sigh of relief as they entered the church, safe at last from prying eyes. She dipped her fingers in the front of holy water by the door and made the sign of the cross over herself, her eyes closing as she whispered a small prayer - a prayer that, like all the others she’d
prayed since Erik was born, she was afraid was being ignored.

A sudden blast of noise from the organ caused her eyes to fly open - in her moment of distraction, Erik had run up to the front of the church and pressed his little fingers to the keys of the organ just like the illustration in his book at home had showed him.

“Erik!” she screamed, horrified.

The magic spell the organ had cast over him as soon as he’d laid eyes it was shattered with her echoing scream. He flinched. He had forgotten himself. He shouldn’t have been running in church!

He scurried back to his mother as respectfully as he could, head hanging down and shoulders hunched.

She marched forward till she met him in the middle of the aisle and grabbed his hand and dragged him back towards the door.

Their visit was over.

“What if someone heard you playing?” she whispered harshly, tears stinging at her eyes. What if someone had heard her scream?

The church was her one last sanctuary in the little town - what if the commotion had brought someone to see what was going on? What if someone saw Erik there in the church, and knew she had been the one to bring him there? The priest was kind towards the boy, but she knew others would be of the opinion that one such as him had no place on holy ground...

Erik wiggled his hand and squirmed - her grip on his little hand was so tight - that wasn’t how the other mothers had been their children’s hands - he had wanted this but not like this - he could feel her nails digging into what flesh there was in his hands. He made a little noise.

“Stop it right now!” she hissed as she stalked forward into the sunlight, dragging him along.

Erik was silent. He let his hand in her grasp go limp. It still hurt, but struggling only made her squeeze tighter.

They walked in silence for a while, and he could feel the anger radiating off of her. He had been bad, again. She wouldn’t be angry with him if he could just stop being bad. He sniffled a little. It was all his fault, he knew. But the organ had been calling to him! How could he not do as it bid him? His hands were made for such an instrument, he had realized it as soon as he saw it there in all its spectacular glory! But still - he had been bad. Why would his mother be upset if he had not been bad? Was it because he had run? Was it because the organ did not belong him, and he had touched it without asking? Was it something else? He didn’t know, not exactly - but the fact remained, she was angry so he must have been bad, somehow.

“I’m sorry, Maman,” he finally whimpered.

She glared down at him, frustrated.

“Don’t you dare start crying,” she warned him. “If you cry, your mask will get uncomfortable and you simply cannot remove it until you are in your room, do you understand me?”

He nodded miserably. Her eyes landed on their hands, and she suddenly realized that she had grabbed his hand without even knowing. She let go quickly as though she had been burned, the force of the action as strong as if she had found herself holding on to something disgusting.
Erik took his hand back and rubbed at it. There were little marks where her nails had pressed in, purple and red half moons. He tried to distract himself from the terrible situation he had gotten himself into by taking in as much of his surroundings as he could - he didn’t know when he’d be allowed out again.

There was a group of children, all older than him but still quite young, and they had a cake on a little bench. The children all had funny hats made out of colorful paper and one child in particular seemed to be receiving gifts from all the others.

“Maman, what’s that? What are they doing?”

She glanced nervously to where he was pointing, trying to avoid the stares of an old farmer’s wife.

“It’s a birthday party.”

“What’s a birthday?”

The farmer’s wife scowled at her, as though she could see right though the boy’s mask, could see right through her - as though she could take one look at her and knew immediately of the secret sin that surely must have been the cause of such a curse, that sin that even she couldn’t suss out (though she had tried - oh, how she had tried), that ever-hidden moral failing that had caused her womb to bear such grotesque fruit.

“Maman, what’s a birthday?” Erik asked again, hoping she would hear him over whatever was distracting her.

“It’s the day a person was born,” she snapped, irritated. “Every year on the same day a person was born is their birthday.”

She cast a wary glance back at the old woman, who had stopped her work to come out in the street and gawk.

Erik was surprised at this new information.

“Do I have a birthday?” he asked, wonderingly.

She turned her gaze to him and leveled a searching stare at that awful masked face looking back up at her.

“No,” she said evenly. “You don’t.”

His shoulders slumped. He turned her words over and over in his head.

Tears welled in her eyes even as her heart began to race. She could still remember all too well when Erik had been terribly ill several years ago, necessitating a visit to a doctor. She had taken him to one several towns over - an expensive trip, but in the end she was glad she hadn’t seen her own town’s doctor, because little Erik had been fussing and accidentally pulled his mask off. She managed to quickly put it back on him, but people had seen - a woman on the street had screamed, a man had swiftly turned around and went back the way he had come in an attempt to avoid having to come near the woman with the hideous baby, and a group of older children had thrown rocks at her, shouting names.
She scrubbed at her eyes with the back of her hand, hoping desperately that no one would throw rocks again, that she wouldn’t be called the devil’s whore again. She had committed no mortal sin, she had gone to confession every week since she was a young girl, she had been as good as she knew how. What had she done to deserve a fate like this? A dead husband and a deformed child? She was only twenty-four and already knew all the bitterness life could offer.

“How old am I?” Erik piped up.

She sighed, exasperated.

“You’re six,” she grit out.

Erik narrowed his eyes. If he didn’t have a birthday, then how could she know he was six? Surely she had to have been counting from something, and if so, didn’t that make that his birthday? Perhaps he really did have a birthday, after all.

“How am I six if I don’t have a birthday?”

She pressed the heels of her palms into her eyes. Why was he always asking so many questions? So many questions about everything, and even when she did know the answers to them, her explanations always led to even more questions!

“Erik, please! Enough!”

He looked longingly at the little party one last time. Ah, surely he did have a birthday - but he must not be a good enough boy to be able to celebrate it. He wasn’t even good enough to know when his birthday was! He frowned. He was a very bad boy, he supposed. Maybe if he could be good, he could earn a birthday party - or at the very least, a birthday.

But his mother had never told him when it was, and it was something that also came up during his time in the Romani camp.

There were some in the camp that were not cruel, some who went out of their way to disobey the orders from the little circus’s leader when he wasn’t looking, some who dared to face whatever wrath might be bestowed upon them for talking to the boy in the cage (but none who dared face the consequences of actually freeing the boy in the cage). Erik did not grudge them terribly - he saw how they too suffered at the hands of the man in charge - and besides, who could blame a person for not helping a monster? No, it was that man that Erik hated, the first person he had ever hated with a cold, hard passion. Erik knew that without the secret kindness of the old women slipping him little jars of ointment for his cuts or extra scraps of food, and the teenagers who would stop to talk to him every now and then so he could feel like something other than a locked up beast, he knew that he would have died in that cage.

He had been with them over a year at that point, when one of the older girls, Fifika, had stopped to chat while the fearsome ringleader was asleep.

“Do I look very different today, Erik?” Fifika asked as she stopped in front of his cage. She spun in a little circle.

She looked just the same as always, but Erik didn’t answer, afraid of a trick question.

“It was my birthday yesterday,” she went on. “I feel so much older!”

“Oh,” Erik said. “I would have gotten you a present, but-“ he gestured at the bars all around him.
Fifika giggled.

“When is your birthday, Erik?”

He frowned, wrapping his arms around his knees and pulling them closer to his chest.

“I don’t know,” he said.

Fifika frowned at that as well.

“You mean you don’t know what day you were born?”

“No.”

“Well, you came to us in midwinter, so maybe that can be your birthday!”

He hadn’t said anything to that - surely she had meant well, but he didn’t want his birthday to be midwinter, didn’t want to have a reminder of the day his life had taken such an awful turn, didn’t want to remember the day that a Romani woman had tried to help the poor little boy she had found on the side of the road, didn’t want to remember how she tried so hard to give him food and drink and warm clothing and send him on his way before the leader of their caravan found him - how, despite her best efforts, he had found him anyway and declared him a freak, a monster, and had locked him in a cage where people would pay money to be disgusted by him.

Erik did not want a yearly reminder of that day. It would be a cold day in hell, he had thought, before he recognized that day as his birthday.

But here was dear little Christine before him, asking him that very same question.

_Erik, when is your birthday?_ 

He stared off at the wall, looking vaguely uncomfortable.

“Midwinter,” he told her.

Every day was a cold day in his cellar that he called a home, after all, and for her to know that his mother had never told him would only break her beloved heart.

Christine nodded, not pressing him for the exact day. If he had known it, if he had kept track of such a thing, he surely would have told her. She realized the dangerousness of her question too late - he likely hadn’t had reason to celebrate the day for many, many years, and she was possibly bringing up some memories he’d rather not think on.

She took a sip of her tea and looked down at her feet. It had felt a little odd to remove her shoes, something she’d never done in his house before, but she had to admit it was much more comfortable. Now that the rush of singing together was fading, she was starting to notice little aches and pains. She glanced at Erik as he sat in an odd little reverie, and she briefly wondered if perhaps his lanky hands were paining him after having played so long. The unbidden thought arose of her massaging the aches out of those joints, and she quickly looked away from him again, hiding her face in her teacup.

Presently he returned from whatever thoughts were plaguing him, and he stirred a little.

“I must apologize for being such a terrible host, my dear, but I’m afraid something requires my attention elsewhere,” he told her. “Will you be alright by yourself until dinner?”
“I think I shall manage,” she smiled. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

“No, no - that’s quite alright. I will fetch you when it’s dinner time, how does that sound?”

He stood to attend to whatever business was pulling him away, but she stopped him before he was gone entirely.

“Erik?”

“Hmm?”

She warred with herself over how to say it, whether or not to say it, but-

“I think you’re a perfectly lovely host. Please don’t apologize.”

He nodded, an odd smile on his face as he looked down, and for a moment it almost looked to her like he was going to cry. He left then, leaving her to herself once more.

Her feet too tired to carry her back to his work room (and not wanting to get in his way, if he were actually there working), she opted to continue reading the book she had picked out earlier. Or at least, she tried to read in between daydreaming.

She kept thinking of all the buildings he designed, and especially the houses. She loved houses. She had so rarely had opportunities to live in a house - she had when she was so small she couldn’t even remember, and then they had been traveling when she was old enough to walk on her own, and then briefly they had a little cottage when the Comte had been funding her father’s career in exchange for violin performances at his weekly parties (but during that time they often traveled as well), and then for a while with Mamma and the Professor (though once she started her serious training at the conservatoire, she had moved into the dormitories). She thought all the houses Erik had designed looked quite nice.

It was when she was finally absorbed in the story she was reading that a delicious scent began to fill the air, and she realized that Erik must have left to start cooking.

It wasn’t long before he called out to her, and she arrived in the dining room with a gasp. He had cooked a three course meal, and it looked better than most food she had ever eaten.

“Oh, Erik,” she breathed, at a loss for words.

She sat at the table as Erik served her, taking some of the prawns and chicken wings from the platters and placing them on her plate before setting it in front of her.

Erik sat across from her as she ate, telling her the story of how he had come across the recipe for the chicken wings when he was traveling in the East, of how the chef who cooked them at the restaurant refused to tell him the spices and method of cooking, so Erik had spent an entire month trying to recreate the recipe, an entire month of mixing different spices in different ratios, a month of trying different ways of cooking them, until at last he had found the perfect intersection of spicy and sweet and crispy and juicy.

“I’m sure the shopkeeper thought I was mad, I must have bought a chicken every day, if not twice a day. I don’t think I’ve ever eaten so much chicken,” he groaned, and Christine giggled.

“Well I must say, I think it was quite worth it - this is delicious!”

He smiled as propped his elbow on the table and rested his head on his hand. At some point she
had abandoned her knife and fork and began picking the chicken apart with her fingers, biting it off of the bone. She had sauce on her fingers, and there was a spot of sauce on her nose. It was undignified and ungraceful, and Erik thought it was the cutest thing he had ever seen.

“Oh, but aren’t you going to have any?” she asked suddenly.

“No, sweet, I’m not hungry. It’s alright.”

She became quite a moment.

“But you didn’t eat any breakfast or any lunch.”

His face went blank. He hadn’t eaten at all that day, or the previous day, for that matter - but that was not information he was about to offer up.

“It’s not good to go so long without eating, Erik,” she frowned a little. “Besides, you went to such trouble to prepare it, you should have some - please?”

He shifted a little in his chair - how could he refuse her when she looked at him like that? He picked up one of the prawns and took a bite of it. She smiled at him, and he almost choked as he swallowed - he would do anything to see that smile.

She ate a few more of the chicken wings, finding that when she was through her fingers were stickier than she anticipated. She attempted to wipe them on her napkin, which only helped so much. He was about to offer to bring her a little bowl of water she could dip her napkin into when she gave a nervous little chuckle and tried to turn away from as best she could before raising her fingers and placing them in her mouth. She removed them quickly, a little embarrassed, but repeated the motion with her other hand as well before drying them on the napkin and smiling sheepishly. Erik’s mind raced with the urgent thought of what other foods he could possibly make for her so that he might see such a sight again. Perhaps if he simply neglected to give her any silverware at all...

She took some of the large custard into a little dish and spooned some of the caramel sauce over it. She knew her previous actions were rather impolite, but she hoped he would be gracious enough to overlook it. She fidgeted a little under his intense gaze, however.

“What? Do I have something on my face?” her cheeks were starting to turn red.

He smiled fondly.

“As a matter of fact, you do,” he chuckled.

Her hands flew up, napkin in place, and patted over her lips and cheeks and chin.

“No, no - not there-“

“Where?” her brow crinkled.

“Your nose, my dear. Here-“

He lifted his napkin to hand to her, but to his utter surprise she leaned forward, seemingly for him to wipe it away. He sucked in a breath as she held her face toward him, letting his hand carefully reach up to her. She didn’t draw back, and with one finger wrapped in the cloth he swiped at the tip of her perfect little nose.
Time seemed to stand still for him as she bit her lip to keep from giggling, her nose wrinkling, her eyes pressed shut. He hadn’t touched her, not really, not with the napkin between his finger and her skin, but he could have sworn his entire hand was tingling afterwards, a sensation that slowly crept up his arm and made him shiver.

She opened those sparkling eyes and raised one eyebrow.

“Is it gone?” she asked mirthfully.

He nodded, not trusting his voice in that moment.

“Good,” she gave a little nod of her own. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” he managed.

“Now, is there a story behind the caramel custard, too?” she asked.

“There actually is, you know.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, would you like to hear it?”

She nodded eagerly, leaning forward a little.

“The market was having a sale on eggs.”

She burst out laughing, and his heart twisted just a little at that glorious sound.

He ended up eating one more prawn and a few spoonfuls of the custard, and they lingered long after they had finished eating. Christine could see how he could easily lose track of time so far underground - she was unsure of the hour, herself, but she felt a ferocious yawn coming on.

“Oh, excuse me! It must be quite late, I suppose.”

“Are you ready for bed, dear? You may go anytime you wish, you know - or you may sit by the fire again. It is up to you.”

He was hesitant to have her go off to bed already - he would have spent the rest of eternity there with her at the table if he could have, but he also knew the poor girl needed her rest. Was that not the entire reason he had offered his guest room in the first place? For her to be able to rest peacefully?

Well, perhaps not the entire reason.

She gave him a look of tired, but thankful, regret.

“I think I will be retiring now, actually. Everything was so wonderful, thank you so much Erik.”

“Any time, my dear,” he rose from the table and pulled out his pocket watch. “Would you like this in your room? To know what time it is when you awaken? I’m afraid I don’t keep clocks in the house.”

She took the watch from him, and he was careful to not let their hands touch.

“Oh, thank you. This will be helpful,” she said appreciatively.
“Do you remember how to lock your door?”

She looked up from the watch, surprised. For a moment her mind completely forgot the precariousness of their arrangement, and she failed to grasp the intent behind the concept of his reminder.

“You really think I should lock it? Isn’t the house already locked? Surely we’re safe enough down here...”

He stared at her a moment in confusion before looking away, his face warm.

“It’s not threats from outside the house that I am worried about, Christine.”
When your crush stays overnight at your house and you have to come terms with your lewd intrusive thoughts about her but you’ve never been able to come to terms with anything in your life and that’s why you live in a cellar

¯\_(ツ)_/¯

Christine hesitated. Inside the house? Surely there was nothing dangerous inside the house, they were the only ones there, no one else around, just her and him, what could possibly happen with just the two of-

“Oh,” she said softly. “Oh.”

She picked at her nails and fiddled with the watch’s chain, not meeting his eye, but he wasn’t even looking at her anyway.

“Are you- are you very worried, then?” she finally asked. “About being a threat?”

She had borrowed a book from Sorelli once, one that she had recommended to her, a most scandalous book (really, where did Sorelli even find a book like that? Christine has asked her where she bought it - she had been very curious), and it told a sordid little tale about a married high society woman and her secret lover. A particularly memorable passage had described the ardent passion of her lover, of how his desire for her had overwhelmed him, causing him (much to the delight of the woman in the story) to ravish her on the spot, not giving a care about her husband just downstairs. He hadn’t asked her or thought about the consequences - he had wanted her, and so he simply took what he wanted, rational thought be damned.

Was that what Erik was afraid of? Was it really like that in real life? Did he- did he desire her, then? And would that desire truly overwhelm him to the point where she’d need a locked door to keep him from-?

“Are you not worried?” he asked, disbelieving.

She frowned a little. She didn’t believe for one second that a man would have no control over his actions if he truly didn’t want to do something like that - surely any word to the contrary was merely an excuse after the fact. That kind of idea made for interesting reading, but - stories were not real life. After all, women had passions, too (no matter what polite society might have one believe to the contrary), and they still managed to have self control. Surely men were not such base creatures as to lack a certain amount of self control, not if they truly wished it. If Erik wanted to avoid doing something like that enough to create a lock on the door to her room, then surely the lock was not needed because he truly didn’t wish to force her and thus would not.

But still- she hesitated. Erik knew himself better than she knew him, he certainly knew what it was like to be a man. If he truly thought she needed to lock her door, then perhaps he had good reason to say so. He had always tried to be on his best behavior around her, but she still could catch glimpses of things that hinted to her that he was... not entirely well in the mind. Whether he had always been that way or if it was induced by two decades of living in such solitude, she wasn’t
certain - but she was certain that he was still her friend, and she was certain that she still enjoyed him and his company, and she was certain that he still had a good heart (though he might be misguided at times, still, underneath it all, all the hurt and misfortune life had bestowed upon him, she was certain that his heart was good). But perhaps it was different for him because of that unwellness - perhaps he was merely trying to warn her against something he was aware of that she was not - perhaps he was not always as in control of his faculties as she thought he was.

She dared to look right at him, meeting his eye with a brave face.

“I don’t think you’d ever hurt me, Angel.”

His hands gripped the back of the chair he was standing in front of, his knuckles turning even whiter as his eyes slid away from hers, unable to match that brave look.

“You are far too trusting,” he murmured.

She flipped the watch cover open and stared at the little hands as they counted down to the inevitable moment she would enter her room and prepare for bed.

She didn’t think she was too trusting, not in this case - it’s not like he was a stranger, for goodness’ sake! This was Erik! She’d known him for ages, really. They’d spent so much time together so often, surely if he were going to lose control and do something he would have already done it by now?

“Perhaps it is you who is far too worried. Do you sleepwalk?” she asked.

He raised an eyebrow.

“Erik does not sleepwalk, he assures you.”

“Do you ever lose time where you can’t remember what you did? Do you find yourself in places and not remember how you got there?”

“No, never.”

“Do you ever have fugue states?”

“Christine, really,” he admonished. “How would I know if I were in a fugue state?”

She pressed her lips into a line as she considered this, studying him.

“What if I’m in one right now, Christine?” he fretted. “Who could even tell? What if- what if I change, somehow? Become... worse?”

“Well, you’re still quite charming in your fugue state, I must say,” she joked.

“Christine, please - this is serious,” he pleaded. “What if you got hurt through some action of mine?”

She shook her head and threw up her hands.

“For Heaven’s sake, Erik - you’re not a werewolf! I highly doubt you’re going to murder me or- or force yourself on me just because I was in your home when the clock struck midnight.”

She managed the words without stuttering too badly, but she was certain her own face was as red as his.
He clenched his jaw.

“Not a werewolf, perhaps, but still a monster,” he muttered, and she frowned.

“No, you wouldn’t hurt me,” she insisted. “Not on purpose, at least. Would you? Surely you don’t want to harm me?”

He looked stricken, as though he’d be sick at the very thought of harming her.

“No, no of course not! I don’t ever want to hurt you, Christine, or ever see you get hurt.”

She smiled and gave a decisive nod.

“You see? So neither of us have anything to worry about, then. You’ve always been as gentle a lamb with me, Erik, and I don’t know of any reason why that should change now, do you?”

Erik didn’t look entirely convinced, but he nodded slowly in agreement.

He only wanted for her to feel safe - and how could a young woman feel safe going to sleep in the house of a man she was not related to? Was Christine just putting on a show of bravado? Was she just trying to be polite when she insisted that she trusted him? It was all well enough for her to say she had nothing to fear, but he was certain she’d be locking her door all the same. A traitorous little voice in the back of his head told him that perhaps she didn’t fear him like that because she didn’t think he was like other men, that she discounted the fact that he was still a man with the thoughts and feelings and urges of a man - but he realized that it was far more likely that she hadn’t even considered anything like that in regards to him before. She probably thought of him like her father, probably had never considered the possibility that he thought of her in that kind of way, that he might be attracted to her.

Still, he had only meant for her to feel safe, for her to know that she was safe when she stayed over. Surely she would feel safer with a locked door? Surely he would feel better knowing that she felt safe.

He would also surely feel better knowing for a fact that he couldn’t get into her room while she slept even if he wanted to - for even though he was fiercely adamant that he would never force her to do anything she didn’t want to, thoughts would intrude into his mind with possibilities of what he could do, and he found it highly distressing (even now that voice taunted him with all manner of vile things he could do to her - he could simply keep her there in his house and never let her leave - no one would even think to look for her here - there was no one around to hear her scream). The more he tried to fight against these horrible thoughts he didn’t want, the stronger they seemed to become. It was true, however, that they tended to leave when he ignored them, or when he didn’t focus on them, but how he could simply ignore the proof of how evil he truly was when such things appeared in his mind? He didn’t want to keep Christine prisoner in his house, didn’t want to think of that bottle of chloroform he had tucked away somewhere and how unresisting she would be, but still, still the thoughts came up, and if he were the kind of monster who could think that up, then surely it stood to reason that he might also be the kind of monster who would act on such a thought? But his terrible mind couldn’t mock him if she was safely out of his reach, and that was one of the two reasons that had prompted him to create the lock - to prove not only to her that he didn’t intend anything when she spent the night, but to prove it to that horrible little voice in his head as well.

“And anyway,” she continued. “I do still remember how to turn a lock, Erik. It might be a little more complicated than a regular lock, but I dare say I can manage.”
“Christine,” he colored a little under her teasing. “I didn’t mean that-“

“It took a genius to create the lock, but it doesn’t take one to know how to operate it, you know,” she shook her head, her eyes twinkling.

“Now- that’s not fair, you’re a very clever young woman,” he protested.

“Do you always remind ‘clever young women’ how to perform simple tasks, Monsieur Opera Ghost?” she raised an eyebrow.

He sputtered.

“Oh, Christine- I- I didn’t mean to insult you on your birthday, my dear-“

She rose from her chair, pushing it back in to the table before smoothing out her skirts.

“Well, I suppose,” she drew the word out.

She turned to leave and was halfway out the door when she paused and turned back to look at him, a wicked smile on her face.

“But Erik.” she said evenly. “Does that mean you’d insult me if it wasn’t my birthday?”

“Go to bed, Christine,” he said firmly, but he was grinning as well now.

“Goodnight, Angel.”

“Goodnight, dear.”

Her mood stayed light as she made her way into the lovely little guest room and shut the door. She went once more to look at the wonderful tub in the bathroom.

She hadn’t been planning to take a bath until the next evening, but she was sorely tempted. She spied a basket that had been left on the counter, and it was filled with all various manner of brand new soaps and bath oils in several different scents, as though whoever had bought them couldn’t decide and simply got one of everything. She didn’t suppose Erik used scents like violet and rose (and besides, those were scents she wore quite regularly - she felt oddly warm to think that he had noticed something like that about her) and she realized with a smile that he must have put these here for her. Did he intend for her to use the tub, then? She left the bathroom, her mind made up to make use of the soaps the next time she visited.

She took her nightclothes out and brought them back with her to the bathroom again. She normally changed while standing next to her bed, but even though she knew her door locked something just felt better about having an extra door behind her while she changed in Erik’s home.

She sighed a little and scolded herself. It was nothing to feel so awkward about, she chided at her mind while she unbuttoned her blouse. There was nothing embarrassing about wearing nightclothes to bed, she assured herself as she loosened her corset. Why, it would be silly to wear anything else!

She removed her skirts and petticoats, the cold air making her shiver and she quickly slipped the nightgown on before wrapping herself in her dressing gown.

She wondered if was always so cold down here, and that led her to wonder what Erik wore to sleep in. She thought of him, not that far away, possibly even changing into his evening wear at that very moment - she was sure that whatever he wore, it was quite fine looking - all of the things he wore always looked so fine - and she felt unaccountably warm again.
She picked up the pocket watch from where she had left it on the nightstand and looked at the time. She determined there was enough time to read the rest of the book she had borrowed, but she lingered over the watch a moment longer, studying its intricate design and wondering if perhaps Erik had carved those patterns into the silver cover himself. She then set it on the nightstand once more and began to read.

She read until her eyelids felt heavy, and she put the book aside. She was about to fall asleep when she remembered something vital - she hadn’t locked the door. Her eyes flew open, a little more alert now.

Christine sat up against the pillows on the bed and stared at the lock on the door, chewing on her thumbnail. The little lock seemed to stare right back at her in eager anticipation of her choice. Would she turn it?

She frowned.

There were so many reasons she should - and shouldn’t.

There were many kinds of men in the world. There were the leery, unwholesome sort that you could tell something was off about right from the start - all of the girls at the opera house were familiar with that sort, not only from various patrons but also from some of the stagehands like Joseph Buquet. Then there were men who were actually gentlemen, trustworthy men like dear Raoul who would gallantly sacrifice themselves before letting any harm befall a lady - it would be utterly unthinkable that a man like that would ever cause harm of any sort to a woman.

But sometimes, sometimes there were men who seemed to be perfect gentlemen, who said and did everything right and weren’t off-putting at all, but after one got to know them - after one was alone with them - they revealed their true self, which was a monster.

Christine thought Erik a gentleman, but he seemed convinced that he was a monster. Was he?

If it were Raoul on the other side of that door, she’d leave it unlocked and go to sleep without a care in the world. If it were Buquet on the other side, she’d check twice to make sure it was locked and push a dresser in front of it for good measure.

But it wasn’t Raoul or Buquet. It was Erik on the other side of that door.

Was the Erik that type? If the door was unlocked, was he going to open it sometime during the night and watch her, was he going to attempt something lewd and improper? Surely he wasn’t, surely he would respect her and the sanctity of her private room.

She huffed and rolled her eyes. She should just lock the thing and be done with it. Erik wouldn’t be offended by it - he wouldn’t even know unless he had intentions of entering the room, and if that were the case she had no qualms about offending him.

But doubt crept into her mind.

What if, in an unexpected and sudden moment of oafishness (she had those sometimes!), she accidentally broke the lock and was unable to fix it? What if some calamity should befall her during the night and she was unable to get herself to the door to unlock it and reach for help? Erik had insisted that once it was locked from the inside, there was no other way to enter - or to leave.

She glanced fearfully at the pretty walls and lovely curtains. As much as she loved the room, she didn’t want this to be her tomb!
She renewed her chewing at her nail with fervor.

Despite all of her teasing of him and insisting that she knew how to work locks, the fact of the matter was that she had broken a lock on her door once before. And that had been an ordinary old lock that she had jammed, somehow. Erik’s lock was rather complicated, though she felt embarrassed to admit it. What if she rattled one of the little parts inside and the door ceased to be able to be opened? The previous time she had been able to kick the door down (which had been followed by a hefty fine to pay for the repair of the door of her dormitory), but this was not the kind of door she could break so easily.

She trusted Erik, she truly did - but there were things he simply didn’t consider the same way other people would consider them. The whole business with the Angel was proof enough of that. He had been respectful enough afterwards, yes, but who knew what other awkward or improper situations he would consider normal or appropriate? There was no way of telling until they were in the middle of one, and by then it would be far too late.

She got up and paced the room a little. There was a small shelf on one wall, and it held a number of strange trinkets - a number of seashells, a glass marble, a little locket (she opened it, and it contained a tiny painting of an eye with few tiny pearls around it, which she recognized as mourning jewelry), a shard of colored glass, a rhinestone brooch, a silk ribbon that had faded with age. They all were likely his mother’s, she realized, and suddenly turned to look at the furniture. It all had seemed rather feminine in a way the rest of his furniture did not. She wondered why he kept it all, kept even her mementos of the past, considering the things he had said about her.

There were many long years he had existed, but she wondered if, perhaps, he even knew very many people that well - perhaps despite everything, his mother had still been the closest thing he had to family. He was apparently friends with monsieur Khan, but they seemed to be on edge around each other. Christine had no family left, but she had very dear friends who helped fill in the gaps she felt in her life, and she had a host of other friends that weren’t terribly close but still very supportive - but who did Erik have? Was there anyone? Had there ever been anyone? She wrapped her arms around herself, feeling very somber. Christine knew hardship and trial quite intimately, knew what it was to feel alone - but Erik, it seemed, truly was alone and had been for a long time. Poor Erik.

The dolls he kept now seemed less a novelty and a little more sad - he probably barely interacted with actual people ever since coming down here. And still, after renouncing the world and society and going down into the earth to hide and live however he pleased, he still created an almost shrine to the mother who had treated him in such a way that he felt it necessary to run away from home at a young age.

Her thoughts consumed with the past, she crawled back into bed, settling down on the soft mattress and pulling the sheets and blankets up around her. She stared up at the ceiling, still illuminated by the lowest amount of light coming from the gas lamp, her head resting on the plush pillow, and she thought about that woman she had seen in the little painting that Erik had showed to her. The comforting silence of the house conspired with the way the warmth from her body suffused in the plush bedding, and she drifted off to sleep.

Erik finished cleaning the dishes and the kitchen and milled about aimlessly. He was brimming with nervous energy, but he didn’t want to disturb Christine. Usually he played the organ when he felt like this, but now with her here trying to sleep, that was out of the question. He refused to go in his work room lest he have to face the plans for their shared house (he was not ready for that, not yet), so he decided the best course of action would simply be trying to sleep. Perhaps by the time he had finished preparing for bed, he would start to feel more restful.
But by the time he was in his coffin and staring up at the ceiling, he still didn’t feel restful. His mind was too busy.

Christine was here, in his house! Precious Christine, sleeping mere yards away, trusting him so sweetly, acting as though he wasn’t the vile wretch he knew himself to be. And she had called him ‘Angel’ not once, but twice! His hands clutched the edges of his blanket as he unconsciously smiled at the memory of her words. And it was her birthday - it was such a special day for her, and yet she chose to spend it with him. His heart was so full it could burst.

But then recalled something else and frowned. Christine had said her birthday wasn’t that special. His poor dear - that wouldn’t do! Birthdays should be special - not everyone had the privilege of having one. And Christine was such a good girl! She deserved a special birthday. He wondered a little while about how she had spent her birthdays as a child - did she have big parties with other children? Or did her traveling lifestyle mean her birthdays were small affairs, with only a gift or two from her father? Her father - how terrible it must have been for him, celebrating the day he had lost his wife. Had he still made sure to make the day happy for little Christine? Erik’s own father had died before he was born, but he briefly wondered what his life would have been like had it been the opposite for him - if his father had lived and his mother had died in childbirth. Christine always spoke highly of her Papa, of how proud he was of her and how he loved her, so surely he didn’t blame Christine in the least (Christine was entirely blameless, anyway, how could it have ever been her fault?). But Erik thought that his own father probably would have abandoned him in the woods as an infant, looking as he did and considering how his mother blamed him for ruining her life, surely his father would have blamed him for the loss of his wife and disposed of little Erik.

He bolted upright in his coffin. He didn’t like that train of thought, and besides, he needed to think of a way to make the day special for Christine. But how? He had certainly never been to a birthday party before, had never had a birthday himself. But - he had read a lot. Birthdays should have cake, should they not? He would bake her a cake.

He got out of the coffin and wrapped a fine robe around himself, pausing a moment before adding the matching hat, then went to the kitchen.

As he pulled out mixing bowls and various utensils and all the ingredients he needed, his mind wandered to that other thing - that thing he had been debating himself on. The gift he had bought for her in a moment of impulsiveness. Should he give it to her? Was it too much? He didn’t want her to feel burdened by it, like she owed him something simply because he had given it to her. It had been expensive, but he didn’t care about that. He only cared about seeing her happy. It was technically the kind of gift a friend could give another friend, but unfortunately their friendship was complicated was by certain things, not the least of which happened to be the fact that he was irrevocably in love with her, which was surely clouding his judgment. It wouldn’t be an odd gift at all if it were given to her by Meg or Colette, but coming from him... He sighed. He had plenty of time to consider it, he supposed - he didn’t feel like sleeping at all that night.

When Christine awoke she had a brief moment of not knowing where she was. But then the previous day came flooding back, and she turned her face in to the pillow and smiled. She had slept soundly the entire night, no noises to bother her, no spring digging into her back, no scratchy linens against her skin. She squirmed a little under sheets before stretching and yawning. Feeling more awake, she reached out for Erik’s pocket watch. The cover flipped open and gasped at the time - she had slept rather late. But still, she felt wonderful and couldn’t find it in herself to regret it - she so rarely slept that well above, rarely felt as rested as she did right then.

