### The Music of the Night

**Summary**

After hearing a disturbing prophecy that her future husband will be a 'faceless monster, whom things neither living nor dead can resist,' Christine does anything and everything to escape the fate that has been given to her. What is fated and what is chosen, however, are not always so different, and the line between 'monster' and 'man' often runs very thin.

ANCIENT GREEK AU, with lots of mysticism and lore, prophecies and monsters, fear and longing, love and hate-- all that fun stuff, but all with a healthy dose of the normal Phantom that we all know and love.

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Inspired by the Myth of Cupid and Psyche and the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice.
A Prologue

Chapter Summary

Once upon a time, way before any of the rest of this story happens, this happened:

Chapter Notes

[6/30/17] Wow! It has been a while, hasn't it? Well, here I am again, back at this Greek Mythology fic and I'm so nervous to do it, for some odd reason. Some of you may recognize this one because, yes, there was a version of it that I started way back last... spring, I think it was? Anyway, don't worry if you have no idea what I'm talking about, because (surprise!) I've decided to re-write basically the whole thing! The old one was sub-par at best so hopefully this little redo will be slightly better.

Anyway, more boring notes. As you probably saw, this fic is set in Ancient Greece, specifically near Athens around the 508-ish BC, although the isn't too important to the story so don't worry if you're horrible with the dates, like I am. I don't pretend to be any expert on the culture of the Ancient Greeks, however, so it is likely that there will be historically inaccurate things in here and for that, I apologize. For those of you who know more than me, feel free to correct me and I will change things! But, since I cannot think if anything more to say, I'll stop boring you with these notes. I hope you enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own The Phantom of the Opera or any Greek mythology. Those rights belong to the creators, not myself.

Another side note: Because this is a prologue, it'll be taking place way before the rest of the story does. This chapter basically works by itself. What follows will be years and years later, and in a different location, and told by characters who have no knowledge of the character narrating this chapter. Okay, now I am done for real. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cursed.

The word echoed in his mind—solitary and hopeless. He was cursed. Mutated. Deformed. Wretched. Cursed.

A scream rose in his throat, full of all his angry, pain, rage, and horror, and burned its way up until it reached his mouth, demanding to be heard. Finally, it fell from his lips, burning and horrible, like the screech of a Fury. All of his emotions seemed to channel themselves into the noise, twisting it into something that was not human, nor even the sound of any creature that walked the earth. It was horrible. Gut-wrenching.
He could not seem to stop screaming.

As the air left his lungs, his legs slipped out from under him, making his stance grow less as his anguished cry grew more. He choked some more air into his empty lungs and collapsed on to the ground on all fours, like an animal—a beast, his chest heaving. Even the air tasted bitter in his lungs and, somehow, he knew that he would never again enjoy the taste of living. That every breath he drew until his last would taste like ashes in his mouth.

He gasped in another gulp of air.

_Cursed._

He looked at his hands. They still appeared almost the same as they always had, yet there was something on them now, something he knew he would never be rid of, even if he could not see it, or perhaps even explain it. These were the hands of a cursed man. These hands had blood on them—the blood of innocents, whose lives he already had or would, in time, take.

He fell backwards, hardly able to support himself further under the crushing knowledge that he was now a demon. A fiend.

He looked at his feet, now positioned in front of him. These, too, were tainted with some invisible substance, some intangible mark that branded him cursed. These feet would now carry the body of one banished from humanity. These feet would harbor a walking corpse.

And his face.

Managing to stand, he stumbled over to the creek on those cursed feet. The water was so clear, so blue within it, not yet damaged by him. It gurgled happily to the sand banks and mossy rocks around it, whispering beautiful tales that no human could understand. This thing—this river—was happy, uncursed. Unblemished. It floated freely down its path, not thinking about its destination, content to follow the lazy current wherever it should take it. It harbored a bright, busy world within it, full of fish and bugs and crabs. It held life within it.

He, too, had held life once; now he was death.

He dipped one cursed hand into the river, feeling the water run over his damned flesh, and, even as the water began to trickle over his skin, the river seemed to hiss in pain. The current slowed; the fish stopped their happy courses. The water grew murky—the once light blue turned to a rusty brown color. It was as if he had killed the river.

Slowly, hardly daring to look, he bent over the now shadowy stream, desperate to look at his face, and yet horrified to see what it had been transformed in to. He did not want to see what now replaced it—what horrible, cursed thing was now his visage. He had never been in attractive man by any stretch but at least he had been whole. Now, he lacked even that small humanity. Now, he was a broken thing—scarred and lacking.

Taking in a deep, stale breath, he looked down to meet whatever sight would greet him in the water’s mirror. This—whatever it would be—would be his countenance from now until his death, showing the world what he was, making it clear he was no longer a whole man. This would be his new face. This would be his curse.

He looked down.

His face. _Oh, his face._
Horror above all horrors. He himself could not even stand to look at it. *Oh, his face!* In his horror, he fell backwards, his head colliding painfully with the ground with a dull thunk. Bile rose in his throat from the sight, and, without warning, he retched. Gasping for air, he managed to drag himself to his feet, his body feeling as stiff and as heavy as a stone.

*His face. Oh, gods, his face.*

There was never a sight so horrible in all the world, never something so vile and disgusting as this thing that was where his face had once been. This was the face of a cursed man. There was not anything as sure as that. It was beyond describable, beyond any words. It was *cursed.*

He groaned, as he wiped the bile from his lips.

This *thing*—this repulsive carcass he had been turned into—did not deserve to be called human. It did not deserve to be called anything. There had never been so horrible a thing in all the world, and to attach a name to it was to disgrace the function of a *name* forever. Not a human, not even a creature. He could not bear to live the rest of his life as such, enjoying the things of this world that humans were allowed to enjoy. Laughter, happiness, love—he could not have these. Tears, anger, hate, sorrow—he could not have these. He could not. The life he would now live was damned forever to be the life of a creature beyond name or utterance, beyond feeling and emotion, beyond love and hate.

“I am dead, now,” he whispered to the stream.

“I am dead,” he told the clouds.

“*Erik*…” he murmured to the ground. Oh, gods, how the name tasted in his lips. It was ashes now—poison on his lips. It could not be his any longer. While he had lived, it had served its purpose well enough but that happy time was up. The creature that would rise and leave this scene was not him. It was not *Erik.*

“Erik is dead,” he cried to the world, willing it to hear him. This was his epitaph, his funeral. Let the earth and the stream and the sky bear witness to it. “Do you hear me? Erik is dead! *Dead!*”

He fell to the ground and wept.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter ended up having pretty monologue-y feel to it, probably because I wrote it during the Shakespeare section of my English class this year and you know how Shakespeare is with dramatic monologues! I think it rubbed off on me a little.

Like usual, I welcome all comments, questions, suggestions, criticisms-- anything and everything you might have for me. Feel free to tell me all!
A Quest and a Stranger

Chapter Summary

In which, Christine goes on a very important quest and meets a strange but enticing spirit.

Chapter Notes

Alrighty! Keep in mind that this chapter is many years after the first, since that one was a prologue.

I'm very sorry that this chapter is so long but I didn't want to separate anything, so this was the end result. Also, due to the fact that I wrote this all rather quickly and did sub-par editing, there will probably be mistakes and for that, I am also sorry. If you notice any, please tell me so that I can fix them! As of right now, I'm working without a beta so the mistake count might be kind of high, unfortunately.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Christine, my dear daughter, ignoring my death is not going to make it go away.”

Christine looked up, conscious of the tears rolling down her cheeks that she had tried to hide for so many days now. “I know, father.”

She heard him sigh and braced herself, knowing he was going to try and speak some unwanted words of comfort to her. They would not matter. Nothing he said could change the fact that the world was going to take him from her. Nothing could change that—not anything she did or said, not anything anyone did or said. His fate was inevitable and nothing hurt her more than that. She looked away from him, wiping her tears away.

“Christine… Christine, look at me. Please.” He sighed again when she refused. “I know these last few weeks have been very, very hard for you but I need you to be strong now. If I could, I would stay with you forever, to guide you and love you but you and I both know that I cannot do that. There has to be a time where we say goodbye to each other. I wish it was not that way but it is now, dear child, and neither you nor I can change that. Please, now, I need you to—” He broke off, coughing violently and his daughter was at his side in a moment.