She rose and leisurely dressed for the day, glancing at the door, at the strange lock. She took her time in front of the mirror, brushing out her hair (Erik had left a beautiful brush on the dresser for
her, and even though she had packed her own brush, she used the one he had supplied instead, and chose to forgo pinning her hair up for the moment. In a rush of wild impulse she pulled her lipstick out of her bag and applied it to her lips, leaning in close to the mirror, her hand working fast before she lost her nerve. She had been intending to wear it when she went back up, when all the other girls would surely be looking for her with dozens of question - but for some reason she couldn’t explain, she wanted to wear it down here, too, even though there were no other mirrors besides the one in her room, and even if Erik was the only one who would see it.

Erik was sitting at the dining room table reading a book when Christine finally found him. He had been dressed for hours at that point, had dressed after he finished icing and decorating her cake. He looked up from the book he had reading ever since dressing for the day and felt a moment of speechlessness.

She was so very lovely. She looked well rested, and her hair was down, curls hanging appealingly over her shoulders, a surprised smile on her lips - lips that were, he noticed, painted that same charming shade they had been the previous day.

“Happy birthday, Christine,” he said as she walked closer, staring at the cake.

“Oh, Erik! Oh, it’s perfect! Did you- did you make this?” she brought her hands to her face, delighted.

“I did,” he supplied a plate for her.

The cake was not very large in diameter (large pans were unnecessary for him, there were none in his kitchen because who else would he ever be cooking for besides himself?) but he had made up for that by making it several layers high, a sweet jam in between each layer of cake, surrounded by icing and topped with chocolate and fresh fruit.

“It’s perfect,” she sighed as she sat down.

He fidgeted anxiously with the book in his hands, and it was as though he was watching the whole scene from very far away when heard himself say, “I have another gift for you, too, my dear.”
“Oh?” she tore her gaze away from the cake, curious.

Well. There was no going back now.

He pulled a jewelry box out from his jacket pocket. He slid the box across the table to her.

A flash of trepidation crossed her features. Jewelry? She took the box and opened it.

Inside, nestled on the soft velvet was a necklace.

But not just any necklace.

It was in the style of the ones all the other girls had - a style that was still quite popular (Meg insisted that she even slept with hers on), and a style she still couldn’t afford. Out of all the little charms they offered, he had picked for her the orange colored design of two little beamed eighth notes on a golden chain.

She took a deep breath.

There was no way she could accept this from him - it was far too expensive a gift, far more suited as a token from a patron than from a tutor, far too much, and she should politely decline it. It simply wouldn’t be proper or right to accept it.

Her eyes slowly slid from the necklace in the box to Erik’s intent gaze, and she pulled her hair up, away from her neck, and turned her back towards him.

“Would you put it on me, please?”

He jumped up from his chair, hastily taking the necklace out of the box and savoring the feeling of standing so close to her, of how close his hands were to touching the bare skin of her neck (so, so close, but not quite, he made sure), and he thankfully had little trouble with the tiny clasp as he settled the delicate chain around her throat.

“If you don’t like the design or the color, just let me know, Christine - I can exchange it for a different one, I don’t mind,” he nearly babbled, but he was desperate to make sure that she didn’t go to the only jewelry store in town that sold those necklaces - not after how he had panicked when the salesman asked who he was shopping for and Erik had blurted out my wife, it’s her birthday.

Her hand fluttered over the charm before clasping it protectively, turning to face him with a serious look in her eye.

“Oh, no - I could never exchange this! I love it!”

The same wild impulse that had caused her to apply lipstick that morning suddenly returned, and this time it was with the absurd notion to throw her arms around his neck and press a kiss to his cheek. She resisted this impulse - it would only make things indefinitely and immeasurably awkward between them.

“Oh, no - I could never exchange this! I love it!”

The same wild impulse that had caused her to apply lipstick that morning suddenly returned, and this time it was with the absurd notion to throw her arms around his neck and press a kiss to his cheek. She resisted this impulse - it would only make things indefinitely and immeasurably awkward between them.

“Erik, you- you have no idea how much I appreciate this,” she stuttered instead. “Thank you so, so much.”

“You are quite welcome, my dear,” he smiled kindly, the tension leaving his shoulders. “I’m glad
you like it. Now, how about some breakfast?”

He gestured towards the cake and her lips quirked into a funny smile.

“Cake for breakfast?” she asked.

“Yes. Why not?”

She arched an eyebrow.

“I must ask, good monsieur - who are you and what have you done with my maestro?”

Erik’s laugh rang out.

“Come now, Christine, it is a special occasion, after all. Am I truly that strict with you?”

She tilted her head, smiling wider.

“Christine! Truly?”

She took a slice of cake, her eyes widening with anticipation when she saw the filling.

“I am merely saying that if I were to tell you any other day that I had cake for breakfast, I would receive an hour long lecture of the dangers of sugar to one’s voice,” she said primly.

He sat back down with a huff.

“But Christine, perhaps that reflects not on your teacher’s strictness, but on his student’s over-fondness for sweets...”

She paused and frowned, shaking her head.

“No, I don’t think it works that way in the least.”

He gave a theatrical sigh and sagged in his chair as she giggled.

“Won’t you have some too?”

He hesitated - he was not at all hungry (after all, had he not already eaten two prawns and a bite of custard a mere fourteen hours ago?) but the look on her face brokered no discussion - she clearly expected him to eat. He took as small a slice as he thought she would let him get away with.

They talked more over breakfast, but over and over Erik found his eyes inappropriately being drawn to her décolletage - he was thankful that Christine was so engrossed in her cake and didn’t seem to notice. He was not staring! He would have sworn it, he was not staring at that hint of cleavage at the neckline of her dress - no, he was staring a few inches above that, at the necklace, the necklace he had given her.

He had already been anxious enough simply going into the jewelry store, and the salesman, who despite being surprised by his mask and trying his best not to look directly at it, still insisted on asking so him so many questions which only flustered Erik all the further. Once he had told the salesman he was looking for a gift for his wife (he regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth), the man was intent on pointing out a number of lovely rings, and Erik had been sorely tempted. The thought of Christine wearing a ring that he had given her made him feel nearly giddy, and even still the image wouldn’t leave his mind. But there were so many potential problems with buying her a ring - what if it didn’t fit properly? What if she refused it on the grounds of the
symbolism? What if she didn’t like it? He knew she liked the necklaces but she would never buy one for herself, because she was a practical young woman. He wasn’t certain if she already had her eye on a certain design (the little cat face? The peacock feather? The sunburst?) but when he had seen the musical notes he had known.

And it seemed he had chosen well - words and facial expressions could be faked, but there was no faking the unconscious movement of her hand up to the little charm every now and then, as if she wanted to make certain she still had it on, the way her finger ran over the chain as though she still couldn’t believe she was wearing it.

But soon the glorious day was coming to an end when it was time for Christine to return back upstairs. For all the worry he held about having her stay with him, he couldn’t help but feel disappointed that she was leaving. Still - her life was up above, and he knew she had to return.

She exited her room, her hair now pinned up underneath her little hat, her lipstick touched up, her overcoat on, and Erik escorted her to the gondola. They were both quiet for much of the boat ride, and it wasn’t until they had been on the shore of the other side for a little while that she spoke up.

“Does the guest room tub get hot water?”

He blinked.

“The entire house gets hot water,” he told her, and she nodded thoughtfully.

“I will keep that in mind, then. For next time.”

He froze mid stride, whirling around to look at her.

“Next time?”

She nodded.

“The next time I stay. Unless- I mean, am I not invited back? Was I that terrible of a guest?” she smiled wryly.

“No, no, no!” he rushed to assure her. “You are always welcome in my home, Christine, always.”

Erik felt like his head was swimming - Christine would truly be coming back? He was glad he was walking just a few steps ahead of her so she couldn’t see the silly grin he could feel on his face. He supposed this might be what normal people felt like when they found out the object of their affection held similar affection in return (though he knew, of course, that she probably liked the big bed and the thought of a hot bath more than she liked him).

Normal people. What he wouldn’t give to be a normal person, to be able to just ask her permission to court her, to be able to actually court her in a way she deserved.

The thought brought his mood down. Normal. But still - he glanced back at Christine. If he were normal, he’d have never know the sheer wonder of having Christine spend the night in his house, likely wouldn’t be her tutor, and might not have ever even met her.

Perhaps being abnormal in a few ways was not the worst thing in the world - not if it meant Christine would stay at his house every now and then.

He took her up to the Rue Scribe exit, and she paused for a moment in the doorway, looking this way and that to make sure no one would see her.
“Oh!” she said suddenly, and reached into her pocket.

She pulled out the pocket watch and held it out to him.

“Thank you for lending me this,” she told him as he held out his gloved hand, intending for her to simply drop the watch into his palm.

Instead, she placed it in his hand in such a way that her own little fingers brushed against his hand, and then, to his utter shock, she squeezed his hand a little before letting go.

“And thank you for letting stay with you,” she looked down, her cheeks pink. “And for my necklace. And the wonderful food. You didn’t have to do all that, but you did, and - thank you.”

She looked up into his golden eyes, her face shining with sincerity.

“You’re a good man, Erik.”

He stared back at her blankly, nodding a little in acknowledgment of her thanks as he tucked the watch into his own pocket.

“Have a good day, Christine,” he pulled back into the shadows, his voice sounding a little hollow.

“I’ll see you soon, Angel.”

He stayed where he stood, watching her as she walked out towards the street, adjusting her hat and patting her hair and probably thinking up lies to tell about where she had been the past two days. When she disappeared from view he turned back into the tunnel once more.

you’re a good man, Erik

The full weight of her words hit him like a punch and he stopped to lean his arms and forehead against the cold stone wall.

No one had ever, ever told him he was good before.

He had been good at things - of course he received compliments on his music, his singing, his architectural skills and stonework, even on those awful skills that had served him so well for a time in Persia.

But Erik knew on a very deep level that there were worlds between being at something - and being good. She had said those words he had unconsciously been longing to hear ever since he could remember, those words that had never come, that he truly thought he would never hear because they could never be true.

Christine thought he was good. She thought it enough to actually tell him. She didn’t think he had the potential to be good in the future, didn’t think perhaps he had been good in the past at some point, didn’t think he would be good if he changed something about himself or undertook some action or ceased doing something - no, she thought he was good just as he was right then.

He pulled off his mask and pulled out his handkerchief and scrubbed it across his eyes in an attempt to clear up the tears that were falling so freely.

Christine thought he was good.

And what could he do in response to that except try to live up to her opinion of him? He must try to be good for her.
Christine neared the steps of the opera house, feeling a little silly. She had already decided to stay quiet about what, exactly, she had been doing while she was gone. She couldn’t very well say she’d been to someplace she hadn’t, because what if another girl had been there recently and asked a question about it that she didn’t know how to answer? That would never do.

Sure enough as she neared the dormitories a few girls saw her and leaned together, whispering. They got up and came near her.

“Christine, you’re back!” Marie said. “How was your trip?”

“Yes, how did it go?” Colette asked.

“It went quite well, thank you,” she smiled a little.

Colette and Marie glanced at each other, curious. Meg was right behind them.

“Oh!” Meg exclaimed. “Your necklace!”

Christine’s eyes widened a moment, then she blushed as her smile widened. She toyed with the charm a little.

“It’s new,” was all she said, and opened the door to her room. “I need to unpack, if you’ll excuse me.”

Marie and Colette nodded, scurrying off to whisper about where Christine could have gone - and with whom.

But Meg stayed behind and knocked lightly on her door. Christine opened it, and seeing it was just her, let her in.

Meg sat on the bed and watched as Christine put her belongings away.

“Are you seeing someone, Christine?” she finally asked, picking at a corner of the blanket underneath of her.

Christine turned to look at her and took in the wounded look on her face. She wasn’t sure what to say.

“I told you about Dmitry,” she continued quietly. “I thought- I thought maybe you would tell me, too, if there was someone...”

Christine’s heart sank. She hadn’t meant to make her best friend feel like she didn’t tell her things.

“Oh, Meg,” she sighed, and sat next to her. “You know I would tell you if I was involved with someone...”

“Would you?” Meg looked up, her eyes a little watery. “You left on a trip, and I didn’t even know about it until you told everyone else.”

“Oh, Meg,” she said again, smiling sadly. “I can tell you, but you absolutely must keep it a secret - can you do that?”

Meg nodded eagerly, sniffling a little and wiping at her eyes.

Christine took her hands and squeezed them.
“You’re my very best friend, Meg,” she told her. “I didn’t mean to make you feel left out. But the truth is... I didn’t really go on an actual trip somewhere.”

“You didn’t? But where did you go?”

“Well, I... I spent the night with someone.”

Meg’s eyes widened.

“With—with my voice teacher,” she squeaked, trying to make Meg understand, but as Meg’s eyes widened even more and a look of horror crossed her face, she realized she had done more harm than good.

She covered her face with her hands.

“I just stayed in his house, I mean! He lent me his guest room to stay in, Meg, nothing happened,” she groaned from behind her hands.

Meg put a hand over her heart and took a deep breath.

“Oh,” she said. “Oh.”

Then she frowned.

“Are you courting your voice teacher, Christine?”

Christine shook her head.

“No! No, it’s not like that. We aren’t courting. He’s not a suitor, or a patron, either. He’s just... Erik,” she shrugged a little. “He’s a friend.”

“A friend?” she raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Did he give you that necklace?”

She nodded, her hand going up to touch the charm, and Meg narrowed her eyes, a strange smile playing across her lips.

“A friend,” she said. “I see.”

“Oh, please don’t tell anyone, Meg,” she begged. “All the girls were talking about their trips and I was so jealous, you know.”

“You lied because you were jealous?” Meg giggled.

“I didn’t lie,” Christine pouted. “I merely let them believe something that their own mind’s came up with.”

Meg burst into laughter.

“Well it’s true,” Christine insisted. “I only said I was going somewhere, I didn’t say where.”

“Christine, you’re terrible!” she snickered. “They all think you went someplace amazing with a mysterious suitor, you wouldn’t believe the kinds of stories they’re coming up with!”

Christine flopped back on the bed.

“Well that’s not my fault,” she muttered, but she did feel a little guilty. “Besides, I’d rather they
think what they please than have them know about Erik.”

Meg’s laughter subsided.

“Is there a reason you don’t want people to know about him? Is it a bad situation?”

Christine frowned a little.

“No, it’s not that,” she hesitated. “He’s just... he’s a very private person. He’d probably be upset that I even told you about him.”

She paused a moment.

“No, not upset - he’d be sad. And he has enough reasons to be sad, I don’t want to add to that.”

Meg nodded, thoughtful.

“Well, you must be quite close to him then, if he’s so private but he let you stay overnight without a chaperone.”

Christine put her hands over her face as it turned red.

“I think he likes me, Meg,” her words were muffled by her hands, but Meg could still understand them.

“Ooo!” her eyes widened again. “Do you like him?”

She let her hands drop to either side of her face and sighed deeply.

“I don’t know,” she said truthfully. “I mean - I like him, but I don’t know if we like each other the same way. He’s a good friend of mine, but sometimes...”

“Sometimes what? Sometimes what?!” Meg leaned forward eagerly.

Christine groaned, almost regretting that she’d even mentioned it.

“He’s not- oh, Meg you can’t tell anyone! - he’s not... handsome, but sometimes... sometimes I think he’s terribly attractive,” Christine grimaced, embarrassed at admitting it.

Meg giggled a little.

“So you like him! And what makes you think he likes you too?”

Her hand strayed to the necklace he had given her.

“The way he looks at me, sometimes, when he thinks I’m not looking,” she said softly. “The way he treats me so tenderly. I don’t think there’s anything he wouldn’t do for me.”

She decided to leave out the horrifically embarrassing conversation he had had with her after their dinner, though it had played its part in making her think her suspicions were true.

“Hmm,” Meg smiled at the dreamy, far off look on her friend’s face. How often had she worn that look on her own face, thinking about Dmitry?

But the look passed and a cloud seemed to come over her countenance.

“But I think, maybe, he’s just being kind to me. He’s, well, he’s had a hard life, you know, and I
think when he’s around me he can kind of forget all that. Sometimes I don’t think it means very much at all, not really. I don’t really know how he feels about me at all, I’m afraid.”

“Do you want him to love you?” Meg asked, curious.

Christine was quiet a long moment.

“No,” she finally said, but something about her own denial struck her heart with pain. “No, it would be too sad if he was in love with me. How could I do all this to him if I knew he loved me?”

“All what?”

Christine gestured vaguely.

“Stay at his house overnight, and let him cook for me, and accepting this necklace, and all the time we spend together - oh, it would feel too cruel!”

Meg chewed at her thumbnail, considering Christine’s despairing words.

“Well, you don’t know that he loves you,” she pointed out. “Maybe he’s just kind, like you said.”

Christine nodded. It was what she had to tell herself over and over in those moments she wasn’t certain about it - she wasn’t taking advantage of his feelings towards her because she didn’t even know what his feelings towards her were. Should she have to guess at every meaning behind every gesture? She would assume he considered her only as a friend until he saw fit to tell her otherwise.

“Does Raoul know you stayed with Erik?” Meg suddenly asked, and Christine glared at her.

“No,” she huffed. “No, he most certainly does not. Raoul doesn’t own me, he isn’t entitled to know where I spend my time. We aren’t even courting, he knows that.”

Her expression grew concerned and she propped herself up on her elbows.

“But Meg, please don’t tell him, all the same. I- I don’t want him to know about me and Erik. Please?”

“I’d never tell anyone anything if you didn’t want me to, Christine,” she said seriously. “I promise I won’t tell anyone, especially Raoul.”

“Thank you, Meg,” Christine said appreciatively.

Sure enough, later that evening a group of girls cornered Meg and grilled her for information, but she just smiled, shrugged, and shook her head.

“She wouldn’t tell me where she went, or with who,” was all she told them.
Chapter 39

Erik pondered over what it might mean to be good the next several days. Surely it was something that had to do with being normal, too. He felt a little better after she had gone back above, knowing that he had passed the longest amount of time with her that he ever had and nothing bad had happened, despite his awful thoughts. She had slept in his house, and he had done nothing terrible to her! She even wanted to come back, it seemed, though he had a suspicion that she was merely being polite at the time.

Still, her words about being good glowed in his chest like a burning ember, and for the first time in a long time he allowed just the smallest amount of hope to flourish that it could actually be true.

How could he be good for Christine? How could he be normal? He would strive to be good for her, even if it seemed nearly impossible.

He knew so very many things about his life were decidedly not normal, nor could they be - and he knew, also, that she disapproved of the Opera Ghost business (though she hadn’t mentioned it in a while, and he truly had tried to be nicer about it all).

It was that that he kept in mind when he approached the office of Madame Giry.

The woman would be coming in soon, and he hurriedly picked up the envelope she had left for him - sure enough, twenty thousand franc notes were inside. He pulled out a few notes and folded them back into the envelope, pocketing the rest. At the sound of footsteps approaching, he hid behind the secret door that he had entered the room by.

Giry tried to pretend to be busy with this and that as she tidied up the room, filed a few papers, and fussed over a few things, but all the while her eye was drawn back to where the envelope lay until finally she glanced nervously at the door to make sure no one was coming, and then scrambled to open the envelope.

Her face broke into a wide grin. The Ghost had left more than their agreed upon amount as a tip for her services in running notes to the managers for him.

“Madame Giry,” his voice boomed out from the ceiling.

She started a little, her smile fading.

“Y-yes, Monsieur?”

“You’ve done well this week.”

“Thank you, Monsieur.”

He had written a series of notes to the new director, each more scathing than the last, and Giry had had to hand deliver each one to him. Thinking about sweet Christine’s innocent trust in his goodness made him regret a few of the words he had used in the notes, but in his own defence, he did suppose nothing he had called the man had been untrue.

“I- I appreciate all of your help.”

She nodded quickly, eyes darting this way and that. She always had the terrible fear that one day while the Ghost was as speaking to her, he would suddenly appear in the room. What would he
look like? Like he had in life, a regular man, perhaps? Hopefully he didn’t look too frightening, like a skeleton or something similar. Sometimes the thought of that kept her up at night. Oh, she would surely faint if such a gruesome sight appeared before her!

“Of course, Monsieur. I am always at your service,” she quickly supplied.

It wasn’t too terrible, though, as long as he stayed incorporeal - and as long as he continued giving such generous tips. She was making more from working for him than she was at her actual job, and it was nice to not have to worry about finances anymore, even if she did have to worry about skeletons.

Erik hesitated. Normal men didn’t play at being a ghost, didn’t inspire such a look of concern on women’s faces when they spoke. Madame Giry had been very good to him, even if her obedience was inspired by fear. You should be better to her, an annoying little voice chided at him, and he thought it sounded oddly like the Daroga - a thing that very nearly made him ignore it altogether. But- he should be better to her, he supposed, and in that moment the extra money didn’t seem to be quite enough in being ‘better’.

“How was your day, Madame Giry?” he asked politely.

Giry’s brow crinkled in bafflement. Why the devil did the Ghost want to know how her day was? Was this some sort of punishment? What had she done to deserve this?

“It was... good?” she glanced about helplessly. “How, uh, how was your day, Monsieur?”

Erik took a step back, surprised. How was he supposed to answer that? He hadn’t thought she would turn the question back on him! He only wanted to be polite, be normal!

“Good,” he said, but he sounded unsure.

His hands fiddled nervously with his cravat. He didn’t know what came after this part of conversations, especially not when one of them was a ghost, and he was terribly at a loss.

Madame Giry blinked down at the envelope in her hands. Good heavens - what if the Ghost was trying to talk to her because he knew something she didn’t? What if- what if something terrible was going to happen to her, and she was going to become a ghost herself? What if she died in the opera house! What if she had to haunt the opera house with the Ghost?! What a terrible fate that would be!

She crossed herself, and Erik cringed. He had only meant to be nice, and yet clearly he had scared her even more somehow!

“I will leave you to it, then,” he said and quickly turned away, embarrassed by the whole debacle.

“Thank you, Monsieur,” her voice wavered, but Erik had already left.

He stalked down the hidden hallways, mortified.

It was never that difficult to talk to Christine! Not even when he had been her Angel. How long had it been since he’d talked to someone (other than Christine) about something other than what he wanted them to do? Deliver a note, shop for food, wrap up a purchase? The Daroga, he supposed, but even then he had been talking to him because he wanted advice about Christine - and when was the last time he talked to the Daroga just to talk? Ask him how his day was? He couldn’t remember, and he was sure the fact that he didn’t truly care about how the nosey old man’s day had gone had something to do with it.
But still - his life had been practically nothing for so long, and then Christine. But what about after Christine? What about when she was done with singing, for whatever reason? Or if her singing took her out of Paris, out of France? He didn’t want to go back to nothing! It wasn’t fair! He knew he’d have no real place in her life once she left, most likely - but especially not if he were so isolated he didn’t even know how to carry on a basic conversation with someone. It was a skill he used to have but had since let it deteriorate terribly. He might not have a real place in her life later on, but perhaps, if the universe smiled on him (it would be a first, if that happened), then he might have a chance of seeing her occasionally after she was done at the Populaire. Perhaps he could travel to wherever she was performing - Vienna or Madrid or Warsaw - and he could humbly offer his praise after the show, his praise and an enormous bouquet of roses. That would be quite nice, indeed.

But if he were to leave the Populaire, he’d need an income source besides haunting. He could return to architecture, he supposed, but that would involve speaking to so many people, acting normally, being outside where anyone could see him... Was he capable of that? Was he capable of that if it were all for Christine?

He sighed wearily. It was all so much to consider that it made his head swim.

He had a lesson with Christine the next day, and she smiled upon seeing him - the kind of smile that implied the two of them shared some kind of secret. She was short on time, and as such they held their lesson in her dressing room.

He wished that they could sing together again, but knew he had to keep the lesson focused on what she needed for her next role. It was a straightforward lesson, not much time for talk before or after, but it did not escape his notice that she was still wearing the necklace he had given her.

After he bid her farewell, the blessed silence in his mind began to fade once more, and he began to turn over the same thoughts that had been occurring to him again and again lately.

Christine was undoubtably the kindest, purest soul in existence. He would do whatever it took to make her proud of him. But what would make her proud? He wasn’t certain, exactly, but he supposed that if she truly thought him good, she would also want good things for him, so he thought over the kind of good things that he wanted for her. To be happy, of course, to be healthy and safe and loved... Christine was good, so he wanted those things for her, and knowing that she had them would make him happy, so surely it stood to reason that she would want those things for him too - even if she didn’t wish them for him as fervently as he wished them for her.

He was as safe as he was going to get, he didn’t know (or care to know) about the state of his health, and he could certainly never be loved (though Christine did, perhaps, care about him in some small way - or at least he hoped she did). Was he happy? Only when he was with Christine, and something about that struck him as the kind of thing she wouldn’t like. She surely couldn’t be happy knowing he would languish away in a dark cellar after she left. What had started out as a much-needed respite from the world had somewhere along the line turned into something else entirely - a sanctuary turned into a prison.

Perhaps it was time to change that.

And if occasionally venturing out a little more into the world and being a little nicer to the few people he did know didn’t particularly make him happier, at least it would make him more... well adjusted. Christine would be happy with that, at least. And if she approved of the actions he took, that would make him happy.

Her words to him previously bubbles up again and again, causing him to question and doubt - I
thought that man was your friend, how could you treat him so shamefully? Did he treat the Daroga shamefully? Did he really? It filled him with shame - not that he was (apparently) treating him badly, but that Christine was not pleased with his actions.

Nadir Khan was on another one of his walks around the seemingly empty theater, humming softly to himself. It was a peaceful night, he thought. That was, until a figured suddenly appeared in front of him.

“Good evening, Daroga,” Erik said smoothly.

Nadir tried to collect his wits, his heart still pounding at the surprise.

“Erik,” he said, only a hint of fear in his voice. “Why are you here?”

It was so terribly unlike Erik to be out where anyone could see him, to not be hiding in the shadows, even when they seemed to be the only two in the building.

Erik looked away from him, staring out at the empty seats.

“How are you this evening, Daroga?” the question seemed to physically pain him as he asked.

Nadir opened and closed his mouth a few times - since when did Erik care about how he was?

“What’s going on?” Nadir finally managed, only to shudder when those yellow eyes turned on him.

Erik was relieved that he didn’t have to listen to the Daroga drone about aching feet or some such nonsense, but he also didn’t appreciate that the man didn’t seem to appreciate his attempts at nicety.

“It has been so long since we have talked, has it not?” Erik said. “It would be... nice, to talk.”

Nadir shifted on his feet.

“Is it about Christine?”

Erik narrowed his eyes.

“I have more in my life than Christine!” he snapped.

“Like?”

Erik looked away again and cleared his throat.

“You should have dinner with me, Daroga - tomorrow, in Box Five,” he paused, looking the man up and down. “But I’m not going to cook for you, so you may bring whatever food you please.”

Nadir stood there, baffled.

“Six o’clock, do not be late, Daroga!” he told him, and melted back into the shadows.

Nadir was at a loss to understand what had just happened. He was, apparently, having dinner with the Opera Ghost.

That same bafflement carried over to the next day as well, when he arrived outside of the door to Box Five a few minutes before six, a ridiculous picnic basket in hand. He knocked, and after a moment the door opened.
Erik had set up a table and two chairs, to which he motioned. Nadir began to unpack the basket - steak and salad and soup and rolls.

It was when both were settled in their chairs and about to eat that Nadir finally broke the silence.

“Erik, what’s going on?” he asked gently. “Is something wrong?”

He remembered it well, how it would go those days in Persia - how Erik would publicly rebuff him and make a show of how little he cared for him, only to seek out his guidance in private when things were going wrong (and things had so often gone wrong in Persia where Erik was concerned). And really, he could picture just how the conversation tonight might go - ”this steak isn’t very good, terribly dry, really - oh, by the way, I’m dying, Daroga - and did you see the latest rehearsal? Isn’t that director the most incompetent you’ve ever seen?”

Neither of them were young men anymore, but barring some illness or accident he thought it was reasonable to assume Erik had a handful of decades left in him yet - but he couldn’t imagine what could have prompted him to want dinner with him besides some mortal terror.

Erik stirred his soup and stared down at it.

“Even monsters grow weary of solitude, Daroga,” he said quietly.

Nadir’s heart sank. After all this time, he still thought himself a monster. And really, should he even be surprised? Nothing had truly changed for Erik in that time between when he was in Persia and now. Why should his thinking have changed at all, either? Still, he didn’t like to know that that’s how Erik felt. The man might have acted quite monstrous in his youth, but he wasn’t a monster because of his face.

Nadir wondered for a moment if he said those kinds of things around Christine - you’ve made your wretched beast of a teacher proud today, Christine; your progress is noticeable even to a vile creature such as myself; I might be a loathsome gargoyle but please pay attention I’m speaking - and he felt a pang of sympathy if that was what the poor girl had to put up with.

It was after the surprise of hearing monster faded that he processed the other part - Erik was lonely, apparently. Nadir wanted to believe it was true - it might have been a good sign if Erik were actually longing for the company of other people, he had cursed humanity for so long and perhaps he had finally reached a turning point. But Nadir knew the man well enough to be suspicious - if he hadn’t bought and cooked the food himself, he would have suspected Erik had poisoned it. Even still, he waited until he saw Erik take a few bites before he began eating, but it was little comfort - a murder suicide was not out of the question when it came to Erik. Yes, he had cooked the food himself, and the thought of Erik finding a moment to actually poison it was nearly ludicrous... nearly. The man was a magician, after all. But it couldn’t be helped, he supposed, and he sent up a silent prayer and began to eat.

“I should think you’ve had significantly less solitude lately, Erik - isn’t Christine still taking lessons?”

Erik shot him a reproachful look. He might find it fine to spend his time talking to only one person (could he ask for a better person to talk to than Christine? No, impossible), but surely Christine deserved better than a companion who only ever spoke to one person... The Daroga’s comment cut him as surely as a knife. A person needed more than one person to talk to in their life, didn’t they? Wasn’t Erik a person too?

“Of course she’s still taking lessons - why? Do you think she shouldn’t be?” his voice bordered on
petulant, but the Daroga took it well in stride.

“No, not at all. How is she, by the way?”

Erik stopped cutting up his steak to stare blankly at him.

“What’s it to you? You think she isn’t well in my care?”

Nadir raised an eyebrow.

“Did I say that? No. If you don’t want to talk about Christine, we can talk about you, instead. How are you, Erik?”

Those yellow eyes focused intently on the meat in front of him.

“Christine has improved quite a lot lately, don’t you think?”

Nadir smiled. He knew it was merely a distraction so he wouldn’t have to speak about himself, but he could still hear the undercurrent of pride in Erik’s voice.

“She has,” he agreed. “Your teaching has certainly taken her far.”

Erik shook his head.

“It’s because she works so hard. All the teaching in the world won’t help if the student doesn’t put in the effort. She truly wants to improve, and that’s why she does.”

Nadir was a little surprised. Erik usually never passed up an opportunity to boast of his many skills and talents.

“You think she’ll be prima donna one day?”

“No, Daroga - I do not think - I know. You could bet your life in it - Christine Daaé will be the prima donna of the Opera Populaire in five years time. I guarantee it.”

Nadir nodded.

“What about Carlotta? Where will she go?”

“Oh, I have a few suggestions of where she can go,” Erik replied dryly.

Nadir very nearly mentioned that perhaps in five years time she might retire, but chose to not say it after all, lest Erik get an idea and retire her himself.

An amazing thing began to happen as dinner went on - they had an almost normal conversation. It began with Nadir offering up little anecdotes about his life lately, going into a little more detail when Erik didn’t stop him. The most surprising of all - Erik even asked a few questions, asked for more details about things, like the garden he was growing and how his elderly cat was doing. Not once did he roll his eyes or tap his fingers impatiently or pull out his lasso or even threaten to do so. What was nearly as surprising was how much Nadir enjoyed the evening. When was the last time he and Erik had truly talked like this? Not Erik begging for help after getting caught in a lie, not Nadir pressing him about what happened to a concussed stage hand - just talking for the sake of talking?

It was nice. It reminded him of Persia, or at least of the nicer times in Persia. So much of the time there was drenched in awful things after Erik had arrived, but even then there had been times, like
now, when they would talk about things other than work. Nadir was pleased to find Erik’s mind was not too worse for the wear after so many years alone and pretending to be a ghost.

He pressed his luck and asked him about his music, and Erik was only slightly evasive as he told him about his composing. Nadir was amused to learn that he was still working on that damned opera of his - “Don Juan Triumphant” - and knew better than to comment on the fact that it had been ‘nearly finished’ for thirty years now.

“I’m working on a new song for Christine, as well,” he went on. “I’m sure you’ll hear it eventually - it’s to be her next audition piece, something to help her stand out.”

“Oh, really? I look forward to that.”

Erik nodded and fell quiet. He wasn’t used to so much talking with someone that wasn’t Christine, and he was rather anxious for the Daroga to finish his soup (the last of the food he had left). He seemed to be purposely drawing it out, stirring it slowly, carefully picking up little pieces and considering them before taking a bite - could there possibly be a more infuriating way to eat soup? If there was, he was certain the Daroga would find it.

“Now that I’ve had dinner at your place, you should come have dinner at mine,” Nadir finally broke the silence, inspecting the contents of his spoon.

Erik’s shoulders tensed.

“Is Darius still in your employ?” he aimed for nonchalance and achieved it perfectly, but Nadir knew better.

It had happened ages ago, while the Populaire was still under construction and Erik was not yet entombed below. Nadir had just recently moved to Paris, and Erik had pounded on Nadir’s door, impatient that it was locked. Darius had opened the door only to be shoved aside as Erik barged in, already complaining loudly about the workers at the opera house construction site that weren’t making things to his exact (and occasionally bizarre) specifications to a slightly confused Nadir who was making his way down the stairs to see what the fuss about.

Erik had whipped off his cape and tossed it at the young man by the door, who was already looking offended at the noisy, boorish Frenchman whom he had never seen before but who acted like he owned the place.

“It’s an insult, Daroga, a pure insult!” he had fumed.

“Now, now, Erik - I’m sure it’s all right,” Nadir had started before turning to Darius. “Why don’t you get us some tea?”

Darius had nodded, making his way to the kitchen, but not before pausing next to Nadir and asking in hushed Persian, ”Is everything okay with him? He just pushed his way in.”

Nadir had nodded eagerly, replying back ”It’s fine, he’s an old friend.”

Darius had shot a parting glare back at the supposed friend who was pacing in the entryway and chewing a thumbnail.

”Your friend is scary and rude,” he had muttered, leaving the room.

Nadir’s face had turned pale, looking quickly at Erik, who had spared only the briefest of glances at Darius as he went for tea. Perhaps they would be lucky and Erik had been too caught up in his
tantrum to actually hear what Darius had said.

It had truly seemed that way at first, too - Nadir had begun to lead Erik to the sitting room, only to find that at some point he had stopped following him.

Erik had found his way into the kitchen, and had silently approached Darius from behind.

He suddenly leaned in close, placing a hand on the counter next to him. Darius had started a little, but quickly returned the same glare that Erik was leveling at him.

He picked up the tea tray - this strange man wasn’t going to get in the way of him performing his job, no matter how tall or angry he was!

Erik leaned his face down a little closer, narrowing his eyes.

"You think I’m scary now, young man?" he intoned in perfect Persian. "Perhaps you should see what you think after I remove my mask!"

Darius had yelped, dropping the tea tray with a crashing clatter as he realized that the man had understood everything he had said. The blood drained from his face as Erik threateningly lifted a hand to his mask, and he darted from the room before he could see whatever horror was sure to lie beneath.

Nadir had entered a moment later, taking in the sight of the broken tea cups and tea-splattered rug.

“Erik,” he had admonished. “I liked that rug.”

Darius had refused to come out until Erik had left, and on the rare occasion that Erik would come back for whatever reason, Darius was resolute about not being in the same room with him at all or even looking in his direction.

Nadir now sat across from Erik and carefully watched how he pretended to not care about the answer.

“He is,” he told him.

“Hmph. I shall pass on your offer, in that case.”

Nadir sighed. Perhaps that had merely been wishful thinking on his own part.

Soon enough the meal was over, and Nadir began to pack up the dishes, a task quickly completed. They both stood, Erik walking to the door with him. Nadir paused a moment.

“This evening has been quite nice, Erik.”

“Was it... It was rather... Normal, was it not?” there was a hint of worry and hope in Erik’s voice.

“It was very normal, friend,” he smiled.

Erik nodded, some tension leaving him.

“I truly enjoyed it,” Nadir continued, and rested a hand on Erik’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

Erik stared at the hand on his shoulder with a mix of unbridled horror and disgust.

“Don’t touch Erik,” he chided as he gingerly picked the man’s hand off of him with the tips of his
fingers and looked at him disapprovingly.

Erik brushed off his shoulder, still frowning. Nadir cleared his throat.

“Ah, yes. Well, we should do this again sometime, don’t you think? It really was nice.”

Erik’s face fell and his shoulders slumped. Another dinner with the Daroga? Why?! He was bitterly reminded that being good was not the kind of thing that you could do once and be good forever - you had to keep working at it, it seemed. Perhaps working at it meant more dinners with the Daroga... But that was simply too much to consider so closely on the heels of an evening already spent that way. He jerked the door open and pointed out to the hallway.

“We’ll see,” he said as Nadir went out, before nearly slamming the door behind him.

It eventually became a thought that Erik could think of without a headache after a couple of weeks, but by then he was focused on something else entirely.

Christine surprised him at the end of one of her lessons. She had planned it all out - Raoul was still out of France, Meg was going to be spending time with family, the other girls all had plans of their own. No one would even notice one more girl missing, and if so it would be assumed she had gone on a little trip like so many others. It was the perfect plan, really - practically fool-proof - and the perfect opportunity.

“Erik,” she asked shyly. “The company has the next four days off, you know, and I was wondering - could I spend them with you?”

A few moments passed where he did nothing but stare at her with wide eyes. She looked up at him, confused as to why he was so silent.

“You wish to stay with me for the entirety of the break? Three nights? Three whole nights?” his brow furrowed under the mask.

She nodded.

“If it’s okay with you...” she added.

“Of course, my dear, of course you can stay... Truly?”

“Yes, truly,” she smiled.

He suddenly became flustered and embarrassed. He smoothed back his hair, brushed a hand down the front of his jacket, and straightened his cravat.

“You may absolutely stay for the break, Christine, just let me know when you would like me to escort you downstairs.”

“I’ll meet you here in an hour?”

He nodded, not meeting her eye, and she took her leave to go pack what she would need for her visit.

Three nights and four days of Christine in his home. He could scarcely believe such a blessing. So she hadn’t just been pretending when she’d said she would come back and stay with him again!

He didn’t think there was anything that could possibly ruin this joyous occasion - not a single thing in the entire world.
Unbeknownst to anyone, at that very moment a ship was pulling into the harbor, and a very eager Raoul was gathering his luggage and grinning about how surprised Christine would be when she saw him.
Christine couldn’t stop the grin on her face as she made her way up to her dormitory to pack her things. Ever since Mamma Valerius had gone, she had felt a little alone. She had plenty of friends, yes, but she had no family at all. Sometimes she couldn’t help the little sting that came along with hearing the other girls talk about visiting their many various relatives. She had Raoul, of course, and Adele would always feel like family too, but even though she loved them very much, it still didn’t feel quite the same as having uncles and aunts and cousins like all the other girls had.

She was surprised to find that Erik felt almost like family as well, but in a way that was decidedly not like a family member. He reminded her a little of her Papa, at times, but in a different way. She couldn’t explain it, and she didn’t like to examine it too closely, but the fact remained that he somehow held the comfort of a family member and the camaraderie of a friend at the same time as possessing a certain charming allure that she would be pleased to find in a suitor - if she were interested in a suitor, that was.

She bumped into Meg in the common area of the dormitory.

“Christine! Where are you off to in such a hurry?”

Meg made no mention of flush on her cheeks or the smile on her lips, but all things together, she had an idea of where her friend was headed soon.

Christine motioned for her to follow her into her bedroom. Once inside she drew her carpet bag out of the little closet an threw it on the bed.

“I’m spending the break with my teacher,” she explained. “But you can’t tell anyone! Oh, please, Meg - it’s important no one know.”

Meg nodded solemnly.

“For the entire break?”

“The entire break.”

Meg sighed.

“That sounds so exciting! Maman wants us to go visit my aunt,” Meg rolled her eyes. “Three days off, and they’re going to be spent with my stuffy old aunt.”

Christine giggled.

“How do you know my teacher isn’t stuffy?”

“Oh, Christine - you wouldn’t be smiling like that if he was!”

Christine tried to press her lips into a serious line, and almost succeeded.

“What do I do if someone asks where you are?”

Christine shrugged.

“Just tell them you haven’t seen me, that’s all. I really don’t think anyone is going to ask, anyway. Who even would?”
They talked a little longer as Christine grabbed this and that and shoved them all haphazardly into her carpet bag.

“Christine,” Meg suddenly changed the subject. “Isn’t your dress going to wrinkle? You didn’t even fold it.”

She hesitated, looking at the dress she had tossed in the bag on top of her nightclothes and dressing gown. She knew very well that nothing would get a chance to form wrinkles - they wouldn’t even be in the bag longer than an hour - but how could she tell that to Meg?

“It’s fine, I think. He, ah, he doesn’t live that far away.”

“You’re in quite a hurry,” Meg remarked with a little grin as Christine grabbed a pair of slippers and tossed them in the bag.

Christine frowned, theatrically so.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said primly.

Meg raised an eyebrow.

“And if I’m in a hurry, it’s only because I’m looking forward to his guest room,” she went on. “He has a perfectly lovely guest room.”

“Mmm hmm.”

“It is!” she insisted. “His bed is the softest mattress I’ve ever slept on. Er, the bed he has in the guest room, I mean.”

“Ohhh, I see. How does the guest room bed compare to the one in his room, then?” she asked innocently.

Christine gasped and swatted at her with a stocking.

“I’ve never even been in his bedroom, I’ll have you know!”

“Ah, so he visits you in the guest room, then?” she teased.

Christine heaved a sigh.

“Yes, Meg - that’s where he... visits me,” she shot her friend a perturbed look.

Meg’s face lit up, overjoyed at how she had finally worn Christine down.

“How perfectly lovely indeed!” she giggled. “Tell me, does he have a piano?”

Christine eyed her warily. She knew better than to trust that wicked look on Meg’s face.

“Yes, he does... Why?”

“Do you remember when we accidentally walked in on Piangi and Carlotta making use of that poor piano backstage?”

Christine groaned.

“Meg! I had just managed to forget that! Now that image won’t leave me alone for weeks again.”
It truly had been weeks before the two girls had been able to cease staring at the piano with horror as the pianist played and touched those very same keys without a hint of knowledge of what had transpired on top of them.

“Besides - Erik would never! He’s- he’s a refined gentleman.”

Meg wrinkled her nose.

“Refined? That doesn’t sound very exciting or... or passionate. Who wants a refined lover?”

“Oh, I assure you he’s plenty exciting and passionate. He’s an excellent lover, I’ll have you know.” Christine didn’t stutter, but her face turned bright red at the word lover despite both of them knowing it was only a joke.

Meg jumped up and threw her arms around Christine, hugging her and laughing.

“Oh, Christine, I hope you’re not cross with me!” she giggled. “You know how I like to tease, but I don’t mean anything by it!”

“I could never be cross with you, Meg,” she returned her hug tightly. “Even if you do have a terribly overactive imagination that comes up with the most awful things that would never happen in reality.”

Meg snickered and pulled away.

“Oh! I didn’t mean to keep you, either - you must be wanting to leave soon.”

Christine nodded and grabbed her packed bag.

“It’s alright. Have fun at your aunt’s, or try to at least. I’ll see you when you get back - and remember! Not a word of where I’m going to anyone!”

“Oh of course!”

Erik was there waiting for her behind her dressing room mirror. He escorted her down the tunnels and across the lake, and after a bit of small talk she eventually brought up a question that she had been wondering about.

“Erik?”

“Hm?”

“How would I get to your house if you weren’t here to escort me?”

A pause.

“Why on earth would you be going to my house if I wasn’t here to escort you?”

“Well, what if?” she shrugged. “What if I wanted to ask you something but you were at home and the question couldn’t wait?”

“What kind of question would that be, exactly?”

She turned in the gondola and shot him an annoyed look.

“It’s a theoretical question, Erik. Do you enjoy making two trips just to fetch me?”
“I don’t mind it,” he said stubbornly.

“Well what if I wanted to surprise you one day? Show up on your doorstep with a gift or something?”

“I don’t do well with surprises, Christine.”

She sighed.

“What if there was some patron who wouldn’t leave me alone and I wanted to someplace safe to hide?”

“Is someone bothering you, sweet? It’s alright, you can tell me,” concern colored his voice.

“No,” she shook her head. “I just- oh, it’s silly I guess.”

He didn’t understand why she’d want a way to spend even more time at his house, but he also didn’t like that defeated tone in her voice.

“My home is specifically designed to keep anyone but myself from accessing it easily, but... I will think about what you said.”

“Thank you,” she smiled a little, her voice soft.

She went right to her room - when had she started thinking of it as her room? It surprised her, but it felt right - after they reached his house, and she unpacked her things. When she had finished, she found Erik had already prepared some tea for them in the sitting room.

She sank down into one of the chairs and sighed happily, letting the intense warmth of the little porcelain cup seep deep into the bones of her fingers. She closed her eyes a took a slow sip. Erik, seated across from her, fiddled with the ring on his little finger as he often did when slightly anxious - this was a long time he would be entertaining her in his house, and he was curious about what she would like to do to fill the time, lest she grow bored of him and being there.

“Would you like for me to play you a song on the piano?”

Her eyes flew open and she choked on her tea, the terrible conversation with Meg suddenly flooding her mind. Her wide eyes darted to the piano in the corner of the room - the one that looked like her mother’s piano - as she coughed and sputtered and very nearly dropped her teacup.

“Christine!” Erik shot up, worried. “Christine, are you alright?”

He knelt next to her and hovered a hand near her, intending to pat her on the back, but she cringed away from him.

The image that had been seared into her mind was there again, only now she was in Carlotta’s place and Erik was in Piangi’s and all of it was taking place on top of her mother’s piano and she knew with a certainty that if Erik touched her now she would never recover.

He pulled his hand back, but still watched her closely as her gasps began to settle into normal breathing again. She stared down at the floor, not able to meet his eye. She felt a little guilty about pulling away from him so - he’d probably assume she was repulsed by him - but there had been no helping it. She took a deep breath, placing a hand on her chest.

“No piano, not today, please,” she managed.
He nodded, standing up slowly.

“Of course, Christine, whatever you wish. You must try to be more careful, though,” he fretted, wringing his hands. “What ever would I do without you, my dear?”

She smiled weakly, her eyes stinging from coughing so hard, but she still couldn’t look at him, and she resolved to slap Meg the next time she saw her (though she knew, of course, that her resolve would fade away in a handful of hours and the incident would eventually become a funny - albeit embarrassing - story to tell her when she saw her again, still the thought of slapping her helped her regain her composure in the moment).

“I’m alright, Erik.”

She supposed it was what she got for joking in such a way - it was one thing for Meg to have said those things about him, but had she really needed to say he was an excellent lover? She dared to dart a little glance at him, a wicked voice in her head wondering far too loudly about just what kind of lover he would be. She quickly looked away again.

He sat back down in his chair, still a little concerned. Her cheeks were red from her coughing fit, but he never would have guessed the other reason behind that color on her face.

She took another careful sip of her tea, and for a moment he held his breath as she swallowed it. Of all the myriad horrible endings his mind had come up with, her choking to death on something he had given her had not come up - until now. What other possible outcomes could there be that he had neglected to think of? It boggled the mind and made him uncomfortable.

But things seemed normal enough in a few minutes, and she didn’t appear to be in any danger of choking again, and his worries began to ease away.

“I’ve made more progress on your new song,” he told her.

“Oh?”

“It’ll be ready with plenty of time to spare for your next audition. It’ll be a little difficult at the moment, but I’m confident that you can improve enough between now and then.”

She nodded eagerly. The next company audition was months away, and though it seemed far off, she knew it would be there sooner than she realized. She was looking forward to mastering the song Erik was composing for her - it was terribly appealing to have something that was a creation of just hers and his, the merging of his spirit and her voice giving an audience something that had never been heard before.

“I’ll try my very best,” she said solemnly - while it already irritated her when she wasn’t able to do well with any old regular song, she knew she would be crushed if she failed to live up to her own expectations with a song her Angel had written just for her. It was not something she took lightly.

“I’m sure you will, my dear,” he smiled warmly at her.

“Have you been working on any other projects? Any more pretend houses?”

A brief look of alarm flashed across his features before they settled back into their normal expression. He hadn’t expected her to remember the house, but apparently it had more of an impression on her than he had realized.

“Just a few sketches, nothing truly planned out yet.”
“Do you ever miss working in architecture?” she tilted her head curiously.

“Sometimes,” he admitted, and paused a moment. “But I have found it does not do to dwell on missing things that are forever gone from one’s life. Those days are long behind me, and I can never get them back again. If I spent time mourning everything I have lost, well—” he gave a little shrug. “I might never have time for anything other than mourning.”

She blinked hard. It seemed to her that she was constantly putting her foot in her mouth, constantly reminding him of things he didn’t want to remember, but she truly never meant anything by what she asked - she only wanted to get to know him better. Perhaps, she thought, perhaps getting to know him better and feeling that ache in her chest as she became acquainted with sorrow were one and the same.

His pensive mood seemed to lift, and a teasing smile came across his lips.

“And I if was so busy mourning, who would write songs for you, my sweet?”

She laughed a little, not wanting her sadness to compound his own.

“Will you show me the sketches?” she asked hopefully.

“You would like to see them?”

“Oh, yes, please!”

She finished her tea and he took her into his work room where he showed her his latest drawings.

Even in the form of rough sketches, she thought these designs were quite clever as well. He held them up and pointed out things he was thinking of changing and his thought process behind certain choices, and she was enraptured by every one. Surely, she thought, it was an awful thing to waste such talent, but she knew better than to bring it up again so soon.

After they had whiled away several hours in his work room, she mentioned that she was starting to get hungry. He immediately headed for the kitchen, and she trailed behind him. It took a bit of convincing, but she managed to cajole him into letting her help as he prepared a meal for them. He explained to her the mechanisms for working all of the appliances in his kitchen with great patience (even more patience than he normally had in her singing lessons, she noticed), and he took the time to show her the contents of each cabinet and cupboard and drawer as their soup was cooking.

“You should know where everything is,” he told her. “In case you should ever... find yourself here on your own.”

She gave him a questioning glance. He wouldn’t quite meet her eye.

“Just in case, you know - in case you came to ask me an urgent question but found I was out of the house, and you decided to wait for me to return and you became hungry in the meantime.”

She smirked at the thought of such a convoluted occurrence ever happening, but she was pleased to know that he really did seem to be thinking of what she had mentioned earlier.

“Oh, I see. Just in case, yes.”

“And you must take care not to burn yourself on the stove, Christine. It’s terribly hot and I don’t want any harm to come to you. The oven, as well, and the samovar.”
She raised an eyebrow as she glanced sidelong at him. She had cooked quite often growing up, and even if she had not, did he really think she wasn’t aware that stoves were hot? She knew she shouldn’t tease him, knew that he only cared about her very much, and that he was the nervous sort, but-

She schooled her face into questioning innocence, her brow furrowed and lips pouting as though deep in thought.

“Erik,” she asked sweetly. “What about the fireplace?”

“Of course that too! Why, an ember could catch on your skirts if you stand too close it, Christine, it’s really quite dangerous and you must keep your distance-“ he turned to face her and stopped dead in the middle of his lecture on fireplace safety when he noticed the look on her face morphing into one of sheer amusement.

He pressed his lips into a thin line and narrowed his eyes. Of course Christine already knew those things! He was being silly again. He straightened his cravat and cleared his throat.

“I’m sure I can manage the kitchen just fine, Erik,” she smiled, her eyes twinkling. “I even have some recipes you might like to try sometime.”

“I- I would like that. I believe the soup is done.”

“Oh! Go sit down at the table, then. I’ll get it for you.”

“Christine,” he protested. “No, you are my guest, my dear, that would be highly improper for you to serve me.”

She shook her head.

“No, I insist, and I can be just be just as stubborn as you can, Erik. Go sit at the table and I’ll bring your bowl to you.”

“Highly improper, Christine!” But he stood up from where he had been leaning against the counter.

“Erik,” she practically begged. “You are always so good to me, just let me be good to you this once!”

“You shouldn’t have to serve me my food like some kind of- of maid or- or servant-“ Or wife, his mind supplied, and his eyes widened just a little.

“Maestro, please!” she was very nearly laughing now as she pointed a firm finger towards to dining room. “Go sit down!”

He grumbled a little and muttered something she couldn’t quite hear, but he obeyed her request and went into the dining room.

She shook her head again, smiling to herself as she portion out the soup.

He held his breath as she entered the room and placed the bowl in front of him. It really was a very wifely action, was it not? She had helped to cook it, and then she had insisted on serving him. Would this be what it would be like to be married to Christine? He let himself savor the brief moment - it would likely not come again.

“Thank you, my dear,” he managed, and she smiled widely.
“Erik-“

“Yes?” he looked up at her, eyes wide and face serious.

She frowned a little and smoothed out her skirt.

“Do be careful with the soup... It’s very hot, you see. I don’t want you to burn yourself.”

He smiled wryly.

“Yes, thank you, Christine. I will keep that in mind.”

They talked of the show coming up, and Erik reiterated his distaste for the director, and eventually the conversation turned to the recipes Christine had mentioned, so she began to tell him of the kinds of things she used to cook for herself and her papa. He hung on her every word about her childhood, about the dishes she’d made from the places they’d traveled or the meals she’d make from her homeland when they were so far from Sweden. He didn’t think he could ever tire of hearing her speak about her life.

She told him the story of something that had happened when she was still quite small, when she had been distracted in the market square by a baby goat that she had tried to approach, only for it to kick up its heels and run from her. Without thinking about her papa who hadn’t even realized his little daughter was no longer next to him, she had chased the goat until suddenly she realized she was no longer in the market square.

“Oh, I must have sat there for ages! Well, not ages, really - probably not even a half an hour - but it felt so terribly long! I just sat down in the middle of this giant field filled with goats and cried my eyes out!” she giggled. “I thought Papa would never find me, that I’d have to live there in that field and become a goat! But he found me, after all. Oh, Erik, you can’t imagine how good it feels to know you won’t ever have to become a goat!”

He knew it was probably awful to laugh at the image of little Christine thinking she’d turn into a goat, but it was so very precious and he couldn’t help it, and he laughed even as his heart twisted for her childhood self.

“But Christine, why would you have to turn into a goat just because your father didn’t find you?”

She threw up her hands.

“Because what else was I going to do? I was all alone in the field, so I was going to have to be raised by goats, after all - surely that meant that I would have to be a goat as well!”

Her laughter died down and she looked a little wistful. She missed him so, even still.

“Did you have plans the next few days, Erik?” she changed the subject, not wanting to linger on thoughts of her papa. “I invited myself over so suddenly, I forgot to ask if you already had plans.”

Erik considered it moment.

“Not any plans in particular,” he said. “Although I had anticipated doing some composing this week.”

“Oh, really?”

He nodded.
“You wouldn’t mind, would you? I don’t want to disturb you at all. I can work on the piano and not the organ.”

“I wouldn’t be disturbed in the least! And where is the organ?” she was curious.

“It’s in my bedroom, that’s why you haven’t seen it. But it can get rather loud. I promise to keep the racket to minimum.”

“As if your music could ever be racket,” she teased.

“Hm. Wait till you hear it,” he raised an eyebrow.

She insisted on clearing the dishes as well, and he let her. He watched her from the doorway to the kitchen as she washed and dried each dish and cup and the silverware and placed them all back where they belonged. It made him feel something, strongly, but he couldn’t name what it was. She looked so at ease there in his kitchen, just like a real wife - even if he did feel that such menial tasks should be beneath any wife of his. But still - his desire to cook and clean for her as an act of service to show his devotion to her - was that what she felt towards him, as well? Was that why she doing this? Or was she merely being polite? He decided to have a copy of the key to the front door made, so that she could come and go as she pleased if she wished to. How she could do so on her own across the lake remained to be seen, but he knew he would find a way. For her, he would.

“What do you normally do in the evenings?” she asked when she had finished with the dishes.

“Read, typically. Shall we go to the sitting room? I’m certain I can find a book that will interest you.”

She followed him to the sitting room and watched as he scanned the many bookshelves.

He frowned at one of the titles, running a finger over the spine.

“I think you’d quite like this one, but I’m afraid you aren’t able to read Russian...”

“Could you read it to me?” the words were out before she could stop them.

He looked surprised, but he pulled the book off the shelf.

“Papa used to read to me nearly every night,” she explained, looking down at her hands as she laced her fingers together. “It was one of my very favorite things.”

“Then by all means,” book in hand, he gestured her to the couch.

She sat down, eyes bright in anticipation. Erik sat in a chair opposite the couch, and she felt the smallest twinge of disappointment that he didn’t chose to sit next her instead - there was plenty of room on the couch for two, after all.

The story turned out to be a novel based on an old Russian folk tale, and though he was reading the page in Russian and translating it in his mind before speaking it in French for Christine, he rarely needed to pause to think about the words before he spoke them, and had Christine not glanced a look at those strange letters on the pages she might have almost thought it was written in his native French to begin with.

His rich, velvety voice wrapped around her like the warmth from the fire, and she rearranged herself on the couch so that she could lean against the armrest and tuck her legs underneath of her. The story was quite interesting, and even as she felt herself growing sleepy she fought to stay
awake so she could continue to hear it. She blinked as she stared at the fire, his words eventually ceasing to make sense and instead just becoming muddled sounds in her mind, but they were pleasant and comforting sounds.

He glanced over at her every so often. She seemed to be enjoying the story, and he was glad. They must have gone on like that for nearly an hour so - Christine curled up against the pillow of the armrest, a dreamy look on her face, and he in his own chair, reading her page after page after page.

He glanced up and paused his reading. She was leaning her head on her folded hands resting on the pillow, her eyes closed.

“Christine,” he whispered softly.

There was no reply. She was fast asleep.

He simply sat there a moment, watching her sleep. She looked so peaceful, but he knew the sofa was no place for her to spend the entire night. He considered how he might transport her to her bed without waking her - it seemed such a shame to have to wake her.

He could carry her, he supposed.

How would she feel in his arms? She was rather small, though he supposed that had more to do with his own height than any particular peculiarity on her part. He was certain he could easily lift her, her petite frame would be quite light, as light as a feather, really. She would be warm, of course, quite unlike himself. Probably warm enough to feel through all her layers of clothing. Would she nuzzle her face against his neck as he held her to his chest? Would she remain limp as a doll as he carried her, every joint loose and every muscle slack as he placed her underneath of the soft covers of her bed?

She really did look too beautiful to disturb, the way the firelight illuminated little strands of her hair (her hair looked so soft, would it feel like silk under his fingers?), the little motion of her back and chest rising and falling as she breathed evenly (would her corset interfere with her breathing during the night? It would have to come off, he was nearly certain), the way her dark eyelashes rested on her pale cheeks (how he longed to brush his lips across her cheeks, to press them against her forehead). It would be the easiest thing in the world, really - two strides and he would be in front of the couch, a mere handful of seconds stood between him and the sensation of scooping her up into his embrace. He swallowed hard against the lump in his throat, his mouth suddenly dry.

“Christine,” he crooned, remaining firmly seated in his chair. “Wake up, sweet.”

Her eyes fluttered open, and when she took in what had happened she smiled sheepishly against the pillow.

“Oh dear,” she said softly. “I must have dozed off a little.”

He smiled kindly as she stretched a little and sat up.

“It’s alright. Perhaps you are ready for bed, it seems.”

“It would seem so.” she stood and yawned. “Thank you for reading to me, Erik. It was a delight.”

She was thankful, also, for the low lighting in the sitting room, thankful that he likely couldn’t see the blush on her face.

“Reading to you was a delight as well, my dear. I’ll see you in the morning.”
“Goodnight,” she gave him one last sleepy smile as she left for her bedroom.

He sighed and placed a bookmark in the book they had been reading. He wasn’t certain what, exactly, she felt for him, but surely she felt *something* (though almost certainly not what he felt towards her) - and he began to let himself believe that whatever shred of *anything* she felt towards him (trust? appreciation? enjoyment of his mediocre company?) was in fact quite real.

Christine, having changed and prepared for sleep, pulled her blanket up to her chin and fell asleep with a sweet smile on her face, blissfully unaware of what was about to unfold upstairs.
Chapter 41

Meg sighed heavily as she sat on the floor of her mother’s office, legs sprawled in front of her, leaning her back against one of the walls and throwing a small rubber ball against the side of her mother’s desk. It bounced off the wood with a thud and she caught it before tossing it again.

The steady thuds of the ball caused Madame Giry to wrinkle her brow.

“Please don’t do that, Meg,” she fretted.

“Maman,” Meg moaned. “I could have made plans with Francesca or Doreen. But now everyone left already!”

“Well, fuss at your Auntie, not at me - I’m not the one who canceled the visit,” Madame Giry said. “I was quite ready to go today if not for the telegram she sent last night saying she was busy and she didn’t want any company today.”

Meg huffed, but she knew her mother was right. Still, the only thing worse that having to go sit in her aunt’s parlor and drink that terrible weak tea she made was to be stuck in the opera house when all of her friends were off elsewhere.

Even Christine had gone and left her!

There was a knock at the little office door, and Madame Giry went to see who was there.

“Oh! Monsieur le Vicomte! How do you do today?” she politely asked as she opened the door wide and ushered him into the office. “What can I do for you, Monsieur?”

Meg scrambled up from the floor and tried to make herself look presentable.

Raoul smiled at both of them. He had spoken with Madame Giry on a number of occasions, buying tickets and so on. He already knew Meg, of course, since she was Christine’s best friend.

“It’s lovely to see you both again,” he told them. “But I’m actually looking for Christine. Do you know where she is?”

And he smiled again, that bright, winning smile that was very handsome to look at but it did very little to help the sudden sinking feeling Meg felt in her stomach.

At that very moment, unknown to anyone else except for Meg Giry, Christine was taking a lesson from her tutor. The director of the show might be terrible, but at least her singing would be wonderful.

Madame Giry looked to her daughter, and Meg quickly recalled what Christine had asked her to say.

“I haven’t seen her at all,” she shrugged apologetically. “I’m afraid I don’t know where she is.”

His smile faded a little.

“Oh,” he said. “Well, does she still rent a room here?”

“Yes, Monsieur, I can assure you that she still rents her room,” Madame Giry supplied.
He nodded.

“Then she should be back this evening, I take it?” he looked to Meg once more. “Unless she had other plans?”

Meg bit her lip. If she told him Christine would be away, he’d ask how she knew. But if he came back and waited for her - he’d be waiting quite a long time.

“Was Christine expecting you?” she asked.

He shrugged sheepishly.

“No, my coming here is a surprise. She thinks I’m not even in France at the moment!”

“Oh, my...” she said weakly, trying to smile.

“If she’s out at the moment, do you happen to know when she’ll be back?”

“Unfortunately not, I’m sorry!”

“Ah, it’s okay. I’m sure I’ll see her soon enough.”

He took his leave, and Meg sank down the wall again, suddenly lost in a spiral of worry. She squeezed the ball in her hand, too distracted to even think of throwing it anymore.

While Raoul was out waiting for her to return, Christine was biting her lip in concentration as she leaned over a table in Erik’s workroom. He had let her borrow a few sheets of paper and a pen, and she was carefully writing out a number of Swedish words as he leaned over her shoulder to watch.

“Erik!” she laughed. “Just wait until I’m done! I can’t focus with you over my shoulder like that!”

He pulled back.

“Hmm. I am merely curious. You can’t fault a man for his curiosity, Christine.”

“Just give me a moment - I’m almost done!” she grinned as she continued writing them out.

It had been ages since she’d written anything in Swedish, but a discussion with Erik had led to him asking about Swedish, a language he didn’t know. She had realized that with his gift for language (it turned out he spoke six languages quite fluently, and knew a fair amount of three others, while she herself only knew four languages) he could probably pick it up quite quickly, and she had offered to teach him a number of words and sayings.

He found he was quite eager to learn whatever he could of the language - he was already making plans to buy some books on the matter. The languages he knew he had learned because he had lived in those countries or visited for a long period, but he had never had a reason to learn Swedish - until now. What could be sweeter than being able to talk to Christine in her native tongue?

“Meg, dear-“

Meg looked up at her mother, pulled out of her worries.

“I’m finished with my work here, would you like to go shopping?”

Meg hesitated. She hated window shopping - she only liked shopping when she had money to buy something. Staring at things she wanted but had no way of getting was not her idea of fun.
“I’m finally going to buy that dress I’ve been wanting,” Madame Giry went on, beaming with pride. “And I thought perhaps you could get that hat I know you’ve had your eye on!”

“Maman...”

Meg was puzzled. She knew her mother had been saving up for a new dress for a while now, but if she finally had enough for the dress, how could she also afford that pretty pink hat?

Madame Giry knew what her daughter was thinking. She reached deep into her pocket and pulled out the envelope that had been left by the Opera Ghost. She held it open and showed its contents to Meg, who gasped.

“Yes, Maman, I agree! Let’s go shopping!”

“The Ghost has been very good to us, hasn’t he?” Madame Giry said, a little on the loud side as she glanced up at the ceiling. “We are most appreciative.”

Meg put the thoughts of Raoul out her mind for the afternoon as she shopped with her mother. She managed to forget entirely about the whole problem for a little while. It wasn’t until she arrived back to the girls’ dormitories that she noticed he was there in the hallway, leaning against the wall and looking concerned.

“Meg!” he called out to her, and her stomach felt uneasy.

“Christine hasn’t returned yet,” he frowned.

“Oh?”

“I asked a girl, Doreen, I think, and she said Christine usually doesn’t stay out very late. Do you think she’ll be back soon?”

“Oh, uh, I’m not certain. Like I said, I’m not sure where she is, so I really don’t know when she’ll be back.”

“You’re her best friend - she didn’t mention any plans anywhere?”

Meg frowned. She was afraid the Vicomte was going to worry too much over it all, worry that Christine was in some sort of trouble. If only Christine had known he was coming! Why did he have to try and surprise her? And Meg had only tried to follow Christine’s wishes! How was she to know Raoul would wait outside Christine’s doorway like a little lost puppy until she came back? She could have thought of a more convincing story than ‘I haven’t seen her’, if only she had known...

“No, she didn’t say anything.”

Raoul shifted a little.

“She didn’t mention any plans in her last letter to me, either. In fact she even mentioned that her next few weeks were going to be rather quiet!”

Meg chewed at her lip. Raoul looked quite concerned, and she wanted to let him know he had nothing to worry about - but how could she do that without revealing anything about Christine’s teacher? She had been so insistent that no one know!

“Is she-“ Raoul looked uncomfortable. “Is she seeing anyone? A suitor, or a- a patron?”
He hated to bring it up, as he knew that he was neither and therefore had no real business even asking. If Christine hadn’t seen fit to tell him, then it wasn’t fit for him to pry about it.

Meg froze, eyes wide.

“I won’t be upset if you say yes,” he looked down, shamefaced. “I just want to know that she’s okay, that’s all.”