“Do not talk, father. Please, you mustn’t… It will only make things worse. Please.” Her fingers sought out his greying hair and brushed it away from his forehead as his weakened body was racked with those horrible coughs. Crying, she wrapped her arm around him to keep his body from folding in on itself. In those moments that she held him, feeling his body shake with coughs, his hands trembling with the effort to move even the short distance to his mouth, she thought this episode of sickness would never end and that her father would die then, in her arms.

But he did not. He straightened, pressing his hand against his beard to feel the wetness of the blood now staining it, a sharp contrast with the greyness that it rested in. Christine bit back a sob, seeing
that blood, the blow of it not weakened any even after weeks of the same results. “Oh, father… shh. Do not move now. I am going to get you something to drink. Please, do not try to talk.”

He shook his head, grabbing onto her wrist to keep her from leaving his side. “No…” a weak cough escaped him. “No. Listen. Listen.” His shaking hands grasped at her, pulling her closer to her mouth to hear his dying voice, insistent though it was. “You need…” another cough “… someone to take care of you when I am gone. Do not cry, Chris. You must… go to the oracle. Hear what it has to say. Hear why every marriage that I have tried to make for you has failed. You must. If the gods are angry with me, I must know why, for your sake. Promise me, Christine. You must promise now that you will.” His nails pinched into her arms, shaping little crescent marks in her skin, but she did not have the heart to pull away.

Christine buried her head into his chest, feeling the tears run down her cheeks, her nose. “But what if…” She sobbed against him, hardly able to speak, knowing that this could be the last time she got to hold her father against her. The last time she got to smell that clean smell he had that reminded her so much of her childhood, days spent resting against his chest as he sang for her. The last time she got to hear him speak to her in that voice which had comforted her at the death of her mother when no other had been able to, that voice that made her smile like none other.

She sucked in a deep breath, pulling together her unstable thoughts. “What if this is the last time I get to…” She could not speak the words out loud, for if she did, that last little bit of hope she held onto would vanish for good.

“It will not be. This heart still has some life in it, I am sure of it. Do not cry so. Look! I am already recovering from that last one.” Her father laughed weakly and she felt his hand pat her hair. “You must be strong, Chris. You must do this for me. You must do this before I… before I leave. I have thought about doing this for some time— some deep instinct inside of me tells me it must be done — but now, lack of time demands that you do this as soon as you can. I must have a way to provide for you, Chris! I cannot rest until I know that I do!” He coughed weakly and Christine jolted to her feet but he waved her off, recovering. “But I promise, I will still be here when you return. I just need you to do this. Can you go to the oracle for me, Chris? Can you do that?”

Christine lifted her head off his chest, looking at this man whom she had loved her whole life, with eyes still full of tears. “Yes. I can for you. I can do it.”

The old man smiled and kissed her forehead gently with his bloodstained lips. “I knew you could,” he said, his voice little more than a whisper.

Christine grabbed his hand and pressed it against her cheek. It was still so warm, so full of life. A new hope arose within her. “I am your strong girl, father. I can do it.”

He kissed her again and she felt the coolness of his tears on her forehead.

For a long moment, they sat like that, two hearts raw and aching, one full of life, one dying. Then, Christine asked, “Do you truly believe the gods are angry with you?”

Her father moved to sit up and Christine, feeling his movements, did likewise, finally getting to look upon his face again. His lips were still red with blood, his skin greyer and more sunken than usual but the face she looked at was one of a living man, not a dead one. Life animated its features and steady breath still streamed out of him.

“Five failed marriages… I do not know what else can cause such a thing unless we are cursed with ill luck.”
Christine wiped her cheeks, clearing them of her tears. Taking a shaky breath, she smiled weakly and replied, “I suppose you are right. Although I hope that we are simply cursed with ill luck and not the gods’ hatred.” Her father smiled.

After a few moments of stillness, the girl crossed over to the window and noted the positioning of the sun in the sky, before coming back to her father’s side. “It is not yet noon. If I leave for the oracle now, I can visit it and come back by nightfall. I cannot bear to be away from you any longer than I need to be.” She pressed a kiss to his temple before running to the open doorway of his room. Then, stopping, she turned to face her father. “Where is the oracle? I have never been there after all and I do not think I know the way. Can you tell me?”

“Of course,” the man said, nodding slightly. “Bring me a piece of that leather—yes, that one there. And a knife, if you can… Ah, yes, thank you. I will make you a map.”

He then set to work, carving the knife into the thick leather skin, sketching what appeared to be some sloppy directions to the oracle. Within five minutes, he had finished his map. It was his talent to do such things quickly—he had a way of being able to shorten tasks by perhaps only a few short minutes but he always claimed that time was always moving forward and that he must capture as much of it as he could. Consequently, many of the tasks he did were poorly done and barely more than what was absolutely needed. His map, too, proved no exception. The lines and pictures were only just distinguishable to Christine, who knew that she would have to spend more time than she wanted trying to figure out their meanings. But he was old and distracted, and she could not blame him this time. So, taking the map in her hand, Christine turned, making for the doorway again.

“I will be back before you know I am gone.”

“I know you will, Christine.” Her father smiled sadly, looking at her, tears still bright in his eyes. “I love you, my daughter. And I always will.”

A lump rose in Christine’s throat, nearly choking her reply. “I love you, too.”

With those words, the girl exited her father’s room, leaving him on his bed, his smile now vanished completely and tears threatening to overwhelm him again. He pressed his hands to his mouth, stifling another cough, and murmured to himself, “And I already know she is gone.”

Outside, Christine’s sisters met her as she crossed through the courtyard, not so much eager to go to the oracle as she was finish her task and return home again. The two jumped to their feet at nearly the same moment, hands clasped together, and a mutual look of apprehension on both their pretty faces.

“Well?” The younger of the two, Psyche, breathed. And the elder, Eurydice, finished the thought: “How is he, Christine?”

“He is well enough,” the youngest sister said, her voice still weak and hoarse. “No worse than he was before, I think. But he has asked me—I am not sure if you knew this before, or if he told you—but he has asked me to visit the oracle. He wants to know if the gods are angry with him—with us, especially after so many failed marriages. So, I am going now. I want to be back to him as soon as I can. I would rather be with him than off somewhere, wondering through the woods, anyway.”

“He asked you to go to the oracle?” Eurydice looked at her sister with a sort of awe and fear in her eyes. You see, Eurydice, the oldest, had been thrust into a position of a surrogate mother shortly after her own mother had died of sickness. She had only been eleven at the time, Psyche eight,
Christine only five. Eurydice’s childhood had, therefore, been cut short in a way, and the eldest of the three had, since then, had the responsibility of looking out for her little sisters in ways that even being the eldest should not have warranted. Her childhood had left her long ago, and, although she was only twenty-five years of age, lines that should not have been there so soon already had begun to creep across her young face, giving her the appearance of someone far older. But despite all this, Eurydice was kind, fair, and very protective over both her sisters and anything that smelled even faintly of danger made her mad with fear.

Psyche, however, was different than her sister. Having not been thrust into the position of being a mother at a young age, she had always been rather reckless, always a little too daring. Eurydice had often said it was because Psyche was the middle child, and the most often overlooked by her father that had caused this, but Psyche always denied this ardently, saying the claim had no truth in it and that she did not do things solely for attention. And yet at sixteen, she had left the house in a fit of rage at some long-forgotten argument, and returned three days later with a young man on her arm, claiming to be her betrothed. Eurydice and her father both had rejected the marriage at first, saying sixteen was far too young for such things, but Psyche had sworn that if they did not approve of her marriage, she run away and never come back again. So, two weeks later, Psyche was a bride, with her family’s somewhat cautious acceptance. Now, seven years later, she had a daughter and a son, both of whom were charming young creatures, loved and fretted over by their now much-subdued mother. A spark of her reckless and rebellious days, however, still lived on inside of her.

“You are leaving right away?” Psyche’s eyes were bright. “Oh, Christine, you must tell us all about it! I have never been there before, of course—Father never would have allowed it. But you… You are lucky! You must tell us all it says to you!”

“Yes,” Eurydice cast a disapproving look at her sister’s obvious excitement. “But do be careful, Chris. The forest can be dangerous, I hear.”

Christine smiled, momentarily swallowing her sorrow, and took Eurydice’s hand. “Of course, I will be. And” she took Psyche’s hand “I will tell you everything it tells me. I shall spare nothing. Now, you must go be with Father since I must leave him. Make sure he does not tire himself out.”

“We will,” Eurydice promised. “Do not worry.”

Christine let go of her sisters’ hands, continuing to cross through the courtyard as she spoke. “And make sure he does not talk too much! It makes him cough, you know!” She came to the door at the far side of the yard and rested her hands against it, turning her face so her sisters could not see. “And make sure… Make sure he is still here when I come back.” She tried in vain to search for more words but she could not find them in her. Tears began to well up in her eyes again, although she tried to blink them away, somewhat surprised she even had tears left to cry after the many she had already shed that day.

Psyche answered her, her voice gentle. “We will, Chris. We will make sure nothing happens to him. Do not worry. Go. Find out what this oracle has to say to you.”

“Yes,” Eurydice said. “Go. And be careful. Do not get lost. Come back as soon as you can.”

Christine turned, gazing at her sisters with tear-filled eyes, her heart bursting with love for the two of them. “Thank you,” she murmured. “I will be back before you even have time to miss me.”

After words of love and farewell were exchanged between the three, Christine opened the door, pausing only to add “I am taking Ophelia with me!” before leaving the house.

Ophelia, the family’s much-beloved donkey, was waiting for her outside, munching happily on
some grass when Christine reached her. “Well, Ophelia? Shall we go? You and I are taking a trip to the oracle.”

With hands well-learned at their task, Christine threw a thick blanket and two leather packs over the donkey’s back. Then, she secured all the food and water she thought she could need for a day’s trip—three days’ worth of supplies, just in case of an emergency. She did not have a desire to die from starvation or thirst, no matter what happened. With that, unable to think of anything else to bring with her, Christine grabbed the map her father had made for her and climbed on Ophelia’s back. The animal made an unhappy bray but Christine shushed her, and the donkey set off after that.

The road from her own house to the city, Christine and Ophelia both had travelled many times. Christine knew who lived in which houses, what sort of trees lined the dirt path, where to be careful of mud. But after she travelled past the outskirts of the city, the path was completely unknown to her, unchartered territory which she had never before explored. It was exhilarating, frightening, and even somewhat liberating to do so now, and escape from the city, from the burden of her sick father. It was not that she thought of him as a burden—for she did not and she treasured every moment with him as if it were her last—but it was emotionally exhausting for her to care for him day and night as she did. After so many tears spilt in one day, she needed an escape, if only for a while. A place where she did not have to worry about her father but simply entrust him into the care of the gods and live. She had not lived—not truly, anyway—in a few weeks now, and she needed to at this present moment quite badly. The feeling of the cold autumn wind in her hair, an unknown road in front of her, leading to a place equally as mysterious, was freeing and, in truth, what she needed. She sighed, listening to the happy calls of the birds around her.

Had she truly had five failed marriages, then? She thought for a moment before confirming that, yes, she had. None of the failures, however, had really been her fault, of course. In fact, all her engagements had ended in such odd ways that when she looked back upon them, divine intervention did not seem out of the question. How else could so many proposals have failed without it? And in such odd ways?

She smiled a little to herself, looking back upon them. Her first suitor, a man named Antigonus, had decided to become a priest shortly after proposing to her. He had claimed, after many apologies, that he had been sent a dream a few nights previous, telling him he must become a priest and he had obeyed it. Being a priest, of course, came with an order for celibacy so marriage was simply not an option. Both her father and her had found the situation more humorous than inconvenient, however, knowing the Christine was a very beautiful girl and would attract more suitors. And she had. The next, Lucianus, she had not even known prior to his proposal, but her father had agreed to it and so, she somewhat grudgingly accepted. But, then, two days later, a messenger had come to their house to inform them that Lucianus had died in a bar fight, murdered by an old friend. Praxiteles, the next suitor, whom Christine knew as a boy from the nearby town, was only engaged to her for a few days time before going off to fight in the army, a reason which her father could not find fault with. Christine, however, could and did so quite strongly. The next suitor who appeared at Christine’s house only about a week later, also unknown by Christine, was called Nikon, who was nice enough, but rather twitchy, often looking over his shoulder like he believed someone was following him. After a three-week long engagement, over which time, much preparations had been done for her wedding, Nikon had disappeared. Christine had been upset, having liked Nikon, but also somewhat relieved, as she did not truly love him, nor even truly know what to think of him yet, only having talked to him a handful of times alone. But, then, she and her father found out that he was already married to a reportedly rather plain woman, who had found out about his new engagement, hence the reason for Nikon’s disappearance. Christine had been upset, having liked Nikon, but also somewhat relieved, as she did not truly love him, nor even truly know what to think of him yet, only having talked to him a handful of times alone. But, then, she and her father found out that he was already married to a reportedly rather plain woman, who had found out about his new engagement, hence the reason for Nikon’s disappearance. Christine had not heard any more about him since then, a thing that she quite regretted—she still wondered what sort of fate Nikon had suffered at his own stupidity. Christine’s fifth and final suitor, however, deserves a
more notable mention that these first four. His name was Rhalamanthos, often simply called Rhal by Christine and her sisters. Rhal had been close to the family for some time before he began to court Christine as a suitor and, furthermore, he and Christine had been childhood friends. They had even had a bit of a romance at one point, if one can call a mutual infatuation between two fourteen-year-olds a romance. But he had had to leave when Christine was fifteen and go back to his father’s other house many miles away and the two had not seen each other for some time after that. When Rhal had returned, therefore, there had been much rejoicing in the family. Despite the changes many years had had inflicted upon the both of them, Christine and her friend had quickly slipped back into their former friendship, so much so that she very quickly decided that she would like to marry Rhal and that he should, therefore, propose to her sometime soon. But only a few short days after his arrival, Rhal had heard of a rebellion of some sorts brewing in Athens and he had almost immediately decided to join the military to put a stop to it. Rhal was the sort of man who was very fond of adventures and sword-fights, and being a soldier, in his mind, sounded like the most desirable occupation that a man could have. Just imagining the feeling of holding a sword in his hands, of beating his opponents, of coming home as an honored veteran made his blood rush. And so, after promising a crying Christine that he would return to her and propose just as soon as he could, with all honor bestowed upon him, Rhal left, nearly as quickly as he had come, leaving Christine wondering where she had gone wrong.

So, now Christine had no suitors. All her five betrotheds (or, in Rhal’s case, promised betrothed) had left—two, albeit, with a hope of returning. She hoped with all her heart that Rhal would return to her and that they could be married, have many beautiful children, and share the rest of their lives together in a happy home. Nothing was for certain, however, and with her father dying, she needed to have a certain plan of what she would do without having him to provide for her, and that meant getting married. It was true, of course, that others suitors would most likely come to her house and ask for her hand. Christine, as she well knew, was perhaps the most sought after girl in the whole land, both for her beauty and charms. That being said, many of the men who did come for her hand were less than desirable, to put it kindly, and were not the type with whom she would see herself spending the rest of her life, and even if more men came to her who she could see herself marrying, if the gods were keeping her from marrying, it would not matter anyway. If the gods were angry, then the whole affair would just end in another failed engagement, more frustration on her father’s part, and more embarrassment on Christine’s.

If the gods were angry, however, Christine did not have the slightest idea why. She had not done anything to offend them, she hoped. She had always been a pious girl—always prayed at least once a day, always kept the fires burning to Hestia within her own house, never was cruel to any of the gods’ scared animals. She could not understand it. She strove to be kind in everything she did, and everyone who had ever known her could attest to that. So why, then, would the gods be angry with her? Had she done something offensive to the gods? Had she forgotten to do something? Had she done something horrible without meaning to? She did not know. And, perhaps, the gods were not angry at all and she was simply experiencing some very ill-fated luck. The oracle, at least, would tell her, she thought.