Meg shook her head slowly. For all the teasing she had done, and even if she did think Christine had a bit of a crush on the mysterious man, she had told Meg that her teacher was neither a suitor nor a patron, and Meg believed her.

“No, she doesn’t.”

Raoul nodded a little. He wasn’t sure how to feel - a little relieved, he supposed, but as awful as finding out she secretly had a suitor would be, it would have been offset by knowing that she was simply out having fun somewhere and didn’t want him to know. It would sting, but it wouldn’t hurt as much as finding out she had been some accident.

Meg felt awful over the whole thing. She searched for something, anything, to say and said the first somewhat comforting thing that came to mind.

“I’m sure she’s alright, Raoul. She’ll be fine. It’s not like that kidnapper is still out there,” she chuckled nervously.

Raoul’s eyes went wide.

“Kidnapper?”

Meg closed her eyes and cursed herself.

“Oh, er, yes, that Mister Williams, the man from England? He, ah, he kidnapped a few young women a while ago... Well, he’s in prison now, at least.”

“Kidnapped,” Raoul breathed, and Meg scowled.

“No, no - I said she’s not kidnapped, Raoul. She’s fine,” she said firmly.

“How do you know?” he cried. “How do you know she’s fine if you don’t even know where she is or when she’ll be back?”

Meg stared, dumbstruck. She had truly gone and done it. How was she going to get out of this one?

Christine sat on one of the chairs in his sitting room and listened to him as he played the piano. She had a book in her lap, but concentration for the story was difficult to come by - she kept glancing up at him, pausing to watch him from behind. He had taken his jacket off earlier in the afternoon, sometime during their impromptu Swedish lesson (a subject he had certainly picked up very well - she had enjoyed hearing such familiar words in his voice, enjoyed that he hadn’t thought it beneath him to learn from his student, even enjoyed correcting his pronunciation). His white shirtsleeves were rolled halfway up his forearms and her eyes kept being drawn back to those sinewy arms and bony wrists.

Content with the knowledge that he couldn’t see her looking at him, she set her book down for a little while and focused solely on him, letting her mind wander.
She wondered what he would have been like had he looked everyone else. He had known such awful things, had been through so many hardships - yet even after all that, even while he shunned society and lived underground, he was so sweet to her, so thoughtful and caring towards her... How much kinder would he have been if he had been accepted by others? How much more would his career - careers - have flourished if he didn’t have to hide? His music played freely for all to hear? His buildings sought after by so many?

He would be incredibly wealthy, far more so than he was now as the Ghost. Perhaps he would have been a philanthropist - he was certainly terribly generous with her, how much more so would he be if he didn’t hate most of humanity? He’d live in a lovely house, probably one of his own design. He’d have a wife, certainly - how could a man as talented and funny and kind as him not have a wife? He’d have children, too. Probably a great deal of children, she thought wryly. And he’d have friends - so many friends.

He wouldn’t be so awfully nervous about so many things, wouldn’t shrink away and avoid contact with other people. He’d live just like anyone else, sleep at night and eat meals with his family. He might not be so thin, either because he ate regularly or because whatever it was that had caused his face to look like was also what made him look thin.

He would be happy.

She sighed a little. He deserved a lovely life like that. He deserved friends and loved ones, and people who loved him in return. But fate had given him this instead. A horrible face and a lifetime of loneliness.

He glanced behind him and noticed she was no longer reading.

“Do you have any requests, sweet?”

She let her eyes slide closed and smiled. She loved when he called her that.

So many men often tried to call the girls in the company by pet names, and it nearly always sounded patronizing and falsely sweet - but when Erik said things like that, he said them in such a way that there was no mistaking the honest sincerity behind them.

“Hmm. Play the song you’re writing for me.”

His fingers paused over keys.

“It’s not finished.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she shook her head, and he began to play.

It was going to be a beautiful song, she could tell. Even only halfway finished, it sent a shiver down her spine and made her heart soar. If she could master this one, she’d surely get all sorts of roles, more than she was getting now.

The ending left uncertain, still unwritten, he instead played the first half again when he got to the end of what he already written.

Christine opened her eyes and watched him again.

When she was a child and she and her father had first come to France, she had right away noticed a bunch of yellow flowers growing up between the cobblestones in the market street. She had excitedly pointed them out to her Papa, telling him how pretty she thought they were.
“They’re weeds,” Gustave Daaé had smiled. “They don’t belong there.”

“No, Papa! They’re beautiful! How could they not belong?”

They had returned to the market a few days later, she had been heartbroken to find the flowers had disappeared. She had asked her Papa about what happened to them.

“Ah,” he had said. “Someone must have cut them down.”

How could someone destroy such beauty simply because they thought it didn’t fit?

The next time they had gone to the market, however, those same yellow flowers had already begun to grow back in exactly the same place, and she eagerly pointed them out again.

Her Papa had laughed.

“Yes,” he said. “That’s what weeds often do. You can try to trample them down, but they come right back up, strong as ever!”

She had secretly been glad that this was the case, and had stared hard at the little yellow flowers, rooting them on in her mind, telling them to never give up if they truly wanted to bloom.

Erik was like a weed, she thought. For the sin of existing, so many had tried to cut him down or trample him, but like those flowers he kept blooming anyway. He held such a beauty inside, but most who glanced his way surely only saw something they thought didn’t fit, something that wasn’t right, something that they wanted gone. But still, he bloomed. When the world would not allow him to sing on a stage, he instead crafted a student into a promising talent. When he was forced to live in a cellar, he instead designed a normal house for himself. When the world told him he had the appearance of a monster, he had created the image of a perfect gentleman. The world had tried its best to be rid of him, to trample him down, but still he bloomed in a flurry of creative endeavors, in his designs for make believe houses, in his compositions for all sorts of instruments - in the dark corners, and hidden away, perhaps, but he was still there, still creating beautiful things even if there was no one there to appreciate them.

How easy it would have been, she thought, for him to give up at any point in the past. And who could have blamed him? Yet still he pressed on.

He trailed off the song with a few chords here and there, eventually bringing it to a sort of an end. He turned back to face Christine to see her opinion of it. She was staring at the wall, a far off look in her unfocused eyes and a dreamy smile on her face.

He cleared his throat.

“That was beautiful, Erik,” she turned her attention towards him.

He smiled.

“What were you thinking about just then?” he asked, curious.

“Flowers,” she said simply.

“Ah.”

Flowers. He should buy her some flowers. Women loved flowers. He often bought her flowers for after her performances, but perhaps he could also give her some for no particular reason, too.
Raoul ran a hand through his hair as he waited in the hallway outside the older girls’ dormitories. There was no other way out or in besides that hallway, so Christine would have to pass through it when she returned - or if she returned. Meg’s words still hung heavy in his mind, and the fact that the man she had been referring to was in jail held very little comfort for him - there were surely dozens more such monsters out there who would think nothing of kidnapping a young woman.

It made no sense to him - where was she? It was dark outside now, had been dark for over an hour. He had stopped every girl who had passed through the hallway and asked if they knew where Christine was, and each one had no idea. When asked when the last time they saw her was, most couldn’t even name a specific day - they had seen her a few days ago, that much was certain, but as to whether or not anyone was sure they had seen her the previous day or even the day before that, no one could say.

Around midnight he could hear a group of laughing girls approaching. There was a number of them, all coming down the hallway at once, and he assumed from their state of dress and seeming slight intoxication that they had come back from a party of sorts. Perhaps Christine was with them! But she was nowhere to be found, and when asked they all frowned or shrugged and none of them were certain where she could be either.

Raoul fell asleep in the hallway sometime around two in the morning. He was sitting on the floor, his back propped against the wall.

Alexis and Marie peeked out at him.

“Why is he still here?” Alexis whispered.

“He’s waiting for Christine,” Marie’s voice was hushed.

They were silent a long moment.

“Do you think she’s okay? I can’t even remember when I saw her last...” Alexis fretted.

“I’m not sure... She was at rehearsal, wasn’t she? But did we see her again after that?”

“I hope she’s alright.”

They stared intently at the Vicomte.

“Should we get someone to kick him out?” Marie asked.

“No, he didn’t seem creepy, I don’t think he’ll be any trouble. Besides, he’s kind of handsome isn’t he?” she giggled.

“Alexis stop!”

Her giggled were contagious, and they tried to muffle them as best they could, but even with the threat of waking him, neither one wanted to leave just yet.

In the morning Raoul awoke feeling stiff and sore and a little confused as to his surroundings, but everything came back to him soon enough. He wanted to spring up and rush down the hallway as quickly as his aching joints would allow and see if Christine was in her room, but he hesitated. He didn’t want to simply charge into the dormitories - it seemed terribly rude, and he didn’t want to make any of the girls uncomfortable with his presence in their private quarters.

He waited until someone came down the hallway.
“Did Christine return?” he asked eagerly.

The girl looked puzzled, and asked him to wait a moment. She returned down the hallway and was out of sight for a few moments, presumably checking Christine’s room.

She came back and shrugged.

“I even opened her door, but she’s not there,” she said apologetically.

Raoul’s shoulders sagged.

“I see. Thank you.”

The girl went on her way, and after a minute or two Raoul turned and marched out of the hallway, out of the opera house entirely.

He was not going to sit by and do nothing while his dear friend was missing.
Christine gasped when she saw the time on Erik’s pocket watch.

“Indeed,” he chuckled as he shut it once again.

“But it doesn’t feel that late!” she protested.

“Because you are underground, my dear. There is no sunlight, so it can be any time you want it to be,” he gestured to the house around him.

Christine considered this for a moment.

“I’m not sleepy at all,” she said. “But I do suppose I should I start getting ready for bed soon. I wouldn’t want to stay up so late so that I simply crash and have to sleep an entire day! But what about you? Are you going to stay up for a while yet?”

“I was thinking that I might do some composing tonight... I seem to have found myself quite inspired lately... But, ah, that is, only if it would not disturb you? It is not worth it to me if the sound of the piano keeps you from resting.”

“Oh, I don’t mind at all.”

He waited until she had taken her leave for the night before he ended up in his workroom. He spent a little time organizing a few projects, gathering his sheet music and also his thoughts as he tried to shift his mind from Christine to music.

He truly had been inspired lately, in no small part because of Christine. She seemed to make his songs take flight in a way that nothing and no one else could, melody after melody coming to him whenever she was near, or even if he just thought about the wonderful times spent in her presence.

Christine closed her bedroom door and sighed contentedly. She didn’t anticipate falling asleep very soon - she could see how easy it was to lose track of time so far away from the sunlight. She decided it was the perfect opportunity to try a bath.

The water was hot, just as he had said it would be. She was delighted at the prospect, and let the tub fill until it was nearly full. After gathering some soaps to try, she glanced back at the door before shedding her clothing and quickly settling under the water.

The steam from the water made the entire room warm, and the scent of the soaps made it smell like a garden. She closed her eyes and leaned back, letting the water go up to her chin. It was the best thing she’d experienced in some time.

She stayed in until the water grew tepid, and by then she was feeling relaxed enough to sleep. She dried off with the plush towels he had left for her, and then changed into her nightclothes. Sitting at the vanity, she used the brush that was there for her hair and put some lotion on her hands. Finally ready to sleep, she had curled up in the bed, head on the pillow, eyes fluttering shut, when she heard it.

The piano. Erik was composing.
Her eyes opened a little, trying to better hear what he was playing. It was soft and floaty, and she wondered if perhaps it was going to be part of the song for her audition. She was reminded once again of why it had been so easy to believe he was an angel, and for a few brief seconds her half-asleep mind thought she was truly hearing the music of heaven. She fought to stay awake, to be able to appreciate the sound for as long as she could, but try as she might she eventually gave up and let herself drift off into peaceful slumber, wrapped in the embrace of Erik’s music.

Meg slept in late that morning, or least she pretended to. She was not looking forward to seeing the Vicomte again, to facing anymore nearly tearful questions of why Christine wasn’t here, so she pretended to be asleep in her bed for as long as possible until she realized that she could do whatever she wished in her own room - it wasn’t as though he could actually see her to know if she was sleeping or not.

She got up and dressed and paced about before sitting in the front of her vanity mirror and trying on her new hat. She tucked her long hair up under it in various styles, tipping the thin brim first this way then that, admiring it from all different angles. The delicate pink was so lovely, and she adored the style, but only one thing bothered her about it.

It had been paid for with the money from the Ghost, and wasn’t that almost like the Ghost had bought it for her? She dearly hoped that didn’t somehow mean that the Ghost would see fit to begin to talk to her as well - her mother was very sparse with details about what the Ghost was like, and that was how Meg liked it. She didn’t want to have to dwell on the thought of the awful specter any longer than she had to, and she hoped she never had the opportunity to meet him.

Outside her door, she could the muffled chatter and general commotion of the other girls coming and going. Perhaps today she, too, could tag along with someone on an outing. A museum, perhaps, or a picnic - anything, really.

“It’s such a shame what happened to Christine,” floated through the door, and Meg froze, eyes wide.

“Yes,” someone sighed. “She was becoming quite good, too - I wonder if that’s why? Someone must have taken notice of her.”

Meg threw her door open, heart beating wildly.

“What’s happened to Christine?!” she cried, her voice shrill and wild.

Francesca and Colette looked over at her, concern on their faces.

“She’s been kidnapped!”

Meg nearly fell over in a swoon.

“What?!”

Surely there was a mistake? She was with her teacher!

“The Vicomte reported her missing early this morning,” Colette nodded unhappily. “I hope she’s okay.”

“Why the devil did he do that?” Meg demanded.

Francesca shrugged and ducked her head, embarrassed.
“None of us knew for certain when we’d seen her last, besides at rehearsal... Oh, Meg - she could have already been missing for four days!”

Meg’s jaw dropped. The Vicomte certainly hasn’t asked her when she’d seen Christine last - he must have started asking that question after Meg had locked herself in her room. Maybe avoiding him had not been the best plan, after all. She’d truly bungled it this time!

She ran out of the room. She needed to find Raoul and stop him before he did something stupid, but she was afraid she was already too late for that.

Blissfully ignorant of what the newspapers were printing about her up above, Christine was enjoying a late breakfast with her Angel - or rather, she was enjoying a late breakfast while Erik watched.

“Aren’t you hungry?”

He shook his head, and she frowned just a little.

When she had been little and her Papa had yet to be employed by the Comte, they were often hard pressed for money. Christine could remember a great many times that she would eat all by herself while Papa tuned his violin, and she would ask him if he wanted any food as well. He’d just smile and pat her gently on the shoulder or brush a hand over her hair and tell her that he wasn’t hungry. It wasn’t until she was older that she realized he had so often gone without anything so that she wouldn’t have to be hungry. She didn’t think she could bear it if Erik had some similar reasoning behind not eating. Weren’t the managers always grumbling about paying the Ghost his salary? What if her insistence on no terrible ghost tricks had made them think he’d gone soft, and they had stopped paying him? Oh, if he had to go without because of her - she’d cry, she just knew it.

“Well, how often do you eat breakfast?”

He fidgeted with his hands.

“I am not usually hungry in the mornings,” he said.

“Do you eat a bigger lunch, then?”

He became very interested in an imaginary hangnail and pretended that he hadn’t heard her question.

“Erik,” she ventured cautiously. “How often do you eat lunch?”

“I eat lunch whenever I’m hungry, Christine,” his tone bordered on defensive.

“I see. And how often are you hungry?”

He narrowed his eyes at her. Who had taught this girl how to question people like this? Why, it very nearly felt like being interrogated by the Daroga!

“I am hungry whenever I am eating lunch,” he said carefully.

Her brow knit.

“Erik! That’s not how you answer a question!”

He leaned an elbow on the table and propped his chin on his hand, not meeting her eye.
“It was an answer, was it not?” he mumbled.

“I’m worried about you, Erik,” she fretted. “I don’t think you eat enough.”

He made a small noise that betrayed neither agreement nor disagreement - while he liked the thought that Christine was worried over him (to worry for someone implied one cared about them), he didn’t like that she was feeling something negative and that he was the cause.

“It’s alright, Christine, I assure you.”

She picked at her food a little.

“The managers didn’t cut your salary, did they?” she asked in a small voice. “Can you- you can still afford to eat every day, yes?”

He looked up, surprised.

“No, my dear - my salary is still the same. And yes, I could afford a great deal of food if I wished.”

She nodded, feeling a little better.

“Then why don’t you eat?”

He shrugged.

“I am simply not hungry.”

“Well... Are you not feeling good? Are you... Are you ill?”

“No, no,” he rushed to reassure her - he hated that worry he could hear in her voice. “I’m not refraining from food because I don’t feel well enough to eat. I think - I think I’m just used to not eating.”

“You should get used to eating, then,” she nodded decisively. “Really, if I wasn’t here to have meals with you, how often would you be eating?”

His blank stare told her all she needed to know, and she sighed.

“Do you eat more than twice a day?”

His eyes slid away from her, and she pressed her lips into a thin line.

“You only eat once a day?”

He cleared his throat and sat very still.

“Erik - Erik, you eat every day, don’t you?”

“That seems rather excessive, don’t you think?” he finally ventured.

“Erik! That’s terrible!”

He sank down a little in his chair. Was it terrible? He was used to it, though.

“You really should eat every day, Erik. You’d feel better, I’m sure,” she tried to coax.

“I feel just fine-“
“But how do you know?” she insisted. “How do you now you aren’t simply used to how terrible
you feel?”

Erik said nothing. They both sat in silence for a moment.

“Will you promise me something, Erik?”

“Anything, my dear.”

“Promise me that you’ll eat at least once each day?”

“I promise that I shall try to eat each day.”

“Oh, no - I didn’t say anything about trying - you will eat each day. For me.”

He huffed. She was a smart girl, but he hadn’t realized the extent of her cleverness until now. She
somehow managed to see right through any slippery response he might give. But, maybe-

“That means in each consecutive period of twenty four hours, you’ll eat something.”

Confound it all! He drummed his fingers on the table.

“For you,” he managed to make the words smooth.

“I appreciate it, Erik,” she paused. “Well, aren’t you going to get something?”

“Right now? It starts right now?” he asked, incredulous.

“Of course it does,” she frowned. “Besides, I like it when we eat together...”

She trailed off shyly and he swallowed hard. He quickly stood and went into the kitchen, her
cheeks red in his wake. She had taken a gamble by asking him to do it for her, and she felt it was
only more confirmation of what she had confided to Meg - he liked her, in a way that was more
than what a teacher felt for a student.

He swiftly returned, a muffin and some fruit on his own plate, and she was highly amused to see a
similar blush on the uncovered side of his own face.

Erik contented himself with the fact that she had not specified how much food he had to eat, though
he had taken extra fruit on his plate in the hopes of pleasing her. He intended to eat something
(even if it was something rather small) each day now (provided he didn’t forget) if for no other
reason than to assuage any guilt he felt at disobeying a wish of hers. What wouldn’t he do for this
angel in front of him, he mused. How could refuse so small a request, if it made her feel better?

Christine brightened when he joined her in eating. Eating by herself made her feel awkward, but
having Erik eat at the same time made her feel better. It had a sense of them sharing something
more than just a meal.

“Are you happy now, my dear?” He made a show of sighing wearily as he picked the muffin into
pieces before eating one.

“Quite,” she giggled.

Meg stood in front of the Opera Populaire and looked up and down the street in a bewildered
fashion. If only she could find Christine this whole thing would be over with! But where did her
teacher live? She’d never told her. She had mentioned that he lived nearby, but what, exactly, did
that entail? What counted as nearby? She didn’t even know his last name. This Erik fellow seemed reclusive from how Christine had described him, so she doubted it would be common knowledge on the street - he probably didn’t talk very much to his neighbors and it was likely that no one would even know who he was if she were to ask anyone about him. Drat her blathering tongue that had planted the idea in the Vicomte’s mind! Oh, why did Raoul have to do this? She set off down the street, unsure of where she was going but certain that she had to get there.

Erik and Christine lingered over the table and the platter of fruits and pastries. It amazed her that someone as good at cooking as he was also held so little interest in eating, and she mentioned it to him.

“Ah. Well, I suppose I used to eat more than I do currently. And it was easier, at times, to not have to rely on others to prepare my food...”

He cautiously left out how his cooking skills had improved by leaps and bounds on Persia - they had to, considering that the threat of being poisoned by a rival or by someone seeking revenge was an all too real threat.

“What made you eat less often?” she awaited the answer with bated breath, hoping she hadn’t touched on yet another topic that would bring him pain.

“I suppose it was when I came down here,” he mused. “It was rather limiting - the long journey up and down, made all the harder when one is trying to carry groceries, you know.”

She nodded.

“And besides that, I didn’t often like to make appearances up above - the more I go out the more chances there are that someone will see me coming or going on the Rue Scribe side. I mostly have groceries picked up by someone, but of course I still have to carry it all home myself.”

She made a little sympathetic noise and sipped her tea. So many facets of life that she simply took for granted were so much more complicated for him. There were probably a dozen more things she hadn’t even considered yet that Erik had to do differently because of how he lived.

“But I must say that it was rather easy to fall into the routine of not eating - with no light to mark the passage of days, and numerous projects I could lose myself in - well, I didn’t miss eating too much, and time just seemed to slide through my fingers anyway.”

He paused, then continued.

“And once I get started on a project, I find myself loath to stop and take a break,” he chuckled.

She smiled a little, knowing how he was once he got started on something.

“Speaking of not taking a break - how is that song coming? The one you were working on as I slept?”

“Ah!” he jumped up from his chair. “Would you like to hear it? It’s nearly finished, but I’d like your opinion on the ending.”

She nodded eagerly and abandoned the mostly eaten croissant on her plate.

They stayed by the piano until the afternoon, Christine becoming absorbed into his obsession with perfecting the song. He played each possible ending for her and she gave her thoughts on each one, thought it was very difficult for her to pick between them.
“They are both good, yes, but which do you like better, my dear?”

She ducked her head.

“I don’t know. I like them both,” she hesitated, a little shy. “I like all of your music.”

He chuckled and played each one again, turning to look at her on the couch when he had finished. She shook her head and buried her face into the cushion, embarrassed.

“Both,” she whispered.

He clicked his tongue as he turned to face the piano once more, straightening out the unfinished sheet music.

“Endings don’t work that way, Christine,” but he had already resolved to write down both endings for her - it was a song for her, after all. He would save both versions in the folder he had tucked away, the folder labeled ‘Music for Christine’ - music inspired by her and written for her, brought into existence solely because of the muse she had provided for him, so how could it ever be anything else than a gift meant to be given back to her?

She didn’t know about the folder, not yet, but one day he was going to bind them all into a book and present them to her. He knew just the occasion, too - after she headlined as prima donna for a few seasons, she’d surely be in great demand at opera houses all over the world. The book of music would make an excellent goodbye gift. Something to remember him by once she was far away and free and wouldn’t be seeing him again.

“I’m afraid I have some errands to run, my dear. I will return in a little while,” he smiled kindly at her as he rose from the piano bench.

“Oh, can’t I go with you?” she sat up, looking a little disappointed.

“They are, ah, ghostly errands, Christine,” he said awkwardly.

“Oh! Oh, I see. Well, I’ll wait here then.”

“I will be back in time to begin cooking dinner,” he assured her as he left.

He hummed a little tune to himself as he locked his house and set out across the lake. He couldn’t remember when he had last felt this happy and light. Probably the last time Christine had stayed with him, but even then he had still been hounded by lingering anxiety. He was amazed at how much he trusted her, trusted her in a way he’d never thought possible. He had found it was easy to open up to her and spill out almost any secret of his life - she should be spared the gory details of Persia, of course - but he hadn’t hesitated in the least to explain about his eating habits and other details that, had it been anyone else, he would most definitely have withheld.

Composing around her was easy as well. It never had been, in the past - he had written quite a lot in Persia (on the violin, as pianos were hard to come by) and he had always had to deal with the nosy Daroga barging in and asking “oh what’s that song Erik” or “I like that song play it again Erik” - the old fool couldn’t even tell the difference between a half-baked mishmash of notes and a polished, finished song! He’d always stop playing as soon as he knew the man was near, or if anyone was near, really. It broke his concentration terribly and he hated having people hear something that he wasn’t yet finished with.

Except for Christine, of course.
There was something different about her, something calming about her presence that made him feel like it was okay to let her hear the process and not just the finished piece. It was one of the many reasons he loved her. Oh, he would keep her by his side endlessly if he could!

He stared out across the water, steering more by muscle memory and years of practice than by actual sight. His mind was busy elsewhere and his eyes fell to the pole in his hands.

Poling a gondola was a skill he had picked up in Italy, but he knew it was likely a little too difficult for Christine to feel entirely comfortable with. Perhaps a paddle would suit her better - she could sit, then, and paddle her way across the lake. Surely climbing down the rope was too dangerous for her in all of her skirts.

He let his mind linger on Christine’s skirts just a moment before he tried to pull his focus back to the main issue - finding a way for Christine to be able to visit him whenever she pleased.

He could make a second boat, was already making plans for what he’d need to complete it. He’d need a way to hide it, of course - out of sight from any who might find their way to the edge of the lake, but close enough at hand that she could easily access it.

There was a little spring in his step and a smile on his face as he made his way down the tunnels to Giry’s office. It would be a simple enough errand, leave a note for the managers, speak a word or two to Giry, and then he could be on his way to Christine again and all would be right with the world. He knew he had only been gone a very short time, but he missed her.

He slipped into Giry’s office and carefully placed the envelope on her desk before hiding himself once more. About ten minutes later Giry walked in and locked her door. She glanced this way and that about the room as though she was greatly distracted.

“Good afternoon, Madame,” his voice boomed from the corner opposite where he was hiding, and her eyes focused on the spot.

“Please, Monsieur,” she began, her voice trembling. “I know it is not my place, but - oh, please have mercy on Christine Daaé.”

Chapter End Notes

In the musical Christine canonically calls Erik “Master” and I don’t know what to do with that information

This has nothing to do with this chapter or even the next, it’s just a thought that keeps me up at night and haunts my waking hours so I thought I’d share it here and maybe it can haunt you too
Chapter 43

Those words hung in the air and echoed in his mind until all he could hear and feel was the blood pounding in his head and the cold sensation of adrenaline rushing through his veins.

“What?” he said, his mouth suddenly dry. “What did you say?”

Madame Giry flinched, but she pressed on.

“The girl, Christine - they say you have taken her away, Monsieur - spirited her away somewhere that no one can find her. Please, I beg of you, have mercy on her and release her. She is an innocent girl, Monsieur, please do not harm her.”

“The girl is not with me, Madame Giry, I assure you.”

His own voice sounded foreign in his head, the scene before him unfolding in slow motion.

She didn’t quite believe the Ghost, but she also didn’t want to draw his ire and a possible punishment. She lowered her eyes.

“Forgive me, Monsieur, I did not mean to accuse you!”

He swallowed hard.

“It is alright, Madame. It is forgotten. I would not harm the girl, nor would I take her away. You need not fear that from me.”

She nodded, her eyes watery.

“Thank you, Monsieur. I will pray that she turns up safe.”

“I... will... do likewise,” he was truly at a loss for words.

She looked away and nodded again.

“Who has said these things?” his mind finally began to catch up to speed.

She started a little, suddenly afraid of getting whoever had told her in trouble - but she was more frightened of what he might do to her if she didn’t answer.

“Some of the performers,” she waved a vague hand. “They talk, you know. Christine was reported missing this morning - it was in all the newspapers! - and of course the topic was of great interest to everyone who works here. Someone - I know not who! - must have made mention of the Ghost - of you, good Monsieur - and I’m sure the story was spread around - false though it may be.”

She had begun to violently wring her hands, hoping dearly that he wasn’t offended.

Behind the wall, Erik nodded absently, forgetting that she couldn’t see him or the movement, scarcely believing what he was hearing. How close to the truth that idle gossip had come, and it struck fear into the deepest depths of his heart like a lightening bolt.

“I see,” he finally managed. “Thank you, Madame. Do not overly worry yourself - I am certain she will turn up.”
“Thank you, Monsieur.”

He backed away from the office, his mind still reeling, before turning on his heel and firmly marching back to his house.

Christine sat quietly for a little while after he had left. The little room still seemed to echo with the memory of the beautiful music he had played for her. Curiosity soon got the better of her, and she decided to take the opportunity to explore the house while Erik wasn’t there.

She had already been in all the rooms, of course - all but one. His bedroom. She paused outside of the closed door for a moment, wondering about what could be inside and debating about whether he had only meant that she shouldn’t go in that room while he was in it (because his mask would be off) or if he meant that she was to never enter it all. There was an organ inside, she knew that much. A bed, obviously. Surely a wardrobe or a closet to hold all of his many fine clothes.

She stared intently at the door before turning and continuing down the hallway. If he hadn’t meant for her to go inside, she would hate to do so, and especially hate to have him return and find her there. She wandered into the kitchen, her mind straying to the story of Bluebeard. He, too, had left his little wife home alone with the only instructions of not entering a certain room - though she doubted that Erik’s room was filled with blood and the bodies of his previous wives like Bluebeard’s room was. She shook her head, surprised at her own silliness - she also wasn’t Erik’s wife. What an odd thing to forget, she mused.

He barely noticed the hallways around him, barely noticed anything. His entire mood was shattered after hearing what Giry had said, and he didn’t feel like he would ever know peace or happiness again. It had been a mistake, a terrible mistake, to ever think that letting her stay in his home was a good idea. The more he walked, the more he thought, and the more he thought everything in his head became worse and worse. By the time he reached the bank of the lake and was approaching his house, his mind was in a frenzy.

you’ve kidnapped Christine, a poor innocent girl, spirited her away, everyone is talking about it, talking about you, everyone knows what you did - have mercy on her!

After pouring herself a glass of water and drinking it in the kitchen, she returned to the sitting room and had settled upon the couch, just about to open a book and read when suddenly she heard the sound of the front door unlocking.

She looked up to smile at him as he entered the room, but her smiled faded when she saw the serious look on his face.

“Christine,” he said, his voice firm and grave. “You’re going above right now.”

Her face fell. Had she displeased him somehow?

“Why?”

“Someone,” he grit out. “Has reported you missing. And do you know what your little friends up above are saying?”

She shook her head, concerned at how tight his voice sounded. She could see the tendons in his neck standing out, how he clenched and unclenched his hands in what could almost be spasms. He crept closer to the couch as he spoke.

“They’re saying the Opera Ghost has kidnapped you.”
Her eyebrows shot up.

“What?!” she nearly squealed.

“So you are going above right now.”

“Erik-“ she was dismayed over the thought of her lovely vacation being cut short by nonsense gossip. “Erik, I don’t want to go up right now. It’s just silly theater talk - it doesn’t mean anything, and they’ll see me tomorrow, anyway.”

He frowned hard - why did she not understand how serious this was, how dire their situation had become? Her reasoning fell on deaf ears, because all he could hear was his own mind screaming at him that Christine did not belong in his house Christine needed to be out of his house this instant it was wrong wrong wrong to have her here she shouldn’t be here couldn’t be here anymore she needed to leave right now.

He quickly closed the distance between them. His hand shot out and grabbed her wrist, pulling her up off the couch. She yelped a little in surprise as she was made to stand up, but his grip on her wrist didn’t loosen, instead he turned and began tugging her towards the front door.

She had to leave right now!

He pulled her all the way to the edge of the lake, intent on making her get into the gondola, before he suddenly realized that he’d put his hands on her.

He let go immediately, shamefaced. She was looking at him with such hurt in her eyes, and he couldn’t bear it. In his haste to prove himself innocent of a ghostly kidnapping and to right the wrong of having her in his house, he had instead revealed himself to be a brutish monster and committed an even greater sin.

He wiped a hand over his suddenly clammy face.

“Forgive me,” he whispered, his voice trembling. “I didn’t mean to, I didn’t- have I hurt you?”

“No,” she looked down at her wrist, but there were no marks on it and even as he had been pulling her it hadn’t been painful. “No, it doesn’t hurt. But,” she swallowed thickly. “You scared me, Erik. I don’t appreciate being dragged like that. Please make certain that you don’t repeat such actions in the future.”

“Never,” he promised, his entire frame shaking. “Never again, I am so sorry, Christine.”

She gave a little nod, eyeing him warily, but her shoulders relaxed.

She sighed and stepped into the boat. Erik followed behind her, still horrified at what he’d done. How could he have dared to put his murderous hands on her like that? Was it really so easy to forget himself? Touching Christine should be a privilege undertaken with all the tenderness in the world, never something like what he had just done!

He bit his lip as he began to pole the boat across the lake.

“I truly am sorry, Christine,” he said quietly. “I am sorry that I grabbed you like that. I should have never.”

She turned to look at him and nodded.
“I accept your apology, Erik.”

He was overcome by how gracious she was, how incredibly forgiving. He didn’t deserve her or her forgiveness.

“Who reported me missing, though?” Christine puzzled out loud.

“I do not know.”

She glanced back again, noticing that he sounded on the verge of tears. He was truly upset over his actions, it seemed.

“Erik?”

“Hmm?”

He still refused to look at her.

“You’re quite strong, aren’t you?”

His brow furrowed, confused.

“What- what do you mean?”

“I mean, you probably could have broken my wrist with just one hand, don’t you think?”

He flinched. It was true - he could have seriously harmed her, and they both knew it.

“Yes,” he was very quiet. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“But you care for me,” she ventured. “Don’t you?”

“Yes,” he replied carefully. “I care for you a great deal, Christine.”

“I could tell,” she smiled a little. “I could tell because even though you were upset and not thinking straight, you still didn’t squeeze my wrist tight enough to hurt.”

He choked out a sob.

“I’ll never touch you again, Christine, I swear it,” he pleaded.

She pressed her lips together. She didn’t want him to never touch her again, she only wanted him to not frighten her again, but surely that was a conversation for another time when he wasn’t on the verge of a breakdown.

“I don’t want your tears, Erik, or any more apologies for it - just don’t treatment like that again, okay? Actions mean more than words.”

He nodded vigorously.

“Of course, Christine.”

They were both quiet for several minutes until Erik finally broke the silence.

“I’ll pack your things for you and bring them up to your dressing room after I drop you off.”

She turned around again, surprised.
“Pack my things?”

“Yes, we- I made you leave in such a hurry, you didn’t have a chance to collect your belongings.”

He brought the boat to the shore, and Christine climbed out, thinking about what he had just said.

“But Erik - I said I wanted to spend the entire break with you.”

“Surely things have changed, now...”

She considered it as they started down the tunnel to her dressing room. Did he truly not want her to stay? Or was he merely frightened again?

He looked uncomfortable, and she was afraid he was going to apologize or cry again, so she pressed on.

“I’ll go upstairs, I’ll put in an appearance, people will see me and know everything is fine, and then I’ll come back and spend the rest of the break with you - all of tonight and tomorrow.”

Erik didn’t know what to say. How could she still wanted to be around him?

“Do you mean it, Christine?” he asked weakly.

“Of course I do, why wouldn’t I mean it?”

He was silent a long moment.

“I... I haven’t...” he swallowed hard before continuing in a choked whisper. “Oh, Christine- have I?”

Her brow knit, trying to understand what he was asking. He was clearly still in a state over what had transpired both up above and in his sitting room.

“Have you what, Erik?” she asked gently.

“Kidnapped you,” the pain in his voice was almost tangible.

Christine turned to look at him, incredulous. The anxiety in his amber eyes was plain to see, and he looked like he might be sick over it. She sighed a little - it was ridiculous thought to her, of course, but she knew that it was very real to him regardless of any lack of logic. It irked her sometimes, on the few occasions that it happened, because he normally was so smart about seemingly everything. But once the fears in his head took over, it was as though logic and reason went out the window.

“No, Erik,” she shook her head. “You haven’t kidnapped me. I came to your house because I wanted to, remember? I could have left at any time, but I stayed because I wanted to.”

He sighed, his shoulders sagging. His heart was still beating far too fast for his liking, and there was still a little voice in his head telling that he really had kidnapped her somehow and she was only saying otherwise because she was afraid of him.

Christine glanced at him as thought she could read his thoughts.

“You haven’t done anything wrong, Erik,” she reminded him.

He was about to protest, about to remind her how he had savagely dragged her from the couch to the boat, but she continued talking.
“What was it about all this that upset you so? Surely you must know that I’d never give up your secrets to anyone. Does the gossip really bother you that much? You’ve never minded any other story that got told about the Ghost, and some of them were quite unflattering.”

“Because it’s not just about me anymore. It’s about you, too.”

She arched an eyebrow.

“Do you think I care what stories they tell about me?”

“I care,” he insisted. “Especially if it’s my fault they’re telling them. I don’t care what they say about me, but they shouldn’t be bringing you into it.”

She frowned. She would have to come up with a story about where she’d been, and quickly.

“Was that the only reason?”

“And,” he hesitated. “And I was forced to think about the situation in a way I never had before.”

“Like?”

“Like what if you truly didn’t want to be around me,” he mumbled, ashamed. “What if you had changed your mind at some point and were only trying to be polite in not asking to leave. What if- what if I had tricked you, somehow, into staying with me.”

“There,” she said softly, and reached a hand out briefly touch the sleeve of his coat. “Doesn’t it feel better to talk about it?”

He nodded a little, taken aback by her almost touch. She had had a conversation with him a while back, a day or so after his last bout of nerves, in which she had explained to him that trying to talk through his emotions might serve him better than simply flying off into a moody cloud. He hadn’t thought much of the advice at the time (could there ever truly be anything that would help him out of a mood once he was in one?), but even though it was embarrassing and it made him feel terribly vulnerable to put his emotions and thoughts into words, Christine didn’t seem to judge him for it. He only wished that he never had need of having to do so - the poor girl shouldn’t have to be the one to calm and reassure him constantly.

“And you have nothing to worry about on that account,” she went on. “And that’s why I’m coming back tonight - because I want to. I like spending time with you. Don’t you like spending time with me?”

He bit back his retort of you like being grabbed by the wrist? and simply gave a single nod instead.

They stopped outside the exit on the Rue Scribe side, a mere dozen or so seconds from being outside. Pale light filtered in, just enough to see each other. She turned to face him, but he was staring at his shoes.

“So it’ll be just like I said - I’ll go up and people will see me, and then in a few hours I’ll meet you in my dressing room, and everything will go on just like we planned, okay?”

“You aren’t... still frightened?” the words were barely above a whisper.

She shook her head.

“No. That doesn’t change anything, Erik. You’re trying very hard to be good, I know you are. And
you are good to me. We’re still friends. We’ll still be friends for quite a long time, too, I think. A little mistake here or there isn’t going to change that.”

“I am sorry that I’m not a better friend to you, Christine.”

She pushed a stray curl out of her face.

“You’re a perfectly fine friend, even still. Friendship isn’t about never making a mistake - it’s about being willing to recognize and own up to your mistakes and changing your behavior based on what you’ve recognized. And Erik - you’ve always done that. You’re a good friend to me.”

She paused a moment.

“Erik, look at me.”

He finally met her eye.

“Do you believe me when I say all that?”

He nodded slowly. There was no guile in her eyes, she looked as honest as she ever had. A part of his mind protested, of course, but he knew that eventually he’d have to take a leap of faith and trust her. Why not now? How long would he doubt her? He had to trust at some point, and this might as well be it.

He took a deep breath.

“Yes, Christine, I believe you.”

She smiled at him, and he thought that her smile was the most dazzling thing he’d ever seen. He wasn’t certain, even still, if she was being honest, but in that moment he decided to let himself believe that she was.

“So I’ll see you in my dressing room, yes? In three hours?”

“I’ll be there,” he nodded. “But, Christine - you don’t have to-“

“No, no - I will be there, waiting. In three hours. Go get dinner started for us, and then come back to my dressing room. Three hours, okay?”

“Three hours.”

She smiled at him again, and she longed to reach out and touch him, touch his arm or even the side of his face, but she refrained.

“I’ll be there waiting for you, I promise. I swear it on our friendship.”

And with those words she made her way to the secret door that opened out to the street. She paused one last time in the doorway, looking back into the darkness of the tunnel she had just left.

I promise, she mouthed, a little grin on her face before she turned and disappeared from his view.

He stayed put for a few moments after she had left, turning her words over in his mind. He wasn’t certain she would return to him, but against all the seemingly better judgment of his mind, he let himself hope.

With that tremulous hope starting to grow in his heart, he turned back towards his house. Once
there, he began to prepare a dinner for them both. With it safely cooking in the oven, he began to set up the table.

Every so often a panic would begin bloom in his chest, and he had to remind himself over and over that he hadn’t truly hurt her - there were no marks or her wrist, no pain. Still, there was surely a mark left on her soul, and if not her soul, then a bruise on her emotions, and he felt that was just as awful.

But all he could do about it was make certain he didn’t do it again, she had made that much clear. She, being the absolute angel that she was, had already accepted his apology.

He placed a newer tablecloth across the table and set a number of candles on top. He would light them just before he left to fetch Christine, and she would have a lovely surprise when she entered the dining room. He ruthlessly shoved down any little voice that told him Christine was not coming - she had promised, after all, and sworn it on their friendship.

She’d promised, and he trusted her.

Meg sat in the Vicomte’s carriage with her arms crossed and wondered for the thousandth time how she managed to get into such situations. She had found him searching the streets for Christine, and he had convinced her to join him.

“I’m sure she’s fine, Raoul. I saw her just the other day,” she said for what also felt like the thousandth time.

Raoul just shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair. He sighed and turned from the window. His eyes found Meg’s hat, a strange little thing that didn’t match her dress at all. He blinked. Was this the latest fashion, perhaps? Some new style he wasn’t aware of yet? The girls at the opera always had the latest trends, it seemed.

“I like your hat,” he offered politely.

It really did look nice, he thought.

Meg looked confused and reached up to feel her hair. In her blind dash from her room she had forgotten to remove it. She pressed her lips together and looked out the window, embarrassed.

“Thanks.”

Out on the street, Christine didn’t have to go far before she caught sight of the newspapers. Her eyes widened and she marched up to vendor’s little stand, picking up a copy.

OPERA CHORUS GIRL GONE MISSING SAYS VICOMTE, it read. It wasn’t the large headline on the paper, but it was on the front page and still in plain view for all to see.

With shaking hands she flipped the pages until she reached the one that the story about her was continued on.

“Hey,” the vendor said, annoyed. “Aren’t you going to pay for that before you read it?”

Christine ignored him - she had left her purse up in her dormitory, anyway.

She barely had a moment to start reading the story, however. The noise of a carriage distracted her, and when she glanced up she recognized the coat of arms decorating it immediately.
It stopped suddenly in the street, and Christine couldn’t help the fierce glare she gave it. The door opened and Raoul jumped out, running to her.

She turned to face him head on, taking a few steps of her own to close the distance between them, not listening to the peeved shouts of the man who was having his newspaper stolen. She held it up in a shaking fist.

“Raoul,” ice dripped from her every word. “What is the meaning of this?”
Raoul took no notice of her glare or her tone, instead rushing up to her and throwing his arms around her.

“Christine, oh, Christine,” he murmured as he pressed a kiss to her cheek. “I was so worried about you!”

She simply glared straight ahead at the carriage and refused to return his hug or his kisses, though he hardly seemed to notice.

“Where have you been, Little Lotte? Here, come into the carriage with me.”

“I don’t want to get in the carriage, Raoul!” she wiggled out of his embrace, and he looked confused.

“Why did you report me missing?” she demanded.

“Because you were missing,” he said simply.

She sighed heavily.

“No, Raoul - I wasn’t missing, you simply didn’t know where I was.”

“Come to the carriage,” he grasped her hand and tugged.

“What are you even doing here?” she asked, eventually relenting and letting him lead her to the carriage.

“It was supposed to be a surprise,” he said, embarrassed.

He climbed into the carriage and tried to pull her up along with him. She resisted at first, but could tell he wasn’t going to give up. She gave one last glance backwards, to the alley she had come from. She still had three hours, she told herself as she climbed in.

She was surprised to find Meg inside as well, and found she was wearing an expression of what could rightly be called anguish.

*I’m so sorry*, Meg mouthed when Raoul wasn’t looking, but Christine shook her head.

Raoul leaned out the window to speak to the footman.

“Take us back to the mansion,” he told him.

“Raoul!” Christine shot up. “Raoul, no! I’m not going that far! I don’t want to! I thought we were only going to talk!”

Raoul was about to answer her when he saw the vendor was trying to chase down the carriage and shouting at them. He glanced at the paper still being clutched by Christine and he reached into his pocket for a few coins, which he dropped out the window.

“I’m sorry!” he shouted to the vendor, who shook his fist at them and let loose a few curses but still stooped to pick up his payment.
Raoul sat back down, feeling awkward about what he’d just done.

Christine sat next to him, the swaying of the carriage becoming too much to continue standing in, and she tugged on his sleeve.

“Stop the carriage - I’m not going to the mansion.”

He frowned.

“Can we at least talk in here? It’s far more private.”

“We can talk but I’m not going to the mansion. There’s somewhere else I need to be.”

“Where?” he pleaded. “Are you alright? Where have you been?”

She was quiet a moment.

“Where I was is none of your business, I should think.”

Meg shifted awkwardly.

“But are you alright? Why must you hurry off so quickly? Is something wrong?”

All manner of terrible scenarios played out in his mind - she truly had been kidnapped or blackmailed, perhaps someone was still after her. He should have brought his pistol!

“I’m fine, Raoul, but please - I truly can’t stay very long,” she fidgeted uneasily. “There are places I need to be.”

“What places?” Raoul was confused by it all - where was she off to that was such a secret?

“Raoul, don’t pry!” she snapped, and instantly regretted it.

He sunk down a little, eyes downcast.

“Forgive me, Christine - I don’t know what I did wrong. I only wished to be certain you were okay.”

Christine groaned into her hand. The carriage was drawing them steadily further and further away from the opera house, and it made her nervous. When were they going to stop like she had asked? If they went all the way to the de Chagny mansion, they’d have to turn around immediately to even hope to get back in time for her to be in place to meet Erik when she’d promised. And she had wanted to see a few of the other performers in that time, to put to rest any stories about the ghost.

“I’m sorry, Raoul,” she folded up the paper and tucked it into her pocket. “I’m just surprised to learn of my own apparent disappearance in the papers, you know.”

He stared at her with pleading eyes, but kept silent.

“I was entirely fine, Raoul,” she said gently. “Whatever gave you the idea that I wasn’t?”

She shot a glance at Meg, who shrugged helplessly.

“Well, you didn’t come to your room the other night,” he looked a little ashamed. “And a bunch of the other girls said they hadn’t seen you since rehearsal, which was days ago. And it seemed that you hadn’t told anyone where you had gone, and- and I was worried for you.”
She sighed as she sank back into the seat. He only cared about her, she knew. He had no ill intentions.

“Sometimes,” she said carefully. “Sometimes I like to go places all on my own, just to get away from everything. I don’t typically tell anyone because I like it being something that’s just mine...”

She bit her lip.

“I would have told you I was going to be gone for a little bit, Raoul, if I had known you were coming. Or I would have postponed my outing. I didn’t mean to worry you, but there was absolutely nothing to be worried over.”

He nodded, understanding, and reached a hand out to take hers. He brushed his thumb over her knuckles and she smiled weakly. She was still thinking of Erik.

“But what about you? What are you doing back here in Paris?”

He grinned.

“That’s the surprise, Lottie - I’m back for quite a while now. I received the opportunity to finish most of my training in France.”

“Oh, Raoul, that’s wonderful!”

“I only wish I had been able to tell you under better circumstances,” he chuckled, and brought her hand up closer to his face. He stooped a little and pressed a kiss to the top of her hand.

Christine flashed a wry smile to Meg, who gave her a nod and a little thumbs up.

“I’m happy to hear it, but - we are going quite far, are we not? I wanted to be dropped off near the opera house, you know.”

A look of disappointment came across his face.

“I’ve missed you so, Christine. Can I not have a little time with you?”

She looked over at Meg, who was frowning now.

“I missed you, too, but-“ she fretted about it in her mind. Could they truly make the trip there and back in time? “But I really only have a little time to spare today, and I really do have to be getting back.”

He nodded.

“Okay. Can we- can we see Philippe first, though? He’s been worried about you, too.”

“Has he?” she wrinkled her nose.

“Just a quick trip, Lottie - there and back. Is that okay?”

She nodded reluctantly. Surely she could be a few minutes late for Erik, and besides, there should still be enough time if they only spent a few minutes seeing Philippe. There and back, that was all. It could still work.

Wanting to turn the subject from herself and what she’d been doing the past days, Christine began to ask him questions about how his training had been going. Meg, who had never had a chance to
talk with him much, was very impressed, and began to ask questions as well, and he ended up spending much of the trip to the mansion telling stories to his rapt audience.

Christine felt her nerves buzzing as they approached the de Chagny mansion. The house loomed up over them in a way that seemed almost sinister. Meg stared with wide eyes - she had never been there before.

There and back, Christine told herself. There and back. It was going to be fine. Everything was going to be fine.

Meg stared awestruck up at the mansion as they got out of the carriage. She turned to Christine, incredulous. To think that she had been coming here all these times! How normal she acted, how nonchalant in the face of such splendor! Meg was suddenly aware of every little movement of hers, of how vastly different her station was from Raoul’s.

The Comte strode down the walkway, greeting them.

“I’ve found her!” Raoul exclaimed, and Christine stifled the urge to say she hadn’t been found because she hadn’t been lost in the first place.

“Christine! How are you, dear? You had us quite worried,” Philippe patted her on the shoulder.

“I’m quite fine, Philippe, thank you,” she was a little surprised at the apparent kindness he was showing.

Meg couldn’t help the breath she sucked in. Imagine being on first name terms with a Comte!

“You should join us for dinner, Christine,” Philippe offered. “You and your friend here, er-“

“Oh, this is Meg,” Christine introduced her, and Meg gave a little curtsy, her cheeks going pink.

She had seen Philippe before, for brief moments, usually when he was on his way to Sorelli’s dressing room.

“You can both stay for dinner,” he nodded.

His brother had been quite distraught over the concept of losing Christine somehow, and Philippe had become agitated at his constant moping. He thought perhaps the gracious offer of letting her attend a dinner with them would cheer him and show that there were no hard feelings between them about her. He had worried for her, just a little - if for no other reason than how upset it was making Raoul, but he was not without fond feelings for the girl as well - he had, after all, known her for just as long as Raoul had, even if he didn’t know her as well. She wasn’t marriage material for his little brother, but good heavens - that didn’t mean she had to disappear.

Christine and Raoul spoke up at the same time.

“I actually need to be heading back now-“

“She can’t stay, Philippe, I was going to take her back-“

“Nonsense,” Philippe waved a hand dismissively. “You’re staying for dinner.”

Christine turned to the footman with the carriage and made her appeal.

“I can’t, actually. Monsieur, could you please return me to the opera house?”
The footman looked to Philippe for confirmation.

“Put the horses in the stable,” he placed his arm around Christine’s shoulders and guided her towards the mansion.

Perhaps he meant for the gesture to be comforting, but she only found it disrespectful.

Meg and Raoul exchanged a glance and both followed helplessly behind.

Christine looked behind with dismay as the footman was leading the horses to the stables. All she had wanted of this day was to read a book by the fire, eat a nice dinner with Erik, and relax. Why was it that this was the third time she was being led away from that by someone who thought they knew what she needed better than she did? She huffed. Was it any wonder that she simply wanted to hide underground for a while?

They entered the mansion and Philippe left them with the promise of seeing them again in the dining room. Raoul followed quickly after him.

He caught up to him in the kitchen, where Philippe was instructing the servants to prepare two extra settings for dinner.

“Philippe,” Raoul hesitated. “Christine has a previous engagement, she really has to leave right now to make it on time.”

He hated to bring it up, because not only did he want to have dinner with Christine, it was an unheard of event for Philippe to be the one to invite her. But he had promised her that if she let him bring her to the mansion, he’d take her right back, and he didn’t want to break his promise.

Philippe shrugged as he poured himself some gin.

“She can cancel it. I’m sure it’s not important.”

He took a swig of the liquor.

“Or if it is, is it really more important than dinner with you?”

Raoul looked down at the floor and frowned. She probably did have things in her life more important than him, but he didn’t want to think about that.

Philippe smiled a little. He knew what buttons to press with Raoul. He gulped down the rest of his drink and winced.

“Let your friends stay for dinner, Raoul. It’s not every day I offer that.”

Raoul nodded. He had tried, after all. If Philippe was insisting they stay, it wasn’t really his own fault that he didn’t take her back to the opera house - but he felt a little guilty all the same.

Philippe breathed a secret sigh of relief. It had been a stressful few days with him in such a state, looking everywhere for the girl, raising such a fuss in all the papers. He’d barely seen his brother since he had returned, was it crime to want to just sit down at a meal with him? If he had to invite not one but two chorus girls to dinner in order to do so, well, that’s what he’d do.

Still, he wasn’t quite sure it felt like a win - was the presence of that Meg girl a step in the right direction for Raoul, or was it the signal of yet another opera girl he was going to think he’d fallen in love with?
“What, ah, what is Meg to you?”

Raoul shook his head a little.

“She’s one of Christine’s friends.”

Philippe chuckled as he poured himself another drink.

“It’s good to see you with another girl besides Christine, even if she is from the opera as well. You really should be going out with other girls, see what else is out there. If they all happen to be from the opera, well, there’s no real harm in that.”

Raoul was about to protest when Philippe suddenly reached over and tousled his brother’s hair

“Just keep your hands off Sorelli,” he remarked as he left the kitchen, not seeing the vaguely horrified look on Raoul’s face.

Christine led Meg into one of the drawing rooms where they could talk privately.

“Oh, Christine - I really did try my best!” she wrung her hands. “I said just what you told me to say, I didn’t know he was going to go to the newspapers!”

“It’s alright,” Christine assured her. “I’m not mad at you. I don’t think any of us could have seen this coming.”

She glanced up at the clock on the wall and bit her lip. Meg followed her line of sight.

“Christine, what’s wrong?”

“Oh, he’s waiting for me, Meg,” she moaned. “In an hour and half he’s going to be expecting me back and I won’t be there.”

Meg’s brow furrowed.

“Surely he’ll understand?”

Christine shook her head, tears forming in her eyes.

“I don’t think he will,” she said sadly. “I promised him, you see. He- he won’t take it very well, I’m afraid.”

“Is he going to be angry with you?” she asked in a hushed voice.

“No... no, not angry. Just... Oh, Meg - he’s going to be devastated,” she dismayed.

Meg didn’t hesitate.

“Do you want me to take a message to him? Maybe Philippe will let me go even if he won’t let you.”

She was dearly looking forward to dinner at the Comte’s, but she couldn’t stand to see her friend so sad.

But she shook her head.

“You’re sweet to offer, but I don’t think that would work.”
Even if Philippe did let her leave, she couldn’t very well go to Christine’s mirror and speak to Erik behind it. Even just leaving a note in her dressing room might draw suspicions from her - and although Christine trusted Meg enough to do so, she knew Erik would be highly unsettled at the thought of it.

Meg hugged her.

“He’ll just have to understand, eventually.”

Christine could only hope she was right.

Raoul stopped in the doorway, afraid he was interrupting something.

“Ah, there you two are. Dinner is ready.”

Christine rubbed at her eyes as the two girls made their way down a hallway with Raoul.

“I’m sorry, Lottie,” he whispered as they went. “I truly didn’t know he was going to make you stay. I told him you had someplace else to be, but-“

She shook her head.

“Let’s just get dinner over with, please?”

The food was very fine, but she found she missed Erik’s cooking. He didn’t have access to as many fresh ingredients or as high of quality products that the Comte had, but she enjoyed the unusual flavors he’d use and how each strange recipe she’d never heard of before had a story behind it.

Despite her worry for Christine and her teacher, Meg enjoyed herself at the dinner. She’d never eaten such fine foods or been served like she was royalty - she found she was going to be sorely disappointed when she had to go back to her normal life. It felt like being a princess.

Raoul tried to let his guilt fade away as dinner progressed, and mostly succeeded. It wasn’t every day that Philippe was so easygoing about having Christine there, and he tried to enjoy it even if he knew Christine was disappointed that she couldn’t do whatever it was she had been planning for that evening.

“John, bring us some wine, would you?” Philippe addressed one of the servants. “I’m sure you’ll be wanting some, Christine, after your ordeal.”

“Oh - there was no ordeal, just a misunderstanding,” she glanced at Raoul, but didn’t refuse the wine that was placed next to her, taking a long drink of it.

Meg dipped at her wine slowly, wanting to drink it all - who knew when she’d have a chance to drink such an expensive vintage again? - but also not wanting it turn her head. She already felt giddy enough just surrounded by so much wealth. She could barely believe that Christine hadn’t attempted to encourage Raoul’s attempts at wooing her - was she really going to pass up a chance to live in a house like this every day? It was a wonder she hadn’t been more eager to try to coax a marriage proposal from him!

Towards the end of the meal, Christine began to relax a little. Perhaps it was the two glasses of wine, perhaps it was Meg’s insistance that Erik would understand, perhaps it was the fact that there was nothing at all she could do about it. Surely Erik would have to understand - she’d explain it all to him, and he would accept it, and everything would be fine. It wasn’t like she had abandoned him! She had practically been kidnapped by the Vicomte, not to mention the Comte! She gave a
little giggle at the thought of how horrified Erik had been at the ridiculous concept of accidentally kidnapping her, of how he had insisted she go above only for Raoul to swoop in and carry her off just like Erik had feared he’d done himself.

She stifled the giggle before it got too loud - perhaps she shouldn’t have had that second glass of wine. She barely ever drank, and on the rare occasion that Erik gave her wine with her food, he was always careful to not pour more than half a glass for her. He fretted about her voice as he did so, but she now realized perhaps he also hadn’t wanted her to become tipsy, either.

She sighed. Erik. Was he still waiting for her? Had their dinner gotten burnt because he was behind the mirror so long? She hoped he wasn’t too disheartened by the whole situation.

Dinner ended and Philippe called for the carriage to be prepared. Polite goodbyes were issued, and the girls went out to the porch to wait.

“Going for a private farewell, eh?” Philippe asked Raoul when he saw him about to follow the girls outside.

Raoul frowned a little as he watched them carefully pick out the cobblestone path in the moonlight. Meg’s footing slipped and gave a little shriek as she nearly fell, but Christine pulled her back up. The two girls clung to each other, trying to keep their laughter quiet.

“I think I better go with them,” he said. “To make sure they get back okay.”

Philippe nodded, a little disappointed.

“We’ll go riding, tomorrow?” he asked hopefully.

“Of course. I’d like that,” Raoul smiled.

The cool evening air made Meg’s face tingle. That wine had been a little stronger than she used to. She nearly jumped when the Vicomte appeared at her right side.

“Might I have the honor of escorting you ladies to your residence?”

Christine rolled her eyes at his formality, and Meg stifled a snort.

“Of course you may, Monsieur,” Meg managed.

He helped them into the carriage with little difficulty - he had had a few glasses of wine himself, but was less affected since he was more used to taking wine at meals than either of them.

The ride back felt longer, in part due to the darkness outside and how tired they felt. They talked a little while, but soon fell into an easy silence.

Raoul dozed a little here and there, finally at peace now that he knew Christine was well. Meg had fallen fast asleep, her head resting on Christine’s shoulder.

Christine stared out at the stars and the moon, wistful. Sometimes, when the lighting hit them just right, Erik’s eyes seemed to glow just like those stars up above. Surely he was fine - he had to be fine.

The carriage stopped in front of the opera house and Christine shook Meg awake. Ever the gentleman, Raoul escorted them to the hallway that led to the girls dormitories. They said their farewells, and Raoul promised to see Christine again soon.
She hugged Meg goodnight, thanking her both for trying to help minimize the damage done by Raoul and also for not letting a single word about Erik slip.

Meg went to sleep with visions of the mansion and all the lovely food and decor and drinks dancing her head, a smile on her lips.

Christine sat on the edge of her bed and pulled the folded up newspaper out of her pocket, looking at it sadly. The shame of it was that Erik had so badly wanted her dispel the rumor of the ghost when he had sent her above, but she still hadn’t been seen any performers and wouldn’t until the next day - no different than if she had stayed the evening with Erik. Raoul wasn’t even supposed to be there. She was happy that he’d be there more often now, but she couldn’t help feeling annoyed that he couldn’t have waited just another day or so.

Poor Erik. She thought briefly of going to her dressing room just in case he was still there, but surely he had gone by now - it had been hours since she was supposed to meet him.

The pleasant effects of the wine had worn off, leaving her feeling tired and a little sad - too tired to walk all the way to her dressing room, almost too tired to walk to her dresser and retrieve a nightgown. She changed as quick as she could, trying to push away the sinking feeling that Erik probably was very far from fine with how the evening had gone.

Her feet ached as she slipped under the sheets, her thoughts becoming muddled as she drifted asleep and found herself in an odd dream that consisted of having dinner with both Raoul and Erik at the same time, both of them completely ignoring the other and only focused on her. It might have been an appealing situation, had their dinner table not been in the middle of the opera house’s stage with bright lights shining down on them, electric lights like in Erik’s home, and in the audience she could hear little coughs and shuffles that let her know it was a sold-out show. Erik offered her a strange pastry that was adorned with pomegranate seeds, and Raoul offered her a slice of an elaborate angel food cake, and she accepted both graciously, but once both desserts were on her plate, both of the men leaned forward a little, each eager to see which desert she’d eat first. She looked down the plate, suddenly aware that her choice was going to have far more ramifications and meaning than simply eating something offered to her. She looked up at the men, at the sly hope barely concealed in Erik’s face, at the intense certainty on Raoul’s, and then she looked down at herself, realizing she was wearing Carlotta’s dress. She looked out at the audience but could see nothing more than blackness past the edge of the stage. Horrible awareness dawning on her, she reached up to feel her hair, which was in fact Carlotta’s wig from the latest production, a tall thing covered in powder. She pulled a fork out from the wig, and both of her companions managed to scoot in closer, a bead of sweat rolling down Raoul’s forehead while Erik swallowed hard. She stared at the fork she was clutching tightly and suddenly swiped her opposite forearm across her lips, a long red stain left in the wake of her mouth - Carlotta’s signature red lipstick. She screamed.

Christine jerked awake, her heart pounding. She threw the sheets aside and dressed in a hurry, hoping to find a way to see Erik before she had to go to rehearsal, but when she looked at the clock her hopes were dashed - she’d be lucky to make it to rehearsal on time.

She fidgeted on stage all day, growing weary of fielding questions of where she’d been. All she wanted to do was see Erik.

“Were you really with the Ghost?” Doreen asked in a hushed voice.

Christine wrinkled her nose and frowned.

“What a stupid thing to ask,” she replied.
Doreen looked slightly ashamed.

Christine stuck with the story that she had been off on an impromptu trip to spend some time alone to clear her mind and recharge her spirit. It was mostly believed. Nearly all talk of the Ghost was squashed, though one or two still whispered that perhaps she had been out with the mystery suitor from her birthday. She just rolled her eyes and laughed as though it was ridiculous.

Rehearsal finally ended, and she took her time in her dressing room as she changed behind the partition. When she felt enough time had passed for the other performers to have left, she quietly made her way up to Box Five and pressed her ear against the door. Erik had mentioned previously that he often watch the rehearsals from there and wrote his notes to managers.

She didn’t think it was entirely her imagination to hear the scratch of a pen and a sigh.

“Erik?” she asked quietly.

Everything went deadly quiet.

“Erik, are you in there? It’s just me... Can I come in?”

There was silence for so long that thought she must have been mistaken after all, but just as she was about to turn to leave, he spoke.

“Come in.”
Chapter 45

Erik’s voice was cold, and as she pushed open the door she harbored the hope that it was only because he was displeased with how poorly rehearsal had gone.

He was sitting in a seat with a little table next to him, a number of papers scattered upon it. She paused for a moment to take in the odd sight before her - he was wearing glasses. The thin wire frames had been shaped to fit around his mask, but it still looked strange to her. She had never seen him wear them before, but then she supposed she had never seen him try to write anything in the near complete darkness, either.

“Can I help you with something?”

She flinched at his words, spoken just as coolly as the previous ones.

“I’m very sorry about last night,” she started, closing the door and moving to sit near him.

He pressed his lips together as he continued writing. She couldn’t possibly be sorrier over it than he was.

“I went up, just like you told me, but once I was there - at that very moment, almost! - well, Raoul showed up, and-“

“I know.”

She stopped short. He hadn’t even looked at her, seemed to refuse to look at her, and that made something in her chest twist.

“The ever-helpful Madame Giry told me all about it,” he added, his voice emotionless. “She told me all about how Christine had turned up and ran off with the Vicomte to spend the evening with him.”

Christine twisted her hands together. Meg, she thought. Meg must have told her mother.

“I’m sorry,” she tried. “I really am.”

Erik shrugged and made a valiant attempt at looking like it didn’t bother him.

“What difference does it make to me? It’s not my place to dictate your whereabouts - if you suddenly found yourself a more attractive offer of companionship, why, don’t let me stand in the way.”

Something about the way he said attractive made her nervous.

“What do you have to be sorry for?” he muttered under his breath, frowning at the note he was writing.

She swallowed hard.

“I tried to tell him I didn’t want to stay for dinner - I didn’t even want to get into his carriage! - but he said we could just talk, and then Philippe insisted, and-“

“And I think we both know what you said to me yesterday,” he interrupted. “And I think we both know what that meant.”
“Erik-“ she said miserably.

“I waited for you,” his voice wavered for just a moment as he recalled how long he had stood behind her mirror, how the fear that she had been hurt along the way and unable to come back had warred with the haunting disappointment that he really didn’t mean that much to her at all until it had made it difficult to even breathe. Could she not have just told him outright? Was his heart just a plaything to her? Was her word so easily broken?

He would not cry in front of her. He was done with tears - tears had been for the previous night, sitting alone in the dining room, his head on his crossed arms on the dinner table, the candles he had lit now just little stumps in pools of wax with weak flames, the food he had prepared sitting on the kitchen counter, cold all the way through and ruined and no longer good for anything, just like him. But that was last night, and this was now, and he had no one to blame but himself. His mistake had been to believe that her words could ever be anything but pretty lies - was it her fault that he had trusted her?

“But it’s not important,” he said, regaining control of his voice.

She shook her head.

“It is important- Erik, you’re important-“ she took a tremulous breath. “I wanted to come back, I told them over and over, but-“

He desperately wanted to hear an excuse, any at all, so that he could cling to it and pretend. But he knew the cycle would only repeat if he did - and if he wanted to avoid more nights like the previous one, he had to put a stop to it.

“Do you need anything else? There’s no need to discuss yesterday, I’m already aware of it.”

She sat silently, unsure of what to say or do.

“Please be sure to close the door on your way out, then.”

She was struck by his words - was he dismissing her? She stood up stiffly, embarrassed. In previous times he had always wanted so badly to extend any time spent around her, she wasn’t used to being sent away from him.

She walked haltingly to the door, her eyes on him the entire time, but he never looked up from his notes. She turned to face the door.

She stood there with her hand on it for far too long, and Erik finally looked up at her. The soft noise that escaped her lips, coupled with the way her shoulders trembled, told him she was crying.

He took off his glasses and rubbed at his weary eyes, sighing deeply.

“It’s alright, Christine,” his voice was slightly softer, but he sounded very tired.