Christine sighed, reaching the leather bags hanging off Ophelia’s sides for some dinner. She had only packed dried meat, some olives, and some stale crusts of bread,—all of these, however, in great abundance—so she decided that would have to do and that she could have a good, hot meal when she returned home. She wished Rhal had simply stayed. That would have put an end to this whole dreadful affair. Had he stayed with her, she could have married and her father need not have worried on her account and would be able to rest in peace knowing his youngest was provided for. But, no. Rhal had had to go off to the military to fight. She had tried to reason with him. She had tried to tell him that she needed to marry him now, before he left to fight, and that after the ceremony, he would be free to do whatever he pleased. He had told her no, saying something about
it being his ‘duty’ to fight and earn money and glory for her, as her suitor. This had frustrated poor Christine even more because she had been certain that Rhal, being her old friend, would listen to her, even if none of her other suitors had. But he had proved just as fruitless a case as all the rest. If he had only stayed, none of this would have happened at all! Why could he not simply see? If he had loved her, as he had claimed, why had he not stayed and done what Christine had asked? Why had he wounded her by riding away for gods knew how long, perhaps never to return again, if he loved her? Christine did not know and it hurt still to think about such things.

Horrible and sorrowful thoughts began to plague Christine’s mind again so, she decided to stop thinking about Rhal and her abundance of useless suitors. Instead, she looked to the vast expanse of road stretch out in front of her, all of it unfamiliar and exciting. All around it, pine trees stood tall and proud, as if they were sentinels over the lonely way, guarding the oracle. When their boughs creaked and hissed in the wind, it almost sounded as if they were whispering something in a language she did not know. When they danced in the cool breeze, it almost seemed as if their branches were fingers and were pointing her to the oracle with thin, brown fingers.

The sun was beginning to sink in the sky, although Christine knew that it would still be some time before it truly turned to darkness. She still had plenty of time to make it to the oracle and return home before the sun set, if she was careful. She must not dally, as she was often prone to do, nor lose focus on the task at hand. She must visit the oracle and return home to her father as soon as she could.

Christine patted Ophelia’s thick grey coat before saying, “Come, Ophelia, we must hurry! We do not want to be stuck in the dark now, do we?”

Ophelia grunted in reply.

As the trail continued, curving sometimes this way, sometimes that through the ocean of trees, Christine sang to keep herself occupied. She had always had a beautiful voice, but she often kept it to herself. Out in the open, however, she felt so free, with the wind blowing through her hair, the soft symphony of crickets chirping behind her, that she did not mind singing out loud. The world seemed so empty where she was, devoid of any human noises or smells or faces. There were only trees and animals here. She had no cause for worry.

Soon, the donkey and the girl came to a clearing a top of a hill, a small, clear island wrapped in an ocean of trees. The little space was entirely fenced in by nature, except one section on the far side of the mountain, which revealed a steep and rocky drop to the ground below. The sight rather unnerved her and an odd feeling settled in the pit of her stomach. Had she seen the glowing pairs of eyes that hid among the shadows, her unease would have grown still more but, fortunately for her, she did not. Still humming softly to herself, the girl climbed off the donkey, her fingers brushing absentely through her hair, looking at the simple map her father had given her. She was not entirely sure where she was now, but she was sure she must be quite close to her goal. She had been travelling for so long that her inner thighs chaffed from sitting atop the donkey. She began to pace, trying to stretch her tight legs and get blood-flow back to her feet, as she tried to translate the map. Annoyance was bubbling at her surface—at Rhal, at this whole ‘quest’ her father had sent her on, when she only wanted to be at his side. It no longer seemed exciting to her, only terribly unnecessary and ill-timed. And she could not for the life of her make out the stupid map! The scribbles were incomprehensible and the sun was sinking in the sky and she still was not married and everything was going terribly, terribly wrong and she really rather just wanted to sit down and give up.

And so, she did. Christine threw the map to the ground with a dramatic flourish and a groan before sinking to the grass floor beneath her, her chin resting on her hand. This whole adventure was
stupid and she wanted no part of it. She had half-a-mind, in fact, to just take Ophelia home and make up a prophecy to tell her father and forget the whole affair. He need never know that she had not actually gone to the oracle. But if she did go to the oracle, what would it tell her? A queasy feeling bubbled up in her stomach. It frightened her so very much to think what it would tell her—there were so many possibilities, and many that she could think of were very bad. In fact, she was not entirely sure if she wanted to hear her future at all, for she had heard many stories of people who had let the prophecies given to them by the oracle dictate the rest of their lives. But if she could not even find the oracle in the first place, what did it matter what it would say to her? It was no use. She put her head in her hands.

It was at that precise moment when she heard a voice—a man’s voice. Her head shot up, and she jumped to her feet, her eyes wide as she looked about, searching for the deep, slow baritone voice that dripped through her ears like honey. It was the most beautiful voice she had ever heard in her life.

“Are you lost, dear creature?” It asked, concerned etched into every syllable, care into every word.

“No,” she replied, turning in a slow circle in hopes to catch sight of this person, with the beautiful voice. “No, I am not lost. I—I came here because my father wanted me to.”

She paused, having turned around in a full circle and still having seen nothing of this mysterious stranger. There appeared to be no one else in sight, and yet it sounded as if this man was very nearby.

“Indeed?” He said and Christine started—it almost sounded as if he were right beside her! But when she turned again, there was no one there.

“Yes,” she said distractedly, still looking around. “Where… Where are you? I can hear you but I cannot seem to see you. Are you nearby?” Perhaps it was magic that made the man sound so near to her. But how could he have magic unless he was some sort of divinity or spirit of nature? Her heart beat quickened.

“Nearby?” The voice echoed, sounding amused. “No, not particularly. I am like the wind… I am everywhere and nowhere all at once, my dear girl. You needn’t concern yourself with looking for me,” he said, and Christine stopped her frantic searching, more confused than she had been before. The voice continued: “You will never find me, I am afraid. I am clothed in shadows and darkness. My voice is all that I have to offer.”

His words sounded more like a joke to Christine than the truth. His words all sounded rather sarcastic to her, in their sweet and disarming way, and she could not help thinking that he had lied to her. She stood for a moment, debating whether she should demand a more sufficient answer from him but, realizing that she had no way to prove or disprove what he had told her, decided against it.

“Who are you, then?” She swallowed hard, thinking. Whoever this man was with whom was now speaking could very well be some sort of god in disguise. A god! She had heard, of course, the stories of mortals having encounters with deities and although she had believed them to a degree, she had never considered the possibility of such a thing happening to her. Such dealings were only the sorts of things that happened in stories and fairytales, not every-day life, much less her own life. These sorts of things did not simply happen—gods did not simply talk to mortals. And yet, who else could this man be, who talked of clothing himself in darkness, of moving like the wind?

He chuckled and the sound sent shivers running down her spine. “Who do you think I am? Some sort of god, I would imagine. Does that frighten you, dear thing? Oh, yes, I can see that it does.
Yes, I suppose I would be frightened too, if I were you, thinking that I were talking with some sort of deity. Well, dear girl, I can assure you now that I am no god. You needn’t fear me.”

Christine nodded slowly, trying to calm her racing heart. If this man was not a god, as he claimed, but some sort of mortal, it still did not explain why he was talking to her nor even who he was, even if he had eliminated the possibility of himself being a god. There were other beings who were powerful and possessed abilities far beyond human beings, who were more benevolent in nature than the gods—nymphs, dryads, centaurs, ghosts perhaps or other types of spirits, demigods… Perhaps that could account for this man, and his seemingly invisible body.

“Thank you for putting my fears to rest. But I am afraid you still have not answered my question, good spirit—whomever you are. I asked who you are, not what you are, if I may speak so boldly.” She finished softly, conscious that her words had come off too strongly and that she still did not know whom, exactly, she was addressing nor the extent of his powers or tolerance. She resisted the urge to begin chewing on her fingernails, thinking somewhat subconsciously that Eurydice, who tried her hardest to make Christine stop what she called a ‘most unbecoming habit,’ would have been proud.

“Ah, you are quite right.” He said, his honeyed voice as easy and pleasing as it had always been, no trace of anger to be found. “I have not told you who I am, have I? If you are asking for a name, however, I must confess that I think they provide only a false sense of security. If I told you my name, for instance, you would, I should think, accept that as my ‘identity’ and yet, you would still know nothing about me. So, if a simple name is what you desire, then I shall give it to you. If you desire to know who I am, and what makes up my very being, however, then I fear I cannot give you what you wish to know.”

Christine stopped, considering his words. In truth, she had never thought about such things before but now that he had brought it to her attention that a name would not satisfy her question either, she was not sure what she wanted. Perhaps, for now, a name would do, so that she could at the very least put a label on this man with whom she was speaking, even if she did not truly know who he was.

“I… I suppose,” she started, her own voice trembling and weak compared with his deep, steady tone. “I suppose that if you cannot tell me who you are, a name will do. For now.” A small smile spread over her face.

“For now, indeed,” she heard him say right beside her, but she no longer had the inclination to turn, for she knew she would see nothing. “If you wish to know it, I am Erik. Although I fear that that name is not one I use much anymore. Truly, I am little more than a voice in the darkness and you mustn’t think of me as much more than that.” Christine heard him sigh, although this time, the sound came from farther away and a sudden rush of unhappiness swept through her at the thought of him leaving before he added, “A name is but a word, my dear girl, and you mustn’t value it at much.”

Her brow furrowing, Christine nodded. “Yes, I suppose you are right. But—if I may ask—why do you say that you do not use your name anymore?” She trailed off before adding in a soft, timid voice: “Erik,” realizing that she could now address him by name. The word sounded foreign in her mouth. She shivered.

“Ah,” she heard him murmur, his voice drawing close to her again. “That is a story you mustn’t concern yourself with, dear girl. I fear that it is dark, rather tragic, and not something I wish to dwell on at this present moment.”

When she said nothing, unsure of how to continue the conversation, he easily picked it up for her,
as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “I suppose I have shrouded myself in mystery, haven’t I? Well, no matter. I assure you, my own life is not interesting enough to warrant your attention. Yours however…” The voice trailed off, leaving her in empty silence.

“My life?” Christine shook her head, wondering if he could see the movement from wherever he was. “Oh no, my life is so mundane. You would be put to sleep if I talked of it, I think.” She giggled a little to herself, imagining a scene in which she and this voice—Erik—began to speak of the events of her life—of her sick father, of annoying suitors and failed arranged marriages, of farm animals and cooking, of the small arguments she often engaged in with her sisters. What a scene that would be! Like a pair of young girls, the two of them, gossiping about all the boring, repetitive things she experienced in her daily life.

“No,” she said again, more to herself than him. “No, I do not think you would find it very enjoyable at all.”

“Hm,” the voice hummed, soft and gentle, holding out the short syllable, like silk gliding across her flesh. “Perhaps not. However, I insist that you must at least tell me your name, child. You know mine, after all, and I believe it is only right that I should know yours, so I may know what to call you, if nothing else.”

“Oh! Oh, yes, you are right. I am very sorry; I had forgotten that I had not introduced myself to you. Forgive me. I am Christine. I am very pleased to meet you… Erik.”

When she spoke his name, it sent a shiver running down her spine in a way she had never experienced before. She was not cold, despite the new winter air, and yet when she said that simple word, his short name, it felt as if the North Wind had flown into her lungs and was sending icicles through her whole body. Despite the oddness and discomfort of the feeling she received, she also found she rather liked it, although why she could not truly explain.

“Christine,” he repeated slowly, drawing out every syllable in that low, powerful voice. For a moment, she imagined that perhaps he felt that same icy breath run through him when he spoke her name as she did his, but she quickly dismissed it as a stupid and completely unfounded idea.

“That is a beautiful name. Christine.” She heard him sigh. “I do not think I have ever before encountered anyone with that name… It is very lovely.”

“Oh, thank you.” She flushed in the twilight, her hands moving down to smooth her chiton. “Yes, my mother insisted that I be named it, although I am not sure where she heard the name, either. It is certainly not a common name, I suppose.” She cleared her throat. “Erik is nice, too, of course.”

He chuckled. “At least one of us thinks so. Well… Christine, this has all been very enjoyable but as I am quite sure you do not make your bed among these trees, I believe that you must be returning to your own house, and I mine. It is nearly dark.”

Indeed, the sun had very nearly descended past the tree line, and Christine had not even noticed until that very moment. She had been too caught up in the throes of that voice and its soft, deep melodies and gentle words. Oh, her father must be so worried! She clapped a hand to her forehead, her breath turning icy yet again in her lungs, but this time not from that pleasant feeling Erik gave her, but from fear. “I had not even noticed! I am so stupid! My sisters are always telling me to be more watchful and observant and here am I, talking into the night with a…”

She had been about to say stranger but she stopped herself suddenly, fearing that Erik would find her words rude after they had both introduced themselves and even talked for so long. And yet, although he was, by all definitions, a stranger, Christine felt as if she had known him before, as if
they had been old friends, who were speaking after a long recess with no barriers between them, despite the years. She had never felt anything quite like it before. A frown creased her forehead.

“I should be going,” she said quickly, trying to cover her error. “Forgive me, Erik, this has been pleasant but it is nearly night and I still have such a long… way to… go.” As she spoke, her words declined to soft and weak, ending in despair. It had taken her the better part of four hours to ride to the oracle and doing it all again in the dark frightened her. Her father had always warned her that the forest was not safe at night. He had joked, when she was a child, that abnormally large rabbits and other rodents would carry her off and make her their prisoner but the joke only went to hide her father true worries—the forest was not safe. Worse things than large rabbits could carry her off and now that she was older, she knew that. She began to chew her thumb nail.

“Ah, now, I see. You do not live nearby, I presume?” At her soft affirmation, he continued. “Of course. I would not want you to go wandering through the woods, Christine, at this time of night. It is not very safe, I am afraid, but, of course, you are probably quite aware of that. Yes… Hm… What if…. Yes, what if, Christine, you stayed here for the night, in this little grove, and I promised to watch over you? I swear I would do you no harm, only guard you from those things that are less than desirable, shall we say, that tend to come out at night. How does that sound, child?”

Christine began to pick at the skin around her thumb, thinking. This was a better alternative to walking back home through the forest, was it not? She knew Erik at least to a degree and, from the small degree that she knew him, it seemed that he would keep true to his word and so her no harm. He seemed trustworthy. And he was a better alternative to others she could meet on the road, whom she could even know well enough to tell what they seemed to be. In the end, the whole of her decision came down to a simple ‘which is better than the other,’ and, of course, she knew that answer immediately.

“I… Well, I suppose that is better than trying to find my way home in the dark.” A quick glance around told her that the sun had already descended past the trees and that total darkness was quickly creeping on its way to cover the earth.

“Yes, I think so too. But you needn’t fear, sweet Christine. The sky is my roof and the soil my threshold. While you remain under and upon them, you are in my house and I would never dare to harm my guest. Please, do not be so frightened. I promise you, you are safe with me. I shall watch over you and protect you. You are in my house.”

After a few more gentle promises on Erik’s voice’s part, and some easy convincing on Christine’s, the girl lay down on the cool earth, using her leather bag as her pillow and curling into a tight ball for warmth. She was still a little frightened at the oddness of the situation she had somehow found herself in, and yet for the most part, her heart had stopped its wild beating and her palms were no longer slick with sweat. She was in Erik’s house and she had no reason to believe that he would harm her, after all he had said. She trusted him, she realized as her eyes slipped closed. Perhaps it was because of the strange shiver that crept through her at the sound of his name, or perhaps the sense of familiarity she felt when she spoke to him, or perhaps it was because she still partially thought that he was some sort of tree nymph who truly had no body with which to harm her—but despite the reason, she was at peace.

“Erik?” She began, breaking the tranquil silence that had enveloped them for some time.

“Yes, Christine?”

“If I… If I, perhaps, wanted to…” she broke off in a yawn. “Wanted to find you again, how would I?”
For a long moment, her only reply was the cold air through the trees. Then, “You would… wish to meet with me again?”

“Yes.” Christine smiled, wondering if he could see. “This evening has been lovely and I—well, I know it is really odd but I do not think I have ever had such a connection with another person before. I feel almost—I know it is strange—but I feel almost as if we have known each other for years and years and I have never felt that way towards anyone before, Erik. I almost feel as if our very fates are intertwined.” She blushed, realizing the depth of her claim and how ridiculous it must have sounded to Erik’s ears. But she had spoken truly, from the heart, and although these ramblings had been brought on by her sleepy senselessness, she could not deny them.

“Fates…” she heard his voice murmur, or perhaps it was only the wind.