Could he truly fault her running off with the young and handsome vicomte? Her heart was fickle and flippant, but curse him - he loved her still.

She shook her head vehemently.

“No, it’s not alright. I promised you, and I broke that promise, and I don’t how to make that better.”
She looked behind her and met his eye, finally seeing the sorrow he was hiding there.

“I don’t either,” he said quietly.

She wiped at her eyes.

“But you don’t have to cry anymore, Christine. I’m not mad at you.”

“I’m not crying because I’m worried that you’re angry with me. I’m crying because I hurt you and you don’t deserve that.”

Pretty lies, Erik told himself. Pretty lies and nothing more, but oh, didn’t she sound almost sincere?

He cleared his throat.

“We’ll still do your lesson the day after tomorrow, if you wish. If you haven’t found something better to do, that is.”

She winced at the barb, and he found no pleasure in it like he thought he might.

“Ohay,” she said softly.

It was probably the longest conversation they’d had where he hadn’t called her anything other than her name, and it felt jarring, in a way. She was no longer his dear, it seemed.

He turned back to his notes, trying to organize them. They weren’t friends, he told himself firmly. They weren’t friends, but they didn’t need to be friends to be tutor and student. Perhaps trying to be anything more had been the problem in the first place. She was young and careless, was it any wonder she’d forget about her old deformed tutor in a heartbeat when offered the chance to be around someone her own age and very rich, someone with a perfect nose? She was beautiful, so it was only natural that she wished to be around other beautiful things as well. That’s just how the world worked.

He felt so ridiculous. He had actually worried for her when she hadn’t come back, as though there needed to be a reason besides her simply forgetting or changing her mind. He had asked Madame Giry that morning if Christine had been found yet, and Giry had happily told him that she had, and how she had been just fine, even going to have dinner with the young Vicomte. He had thanked Giry and left, heartbroken by the tale. How foolish he had been, to think she was coming back in the first place. He had immediately returned to his house and packed up all of her items she had left behind there, everything she had brought with her. After it was all stowed away into the carpet bag, he carried every last trace of Christine’s presence in his home back up into her dressing room and left it there for her.

Christine took one last look at Erik, hesitating.

“It’s not like I wanted to skip out on our dinner, you know. I tried to get back in time, I really did. I didn’t- I didn’t mean to leave you waiting like that,” with those words she pushed the door open and left.

She walked hurriedly down the corridor, sniffling. Her mind played on a loop, finding a constantly shifting blame - if she had just insisted a little harder to Philippe, if Raoul hadn’t made her get in the carriage, if Erik hadn’t insisted she go up where Raoul was, if Raoul hadn’t even come back in the first place, if Philippe had only listened to her, if Erik would just hear her full explanation, if she had been firmer about not getting in Raoul’s carriage-
But no matter where the blame lay or what circumstances might have been changed, nothing changed the fact that it had happened as it happened, and he was terribly hurt by it. It was more, also, than just simply not making it back in time for dinner. She had sworn on their very friendship! Her word had been broken, regardless of if it had on purpose or not, and she knew that because of that he likely wouldn’t take any apologies or explanations - how could she make it up to him now that he didn’t trust her words? And how could she ever show him differently if he was just going to send her away like that?

His trust was such a fragile thing, and she had let it slip through her fingers and shatter on the ground.

She pondered over it with great emotion in the time before her lesson. Meg even asked how he had taken it, and Christine regretfully informed her that he was quite broken over the matter.

“What if I backed you up about what had happened? I could vouch for you that you asked to not go the mansion,” Meg offered.

Christine just shook her head sadly.

“I don’t think that would work.”

She knew the very last thing Erik would want was more people drawn into the whole thing. How could she arrange for Meg to talk to him? It wasn’t possible without betraying yet another piece of his trust.

She felt a fresh wave of regret when she went into her dressing room and noticed the bag she had left in his house had been put in the corner next to the mirror, all packed with everything she had left in the guest room.

Erik was in conflict with himself over the whole matter. He brooded down in his home, refusing to eat. He had promised her he’d eat, yes - but what were promises between them now? He tossed and turned that night, not in the mood to do anything at all but also not tired enough to fall asleep.

Was it truly possible that she hadn’t wanted to dine with the boy? Or was that simply what he wanted to believe? Surely not all of their good time together had been acting on her part, had they?

She had seemed sorry enough - but no, no! She had sworn to him!

He hated to admit it to himself, but this was probably one of those situations that he needed to talk through, preferably with Christine. But how was he to talk it through with her if he couldn’t be certain of her truthfulness? It only confused him all the more.

The following day he watched again from Box Five, peeved that only half of his corrections had been implemented. Try as he might, his eyes kept finding their way to Christine again and again. He missed what they used to have, even if it had only been pretend.

He noted with distaste that the boy was sitting in the audience, one of a handful of people who paid to be able to sit in on a rehearsal, and he was staring raptly up at the stage - at her - as though she were the entire world. Well, Erik mused, he wasn’t wrong, but somehow it annoyed him all the same.

It was once rehearsal was over and he pulled out his pen and paper, about to prepare a rather scathing note to the managers, when it happened.

Christine was starting on her way down the steps to leave the stage when Carlotta snuck up behind
her and gave her a little push. Christine slipped down the steps with a yelp, falling hard on her bottom and her ankle hitting the ground at a funny angle. Carlotta laughed.

“Little toad has to learn to watch her step,” she smiled a saccharine smile as she swept past Christine.

Christine took a moment before getting up carefully and limping fast away from the scene.

Erik’s temper flared at Carlotta - the absolute nerve of that awful woman! - but it quickly died out, washed away with concern for Christine. She had only just gotten over a recent injury to that foot, what if it had gotten worse now?

He left his notes and made for her dressing room.

He had a reason to be there, he assured himself as he approached from behind the mirror. Dance was a part of her career, and he was overseeing the success of her career - if she had become injured, he needed to know.

He paused behind the mirror, watching as she tried to take her ankle through its complete range of motion, wincing a little as she did so. He was about to call out to her and let her know he was there when a knock came at her door.

“Lotte? Are you in there?”

Erik’s hands tightened into fists. The boy. Of course.

“Come in, Raoul,” she said.

Erik knew he should leave then, knew he shouldn’t spy on her so, knew that it wasn’t respectful - but he stayed where he was. He had gotten there first, after all, and didn’t he have a right to make certain his student was okay?

Raoul entered the room.

“Are you alright, Lotte? That was quite a spill,” he frowned.

She nodded.

“Just a pulled muscle, I think. But it should be okay in a day or so.”

“Speaking of ‘in a day or so’,” he started sheepishly. “I had wanted to ask you - do you want to go to the zoo with me tomorrow? Around noon?”

Erik’s heart sank. Their lesson was supposed to be at noon tomorrow. It was about to happen again, and was he going to have to actually witness it. She’d accept, of course she would. Would she even bother to try and tell him that she was going out with Raoul instead, or would she simply go and leave him to figure out why she hadn’t shown up?

Her face lit up at the offer.

“Oh, Raoul, I would love to!”

Erik exhaled the breath he had been holding through clenched teeth. There was his proof, right there.

Her smile turned a little lopsided, as though she had a secret no one else knew and it amused her to
have such secret knowledge.

“Except - I have a prior engagement tomorrow at noon. Perhaps another time?”

“Of course,” Raoul nodded, and smiled wryly. “I don’t wish to keep you from your previous plans. Let’s not have a repeat of the other day.”

*The other day?*

Raoul paused, his face turning serious.

“I really am sorry about that, Christine. I hope nothing was spoiled too much by my keeping you so late. I should have listened to you the first time when you said you didn’t want to go.”

Christine pursed her lips and looked away. Things had been spoiled very much, she was afraid, but she couldn’t reveal that to him.

He took in her downcast countenance and frowned a little.

“Was it- was it terribly important, whatever you missed?”

“Oh, yes. Terribly so,” she sighed. “I don’t think I realized just how important it was until I missed it.”

He shifted, uncomfortable.

“I’m sorry,” he tried again.

“I think we’re both sorry,” she smiled sadly.

“So what’s your plan for tomorrow? Social call, perhaps?” he asked teasingly, wanting to take her mind off their previous time together.

Her smile was a little less sad.

“Yes, you could say that.”

“Ah, a friend, then? Do I happen to know this acquaintance as well?”

“I don’t believe you’ve the had the opportunity to meet this friend of mine, no,” she laughed lightly.

“Hmm. Well, whoever it is, they get to spend the afternoon with you, so they’re the luckiest person on the planet, I should think.”

She giggled and shook her head.

“No, I think I’m the lucky one, in this particular case.”

“You’re both lucky, then,” Raoul nodded and sighed. “Enjoy your day tomorrow, Lotte - and I thought the show was coming along nicely.”

Christine sighed a little after Raoul had left, completely unaware that she was not alone. She turned her hairbrush over in her hands a few times, lost in thought. Was Erik still upset? Would he still be cold to her tomorrow?
Erik, meanwhile, was rooted to the spot he was standing, scarcely breathing. Could it be true? His mind railed against it, but he had seen and heard with his own eyes and ears! And Christine was surely not lying now, not to the boy - she had no reason to. And he had apologized to her! She really had tried to return to her poor Erik!

He stared unblinking at her in her vanity chair as she played with her hairbrush, and his mind wandered to the conversation they had just after he had forcefully evicted her from his home, the one about what it meant to be a friend - perhaps her missing dinner was merely a mistake, a mistake she was not eager to repeat again. Hadn’t she turned the lovely vicomte down so that she could spend time with Erik?

Maybe they were still friends after all - or maybe she simply wanted her voice lesson. In that moment, he wasn’t certain it mattered. She hadn’t lied to him, and that was all that mattered.

He should have known, really. Had he ever known this sweet girl to lie before? Of course not. She was no little Delilah. Perhaps he had dealt in lies so long that he couldn’t fathom someone being so truthful for so long - but it was rather unbelievable, was it not? That she enjoyed his company? But - there was no denying what she had told the boy. She had no idea that he was behind the mirror, she certainly had no reason to think him to be there, so the words had not been for his benefit.

He turned, finally, and went back to his house, the notes he was going to give to the managers suddenly unimportant. Once in his kitchen, he set about preparing some toast with jam and butter, not much of a meal, but food nonetheless, just like he had promised her.

The next day Christine was nervous as she approached the old storage room with the piano where they would do her lesson. Would he even be there? Or would he let her wait and wait and never show up, as she had shamefully done to him?

But he was there, even though she fifteen minutes early - he was there.

“Good afternoon, Christine,” he said calmly, his tone betraying nothing of his emotional state.

“Hello, Erik,” she replied, and dutifully took her place by the piano.

But Erik didn’t move to approach the piano. Instead he paced the room slowly, and she watched him carefully as he did so.

“It has occurred to me,” he said suddenly. “That the good Madame Giry might not, in fact, have all of the details of what happened when Christine miraculously reappeared after her disappearance - that perhaps Christine has a version - a more accurate version - of how she came to have dinner with the Vicomte. Perhaps... perhaps Christine would like to recount those events... without, ah, being interrupted or sent away.”

She sucked in a surprised breath. He didn’t look like he had the other day, he wasn’t cold or aloof. He didn’t look angry either, just a little nervous, and perhaps embarrassed. He wouldn’t look straight at her, but he was watching her from the corner of his eye, his arms crossed behind his back.

She told him what she had wanted to tell him that day in Box Five, and true to his word he didn’t interrupt her, only nodded here and there to show he was listening.

“I wouldn’t have gotten in the carriage if I had known, Erik,” she told him after her story of the night’s events was finished. “And I don’t think Raoul would have taken us back to the mansion if he knew Philippe was going to keep us - but I was so flustered with everything, and- and no one
was listening to me, it felt like, and I didn’t know how to make them listen without being rude—“her brow creased with sorrow. “But maybe I should have been rude, because they would have gotten over it in a day or so, but you... I hurt you so very much because of it, and I am sorry.”

Everything was quiet. She sniffed and blinked.

“Hmm,” he finally said, turning away from the shelf of props he had been staring at and walking over to the piano. “Dry your eyes, my dear - it’s time for your lesson.”
Christine could think it nothing less than a miracle that Erik seemed to trust her again. She truly hadn’t thought he would be able to move past such a betrayal so quickly, so she took it as a good sign of progress even though she wasn’t certain what had inspired.

Their lessons continued on normally, though it was a few weeks before he offered to conduct them in his house again.

He knew, now, that she hadn’t meant to leave him waiting like that, hadn’t meant to break her word, and though he could logically see that she hadn’t shown up for reasons outside control, that she still presumably meant all the things she’d told him - it still hurt. No amount of reasoning could talk the hurt away, so he didn’t try to. It would have to hurt for a while, he supposed, and it made him a little more guarded around her for a time. It began to fade after a while, and as it began to hurt a little less he let his defenses down once more.

“Would you like today’s lesson up here or downstairs?”

Her eyes lit up and she grinned.

“Downstairs, please!”

She had been concerned that perhaps he wouldn’t ever offer that again, that perhaps the hurt had been a little too much to ever again be comfortable with that level of vulnerability.

But sure enough he led her down the familiar tunnels and across the lake, and they once again had their lesson by his own piano, and Christine didn’t think she would ever stop smiling.

He offered her tea afterwards, which she gladly accepted. He brought it to her on the couch, and he stood and watched as she sipped at it, a small smile on his face.

“What is it?” she finally asked, her face pink under his intent gaze.

“I’ve missed you, Christine,” he said softly.

They had been doing just as many lessons as they always had, but somehow she knew what he meant. It had been different between them, for those few weeks. But being there in his home once more - it was just like nothing had ever happened to interrupt that. She smiled sweetly at him.

“I’ve missed you too, Erik.”

He was seized by the sudden urge to hug her, but he refrained, instead going to the kitchen until the desired passed. He truly had missed having her in his home, even when she was doing nothing more than just sitting on his couch and drinking tea. It made the entire house feel better, somehow.

When they had finished their tea and small talk, he took her back upstairs, pausing just behind the mirror.

“Christine,” he said, his voice serious. “There is something I want you to have.”

“What is it, Erik?” she was a little worried. What could it be?
He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a key on a long chain and held it out to her.

She gasped a little.

“To my house,” he explained, the redness on his face mostly hidden in the dim light filtering through the mirror.

“Oh, I’ll treasure and guard this always, Erik,” she said solemnly, taking it and placing the chain around her neck next to the little charm he had given her - something that she wore more often than not, something that did not escape his notice. The chain being so much longer than a regular necklace, she tucked it underneath the front of her dress, turning from him first before she did so, but even so he looked away from her as he realized what she was doing, desperately trying not to stare at her.

The key was something that had weighed heavily on him for a while - he had been planning to give her one since before the incident with the de Chagnys, and of course after that the issue of giving her a key had been one of extreme discomfort (to think, he had been about to give her a key, and she had simply run off with that boy! He had been mortified!) but after he had found out the truth, it was a thought that occurred to him once again, and he finally felt ready to trust her with it.

“There is, of course,” he continued. “The matter of how you will cross the lake, but I am currently working on that. Would you be comfortable with using a paddle?”

She thought about it and nodded.

“Good, good. I’ll inform when it’s all finished. And we’ll work on helping you get your bearings on the water, as well. All in due time, I suppose.”

He slid the mirror open and she stepped down into her dressing room before turning to look up at him again, her eyes shining with joy and hopefulness and an emotion Erik couldn’t quite name, her hand clutching tightly to the chain the now-hidden key was on.

“Thank you so much, Angel.”

“You are quite welcome, my dear.”

For the briefest of moments Erik thought she about to reach out and hug him, and his heart leapt into his throat. He both wanted it more than anything in the world and also sought to avoid it somehow.

He reached out a hand, hoping to cut her off, but by the time his hand was too far out to pretend he was doing anything other than trying to touch her, he suddenly realized that she hadn’t been moving in to hug him - or perhaps she had, but she had stopped herself at the last second. Erik watched with wide eyes, vaguely horrified, as his gloved hand reached out and gave her shoulder a single, awkward pat.

He attempted a smile, which he was certain he failed at, and quickly closed the mirror in more of a slam than he intended.

Christine’s own eyes had gone wide at the touch, something so rare coming from him. In the wake of the slammed mirror, she turned around, her back to the mirror, and bit her grinning lip as her cheeks flushed. He was so very awkward at times, and it only made him all the more dear to her.

Erik walked back to his house with his hand to his head. Why had he done that? Why did he have to do that? The horrible and wonderful scene replayed before his eyes over and over and he
In the following weeks Erik continued to work away on the small boat for Christine, and he showed her his progress every time she visited his house.

“‘You have so very many skills,’ she said one day as she admired the half finished boat. ‘I would be quite surprised if there was anything you couldn’t do.’"

She ran a finger across the smooth wood of the bow. Erik didn’t reply, but she was used to this habit of his by now and took no notice.

There were a great many things Erik couldn’t do, and he was all too aware of them. He couldn’t live normally. He couldn’t be loved. But he knew better than to bring any of that up - it would only make her pretty mouth twist into a frown, and that would never do. That was another thing Erik couldn’t do - he couldn’t hurt or upset Christine. He would go back to Persia and face the Shah’s tortures before he undertook any action that would cause him to knowingly harm Christine. She deserved the world, and he was going to see that she got it. He would do anything for her happiness - and if being able to decide to pay a visit to her old mentor all on her own would bring her happiness, who was he to deny her that? Her happiness was his happiness, and it just so happened that her visiting him also made him happy regardless, so he continued to work fervently on the boat.

Christine was quite anxious for it to be finished, as well. She thought of it quite often, sometimes on her own, and sometimes when something would remind her of it.

She saw one of those reminders one day when she was out taking a walk with Raoul.

Since Raoul had returned, they often went on outings together, places here and there and nearly everywhere. Christine was aware it was something of a minor scandal - while it was not looked down upon for a vicomte to keep the company of a singer, it was unusual that he take her so many respectable places in the broad daylight. Their outings were never chaperoned, either (regardless of her distaste for the concept, she had no one to chaperone her, anyway), and that only added to the general gossip about them, but Raoul didn’t care one fig what anyone said about the matter. Christine didn’t mind, and that was the only important thing to him.

They walked along the winding sidewalk, Christine holding on to his arm, and eventually their path took them near the lake.

“Carlotta made them stop the entire rehearsal because she didn’t like the color of the director’s vest. He actually went and changed it! I’ve never seen anything more ridiculous, it was just like when-” she stopped mid-sentence to stare at the lake. “Ooo, Raoul - look at the boats!”

There was a little dock on the lake with a number of small paddle boats tied to it, and a man was renting them to anyone adventurous enough to try.

She tugged on Raoul’s arm and pointed an excited finger at them, and he laughed.

“Since when do you like boats, Lotte?” he teased.

“But look - you can rent them!”

“You wish to rent one?”

She looked up at him with shining eyes.
“Can we?”

“Of course we can!”

He led her down to the lake, smiling at her enthusiasm. He couldn’t help but think her newfound interest in the boats and being on the water had something to do with him. How many times had he told her that she’d love being on a ship? These boats were the first step, obviously.

He paid the man and thanked him, and then picked out a boat for them to take across the lake. Christine’s face was pure radiance, and Raoul was pleased that they had found something that seemed to make her so happy.

She watched eagerly as he rowed them out towards the middle of the water and he told her tales of the previous times he had been similar boats during training and expeditions. She smiled that sweet smile of hers and made no mention of the fact that she, too, had been in a boat almost like this numerous times before.

“Raoul,” she said eventually. “Do you think I could try rowing? It’s not terribly hard, is it?”

Raoul considered it.

“Well,” he said, grinning. “There’s only one way to find out, isn’t there?”

He handed her the paddle.

She had a little difficulty at first, but Raoul was patient and they laughed when she accidentally splashed them both with water. With his gentle instruction she soon became more at ease with how to steer the little boat. They spent much of the afternoon on the water.

Christine could scarcely believe her luck. A chance to practice with paddling a boat before Erik had to show her! She had never done such a thing before, but he would be quite pleased with her skills now. She wasn’t nearly as good as Raoul at it, but she didn’t think she was too terrible.

“We should head back soon,” Raoul said at last. “Your arms are going to be terribly tired!”

She laughed, realizing he was right - her arms were already tired, and she felt she was going to be in for a surprise the next morning.

“Take us back to shore, Captain Christine!”

Once on shore, they treated themselves to a visit to the ice cream parlor. It was a slow hour for the little store, it seemed, and the two of them were the only customers at that moment. Christine noticed the strange look on the shopkeeper’s face as he glanced from her to Raoul and then searched for something just past them, looking out the large windows to see if anyone else was coming in. With no chaperone in sight, his glance surreptitiously fell on her hands. Christine balled her hands into her skirts, hiding her fingers. It was no business of the man’s whether or not she was wearing a ring. He took their order with a raised eyebrow, but Raoul seemingly didn’t notice. They sat down at a table near the window where they could watch the people outside come and go.

“Don’t you miss being in faraway places?” Christine asked, curious.

Raoul frowned a little.

“Sometimes,” he admitted. “It’s difficult, you know? I miss the adventure, seeing new places, trying new things - but when I’m gone, I miss a lot about France, too. The familiarity, the people...
I’m afraid I’ll always have to be missing something or someone, it seems.”

She nodded understandingly.

“That does sound difficult.”

“Philippe said I was being a goose about the whole matter,” he confided shyly. “But it makes sense to you, doesn’t it, Lotte?”

“Oh, Raoul, you’re not a goose! No, it makes perfect sense.”

She could understand all too well what it was like to have one’s heart in two places at once.

They walked back to the opera house, and once it front of it they paused.

“Do you want me to walk you in?”

She shook her head.

“No, that’s fine. Thank you for such a lovely afternoon.”

He reached a hand up and softly cradled the side of her face before leaning down and placing a gentle kiss on her lips.

“All afternoons are lovely when they’re spent with you,” he murmured.

Her heart was racing as she gazed up into those clear grey eyes. She knew they were probably becoming a spectacle standing there on the steps of the Populaire as they were, but she couldn’t find it in her to pull away. She swallowed hard.

“Will I see you next week?” he asked as he brushed his thumb across her cheek.

She could only nod.

“Until then,” he smiled, and kissed her one last time on the cheek.

She was sorely tempted to turn her face at the last second so that his lips would meet hers once again.

She stood on the steps a moment and watched him walk down the street before she huffed out a breath and turned to go inside. She had work to do still - Erik wanted her to learn a new song, and she needed to memorize it before their next lesson - but she wasn’t certain she would be able to focus on it at all after that kiss. She raised her fingers to her lips, which were still tingling from the sensation. A lovely afternoon, indeed.

When they met next week, they went back to the lake and Raoul helped her refine her technique. It made his heart feel warm to be able to share this with her, to have the chance to teach something that he loved so much to someone that he loved so much.

It was several days after that Erik surprised her when they were on the bank of the underground lake. He pulled out a little paddle from the shadows and presented it to her.

“Your boat is not quite finished, but I want to be certain you’ll be able to handle it first. It will be up to you today to get us to my home, my dear.”

Christine sat in the gondola with a determined look on her face, and Erik sat down behind her, pole
in hand just in case. She dipped the paddle in the water when suddenly Erik spoke up, concern in his voice.

“Christine - you do know how to swim, don’t you?”

“Of course, Erik.”

He nodded uneasily. He could just picture Christine tipping the gondola over in her eagerness, and the ensuing mess that would create - his mask at the bottom of the lake, and her drenched to bone and catching a chill so far underground.

She surprised him, however.

“Christine, you’re doing marvelously!”

Her face turned pink under his praise. He was so very good at so many things, and she was often only mildly good at most things - could she really have been blamed for spending her time with Raoul working on a skill to try and impress Erik? It had worked, after all.

“Do you know the way to the other side?”

“I think so,” she frowned as she squinted into the darkness, the light from lantern only going so far.

They reached the fork in the path and Christine stopped.

“To the right?” she asked.

“Yes, dear - always to the right.”

“What does the other way lead to?”

Erik was quiet a moment.

“That’s not important, Christine. The only important thing is that you always go to the right, never to the left - that’s quite critical, I’m afraid.”

She turned to look at him and saw his expression was deadly serious. She was rather afraid of pressing the issue - she knew he had made mention of boobytrapping some of the entrances to his home, and she realized that she probably didn’t want to know what lay down that path, after all.

They reached his house slower than they would have if Erik had been steering, but they reached it all in one piece and completely dry, and Erik felt quite proud of his student.

“Well done, my dear,” he told her as he showed her how to tie the boat to the ring stuck in the side of the stonework on the bank.

After that he let her row each way there and back, noting with relief that she never forgot which direction to go when they reached the fork. It was with great ceremony that he announced one day that her boat was finished, and after that he allowed her to paddle on her own to his house while he followed behind in the gondola, just in case she should need help.

But she never did, and he felt his heart swell with love for this dear, clever young woman who had somehow stolen into his life and captivated his very soul.

After nearly a dozen of such supervised crossings, he declared her perfectly capable of coming over on her own, and he extended his unfettered welcome to her.
“Any hour, any day, any time at all - you are always welcome here, my dear. I will never not be happy to see you in you my home,”’ he hesitated. “But I only ask that you make yourself known as soon you enter the house, and do not come looking for me until you hear me call you in. I am often without my mask in my home, you see, and I do not wish for you to receive a fright.”

She was about to say that she didn’t mind if he didn’t have his mask on (she mostly didn’t mind, and besides, it felt the most polite thing to say), but then she thought that perhaps he would be the one that would mind, so she simply nodded solemnly and looked out across the dark water, squeezing the key around her neck in her hand tightly. She wondered if he felt terribly vulnerable around others without his mask, even if they didn’t mind how he looked and didn’t call attention to his face. She knew so much of him, yet so much more was still shrouded in mystery.

After that, Christine had the ability to visit Erik whenever she pleased, and things were never quite the same again.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 47

It never ceased to surprise him, how much he loved having her there in his house - after so long of craving solitude away from others, he found he actually craved having her there with him. He was used to having her there for lessons or the occasional use of his guest room, yes, but there was nothing quite like having her there for no other reason than she had decided to be there.

She still had a busy life up above, but even so she tried to find time at least once a week to visit him. Sometimes she would bring flowers to put in a vase on his mantle place or in the kitchen (although flowers were not high on the list of things he himself would choose to decorate his house with, he loved them for the distinctly feminine touch they brought, the tangible evidence that made it clear that a woman also inhabited that space). Sometimes she would bring some sort of food for him, usually fresh fruit, which was difficult for him to procure for himself very often. Sometimes she brought nothing but gossip and her own delightful self, and he looked forward even just to that. Each day seemed to have a little more purpose when there was the possibility that she might drop by.

When he came back to his house one afternoon after a stressful day of errands he had to run, he noticed her boat was tied to the dock. A smile formed on his face as he saw it, and the worries that had accumulated during his time out in the sunlight began to fade away.

He opened the door and called out to her.

“Christine, dear, I’m home.”

Oh, how his heart fluttered at hearing those words out loud from his own lips, as though he were calling out to his wife just like any other man coming back from a long day.

He found her in the sitting room, curled up on the couch with a book, and she gifted him with a luminous smile when she saw him in the doorway.

“How were your errands, Erik?”

His soul ached at the splendid perfection of it all.

He didn’t think he would change a thing about their situation. Perhaps, if he were a bolder man, he would find it in him to hope for even more - but he knew that hoping for things that would never come to be was a dangerous pastime. He had already been blessed with so much, had he not? None of it had been easy, of course - but it had been worth it. Her, there in his house, was seemingly a miracle. He could live like that forever, if only it was possible. Every pain they had endured at the hands of the other, though still regrettable, had all been worth it in the end if this was the final result. Perhaps, he sometimes mused, it was because of those pains and having to work through them that they held so much trust for each other now. Pain was a byproduct of allowing someone into his life, but unlike so many pains he had endured before, this one was soothed by the balm of knowing that she was actively trying to not hurt him, and that she - that they both - would work to make up for any inadvertent pain that was caused.

He knew it couldn’t last forever, knew it was only temporary - but the triumph of him opening up his life to someone and the immense amount of trust that she placed in him to keep her safe was surely a thing to celebrate having achieved, regardless of how long it would last. How many people had he ever trusted to know so many of his secrets? Only Christine. How many men did she feel comfortable enough around to stay overnight in their home? Only Erik.
The guest room slowly but surely became Christine’s room and her room alone.

He never entered when she was there, but of course he still had to clean it every so often and keep it tidy for her (it would never do to have her suddenly show up and want to use the room only to find it was dusty!) and that was how he noticed the way the room slowly began to collect some of her belongings.

It was a few things here and there, at first - a pair of earrings on the dresser, her slippers by the bed, some hair ribbons by the vanity - but over time it grew to include a number of articles of clothing, almost as though she lived there full time.

He eventually worked up the courage to look in the wardrobe one day (to think that he, a man who spied on others more easily than talk to them, felt shame over looking in his own wardrobe in his own house! And all because of Christine, his seemingly newfound moral compass) and what he found inside confirmed his suspicions - three dresses, a hat, a pair of shoes, and a dressing gown.

She approached him one day about his choice of decor.

“Erik,” she asked in that simple way that seemed oh-so-innocent, but Erik had come to realize meant she had already planned the ensuing conversation ten steps ahead. “Would you mind very terribly if the shelf of your mother’s things in my room... didn’t have your mother’s things on it?”

“What do you mean,” he stared dumbly at the wall, trying to process her words, but he was particularly stuck on her use of ‘my room’.

“I mean, would it bother you if I packed them up and put them away somewhere and I used the shelf instead,” she clarified.

He thought on it a few moments.

“Of course you may use the shelf, sweet. I’ll find you a box to put her things in.”

He brought her the box a little while later, and watched, curious, as she packed away the little treasures with the utmost of care, wrapping them in the tissue paper he had provided.

She felt great satisfaction once they were all in the box, and she smiled triumphantly at Erik as he took the box from her and placed it into his storage closet near the portrait of his mother. In truth, the old mementos had unnerved her to a degree - she didn’t want to think about his mother every time she stayed there - it was bad enough that they shared an uncanny resemblance - and she despised them for the mocking reminder of yet another person who had hated the man she held so dear.

Besides that, she really could use the extra space.

The girls up above had taken to playing pranks on each other, most recently by stealing small objects from one another’s rooms. She hadn’t minded too terribly when Meg took her comb, or when Colette had taken her sewing kit, but she had nearly slapped Francesca when she found that she had taken the little photograph from her dresser. It hadn’t mattered that all the items were returned once one realized they were missing, it hadn’t mattered even that photograph hadn’t been harmed - it was the only photograph she had of her Papa, and it was so very precious to her. Who else would take such careful care of it but her? Francesca could have been careless with it, it might have torn or bent or gotten a stain or any manner of calamity - Christine wanted to scream just thinking about it. It was that incident that made her realize her most precious treasures were perhaps not safe in her dormitory and needed to be somewhere else. She would take no chances
with that photograph.

So of course it was the first item she placed on the newly cleared shelf.

Erik examined the objects on her shelf with guilty eyes as he dusted her room the next week. He tried to tell himself it was okay - she was coming for a lesson tomorrow, and she would probably want to stay the night as well. It wasn’t as though he were spying, not really, but he couldn’t help the guilt that assuaged him - especially since not looking at whatever treasures she had seen fit to store here was not an option (both because he needed to clean around them and also because he wanted to see what they were). He tried to make it better by telling himself that he hadn’t been in the room since the last time he had cleaned it, which really was quite a feat considering how he longed to know what, exactly, she had wanted the shelf for.

There was a tiny bottle of perfume, empty, from what he could tell (a gift from Mamma Valerius from so long ago, her first bottle of perfume and her first grown-up lady gift on her thirteenth birthday), a smooth stone from a river (Professor Valerius had died a number of years before Mamma did, but when he had been alive he often made a point of setting time aside in his busy schedule to take young Christine to the lake and skip rocks, a pastime she used to enjoy doing quite often with Papa - so she and the Professor would skip rocks and talk about their memories of Gustave Daaé - one story or memory for each rock they’d skip), a wooden crochet hook (her Papa had carved this for her mother, and her mother had used it to create Christine’s first baby blanket - the blanket itself was now sadly lost to time), a finely painted box about the size of his hand (it had held tea leaves at one point, but it currently contained a large number of dried white rose petals - he did not know this, of course, because he dared not look inside, but if he had looked he would have been quite thrown to see what he would rightly assume were the remnants of some of the many, many roses her Angel had given her), a postcard that someone had drawn a less-than-quality landscape scene on (a gift from a younger Meg), a red scarf (this was the only object on the shelf that Erik actually knew the backstory of, of how the boy had run into the sea to fetch it from the waves for her - he eyed the scarf with disdain, jealous of it somehow, but he supposed he couldn’t fault her for it, or for how her eyes had sparkled as she told him the story after he had asked what she was doing with a scarf in the middle of summer, for holding it dear to her even after all these years. The boy was quite lucky, holding a place in her heart as he so clearly did, and Erik hoped that he appreciated that - not everyone was so lucky), and a single, unframed photograph.

He delicately picked up the photo, holding it carefully by the edge. It was an image of his dear angel as a little girl, standing next to a man who was holding a violin. They were both grinning, and the resemblance between the two was clear. So this was the man who had promised her the Angel of Music.

He studied the image. He spared only a perfunctory look at the man - he didn’t look terribly tall, but his hair was dark and face was charming, especially the way he was smiling. His eyes were a darker color as well, and Erik could only assume that Christine’s lighter coloring must favor her mother, though her facial features were not dissimilar from his. Her hair had been shorter then, and although he would still classify Christine as a generally happy person today, this little Christine had clearly not yet tasted the bitterness that life could offer. Erik felt a mix of emotions. He was most certainly not what her father had in mind when he had told his daughter about the Angel, and Erik couldn’t help but feel he had disappointed both of the people in that photo, regardless of what Christine might claim. Christine deserved so much more. He placed the photo back on the shelf and finished cleaning her room.