At length, she began again with “I’m sorry,” conscious that the silence between them was now growing both longer and more uncomfortable. “I must sound crazy, telling you all of this when we have only just met. Forgive me. I’m so tired. I suppose it would be better for the both of us if I just went to sleep and stopped babbling. Forget all that I have said. Really, you should not listen to me anymore.” A breathless laugh escaped her as she passed her hand over her cheek. Ah, regret.

She was too tired to await his reply and she had quite nearly fallen asleep when she at last heard him respond, his voice sounding strained. “If you should ever desire my presence again, you need only come here again—to this exact spot—and I shall be waiting for you.”

“Hmmm… Thank you, Erik. I will do that, then.”

“I am glad, Christine.”

Her eyes slipped closed, a happy, lazy feeling in her veins. Then, again, “Christine?”

“Yes, Erik?” Her eyelids seemed to be too heavy to open.

“When you said that you felt… as if we had some sort of connection, I suppose… I suppose that I feel it, as well. You are not ridiculous, dear girl. I suppose that I, too, have never felt this way towards anyone before. And I do confess that it is odd but I do feel it. I did not want you to think that I did not.”

Christine attempted to make some sort of reply but her word all tumbled together in a way that she was certain Erik could not understand, unless he truly did possess powers greater than mortals. At that, she heard him chuckle, yet the sound was muffled, as if he stood behind a wall.

“Sleep, Christine. You are very tired. Dream well, child.”

And with that, Christine fell happily dead to the world, under the roof of stars in her companion’s house.

Chapter End Notes

If you haven't guessed yet, Rhal or Rhalamanthos (whichever you prefer) is the equivalent of Raoul. The name Raoul, however, sounded far too aggressively French to be appearing in a Greek fic so I edited it a little. Christine is actually a Greek name (if any of you were curious) but it really doesn’t make any sense for her name to be
Christine if she is still worshiping the Greek gods and not her namesake Christ, I guess. The name Erik is not Greek but it didn't sound too aggressively French and I didn't have the heart to change it, so here we are.

Also, in the Greek culture, hospitality was very important. There were special punishments in the Underworld AND on Earth for hosts that killed or harmed their guests, if I remember right. So, by Erik saying that the forest is his 'house,' it's a pretty weighty statement and, all things considering, it makes sense that Christine would trust him, as her host.
A Night Spent in Shadow

Chapter Summary

In which Erik remembers, for the first time in a while, what it is to feel truly human again...

Chapter Notes

This chapter, as I'm sure some of you will soon notice, is the one and only chapter I have kept fully intact from the original version of this fic, just because I liked it so much that I did not have the heart to get rid of it. That being said, there have been a few minor changes for plot points I had originally thought to pursue, and then later decided not to. But anyways, I hope you enjoy Erik's little chapter here... it'll be the last of his chapters for a while, I'm afraid.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Erik crossed his arms over his chest in an effort to keep from shivering as the cold seeped through his thin tunic. He took a deep breath through chattering teeth and observed the small puff of smoke that arose from his lips. It was not usually this cold, even in winter, he thought bitterly. He pulled his cloak tighter around his shoulders, trying to conserve what little body heat he had. After adjusting himself, he turned his attention back to the girl, who lay sleeping just a few yards away from him. She had curled up into a tight ball, legs to drawn to her chest and arms tucked safely in the small space between the two, but her tiny body was still racked with shivers. Poor girl.

He wrapped his cloak tighter around him as he collapsed against the trunk of the closest tree, sighing. Poor, cold girl. She needed the warmth more than he did yet he was unhappy to part with it all the same. He reprimanded himself silently and after a moment, he rose once again from his spot against the tree, albeit somewhat grudgingly.

As he walked from the shadows of the forest, he slowly pulled the cloak off his shaking shoulders, trying to move as slow as possible to enjoy the last few moments of warmth he would get for the rest of the night. He stopped just short of the clearing in which the girl slept, hesitating. Without the comforting presence of the darkness at his back, he felt so vulnerable. The cold light of the moon shone on his foot, which alone had stepped across the boundaries of the shadows that hid him from the world. Shivering, he drew his outstretched foot back towards himself, extinguishing the thin ray of light as he submersed himself fully in the dark. To step out from his place in the shadows meant to display himself to the cruel, judging world. He was not sure he was ready to do that, not even for a moment, not even for her… For Christine. He whispered her name to no one in particular, but to simply hear it for himself. Christine.

He paused, turning his thoughts back to that of Christine. He liked the way her name sounded on his lips. So full and crisp yet so… soft. He hardly had to move his mouth to say it. A strange name, not one he had ever heard before, but it suited her nevertheless. When he looked at her, with her dark curls and olive complexion, her entire being seemed to whisper Christine. Nothing had ever
seemed as right as the way the name fit with the girl.

Shaking his head, he turned his gaze away from her. What was he doing? He did not even know this girl; why was he so enraptured by her? Her name was of no concern to him, nor the way it sounded on his lips. She was just a sleeping girl who needed warmth that he could provide. Otherwise, they had no connection, no matter what she claimed she had felt. She did not understand. He could not have dealings with likes of her; he was a monster and she was an angel. He was a creature of darkness and she was a child of the sun. There was nothing between them nor could there ever be. Once again, she shivered, goosebumps creeping up her arms, pulling him from his thoughts and reminding him of his mission: to bring the sun’s child his warmth.

This time, he did not hesitate as he stepped from the shadows, feeling vulnerable and naked but determined. The girl was fast asleep; there was no way she would be able to see him. Even if she did somehow, he was wearing his mask so no permanent harm would be done. He needed only to give her his cloak and then he could retreat once more to the forest, his safe haven.

He crossed over to her in just a few large strides. It made quite a spectacle: the tall, thin man, dressed in all black, outlined against the forest by the light of the moon. He seemed almost like a shadow himself—he was noiseless and his dark clothes made him seem all the more ghostly. From his full-face black mask to his black sandals, he was practically invisible. Only his occasional shivering made it clear that he was not, in fact, some sort of dark phantom but a real, living and breathing man, who was quite susceptible to the cold.

He kneeled next to the girl, stopping to take her in. She looked so peaceful—all the worry gone from her beautiful face and her eyelids fluttering ever so slightly as she dreamed. Gently, so as not to wake her, Erik brushed a stray curl out of her slightly open mouth, smiling to himself as he did so. Sweet little angel. Then, he pulled his dark wool cloak fully from his shoulders and wrapped it around hers instead. He tucked the top snugly just under her chin and went to great lengths to ensure that her entire body was covered. As he pulled the last bit over her bare, icy toes, she stirred ever so slightly.

He stopped moving immediately, pulling his hands from her, silently begging her not to wake up. He could feel his heart pounding against his ribs and he bit his lips, trying not to let out so much as a breath. Turning his nervous gaze to her face once again, he checked desperately to see if her eyes were open. They were not. He breathed a sigh of relief and rocked back on his heels, wiping his clammy hands on his thighs. For a moment, he thought she had awakened and that she would see him. If she saw him, she would be ruined. There was no way she could know about his curse, but that would not stop it from hurting her, innocent though she was. The curse was beyond his power and, although he had taken many precautions to ensure that no one was affected by it, he still did not like exposing himself to others. Not when things were so unpredictable.

The girl let out a little sigh and turned over so that she was facing him. In his surprise, Erik fell backward, cold fear coursing through him. He could not let her eyes fall upon him! She would just be another unsuspecting victim of his curse, another person who had to suffer for his tragic fate!

But no.

He took a deep breath to calm himself; nothing could happen to her unless he caused it. He was wearing his mask. If he was careful, no harm would come to her. Slowly, he arose and slipped into the safety of the shadows once more, trying to subdue the fear inside him. In the forest, she could not see him and so, there was no way he could accidentally expose himself to her. He would be careful and she would be safe. However, his eyes could do her no damage so he decided to observe her quietly from the darkness.
She tugged his cloak tighter around her and drew her legs closer to herself, murmuring something unintelligible as she did so. Erik could have sworn he saw her smile, just ever so slightly, as the warmth from his cloak began to seep into her bones. Now, even though he was shivering even more, he felt content in watching her, knowing his small act of kindness had brought her some comfort.

He settled back against his tree, resolving to stay there until the morning came. After all, someone had to watch over the girl while she slept. He could not just abandon her all alone in the dark, especially not when he had promised her that he would stay by her side. What if something were to happen to her? She was so small and fragile and the night was dangerous. For the time being, he would be her guardian, her host, keeping her under his far-reaching gaze until the sun could take his place.

He watched her somewhat absentmindedly, keeping his eyes trained on her while his thoughts wandered elsewhere. Christine was young—far younger than himself. She still had so much life ahead of her—she could fall in love and get married, if she had not already. She could be the proud mother of happy, beautiful children. She still saw the world with wonder in her eyes, where as he looked upon it with dread. She still could have a future whereas he could not. He drew his attention back to her, now focusing on the slight rise and fall of her chest as she snored. With every breath she drew, he was reminded of her fragile mortality. One swift cut from a sharp knife could silence that beautiful voice of hers forever. One wrong move and the flickering fire that animated her entire being would be snuffed out. If the world was darkness, she was the last delicate beam of light and that light needed to be shielded from the monsters around it.

“I will protect you, my darling,” he whispered, so quiet that she would not have been able to hear him, even if she had been awake. “Erik will keep you safe from the cruel world.”

A jolt of realization ran through him. What was he doing? A hiss of annoyance escaped through his clenched teeth as he ran a hand through his hair. Why did he care so much for her? He was acting like a fool, throwing his words to the wind for the sake of some girl he hardly even knew. Why should it matter to him whether she lived or died? She was no more than just another person in the midst of humanity to him. So why did he care so much for her that he was willing to lose an entire night’s worth of sleep just to make sure she slept safely?

He sighed, burying his face in his hands as the truth became evident. He loved her. He loved her and he hated himself for it. It was horrifying how quickly he had fallen for her, and without any reason for it. Was he really so desperate that just a word of kindness from the lips of a beautiful girl could make him fall in love? Was he really so lonely? Was he really so weak? Did he have so little control over his emotions that the very sight of her could make his heart melt? This had to be the work of the gods. Feelings this strong had to be supernatural; he did not think he was capable of feeling an emotion to this degree until now. His entire being was filled to the brim with burning, unrestrained love. He wanted to protect her, to comfort her, to make her laugh, to kiss her, to curl up beside her and warm her. He wanted tell her how beautiful she was, to sing her to sleep, to cradle her soft body in his arms until morning. He wanted to, yet he could not. He was the very thing he wanted to protect her from—a thing of darkness, hate, and unspeakable horrors. How could he hope to guard her from the world when he could not even defend her from himself? He shook his head. It would be better if he just left her alone—it would be better for both of them that way.

A bitter sob rose in his throat, threatening to escape through his trembling lips. Nothing that a normal man could have in life was attainable to him. He wreaked destruction on things of the purest and most innocent nature without even willing it to happen. Everything he touched crumpled to ash at his fingertips, leaving him with nothing. He could not get too close to this Christine, no
matter how he felt about her. She was, to him at least, unattainable and he could not view her as anything otherwise. So, he sat alone in the darkness, heart full of empty longing and hatred for what he was, waiting for the sun to come and dismiss him from his post.

She stirred again and he glanced up, hugging his arms to himself as he shivered. It hurt him to see her curled up so peacefully when he, her guardian, could be nothing to her. He could have no place in the angel’s life, unless he wished to harm her and he could never do that. A thing of beauty and perfection such as her must be kept pure.

He sighed, creating a puff of visible breath in the cold. Even from his spot in the woods, he could see how long her dark eyelashes were, the delicate curve of her nose, the fullness of her pink lips. He tried to turn away but he could not. It been so long since he had been able to stare so uninterrupted at anyone, much less a member of the opposite sex and a very attractive one at that. Usually, he hid away in the safety of his own home although he did occasionally go out. However, he did not get to enjoy the company of others even then because he kept to himself and his mask frightened those around him. But Christine did not know about the mask.

The rest of the night passed quickly as he sat, letting himself dream of a life without loneliness, a life without fear and hate. For a few blissful hours, he almost forgot that he was an outcast, doomed to wander the earth alone until death. With this new hope of love and redemption, he could almost let himself dream that there was still some happiness in store for him after all. That night, for the first time in years, he almost felt human again.

Finally, he caught his first glimpse of the rising sun, the exposing light tearing through all his poorly constructed dreams of deliverance. He could not let himself believe in these childish fantasies, no matter how he felt about Christine. They were nothing more than honey-dipped lies, something to cover his bleak and unchangeable future of misery. He let out a bitter laugh as the painful truth hit him once again. He could not escape the very essence of who he was. It was impossible.

His sweet dreams crumbled before his eyes as beautiful color filled the sky. The night was over and now his watch was done. He needed to get away from this intoxicating girl before he let himself forget who he was. After standing from his place against the tree, he stretched his sore muscles and rubbed his tired eyes. He needed sleep; he felt as if he was about to collapse from exhaustion. All he wanted to do was fall into the embrace of his warm, soft bed, curl up in his blankets, and let his mind escape this cold world, if only for a few hours and forget about this girl.

However, he could not bring himself to leave her without saying goodbye. If, after all, everything went as it should, he would never see her again. Silently, he slipped from the shadows and made his way back over to Christine. She looked so serene in the soft light with her dark curls fanning out around her, her cheeks flushed from the cold. She looked almost like an angel. And he could not be seen by an angel such as her; he was far too disturbing for her ethereal gaze. He knelt beside her, humming softly as he considered taking back his cloak. The day was still cold but the sun’s gentle rays were already beginning to warm him slightly. In a few hours, she would no longer have need of his coat but he decided against taking it all the same. He would leave it for her to remember him by, to remind her of that sweetly speaking shadow who fell somewhere in between dreams and reality, monstrosity and humanity.

He brushed a curl from her forehead, trying to take in every detail of her face before he had to leave her. “I am sorry, Christine,” He whispered lightly, pushing another strand of hair out of her face, hoping that she could hear him through the veil of sleep. “I must go but I will always be nearby, should you have need of me.”
Gently as he could, so as not to wake her, he stooped down and pulled his mask off just ever so slightly, uncovering his mouth, and kissed her lightly on the forehead, sending a thrill through his entire shaking body. He kissed her so softly that his lips hardly even grazed her head and, in hardly a second, he had pulled his mask back on, covering his entire face once more. As a last, silent goodbye, he ran a shaking finger along the side of her rosy cheek, brushing her fair skin with as much tenderness and adoration as he knew how.

The corners of her lips tipped up ever so slightly at his gentle touch and she sighed dreamily. Seized once more with fierce devotion, he stood, pledging himself to her once more, although she could not hear it: “I swear it, Christine. I will always be here for you.”

With a breaking heart, he left her. It did not matter if he never saw her again. In fact, it would be much better for both of them if he did not. The girl would forget about him and he would hole himself up in his empty house, with only the ghosts of his past to keep him company. That was the way it had to be. Monsters and angels could not mix, he knew that quite well. Every day, the world seemed to taunt him with the knowledge that he could never be like anyone else. He was different, he was a horror. He was an outcast and he had no one to blame but himself. His own arrogance had brought on Apollo’s wrath. Now, he would have given anything to alter the course of that fateful day which had forever condemned him to a life of solitude but it was too late. The damage was done and he was now forced to leave the girl he loved, the girl who could be his deliverer, because his very being was twisted.

He trekked silently through the vast expanse of woods until he came to his large, decorated house, stopping in front of the golden doors. Everywhere he looked, he could see flowers just beginning to bloom, making his marble house, with all its ornate columns and sculptures, all the more stunning. Erik, however, hated it. This house was his own personal prison, the place he was destined to spend the rest of his life in hateful solitude. He flung open the carved doors with unnecessary force, storming into the courtyard and crossing over to his room on the far end of it in just a few quick strides.

As soon as he entered into his bedroom, he sank down onto the floor, his face in his hands, as all the emotions from that night threatened to overtake him. Why must he be forced to endure this life of total alienation from humanity? He hated it; he hated himself. It was his fault, after all—he had damned himself to eternal suffering without the hope of another to share in it with him. Was it so much just to ask for companionship? All he wanted was someone to love him and someone to love in return. He wanted to be understood, to be accepted but his cruel fate continually mocked him. He was alone, completely and utterly alone, forced to endure everything by himself. It was enough to drive him mad all over again.