He knew that their situation was highly improper, a fact he chose to ignore most of the time. He knew, also, that buying her gifts most certainly only made the situation worse - what reason could he cobble together to justify buying her presents? They were not courting, it was not a gift-giving
holiday, either. But... If a finely wrapped box happened to appear on her bed one day, and if there happened to be a silver picture frame inside (with a sturdy glass to keep even the most fragile and important of photos quite safe), and if he just so happened to notice the next time he was dusting that she had used said silver frame to store the photograph of her and her father, well... Neither one of them made mention of it. They were already so far past any semblance of propriety, were they not? What was a gift here or there?

Although he tried to ignore it as best he could, Erik was aware that she was spending a great deal of time with Raoul as well. He couldn’t complain, he supposed - was she not already incredibly generous with how much time she spent in his home? Besides, he couldn’t take her places that the boy could - or even if he could, she probably wouldn’t want to be seen there with a masked man.

“How was your day yesterday? With the boy?” he just barely managed to get the words out with choking on them.

She looked up from her book, a little surprised that he had remembered a passing comment from a while ago that she was going to spend the previous weekend with Raoul.

“Um,” she shifted on the couch in his sitting room. “It was good, mostly.”

“Mostly?”

“Well,” she looked away, uncertain how to word it. "It was good but a little awkward, I suppose. I think- I think that he perhaps might want to- to **court** me,” she nearly sputtered the word out as though it were preposterous. “And so I had to have a bit of a conversation to prevent that, as it were.”

She kept her gaze down and smoothed out her skirt. Perhaps yesterday’s slightly awkward conversation could kill two birds with one stone. She glanced up at Erik where he was perched on the piano bench before she quickly looked away.

“I had to tell him that I don’t intend to have any serious relationships, not in that way - not for a long while, at least. I just want to sing, you know? I don’t want to have to worry about courting or marriage or- well, any of that - while I’m trying to focus on my career. I don’t need the worry of someone falling in love with me right now.”

Erik’s eyes were downcast, staring at a particular spot of nothing on the floor. He was certain she wasn’t intending her words for him, but he couldn’t help but feel the weight of them, anyway. She didn’t need the worry of someone falling in love with her and trying to steal her away from the stage and all her dreams - and she certainly didn’t need the worry of having her vocal tutor fall in love with her. As much as it stung, it was also a relief to know that the boy was not in competition with him for her affections.

She dared to look back up at him.

“My first love is music, and it always will be. There’s time enough for all the rest of that after my future in singing is secure.”

“Hm. A worthy love, indeed,” he slid a single gloved finger silently over the keys of his piano before his eyes snapped back up to hers. “But what about the boy? How did he take it?”

“Oh, he took it all right, I suppose. A little disappointed, maybe, but- well, I’m sure he’ll live,” she arched an eyebrow.

“Hm,” he said again. This conversation seemed to have a way of stealing all his words. “He- he
treats you with you respect, then? Respects your wishes?”

“Of course!”

“Good, that’s good.”

He hesitated a long moment before continuing.

“Should the day ever come that he doesn’t, just let me know, Christine. You should always be treated with respect.”

He had witnessed far too many nobles who thought whatever they wanted was theirs for the taking. The boy might respect her wishes now, but what if he got tired of waiting?

“If he ever oversteps his bounds with you, say the word and he will disappear. I can make it look like an accident - or I can simply make him vanish. They’d never even find the body.”

Christine stared blankly at him, eyes wide. Then she burst into laughter.

“Erik, you say the funniest things sometimes!” she shook her head mirthfully.

Erik tried a smile, confused. He had been quite serious on the matter. Why did she think it was funny? It certainly wasn’t a joke, not to him. He crossed his arms and decided to go along with her.

“Anything to see you smile, sweet.”
Chapter 48

Christine often took to spending her spare time in his house. It wasn’t often that it was feasible, but whenever it was possible she found herself crossing the lake in her little boat and pulling the key out of the neckline of her dress and calling out to him as she entered.

Sometimes he wasn’t doing much of anything, and he would sit and talk with her or even play music for her. Sometimes he wasn’t in the house at all, and she simply waited there for him to get back, or, if she had to return above before he returned, she’d write a little note for him and leave it on the kitchen counter, informing him of her visit. When that happened, she often drew a little animal in a silly pose on the note, such a cat doing ballet or her best approximation of an elephant rowing a boat - for no other reason than it amused her - and she was completely unaware that he kept each and every one of these notes in a box in his bedroom. Sometimes, however, he would be there when she arrived but he would be busy with something.

“Erik?” she called out, standing in the entryway. She could hear the organ music and had waited until it paused.

In a moment he appeared, looking surprised.

“How are you, my dear?”

“Good, how are you? Do you mind if I stay a while?”

“Of course you can stay. Ah, I am afraid I’m quite busy composing at the moment, though. I hope you do not mind entertaining yourself?”

He hated not being there to spend time with her, but he was making good progress on his opera, something he hadn’t been able to do for ages, and he was afraid if he stopped for too long he would lose the muse.

“Oh, I don’t mind.”

It was always a pleasure just to sit and listen to him play, even if during composing he tended to play the same few notes over and over until he found something he liked - which he’d then play over and over just be certain he truly like it before writing it down.

He left for his bedroom again, closing the door, and soon organ music was pouring through the house once more. She settled in the sitting room, laying down across the couch and staring at the ceiling. Erik’s home always felt so much more peaceful than nearly anywhere else in the opera house, and it was nice to be able to get away from the constant chatter and gossip and physical proximity with others that all got on her nerves after a time.

She dozed off in a little nap, her dreams starting out nice enough but soon turning to a muddle fright. She woke up a bit later, a little dazed, and suddenly she realized why.

Erik’s music had turned dark, sometimes brooding, sometimes crashing, and she shuddered. She’d never heard him play like that before - she’d never even heard music like that before. All hopes of continuing her nap abandoned, she tried to fall into a book but still the music haunted her, set her teeth on edge and made her fidget. She could only imagine what this piece would sound like finished - a wonderful, horrible, song the likes of which had never been heard before. She paced the room a little, unsure of what to do next.
Then the music shifted, and thought it as just as strange as the previous song, it was less bitter. She sighed in relief and the tension left her shoulders. With her mind a little more clear, she realized she hadn’t eaten in a while, and headed to his kitchen. While there, she began to wonder when he had eaten last, and had an idea.

Erik was always so good to her, always made certain her needs were met. Perhaps she, too, could do something nice for him, to look out for his needs as well. She hesitated just a moment, but forged ahead in her plan - how many times had he told her that she was welcome to anything and everything in his home?

She searched the pantry and pulled out the ingredients, delighted that they were all there. She knew he had been keeping it better stocked since she had started coming by more often.

It was a recipe she had often made before in the past, needing very few ingredients but still tasting lovely. He didn’t have any cookie cutters, which didn’t truly surprise her, so she took one of the glasses from a cupboard and used the rim to cut out circle after circle from the spiced dough, placing them on metal trays before placing the trays in the oven.

It wasn’t long before she was sprinkling powder sugar over the freshly baked cookies and placing them on a platter. She was terribly pleased with how they had turned out, and she couldn’t wait to show them to Erik.

She took a number of cookies from the platter, placing them on a smaller plate, and went to his room. She waited outside his door until the organ music stopped, then counted to ten (just in case he was writing something down) before knocking lightly.

“Erik?”

A pause.

“Come in, my dear,” he called out, but sounded distracted.

She pushed the door open, a little grin already forming on her face as she prepared to present to him the results of her baking. She took a step inside the room and looked up from the plate of cookies, seeing him at the other end, seated in front of a small pipe organ. Her eyes took in the rest of the room and her smile vanished.

The room was painted black, which was perhaps a little morbid, but paled in comparison to what else was in the room. The pipe organ was an odd choice for a bedroom, but nothing too strange, comparably. There was an armoire, and a chest of drawers, and a few other pieces of furniture that were to be expected.

And there was a coffin.

She stared at it, her face blank, and her mind swirling.

It was open.

Her eyes sought him out, seeking understanding. He had turned from his work to glance back at her, and suddenly turned all the way around when he saw where she was looking before her gaze turned to him. He watched her cautiously as she took a deep breath, then another before squaring her shoulders.

“I made you something,” she was proud of how she managed to keep the tremble from her voice.
She began to stride forward with a confidence she hardly felt, trying to keep her gaze on him as she did so. As she walked the past the coffin, her eyes darted down to look at it, defying her will to not look.

There was a blanket inside. Did he- oh no, please no- did he sleep in this? There was certainly no bed in the room, not even a chair. Did he sleep in the guest room, perhaps? Why he even had a guest room was beyond her - she was his first guest, as far as she knew.

But that guilty, guarded look on his face as she approached him told her all she needed to know. Her heart sank.

“These are for you,” she held the plate of cookies out to him.

She made no comment on the topic he feared she might, and he relaxed just a little.

Her eyes fell on the organ, on the sheet music held there and the little jar of red ink - and on the little wooden Dala horse she had carved for him on that Christmas so long ago. Her lips quirked into a smile. Had he kept it there on his organ this whole time?

She cleared her throat.

“Try one,” she motioned to the cookies.

“Oh, Christine - you made these?” he asked, feeling a little stupid - it was obvious she had made them (hasn’t she just said so?), but he was still surprised that she done so.

He was rattled, too, by how easily he had forgotten what horrors his room held. He had been so consumed with composing he hadn’t even thought twice about letting her come into the room he otherwise tried to keep her out of.

It was perhaps the only time he wished that she wasn’t in his house - he regretted that she had to hear the score of Don Juan Triumphant (such harsh music for such a pure soul to endure), regretted that he had let her see the coffin which had clearly upset her.

He reached out and took a cookie. It tasted spicy and sweet.

“My Christine is too good to me,” he murmured, his mind still far away.

Her eyes snapped up to his face, away from that awful coffin she had been staring at once more. He hadn’t even seemed to notice the words he had let slip, those two little words that set her pulse racing and made her feel warm all over.

My Christine

“Do you like them?” her mouth felt dry all of a sudden, and the realization that she was in his bedroom dawning on her did not help.

“You are a marvel, Christine. They are delicious,” he took a second one, and she smiled warmly.

“How is your composing going?” she placed the plate on top the organ and tried to glance at the name across the tops of the staves was he working on, but he quickly turned the sheets around so she couldn’t see what was written there and fussed with them nervously.

“Just fine. I do apologize if it is not to your liking. I know it is... different.”

“I wouldn’t say I don’t like it,” she turned her head to look at another page he had neglected to turn
“Oh!” she said suddenly. “That’s in my key, isn’t it? Is it for me?”

He hastily grabbed the paper and turned it over.

“Hmm? Whatever do you mean, silly girl? Not everything I write is for you, you know,” he hoped his teasing tone would hide the sweat crawling down his neck.

“Well, who’s Aminta?”

Her voice was full of such inquisitive innocence he didn’t think he could stand it. The fact of the matter was he had written the role of Aminta for her - for her to play opposite his Don Juan. His Don Juan, a fiendish cad, a lecherous deviant, and Aminta, the woman he doggedly pursued and wooed and conquered - Erik felt ashamed that she might discover this. After all, it had only been after he realized he was in love with her that his work on the damned opera had truly taken off - he had been working on it since Persia, a project he had poured his bitterness and rage into, and now - now also a project he infused with newfound feelings. Feelings that added to it what it had been missing all those years. Passion. Desire. Lust.

But this was music! It was just words on a page! He’d never-! Surely Christine must know he would never treat her like how Don Juan treated Aminta!

He shifted uncomfortably, his hand on the back of his neck. At least he hadn’t been working on the more lewd parts of the music while she was there...

“She is a character in my opera,” he raised an eyebrow. “Surely that much was clear.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. He was being dodgy about the whole thing and it made her suspicious.

He grabbed another cookie and hurriedly shoved the entire thing in his mouth.

“This really is quite good,” he said with his mouth full. “What is this in it, is that nutmeg?”

His voice (what she could hear of it through the cookie) bordered on desperate, and the look of near panic in his eyes as he looked at her caused her to feel something towards him. If he didn’t want to talk about his opera, she supposed she wouldn’t push the subject.

“Nutmeg, yes,” she nodded. “And cinnamon, too.”

“It truly is delicious,” he rose and began to usher her out of the room, an arm widespread as though to keep her from darting around the side of him and stealing a look at those mysterious, forbidden staves.

She started for the door, giving one last, long glance at the terrible coffin before looking up at his golden eyes. Her lips were pressed together, and she looked like she both disapproved and was hurt by the coffin’s existence. His gaze softened and he paused.

“One has to get used to all parts of life, Christine,” he said gently, and glanced at the coffin himself. “Even to that.”

She turned her head away, frowning.

“But come now, sweet, let’s go in the kitchen and find ourselves a lovely drink to go with these
wonderful cookies.”

She nodded and went with him, arms crossed about herself as though she were chilled.

Christine did not go in his room again. Any curiosity about that strange opera was overshadowed by the morbid furnishings inside.

Erik often daydreamed about an alternate reality for him and Christine, often pretended to himself that they were, in fact, something more to each other. To temper these fantasies, to keep from getting lost in a world of his own creation, he would remind himself most viciously that he was nothing to her, that she only kept near him because she liked his teaching. The truth of the matter, he supposed, lay somewhere in between. They were not married, obviously. She didn’t love him (she didn’t even love the boy that way, with all his handsome charms). But it didn’t seem logical that she actually hated him, either. He supposed, in those times he felt a little more clarity of mind, that they were friends of sorts.

How much of that odd friendship sprang from her feeling obligated to give him something in exchange for years of free lessons? He didn’t know. But he certainly couldn’t be loved for himself, at least he didn’t believe so. It was safest, in his mind, to error on the side of caution - she didn’t hate him, but she didn’t love him, not in any way. He knew it would be so easy to get caught up in the thought of her loving him, knew how easily he could slip into that trap. He could just picture some day in the future when he’d entirely lost it, insisting to her that she had to love him. He’d probably string up the boy for being competition. It would be awful. No, it was much better all around if he remembered that she could never love one like him, not truly anyway. It would spare them all from any... unpleasantness, down the line.

Christine didn’t love him. But there were times, every so often, that he let himself believe. Times like right then, standing in the kitchen, looking at the plate of cookies she had baked for him. She didn’t love him, but... Perhaps she did care for him, just a little. How could he not think so in the face of such evidence?

He took a little break from writing his inappropriate opera and poured them each a glass of sparkling water to drink while they shared a small meal of cookies.
It had started normally enough, because the fact of the matter was that Christine Daaé often felt run down. There would be numerous days she’d feel extra tired, that she wouldn’t sleep well or simply didn’t feel good - being a performer could be a draining profession, and she put her very soul into her work. She didn’t need to have a reason such a sickness to feel unwell at times. But on this occasion, it was the appearance of a cough that worried her and made her think something was wrong.

Surely she had merely breathed in an irritant, that was all. But the day came and went and still she coughed. Two days later, to her horror, she also coughed at the start of her lesson with Erik.

Erik stopped, staring at her silently for a moment. He didn’t like how that cough had sounded.

“Christine, are you alright?”

She nodded.

“I’m fine, Erik.”

He watched her closely in the gas light of her dressing room, how she fidgeted under his gaze, how her eyes were glassy and how her breathing was shallow and a few beads of sweat gathered on her brow. She stifled another cough, hoping he wouldn’t notice.

“Christine, no - you’re ill, dear,” he righted himself from where he had been leaning against the wall, uncrossing his arms as he walked closer to her.

He stood in front of her, his gaze turning troubled, and he removed one of his gloves.

“May I?” he hovered the back of his hand above her forehead, waiting for her permission.

She gave a little nod, and he gently rested his hand on her skin. He was certain that she would have felt warm to him regardless, but now her skin felt like a firebrand.

She looked up at him, startled. His hand felt like ice. She must be sicker than she realized, she thought. How high must her temperature be to make him feel that cold? It frightened her.

“You’re burning up, Christine. No singing today - no singing at all until this passes,” he tutted. “You’re quite sick, I’m afraid.”

She wrung her hands. She was afraid to admit that she was sick, that it might be serious.

“But I don’t want to be sick, Erik,” she whined desperately.

“Unfortunately, my dear, that does not change the fact that you are,” he said, then hesitated. “Do you want to come stay with me until you’re better?”

If she had to be sick, she would prefer to be with someone she trusted rather than to suffer up in her dormitory all alone.

“Yes, please,” she said in a small voice.

He nodded, relieved.
“You write a note for whoever will be missing you for the next few days, and then pack whatever you’ll need from your room. I’ll make the rest of the preparations.”

She went to her vanity and pulled out a piece of paper to begin a note to the ballet mistress. She’d tell her she had fallen sick and was staying with a family friend until she was better. Erik had disappeared when she glanced up. She wondered what preparations exactly he was making, but her head ached to think too hard, so she left it be. She quickly scrawled up another note to Meg and then one to the managers, and finally one to Raoul before she left to find Meg’s mother.

Madame Giry was in her office as usual, and she smiled warmly when she saw Christine come in.

“Hello Madame Giry,” she said politely. “Would you be able to deliver some notes for me?”

Madame Giry’s blood ran cold for a second - the mere mention of notes always made her think of the Ghost. She dismissed the fear - Christine was a sweet, innocent girl, she would never get tangled up in the affair with the Opera Ghost, surely.

“Of course, Christine,” she nodded. “I trust all is well?”

Christine’s brow furrowed.

“I’m- I’m not feeling so well, you see. I need a few days off to recover, I think. I’ll be staying with a family friend for just a little while,” she handed her the letters.

“Oh, you poor thing! Well, I hope you recover quickly, then.”

Her notes delivered and pleasant words with Madame Giry exchanged, Christine made her way to her dormitory to pack a few articles of clothing.

Finally she stood in her dressing room, facing the mirror as she clutched the large purse she had put her extra clothing in. She felt terribly tired, more so than the few simple errands should have accounted for. The mirror opened and she gathered her strength to step up into it. She was quiet as they walked down the staircase behind the walls.

She blinked a few times at the sight that was suddenly before her - there was a horse in the catacombs. Oh, but not just any horse-

“Cesar!” Christine brightened when she recognized the big white horse that was often utilized in performances, either pulling scenery or as an actor himself.

“Oh, Cesar,” she patted his nose and rested her aching head on his neck, and Cesar made a soft noise as he pushed his nose into her hand.

Erik was surprised.

“You two know each other, I take it?”

Christine nodded.

“Of course, I love Cesar,” she smiled.

Erik knew it was shameful to feel jealous of a horse, but still-

“You are acquainted because of his work on the stage, I assume?”

“Yes, mostly. Sometimes,” she ducked her head. “Sometimes I sneak down to the stables to give
him a sugar cube or an apple, too. He’s such a good horse.”

She gave him another pat.

“How long have you been doing that?” Erik asked, amused.

She shrugged.

“Oh, years now, I suppose.”

“Before you even knew me as the Angel?”

“Yes,” she hesitated. “Why?”

His lips quirked in a smile.

“Cesar is my horse. He lives and works at the opera, but he’s mine, still - legally he’s the Daroga’s, but that’s a mere technicality,” he waved a hand.

Christine turned her face to press it against Cesar’s neck, hoping to hide her blush. She hadn’t had any idea at the time that she was feeding and visiting the Opera Ghost’s horse - or even Erik’s horse, for that matter. There were a number of horses in the opera’s stables, and she loved them all, but Cesar had always been her favorite.

“What’s he doing here?” she asked.

“He’s here to take you to my home.”

He motioned to the overturned crate he had waiting near Cesar, and Christine climbed up and sat across his back. The horse seemed quite comfortable in the tunnels, and Christine was terribly grateful that Erik had thought of such a thing, since she was quite exhausted. It was nice to not have to walk so far.

Erik glanced back at her every so often. She looked so tired, like she might fall asleep at any moment. He was glad he had brought Cesar. The only other option would have been to carry her himself - but as appealing as the though of holding her in his arms like that was, he knew it wasn’t truly an option at all, so Cesar it had to be.

Erik kept quiet for most of the journey to the lake - she hadn’t said anything, but he had noticed how she flinched a little each time he had spoken, so he assumed that the echoing noise in the tunnels was aggravating a headache of hers. The clip-clop of Cesar’s hooves on the stones made her frown a little, but she absentmindedly ran her fingers through his mane, thinking on how strange it was not only to see the big horse here but know who, exactly, he belonged to.

Erik watched those little fingers lithely thread through the long white hair, and couldn’t help but wonder how marvelous it might feel on his own scalp. He dared, for a moment, to imagine them not in his wig, but in his own hair. Would Christine run her fingers through it just like that? If his hair had one redeeming quality about it, it was that it was rather soft. But it also thinning and grayed (something it had been for ages), and in the last few years, receding. He pushed the thought away. She wouldn’t like doing a such thing, he was certain, regardless of how soft it was. Better not to think on it at all.

They reached the bank of the lake, and Erik belatedly realized there was no crate for her step down on here. He hesitated for a moment, but Christine did not.
“Will you help me?” she asked, arms outstretched.

His heart leapt into his throat and he could only nod. He moved in close, and she placed her hands on his shoulders. The universe seemed to slow to a halt for him when he put his hands on her waist to lift her to the ground. He desperately tried to memorize every fleeting moment, every sensation of the movement - her hands weakly gripping his shoulders, the fabric of her dress underneath his fingers and the stiff corset underneath of that, the little “oof” sound she made when her feet touched the ground, the entire realness of her under his hands, solid and tangible and Christine and - and it was over. Just like that the moment was gone, fading into the past, into memory.

He pulled back, stepping away from her, his hands clenching and unclenching, his mind reeling.

He scolded himself that she had only asked because she felt ill and simply wanted to get into a soft bed and sleep her sickness away as soon as could - if she had to let a monster touch her briefly in order to expedite that, wouldn’t she?

She turned to Cesar and hugged him one last time, patting his neck before pressing a kiss to his cheek. She then got into the boat and sat down wearily.

Erik glared at his horse as it stood there blinking, too stupid to realize the gift it had been blessed with. But still, Erik too had been blessed with something - his hands still tingled pleasantly.

He got in the boat behind Christine and pushed them away from the bank with the pole. Christine suddenly turned to him.

“Oh! What about Cesar?"

He glanced back at the animal as it watched them on the water.

“Well he can’t come with us to the house,” Erik stated.

Her brow furrowed in confusion.

“What? No, I mean he can’t just stand there forever.”

The blessed loop of memory he had been replying in his mind cleared and he then fully understand her question.

“Ah. Once you get settled I will return and take him back to the stables. He’s quite used to being down here, he’ll be fine till then.”

She nodded, and he was touched that, even in the midst of feeling so unwell, she still found it in herself to care about even an animal.

Once in his house, he led her to the sitting room before taking her luggage to her room for her.

“Do you need anything?” he asked. “Something to eat or to drink?”

She shook her and simply sat on the floor next to the fireplace, which had a lovely fire burning brightly in it.

“Will you be alright on your own for a bit?”

“Yes,” she said quietly. “Thank you, Erik.”
He watched her a moment longer. She seemed to be feeling worse as time went on, and though he was hesitant to leave her, he knew the longer he tarried the worse she would be - if he left quickly and hurried back, he would be there in time for when she truly felt worse. Besides, poor Cesar really couldn’t stand there all night.

He made his way quickly across the lake and took Cesar back to the stables. He tended to him there, settling him in for the night.

Once finished with everything, he ran a hand through his mane, thinking of Christine’s hand that had been there earlier. He would love to hold Christine’s hand. Would their fingers twine together the same way hers had twined in Cesar’s mane?

His eyes fell on his horse’s cheek, the very one Christine had kissed. He, too, had given Cesar a kiss on occasion. If he were to do so now, it would not be so odd... if he happened to place his lips in the same spot that hers had touched, well...

Cesar turned his long face to look at his master, uncertain of why the man was just standing there. Was he going to give him a sugar cube or not?

Erik’s jaw clenched as the judging stare from the animal brought a wave of shame. He turned to leave, pretending he hadn’t even considered such a vulgar course of action, but Cesar bit at his sleeve before he could get out of reach.

Erik sighed. It wasn’t his horse’s fault that he had fallen into obsessive love with a young woman who could never return his feelings. He walked to the end of the stables and opened the box that stored the treats, pulling out a few sugar cubes, which he gave to Cesar. He patted the horse as it happily crunched on the sugar, and Erik let his mind wander to a life where he could ride and care for Cesar every day instead of secret, sporadic visits like these. He gave him one last pat - and one last sugar cube - and left for his house once more.

Christine huddled as close to fire as common sense would allow, her arms wrapped around her knees. She didn’t like being alone at that moment, but his house was comforting. It all held the memory of him, and she knew he would be back soon enough.

She cursed her own irrationality over the subject of sickness. Other people didn’t get worked up over a little fever, a little cough, surely not. They took it in stride and thought nothing of it and were better in a few days. Other people weren’t filled with unspeakable dread that getting sick was the beginning of the end of everything.

Other people had not watched their father die of an illness when they were nine years old.

Her only anchor in a world that was so often changing, he had insisted to her that he was fine right up until the last few months, but even she could see that he had not been fine. Even when they had gone to live with Mamma and the Professor, he had said that it would be a little while longer and he would get better. But he hadn’t gotten better. She had Mamma and the Professor afterwards, but she had felt truly alone for a long time. Her anchor was gone, and she had been left to be tossed about on the rough waters of life all by herself.

How could she trust that she would get better when anyone said so? Were people just patronizing her, placating her? Pretending everything was fine so as to not worry her? She could not abide that! Why couldn’t people just trust her with the truth? Why hadn’t Papa? How was she to prepare for the future if she was constantly kept in the dark as to what that future would be? She hadn’t been ready to lose him back then, and she wasn’t ready to lose everything - everyone - she had here now and move on to whatever came next.
“Christine, I’m back,” Erik called out.

He came into the sitting room and frowned.

“You’re too close to the fire,” he fretted. “Scoot back a little.”

She shrugged but scooted back.

“I’m cold,” her voice sounded so small and weak.

“Sit right there, I’m going to make you some tea.”

She sat closer to the fire again once he left, and stared into the flames, her eyes stinging but not just because of the heat and brightness.

Erik returned and leaned down to hand her a cup of tea.

“Are you alright, dear? You looked a little lost in thought,” he asked kindly.

She blinked up at him and smiled weakly.

“I’m just being silly, I’m afraid. It’s just- well, I haven’t been sick since I was a little girl. The last time I was sick, Papa was still here. He cooked me soup and he played the violin for me,” she paused, looking at the flames again. “I’m just not used to being sick.”

There was an odd little waver in her voice, and Erik did not like it.

She coughed again, stronger than she had before.

“Hmm,” he frowned.

She looked up, suddenly worried.

“What? Do you think it’s serious?”

“I’m worried for your voice, Christine.”

Her face crumpled.

“Oh,” she breathed. “Do you think I might lose my voice entirely?”

Erik said nothing.

“It- it will come back eventually, even if I lose it, won’t it?”

Erik glanced at the fire.

“Erik!” she was on the verge of hysterical tears.

“You’ll be fine, Christine,” he crooned, sitting next to her. “I don’t want you to worry about a single thing, sweet. The fever will pass, and so will the cough, and you’ll be just fine.”

She pressed her forehead to her knees, eyes shut tightly.

“Erik,” she whispered.

“Hmm?”
She felt utterly ridiculous asking him, but her fever ravaged mind would not let her be unless she knew the answer.

“Would you still be my friend even if I couldn’t sing anymore?”

There was a pause, and she sniffled because she was suddenly afraid of his answer.

“Of course I would, Christine.”

The words were spoken with a serious air, as though they were a vow.

“And you’ll sing again, you’ll see.”

He had never wanted so dearly to take her in his arms and hold her, and he very nearly did so. Wouldn’t she feel safe in his arms? Wouldn’t she be comforted by his presence? He was almost certain she would - almost. What he was certain about was that he couldn’t abide the shame he knew would follow should he try to embrace her and she asked him to stop - or even worse, if he made her too uncomfortable to ask him to stop.

She nodded her head a little.

“If you say so,” she said softly.

“I do say so,” he said firmly, and stood up. “Now stay right there, I’m going to get you something else to drink.”

He left for the kitchen, and she slowly lifted her head to stare at the fire again. She watched the flames lick and consume the logs and she could feel the flames in her own veins curling around her heart, making it beat fast, seeping into her joints and making them ache, pounding behind her eyes, burning her throat. She clenched her hands around the fabric of her skirts. Every part of her wanted to fight against this strange sickness coursing through her, wanted to do something, anything, to make it leave that instant. But she knew fighting against it was hopeless.

Papa had tried to fight it, too, once upon a time.

She could still see his blood spotted handkerchief every time she closed her eyes, and with each cough she found rising in her own throat, she tried to push it down again lest she pull back her own hand from her mouth and see that same blood.

She started a little when Erik returned and was suddenly, silently, standing beside her. He handed her a steaming mug of something that smelled strongly of strange herbs.

“Drink all of this,” he told her gently. “I know it’s not the best taste, but it will help you.”

She held it in both hands and drank it down in a few large sips. He was right about the taste, and she hoped he was right about it helping. She handed the empty cup back to him to place on the table, and she wiped the backs of her hands over her eyes, a small whine in her throat as tears fell down her cheeks.

“Christine! Surely it wasn’t that terrible, was it?” he tried to joke, but she didn’t laugh.

“Sweet, what’s wrong?” he was seriously concerned now.

“I don’t want to die,” she whimpered, and he stared at her, dumbstruck.

Die? Perhaps he had needlessly frightened her about her voice (though it was still a worry in the
back of his own mind), but why on earth would she think she would die from a simple fever and cough?

“You aren’t going to die, darling girl,” he said softly, shaking his head a little.

Ah, but that’s what Papa said about himself, too. *I'm just a little under the weather, Christine - I’m sure I’ll be fine*

“Come now,” he held his hands out her in case she needed help getting up. “Let’s get you to bed. I’m sure your fever will have broken when you wake up, and you’ll feel much better by then.”

She reach out and took his hands, using them to help pull herself up. But the medicine and her sickness and how quickly she stood all worked against her, causing her head to spin. She wobbled and nearly fell, but Erik caught her with a hand on her back. She placed her own hand on his shoulder, hoping for balance.

A thought occurred to him.

“Christine,” he started. “Ah, I’m quite sorry, my dear, but I don’t think you should lock your door tonight - you are unwell, and I would hate for you to take a turn for the worse and not be able to get help.”

She looked up at him, her brow furrowing in confusing.

“But I never lock my door when I stay here,” she said.
Erik paused. The poor girl was delirious with fever, he realized. Surely she didn’t know what she was saying - surely she locked her door.

“Well, that’s how it’ll be tonight, I’m afraid. Is that okay with you?”

She nodded slowly, still looking at him, her hand still on his shoulder.

Their faces were mere inches apart, the way they were standing was dangerously close to an embrace, yet still she didn’t pull away. Delirious, he was certain. He swallowed hard.

“Let’s get you to bed,” he repeated quietly, and turned her towards to the door, a gentle hand hovering close to her back even still, just in case she almost fell again.

He saw her to the doorway of her room, at which point she went over to her dresser and pulled a nightgown from it. Erik quickly turned went down the hallway, and she watched, biting her lip, as he went away.

She had very nearly asked him to help her unbutton the back of her dress, and she couldn’t help but feel that perhaps he knew that. She supposed she could manage on her own, but her fingers were trembling and they felt slow and clumsy. She sighed. Even in the daze of her illness she knew such a request was highly inappropriate, and yet...

She changed (with difficulty) in the bathroom before pulling her dressing gown around herself, then settled into bed, wishing for more blankets. Though she felt hot on the inside, she was shivering and couldn’t seem to stop. She blinked miserably as she nestled her face into the satin pillow.

He came back to check on her in a little bit, knocking on the doorframe and pausing before glancing in. She turned a little to face him.

“How are you feeling?” he asked softly.

She shrugged and shook her head.

“The same.”

“Do you want another blanket?”

She nodded eagerly.

He left and came back a moment later, cautiously entering her room and spreading the blanket over her

“There,” he said. “Anything else?”

“No,” her voice was small. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” he turned to leave but she sat up a little.

“Erik?”

He paused.
“Will you- well, you won’t be too far away, will you?” she sounded so uncertain, so scared, and was overwhelmed with the urge to kiss her forehead and assure her that he would never leave her side, ever.

“I’ll be quite close, my dear. It’s alright. I’ll check on you every now and then, okay?”

“Okay.”

True enough, Christine noticed him at her doorway every now and then as she tried to sleep. He would linger a few moments before leaving once more, but she felt greatly comforted by his presence.

Eventually she fell asleep entirely, her mind simply too exhausted to keep worrying. At first Erik hoped that sleep would bring her some relief and help her feel better, but before long her slumber became fitful and he watched with concern as she tossed and turned.

He approached her slowly, and hesitatingly placed his hand on her forehead - she was quite asleep, and did not even wake when he did so. Her fever was still burning and he was briefly concerned that if it lasted much longer he might have to take her to an actual doctor. Still, there was nothing to be done for the moment except wait.

An hour later she was still restlessly turning, clearly uncomfortable. Erik felt terrible that there was little else he could for her. Unless-

He left her doorway, making his way to his own bedroom quickly. She had said that her father used to play the violin for her when she was ill, did she not?

He brought his violin with him and entered her room, feeling out of place in it. It was a foreign thing, being there with her. It was not unpleasant, but it held a sense of wrongness about it still.

She, fast asleep in her bed, dressed in her nightclothes with only the blankets to hide her from view, and him, there in her apartment while she slept - almost as if they were married. It would not be so strange if that were the case, would it? Husbands were allowed in their wife’s private rooms.

He placed the freshly rosined bow to the strings and began an old folk song that he thought would please her.

She stopped squirming. Her eyes tried to flutter open, uncertain of where she was, and her brow furrowed.

She could hear the most heavenly music - surely only the angels could play like that. Had her Papa sent her the Angel? Or was that Papa?

She pressed her face into the pillow, even the dim gaslight too bright for her eyes. But still - she had to know where that music was coming from. She wasn’t certain where she was or how she got there, or why she felt so terrible and hot, but she did know that finding the source of the music was currently her highest priority. She blinked unseeing into the room.

“Papa?” she asked weakly.

Erik paused in his playing. His hand tightened around the neck of his violin, just as the lump in his throat squeezed as well. She thought he was her father.

“Close your eyes, dear child - go to sleep,” he managed and began to play again.
She obediently closed her eyes at once. Her mind was still muddled and she still felt unwell, but now a sense of peace enveloped her as well. She wasn’t alone - there was Someone there with her, even if she couldn’t quite tell who. The Angel (was Papa the Angel?) wouldn’t let any harm come to her. As sleep caused her mind to drift away like a wave on the beach, her last discernable thought was that she was forgetting someone important from the equation, someone she needed to tell Papa about, someone who had been sent to her by the Angel - someone terribly important but she couldn’t remember his name. When push came to shove, however, she realized she couldn’t even remember her own name in the moment, and she gave up on the quest for his name as she gave up all waking thought and settled into slumber once more.

Erik noted how her breathing evened out, how she was finally still and restful, her brow unfurrowed, her lips no longer twisted into a frown. He breathed a little sigh of relief and kept playing for her.

He played for her for quite some time, eventually having to stop when the joints in his fingers and hands began to ache. He waited a little while there in room, choosing to sit in the chair there and make certain that her sleep continued calmly. After a half hour he decided that she was fine and he left to get himself some tea. He came back a little later only to notice she was once more restless. He frowned, approaching her, but was surprised that she quieted as he drew closer.

Could it be? Could it truly be? Could she sense his presence even now?

He brought his tea into her room, and a book too, and sat back down, settling himself in for the night. He was certain that it was merely presence of someone else in the room that calmed her - he most definitely did not feel the hubris to assume it was anything about him specifically - and if that’s what she needed to get better, that’s what he would give to her. Never mind all the voices in his head saying how inappropriate it was that he should spend the evening - or any time at all, really - in her private chamber, especially as she slept. But was it so terribly inappropriate if no one else except for her and himself would ever know? And he hadn’t even touched her, besides!

He paused briefly in his reading, wondering if having placed his hand on her forehead counted as touching her. He hesitatingly decided it did not, not really - he had only done it to accurately gauge her condition, it wasn’t as though he took in pleasure in it...

He chewed his lip a little.

It wasn’t as though finding it pleasurable was the only reason he had done it. He really had needed to know if she was getting better or not.

He returned to reading, not wanting to focus on any disturbing thoughts. Christine was sleeping peacefully, and that was all that mattered.

In the small hours of the morning he regretfully had to wake her in order to give her a second dose of medicine - her fever still had not broken, and he was concerned.

“Christine?” he whispered.

She did not stir.

“Christine? Wake up, sweet,” he spoke normally.

She twitched.

“Christine, you need to take your medicine.”
She frowned in her sleep.

“Christine!” he spoke a little more forcefully, and she awoke with a start, blinking fast.

“Wha- what- Erik, why - what’s with all the yelling?” she asked sleepily.

“Drink this,” he handed her the mug, and she drank it down, wrinkling her nose at the taste, and then she handed it back to him.

“Now go back to sleep,” he said, gentle once more.

She huffed and rolled her eyes and flopped back down into the pillow, muttering.

“I can only sleep if you stop yelling,” she grumbled.

Erik smirked and was about send back a retort, but he realized she had, in fact, already fallen asleep again.

It was in the early morning that her fever finally broke. Erik rested his hand on her forehead as he had every hour or so and finally breathed a sigh of relief. The worst, hopefully, was over.

She continued to sleep until a little past noon. When she finally woke she felt disoriented, not knowing what time it was or where she happened to be. She blinked groggily at the room around her as bits and pieces came back to her.

She was ill, that’s why she felt so strange. And Erik has offered her use of his home. She placed her own on her forehead, but she didn’t feel hot. She was in her room in Erik’s home - yes, she recognized it now, that familiar decor she loved so. Her eyes swept over it and stopped when they reached the chair in the corner near her bed.

“Erik?” she asked, leaning up on her elbow.

“How do you feel, Christine?” he sat up a little straighter.

There was a book next to him but he hadn’t been reading at that moment, simply sitting and staring at the wall (staring at her?), and though she supposed she should find the concept disturbing she truly couldn’t find it in her to think so.

“How long have you been there?” her voice sounded scratchy, and she didn’t like it.

He hesitated a moment. Would she find his answer distasteful, unseemly?

“All night,” he said truthfully.

She merely nodded and lay back down.

“Let me go get you some water,” he offered, standing. “Do you want anything to eat?”

She shook her head.

He brought her back a tall glass of cool water, and she drank as much as she could.

“Oh,” she said. “Oh, I had the strangest dream, don’t you know...”

He tilted his head, listening.
She opened and closed her mouth a few times. Should she say it? She looked at him a little oddly. Had it- had it been *him*?

“It was about Papa,” was all she settled on saying.

She had been absolutely certain that somewhere in the midst of her feverish slumber, someone had played the most exquisite violin music. Had it only been in her head? Had Erik played for her as she slept? She didn’t know to ask such a thing. Imagine if he hadn’t - if she had hallucinated the whole thing! No, she wouldn’t ask him.

“Was it indeed?” he mused, studying her.

This marked the start of Christine’s recovery, a process that took no less than four days.

Neither one was certain what sickness, exactly, she had come down with, but it was apparent that whatever it was it had left her entirely fatigued. She barely got out of bed the first day, and on the second she became winded walking short distances. She was rather frightened of what that seemed to imply (how could she ever sing again, like this?), but Erik reassured her endlessly and insisted she would be quite fine (he had learned to not share his worries over her condition with her - the last thing he wanted was for her to cry again about being afraid to die, so he refused to give voice to his own fears).

Erik found he quite enjoyed doting on her and fretting over her - “are you quite sure you don’t need me to fluff your pillows again, my dear?”, “Christine, you simply must go back to bed, I won’t have you exhausting yourself so!”, “I made you some soup, I think you’ll like it.” Would this be what it was like to have a wife to look after? He’d care for her like this every day if he had the chance.

But that’s where the doubt crept in. He only had this chance because she was sick, and because she was upset about being sick. If she hadn’t given a fig about not feeling well, she’d have slept it off in her own dormitory and gone about her business. But no - she had been greatly distressed, thinking she might die, even! Surely he was an abhorrent fiend to take such joy in a situation comprised of her suffering. But was his joy not found in the alleviation of her suffering?

After her fever broke he preferred to let the door stayed closed when he was not in the room, to allow her to have some privacy. He was quite baffled when he brought her a tray of breakfast foods the next morning - he knocked on the door, and she called out almost immediately for him to enter. He narrowed his eyes at the doorknob before he turned it, finding it unlocked. Did she really never lock it? Or had she merely forgotten to do so the previous night, too weary from her sickness? He presumed he would not find out - it seemed impolite to ask, and downright brutish to try opening her door on any other occasion to see if it was locked or not. But still, it seemed within the realm of possibility that she truly never had locked her door whenever she stayed there, just like she’d said.

Christine, for her part, hated being sick. She was missing so much up above! Life - and dance class, and rehearsal - was going on without her, and she couldn’t stand it. She felt like she was getting behind in everything, though she had to admit that perhaps she was being a bit overdramatic. Still, she hated it.

The only redeeming factor was Erik’s attentive care. There was something satisfying about having him fuss over her. She hadn’t been fussed over in ages - Mamma had when she was younger, and of course Papa before that, but Mamma’s health had been in a steady decline ever since the Professor had died, and as such it was more and more that Christine had been the one doing the fussing over her Mamma. It had been five years, if not more, since she had been on the receiving end of someone looking after her.
It was nice to be fussed over, as though it validated how terrible she felt, how tired she was. And she truly was tired from it all - she was still coughing a great deal even after her fever had passed. It seemed even just the bare minimum of getting through the day drained what little energy she had. Eating whatever Erik cooked for her, taking a bath, changing into fresh nightclothes - she felt up to little else after that was done.

Erik knocked on her closed door.

“Christine?” he tried his hardest not to think about whatever it was she was doing behind the door. “Let me know when you’re ready for dinner, my dear.”

“In just a few minutes, I should think,” she replied, wrapping her dressing gown around her. “Could we eat in the sitting room tonight?”

“Oh of course.”

The previous night she had eaten her dinner in bed, and though she was still fatigued she didn’t want a repeat of that lonely meal - not only had she worried over spilling the tray of food and ruining the sheets, Erik had refused to eat with her in her bedroom. He had drawn himself up to his full height, tugged a little on the edges of his jacket to make certain it was straight, and gravely informed her that it wouldn’t be proper, as though every step they had taken up to that moment had been a paragon of propriety.

She took one last look in her mirror, smoothing out her flowing dressing gown. It wasn’t exactly proper, either, but in her own defense she reminded herself that she had a very modestly cut nightgown on underneath, and a chemise below that, and it wasn’t her fault she didn’t feel well enough to dress fully, was it? She went and found Erik in the sitting room.

Erik’s eyes darted over her, shamefully lingering before pulling away, only to take another look. It wasn’t so much her state of dress, though that was undeniably part of it - she hadn’t been truly dressed all through her sickness, but her dressing gown covered everything up to her neck (the hem touched the floor and the sleeves were quite long as well, still, Erik could never understand how a garment so modest managed to look so appealing). No, tonight the cause of the bright red on his face was her still-damp hair, evidence of the bath she had just gotten out of.

The residual water had turned her tresses darker, and they had less curl than they normally did. She looked lovely with darker hair, he mused - but then again, she always looked lovely to him.

They supped together and talked, and Erik frowned in concentration, trying very hard to not imagine her in the bath she had just been in.

“I feel like I’ve been coughing less today,” she mentioned.

“That’s good,” he nodded.

He was most definitely not wondering how deep she filled the tub - all the way up to the edge? It was a deep tub, after all. Did she sit in the water all the way up to her chin? Did it reach her shoulders? Did it cover her-

“I’m just glad the fever is gone, but I do wish I wasn’t so tired,” she mused.

“You’ll probably be tired a few days yet,” he said distantly.

Had she put her towel next to the tub so that she could preserve her modesty, wrapping it around her as quickly as she stood up from the water? Or had she left it on the counter, necessitating her to
take several nude, dripping steps across the room to fetch it?

“Erik?” she broke his thoughts, and he guiltily met her eye. “Is there something wrong with your steak?”

“What?”

She gestured to his plate.

“You’ve been cutting that piece rather harshly, and you’ve been frowning at it for some time now,” she sounded concerned.

“Ah, no, no - it’s fine,” he cleared his throat.

He was the worst kind of monster around, surely one would be hard pressed to find a fiend lower than him. How dare he sully the image of Christine with such vulgar and crass thoughts about her?

“I don’t want to rush your recovery, now that you’re feeling better. No singing for a while still, but we’ll work on your breathing exercises once you’re feeling up to it,” he told her, trying to remind himself that he was her teacher and her mentor and had no excuse to think of her like that. Besides - she would never return any sort of feeling towards him. It was ridiculous to even entertain the idea. She was probably too innocent to even imagine such base longings could be harbored towards her.

She nodded, stirring her pudding with the spoon. He seemed quite focused on his own food, and she took the opportunity to let her eyes rest on his hands once more.

Breathing exercises.

She had overheard one of the singers make mention of a number of breathing exercises she performed while laying down - perhaps in her next lesson she would ask about that. Perhaps she could spend her next lesson laying the divan in her dressing room- no, no - on Erik’s couch - and perhaps she wouldn’t quite understand his instructions... Perhaps he’d need to place his hand on her midsection, or perhaps over her, er, lungs... Perhaps that hand would have to... Go lower (she could not, for the life of her, imagine a reason why his hand would go lower than her waist - oh, she could think of a reason, all right, but not a singing lesson related reason).

She stared at his hands as they expertly wielded the fork and knife, graceful and poised and agile. Did his hands ever warm up, she wondered. Or were they always cold? She shivered a little, suddenly all too aware of her indecent state of dress. Most of the time she had no problem at all around him, but every now and then there were occasions where she would suddenly be struck by the realization that he was an oddly handsome man.

Would he kneel beside the couch, or would he remain standing, towering over her? Him on his knees beside her was an appealing image, but she spared a thought for his poor joints - what if he had arthritis? He wasn’t exactly a young man, after all. His knees would surely ache if they had to be on the hard ground for very long. Perhaps it would be best if he were to join her on the couch, then...

Her throat was unbearably dry, and she reached for glass, flustered. Her hand was unaccountably clumsy, and she nearly knocked it over.

Erik paused at the clatter of the glass nearly falling, his frown softening. She must be terribly tired still, and here he was speaking of lessons and plans when she could barely make it through a meal.
“Are you alright, sweet?” he asked kindly.

She narrowed her eyes and licked her dry lips, stealing a quick glance at him before looking away. Could he see her blush in the firelight? He seemed completely oblivious to the feelings he created in her.

“I’m just a little tired still, that’s all,” she said.

He nodded understandingly.

“Would you like to go bed when you’re finished with dessert?”

She sank down a little, shy.

“Mm, I was wondering if maybe you’d read to me for a little while tonight? Right here on the couch? The fire is lovely this evening, and I’m not ready to go bed just yet.”

He was surprised but agreed immediately. They finished the pudding and he took their plates to kitchen before returning to find a book for her. She had dearly hoped that he would sit on the couch next to her, but he returned to his own chair once more.

She blinked sleepily as she watched him while he read, and she let her mind wander to some day that he would actually sit on the couch next to her as did so, a day that he’d let her curl up to him instead of sitting so far away from her. Maybe he’d keep an arm around her shoulders. It would be warm to sit like that, she thought. He might have a perpetual chill about him, but surely the fireplace would make up for some it, and the warmth from her own body so close to his would take care of the rest.

He stole glances at her above the pages of the large volume of German fairy tales. Her hair was drying, returning to it’s usual cornsilk shade and curling up into ringlets. He noted with interest that the forming curls didn’t have their typical glossy sleekness about them - it looked a little unkempt, a little wild, and he wondered if on most days she put something on her hair to keep it all in place. He was almost certain that she did, and he wondered, not for the first time, what that mysterious product might make her hair smell like. Erik had studied a great many subjects in depth during his long life, and, if he could have one wish granted, Christine’s hair would be one of them.

She stopped him a little while later, not even a full hour after he had started, citing her tiredness.

“You know I enjoy evenings like this, but I’m afraid I’m going to fall asleep,” she told him.

He walked with her to her room, pausing outside her door. She turned to look up at him, her thoughts going back to the subject matter that had flustered her so at dinner.

She was almost certain that he liked her in a romantic kind of way. He simply wasn’t bringing up the fact that he did due to politeness. If she were to initiate it, however, she felt it was quite likely he would follow suit.

“Erik, I-”

One word from her, one touch, and they would be moments away from bring her earlier fantasy to fruition. He might even spend the night with her in her bed, if she asked him to. Was that what she wanted? She must admit, she was very... curious. And she knew of plenty they could do that wouldn’t risk her conceiving a child. But...

What would become of her career after that, even if no child was produced from their coupling?
Erik was too important to the future of her voice to be careless with him. She knew men’s egos were easily bruised over such matters, but she also knew Erik was not like other men. If they were intimate together and she decided she no longer wished that to be the case, it wouldn’t just bruise him - it would destroy him. He wasn’t used to people touching him, or to kindness or love, wasn’t used to opening himself up to vulnerability. And what could be more vulnerable than undertaking something like that?

If they spent the night together and she decided she didn’t like it, that she didn’t want to do it again, she didn’t think he could bear to continue lessons with her. They had come back after some fierce betrayals, but that - she didn’t think there could be any coming back from that. She thought about how cold and distant and hurt he had been from her just missing dinner with him - she could only imagine what it would be like if she rejected him after having physical relations. Once started, it would have to continue, because once it ended between them their relationship of teacher and student would forever altered - if she tried it and didn’t like it, she would still have to continue to do it if she wanted to still have voice lessons with him - and she was not about to trade something like that in exchange for her career, not while she had a choice.

“I’m feeling so much better, now,” she smiled at him. “Thank you for taking such good care of me.”

“Think nothing of it, my dear.”

They exchanged goodnights and she went in her room and closed her door.

Her curiosity would have to remain curiosity. She couldn’t risk what they currently had because she simply wanted to try something to see how it felt. There was always a chance that it went wonderfully - but she could envision far too many outcomes where it went horribly. How would he feel about being treated as though he were a sample at ice cream store, or a book skimmed through in the store before being put back on the shelf? It would be cruel to him, she thought. He deserved better than to be at her beck and call to serve her whims of curiosity and then be cast aside. She knew she would be quite heartbroken if the roles were reversed. She knew people were capable of trying something with someone and being able to leave it at that with no problems (she had heard rumors about Sorelli and a prima ballerina who had been a guest star at the Populaire for a season, rumors that, when repeated to Sorelli, had only caused a wry sort of grin to form on the dancer’s face) - but Christine had the distinct feeling that Erik would not be one of those people. He was her friend, and she was hesitant to think unkind things about him, but the fact remained that Erik was rather needy.

She already had to reassure him on a regular basis that they were friends - she could only picture how it might fracture his already fragile mind if something so terribly intimate were to happen between them. Was it good for you, Christine? Are you sure? Had you truly wanted to do that? I didn’t - oh, Christine, I didn’t force you, did I? From all his concern over propriety - and from other clues as well - she had guessed that he’d never been with anyone like that, and she half expected that he might insist they needed to be married before they did anything. Even if they discussed expectations beforehand, even if he knew going into it that she only wanted to try something once, she felt he would still take it as some sort of deeply personal rejection, as though he were flawed or hadn’t performed well enough. It would truly complicate matters all around, even some of her (comparatively) innocent fantasies. Their good working dynamic might be irreparably shattered, and she couldn’t risk that.

She shook her head at herself and placed her hand on her forehead, wondering if she had become feverish again. She thought the oddest things sometimes - look how much energy she had devoted to imagining such a ridiculous scenario and it’s imaginary fallout! As if such a thing would ever...
happen! Her with *Erik*! She fell into bed, sighing, and scolded herself for letting her thoughts run away like that. The fever, she told herself. It was most definitely the fault of the fever that she was thinking like that. Never mind that her fever had broken several days ago (never mind that this wasn’t even the first time she had turned such ideas over in her mind). No, it was definitely the fever. Fevers could cause such strange ideas and feelings, it was very odd, but true.
Christine was quite pleased that she had recovered fully (a most unexpected turn of events), though sure enough she still tended to fatigue easily in the coming days even after she had returned to life above.

Her next number of lessons involved very little singing (Erik refused to push her voice, insisting it was safest to give her more rest) and although he asked on occasion if there was anything in particular she’d like to go over, she’d shake her head each time and never brought up the exercises she had been thinking of. There might come a day when she felt the need to act on her bizarre curiosities (would kissing him feel very different than kissing Raoul?) but it was certainly not today. She could wait, she told herself. Besides, what they had currently was lovely. She was quite happy, and he seemed to be happy as well.

And then there was Raoul.

She was also quite happy with Raoul. She enjoyed Erik’s company very much, but it was wonderful to have someone to go places with. She adored their many trips and outings, and she always had plenty to smile about and laugh about when she was with him. It was often as if all her cares were washed away when she was with him - she didn’t have a single thing to worry about when they were together. There was no Philippe, no pressures of the opera house, no remnants of childhood struggles, no thought that she was in the presence of a vicomte - there was just her and Raoul.

She lay on the blanket on the grassy bank of the lake and stared lazily up at the soft clouds drifting across the sky. The tree branches bobbed and swayed in the breeze, and the only sound around them was the occasion buzz of an insect and the constant music of birdsongs.

“You always find the most lovely places, Raoul,” Christine said.

Raoul, laying on his blanket a few feet away from her, smiled.

“The most lovely girl requires the most lovely places to spend her time, you see,” he replied, and she grinned.

The lake was in a clearing in a forest, and it was quite deserted. They were silent a little while.

“Do you ever think about the future, Lotte?”

“Mm. All the time.”

He rolled over and propped his head on his hand.

“Where do you see yourself in ten years?”

She let her eyelids flutter shut.

“I’m on the stage of the Populaire, and I’m taking a bow, and everyone is standing and clapping because I’ve just closed another spectacular season I headlined,” her cheeks were pink as she smiled at the thought.
“Is there someone there waiting for you in the wings?”

Her mouth twisted into a frown, her eyes still closed. Was there someone? Erik, probably, but she realized Raoul was likely asking about himself.

“Yes,” she finally said.

“Who is it?” he twisted the corner of the blanket around his finger.

Her eyes opened and stared at the blue sky and the swirled clouds. Was it Erik or was it Raoul? Or was it both? What if it was someone she hadn’t even met yet?

“Someone I love very much,” was all she said.

“And does he love you?” he teased.

“Oh, yes, very much. I’m sure.”

She turned her head to look at him.

“What about you?” she asked. “Where are you in ten years?”

He flopped back onto the ground.

“The North Pole,” he said with all the seriousness in the world.

She burst out laughing.

“What on earth are you doing at the North Pole? There’s nothing up there!”

“Exploring, of course! But I’ll come back in time to watch from the wings as you close the season, I promise.”

“You’ll miss my entire season up at the stuffy old North Pole?” she pouted teasingly. “Is that snow really more interesting than me?”

Raoul hesitated.

“I’ll stay for your whole season,” he decided. “And then when it’s over, you’ll come to the North Pole with me.”

“Hmm...”

“Think about it, Lotte - you could be the first woman to perform an opera at the North Pole.”

“No!” she shrieked with laughter. “I couldn’t! Besides, Erik says the cold is bad for my voice.”

There was a pause.

“Who’s Erik?”

She cleared her throat.

“I would like to tour, but preferably not somewhere so cold.”

“Ah,” his face lit up. “You can tour, and I’ll along with you! We’ll go to all sorts of places together!”
It wasn’t an unpleasant thought, but she felt her mind wander. Would Erik go with her on the tour? She was struck by the image of all three of them together, standing up at the North Pole, wrapped in coats upon coats as the snow blew all around them. They was absolutely nothing around them, and Erik kept glaring at Raoul who was steadfastly trying to insist it had been a good idea to go to such a place, and she - she could feel her very hair freezing while they argued.

She snickered at the thought.

“But I’ll be going to places like Italy and Russia and England... Those aren’t exactly prime exploration destinations.”

He frowned, and she turned her head to watch him as he thought about it. She could tell what was on his mind. He had hopes and goals he wanted to achieve, but she knew that two of the biggest ones were diametrically opposed to each other. He wanted to be the supportive husband who waited in the wings and watched her as she performed, and he wanted to be off exploring the wilderness and making discoveries. He couldn’t have both - or if he could, it would be a half life of each, shows missed and not seeing her for months, and then time with her in places that were dull to him while there was a whole world out there waiting to be explored.

She reached a hand out to grasp his, twanging their fingers together and squeezing.

He looked at her smiled, but he still looked a little sad.

“Christine... whatever happens... we’ll still be friends, won’t we?”

“Forever and a day, Raoul. I swear it. No matter what.”

He nodded, pensive.

“I still think we could put an opera house at the North Pole.”

She laughed.

“You won’t laugh when you see it, Lotte.”

“Mm, I’m sure,” she brushed her thumb over his knuckles.

“Will you write to me while I’m at the North Pole?” he asked, his voice a little smaller.

“Why on earth would I write to you when I would be there too?” she smiled. “But I’ll write you every day if you wish - I’ll even hand deliver my letters right to you, I’ll save a fortune on postage!”

He smiled. They lay there a while longer, staring at the clouds and holding hands.

“The North Pole can’t be all that great,” he finally said. “I’m sure there’s plenty of interesting places that you’ll be touring.”

“What you need to do is hurry and finish your training,” she said, looking over at him coyly. “So you can go to the North Pole and see what it’s like, and then come back and join me as I go on tour.”

His lips tugged into a smirk.

“I’ll go up and scope out a place to build the opera house,” he agreed. “And then when you complete your tour around the world, it’ll be finished being built, and we can move up there.
You’ll headline and huge crowds will come see you.”

“You could be head of tourism. Maybe we’ll open a resort. ‘L’hôtel de Changy’ - how does that sound?”

“Hmm - ‘come stay at the de Chagny Hotel and see world-famous opera star Christine de Chagny perform’ - it has a nice sound to it, I must admit,” he smiled mischievously.

She shook her head vehemently.

“I’m keeping Daaé for my stage name,” her cheeks went pink. “But the deed to the hotel will say Christine de Chagny.”

He huffed a laugh and rolled over to face her, pushing up onto his elbows. He studied her blushing face for a moment and then leaned down to kiss her. It was sweet and tender, but Christine thought it felt a little sad as well, and she knew why.

Philippe would never approve of them getting married, and they both knew it. The very thought of her becoming a de Chagny was about as realistic as an opera house at the North Pole.

He eventually broke the kiss and sat watching the water ripple across the lake. She sat up and smoothed out her skirts before leaning against him. She couldn’t see a way their relationship could last as a romantic one, but she knew he wouldn’t give up. She knew deep down that he would give up anything for her, and that both worried and touched her at the same time. He’d give up his title, give up dreams of the North Pole, give up everything else but her - but she didn’t want him to. She refused to be the person who stripped him of everything else in his life. Would he ever forgive her for that? For taking everything from him except for herself?

*Should* he ever forgive her for that? For refusing his love, refusing his own choices in what he wanted out of life? If they both loved each other (if, on that future day, she knew for certain that she loved him in the same way he loved her) who was she to deny them both of that joy? For what? A title? Wasn’t love - true love - worth more than that?

She sighed as she rested her cheek on his shoulder, her eyes lazily half closed as she stared at the water and how the pale pink and purple and yellow flowers bobbed in the breeze. All of those concerns seemed so far off, so unreal - all that was real right now were these flowers and this lake and herself and Raoul and the sky above them. There was no Philippe, no Erik, no North Pole, no opera houses, no ten years in the future. Not here. Not now. She couldn’t bring herself to truly worry about any of those things. It was enough to simply be there with him and live in that present moment as it unfolded.

Raoul glanced down at her.

“You look like you’re thinking of something very serious,” he remarked.

She nodded and furrowed her brow.

“Oh, yes - terribly serious.”

“Do you wish to talk about it, perhaps?” he asked softly.

“Well, you see, it’s a very difficult matter,” she began, then glanced up at him gravely. “I’m trying to remember if there happened to be any cake left over from lunch.”

He laughed heartily and she giggled along with him.
They raided the remains of the picnic basket they had brought along with them, and sure enough there was some cake left, along with a bit of fruit and a few other things.

“Why do always pack so much?” Christine wrinkled her nose. “No wonder it was so heavy to drag all the way out here!”

“Ah,” Raoul grinned. “It’s because I know someone is always going to ask for more long after the meal has ended.”

She gasped in feigned shock.

“And as for it being heavy, I seem to remember it was you who asked to help carry it,” he went on. She pulled a grape off of the bunch and threw it at him. It bounced off of his face and he returned the gesture with a slice of strawberry, which landed in her hair and caused her to shriek. Soon nearly every piece of fruit and each roll of bread and every celery stick had been tossed at each other in fits of laughter, and just as they had nearly run out of ammunition, Raoul reached for a slice of the cake, already imagining the pink frosting splattered across her face.

“Oh, no, no!” Christine’s eyes went wide and she motioned for him to stop. “Not the cake!”

“Do you give up, Madame?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” she scooted closer to him. “I do give up. You’re quite right, I have an appetite that’s highly unladylike, especially when it comes to sweets, and you’re very smart to think ahead and prepare for that.”

She eyed the cake as he pulled his hand away from it.

“Hmm... I don’t know if I’d word it that way, exactly,” he reached up and brushed his thumb across her cheek, wiping away the fruit juice that was there. “But I do suppose we can call a truce.”

“Truce, absolutely,” she nodded, and brushed the bread crumbs out of his hair. “Now, about that cake~”

They stayed the rest of the afternoon by the lake, finishing off the cake and then picking wildflowers, and a good deal of time in concentration on making little boats out of leaves and seeing which ones would float the farthest.

Soon the sun was starting to set. They were both loath to leave the little clearing, and the thought that they could come back again soon didn’t seem to help as much as it should have. The day had been nearly magical.

It wasn’t until the carriage drew closer to the opera house that she suddenly remembered that her plans for the evening were far from over. She had very nearly been nodding off in the carriage after such a long day spent in the sun and a good deal of walking (that picnic basket had been heavy, even if she had been the one to suggest that they each carry one end of it as they walked to the clearing), but now that she remembered what was next on her schedule she found herself wide awake.

Whereas before she hadn’t wanted the day to end, now she was eager for the end of it. She jumped down from the carriage, followed by Raoul. He paid the driver and the two were left alone once more. She glanced up the statue of Apollo atop the roof, the clear moonlight illuminating it. She didn’t want to be late - she had promised. She took a few steps towards the building, letting her
gaze fall to the ground and thinking of what - of who - was underneath before she turned to her companion.

“It’s been such a lovely evening, Raoul,” Christine stopped in front the stairs leading the main entrance of the opera house. “I truly enjoyed it.”

“I enjoyed it too, Lotte,” Raoul said tenderly. “Thank you for coming with me.”

“Thank you for asking me,” she smiled.

He hesitated only a brief moment before leaning in for a quick kiss. His lips were soft and warm against her own, and her cheeks felt hot after he pulled away.

She looked away from him, out into the distance. The smile on her face grew bigger, but not only for the reasons Raoul assumed.

He smiled as well, although if he had fully seen what was in her mind at the moment he might not have smiled at all.

“I’ll see you soon, okay?”

“Okay,” she nodded.

“Have a wonderful night, Christine.”

“Oh,” she laughed lightly. “Oh, I will.”

He nodded and started off down the sidewalk, hands shoved in his pockets. A few dozen paces down the street, he turned back to wave to her one last time, that lopsided boyish grin that she loved so much on his face. She waved back.

She hoped that Raoul would have a wonderful night, too. He deserved it.

She waited until he was out of sight, and then she turned and walked around the side of the opera house instead of up the stairs. The little door to the cellars on the Rue Scribe side often went unnoticed, and she slipped inside under the cover of the shadows.

She mused to herself on the subject of fairy tales as she navigated twists and turns and staircases with steps so steep and narrow that they might as well not even exist, places where the light went out entirely and she had to move forward by feel alone.

She finally came to the little house on the bank of the underground lake. The door was unlocked, and her smile returned. She went inside without knocking.

“Erik?”

“Ah, Christine, you came,” Erik appeared from another room, looking pleasantly surprised.

“I said I would, didn’t I?”

The smile which had started when she was still saying goodbye to Raoul turned into a full-on grin as she looked up at her Angel. Perhaps it was unseemly to have been in the midst of being kissed by a would-be suitor and have one’s thoughts already turning to the man one was going to be staying the night with, but Raoul would never know, so it surely couldn’t hurt him, and she was not one to condemn herself over the matter.
“Dinner was quite earlier, I’m afraid, but I did make extra for you if you wish me to reheat it. If
you aren’t in the mood for a full meal, I also made a chocolate mousse, if you are interested?” he
twisted his hands anxiously.

“I would love some mousse, Erik.”

Wasn’t it just like a fairy tale?

She thought that it was. It certainly seemed that way to her, at least. Maybe her life wasn’t filled
with saintly maidens and Voices sent from heaven. Maybe her life was more the kind of story that
was filled with goblins and curses and enchantments, with princesses who held secrets and visited
strange lands. Yes, she could see that.

She thought about that as Erik prepared two bowls of mousse and two cups of tea for them,
graciously agreeing to let her eat in the sitting room instead of at the table. She sat near the fire he
had blazing, the one he had made knowing that she would be chilled from the long journey there,
and sipped her tea carefully as she watched him sitting on the couch with his own bowl of mousse.

“How is that new opera coming? The one you were telling me about the other day - Hannibal, I
think it was?”

She was reminded of the story of the twelve dancing princesses, and she felt that maybe that story
was a little like her own life. Days spent up above in normal pursuits, evenings spent traveling to
an enchanted castle, a secret no one else knew of. She though of poor Raoul up above, none the
wiser of what she was doing down here, but much like the princesses in the story, she didn’t feel
guilty. Why shouldn’t she be free to choose where she stayed, to choose who she spent time
around? She was the mistress of her own actions. Never mind that the story would make Raoul the
knight who was doomed to die once he figured out the secret of the castle, never mind that it meant
that one day she’d be pulled from this little world down here just like the princesses, never to
return or see the castle again. Never mind about any of that - it didn’t matter. Those were worries
for another time.

All that mattered in that moment was the lingering happy memories from the previous hours she
had spent with Raoul, the warmth of the fire before her, the bittersweet taste of the fluffy chocolate
dessert that had been made for her as it dissolved on her tongue, and the rich, dark voice of her
Angel wrapping around her as he told her about the new piece he was writing.

Chapter End Notes

And that’s a wrap (for now)! Heartfelt and sincere thank you to everyone who took the
time to toread this story, and to everyone who left a comment or a kudo or
bookmarked and subscribed :) I appreciate it!

This is far from the end for these particular two, though - I have a second story
planned, which will be called A Love There is No Cure For, which takes place *after*
the Valentine’s Day story, and a bridging one-shot (haven’t given it a name yet) that
sets up the last needed details between Valentine’s Day and the next part of the story. I
can’t promise when they’ll be out, but I’m working on them! :3
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!