Standing, he walked over to his large, warm bed, cursing his cruel fate through clenched teeth. As he pulled his blankets around him, a lump formed in his throat. He just wanted love—was that so much to ask? He saw so many young, happy couples, so clearly full of love for each other. It was like a slap to the face for him, who knew he would never get to experience any of that love. How was it possible to love someone whose very face could make anyone’s blood run cold? How was it possible to love someone who eternally wore a cold, unfeeling mask, hiding them from the world?

Erik already knew the answer. It was not possible. He could not be loved.

He had thought he had grown to accept his fate until he saw her. She made him realize that he did still want to be accepted and that he wanted it more than anything. His whole being longed for her affection yet he could not have it. Christine. He sighed. She was who he wanted, she was who he craved. She was the one who made him ache with painful longings of love and acceptance and
deliverance from this hell he was living.

He turned over, his eyelids drooping in spite everything. As he wrapped his arms around himself, he thought of her—how he wished it were her warm arms around him rather than his own cold ones. How he wished her sweet voice could coax away all his self-loathing with a few gentle words of love. The hope that maybe, some day, she, too, would look on him eyes full of love and save him from his solitude.

He yawned as his exhausted mind faded in and out of coherent thought. He hoped that she would remember him. Perhaps she would return to him. The chances of that happening were small but not nonexistent and, because of this, he dared to hope. He knew he should not have—hope was a dangerous thing—but he could not help it. As long as there was something for him to hang on to, he would. Christine may return to him yet.

As his tired eyes slipped closed, his last thoughts were of her and the possibility of a new life.

Chapter End Notes

How are you enjoying things so far? If you remember the original version of this, how does this new one compare? I would love to know! :}
Christine awoke to the feeling of the warm, hesitant light upon her face, as the sun just barely peaked over the tree line. With a groan, she fought to retain the blissful rest which had held her only moments before. Unfortunately, the sun had done its job and driven the sleep from the tired girl. After a few moments, she slowly opened her eyes, drinking in the bright light through her lashes and stretched, ignoring the protests of her muscles. They were all sore and knotted from their uncomfortable bed on the hard ground. She wished more than anything she could just go back to sleep; her back hurt but the blanket wrapped around her made her feel so warm…

**Blanket?**

Her tired eyes snapped open as the realization kicked in: last night she had not *had* a blanket. She had woken multiple times during the night, shivering and, in her half-awake state, had tried desperately to find some warmth to cover herself with. Last night, she had found none but now she lay with a thick cloak draped over her. This was certainly new.

She frowned, running her hands over the thick wool. When and how exactly had this happened? Blankets did not simply appear on those who wished them, as much as one might like them to. No, someone must be behind this small act of kindness. But who exactly had was, for the moment, a mystery to Christine and despite her half-awake mind, she began to work on it. The answer came to her a great deal faster than she had originally thought it would. After all, there had only been one other person with her last night-- a man by the name of Erik.

Christine sat up slowly, giving her poor muscles a chance to readjust to basic movement, as she gathered her thoughts on this Erik. Last night seemed almost like a dream—beautiful, disembodied voices, and carelessly exchanged words. Yet this dream, it seemed, was a reality. She knew without a shadow of a doubt that Erik had been real. How else could she have obtained the cloak if he had not given it to her?

After shifting into a more comfortable ball-like position, Christine propped her head on her knees and thought. She had promised to be back home yesterday, and yet she still sat atop a mountain in some far-off place she had never been before. She had also promised to visit the oracle, another
task she had yet to accomplish. In fact, as of now, she had completely failed her mission, having not done the two things which she had promised she would do. There was no time to waste, it seemed.

Finally gathering the strength to stand, Christine climbed, with some difficulty, to her feet, the cloak still wrapped around her. It reminded her that there was a man nearby, a man who had watched over her the night before, a man who she knew hardly anything about yet felt undeniably draw to all the same. Yes, her companion must be out there somewhere, unless he had simply disappeared into thin air. For a moment, she was silent, internally debating whether she should call for him. But he had protected her last night, she realized, and given her a place to lay her head. So, deciding to give him his due thanks, and perhaps gain the chance to hear his enchanting voice again, she called for him:

“Erik?”

She yawned and waited uncertainly for a reply. None came from her strange companion.

For a moment, Christine stood on that clearing on top of the hill, wondering if she should call to the man again. She knew it would be right for her to thank him after all he had done for her. And besides, she still was not entirely sure how to get to this oracle and there was a chance that he might be able to direct her. Just as she opened her mouth to try again, something stopped her. Perhaps it was the knowledge that her family was probably worried sick about her, or that she was dreadfully behind schedule, or perhaps it was because she was afraid of this strange, powerful, and yet, somehow beautiful presence. For one of these reasons, or maybe all, Christine held her tongue.

Taking great care to be silent since she had decided not to call to Erik, Christine packed up her meager belongs—her bags she had used as a pillow, Ophelia, who she had tied to a tree before she went to sleep, and, now, Erik’s cloak. In the morning light, her father’s poorly drawn map made considerably more sense than it had the night before and Christine suddenly saw that the oracle was only a few paces ahead of her, just barely out of sight. Her father’s directions were now the clearest thing in the world and she could not understand how she could not have seen it last night. Ah, well! Taking Ophelia by the old rope tied around her neck, the girl continued on foot to the oracle, now encouraged by the knowledge that she was almost there.

Just as the map had said, only ten minutes later, a small, marble temple appeared ahead of her, perched on top of another barren hill. The glassy marble shone in the sun, making the temple glow with white light, blindingly so. It was little more than a smudge of brightness on the horizon but Christine knew she had found it. She and Ophelia walked quickly up the hill until they reached the small building, which now only glowed in the light slightly. Christine reached out and touched on of the great, white columns ornamenting the place, feeling the cold stone beneath her hand. So, this was the home of the oracle.

She tied Ophelia to one of the columns and, as there appeared to be no one else there, she was sure it did not matter where she left the donkey, although in the back of her mind she wondered if she would be struck down for leaving an animal as common as a donkey tied to a god’s house. But no matter. Petting the donkey’s mane one final time, and whispering some words of assurance that she would be back, you needn’t worry, Christine entered the temple of the oracle.

The inside was also made up of the same white marble as the outside yet somehow, it seemed infinitely more menacing inside than it had outside, without the natural light shining upon it, with the exception of a few small windows placed near the ceiling. Now it appeared cold and overpowering, giving off a slightly bluish glow, making everything seem more unreal than it had before. The only sound in the place as Christine walked was the quiet tip-tap of her sandals on the
stone floor, disturbing the silence that had reigned unopposed until her arrival. There was no one else with her, no one else in view, no one else making any sound at all. The room itself smelled of mildew and over-ripe fruits and something else that Christine could not name, creating a strange, dusty, overly-sweet scent that smelled far from inviting. The temple almost seemed deserted. The *tip-tap* on the floor stopped as Christine’s movements ceased and she stood like a frightened animal in the middle of the floor, too unsure to continue forward but too determined to go back.

Then, a light appeared in front of her. It happened so fast that, for a moment, she thought it was simply a trick of the light and the oddly shaped shadows, or that she had blinked, but when she closed and opened her eyes again, the light was still there. It simply hovered in front of her, a golden, floating orb. Cautiously, after checking behind her to see if there were any other light—there was not—Christine reached out her hand and gingerly touched the orb with her index finger. She had scarcely brushed it before she snatched her hand back to herself, expecting her finger to be burned, but, when she examined it, she saw it was not. When she thought about it, the light had not seemed warm either. Ever so carefully, she reached out again and repeated the motion, but this time slower, letting her finger linger in the strange floating light. It was not warm at all! In fact, it seemed to have no temperature. Caution thrown to the wind, she stuck her whole hand into the light, smiling when she felt nothing. This was odd, indeed! She withdrew her hand, felt nothing different, examined it, and then stuck it back into the light.

The same moment her hand went into the light, another one appeared a foot or so in front of her, demanding her attention. This one looked identical to the first—an orb of light, suspended in midair in front of her, emanating golden light. Christine approached it cautiously, but less so than the first light, and examined it in the same way. She passed her hand through the light, which, also like the first, gave off no heat, and even tickled her flesh. She laughed. Another light flickered into existence in front of her but now, she was almost used to the phenomenon. This one, too, she approached and when she had reached it, another appeared in front of the third. They were making a trail for her, Christine realized—a trail of soft, glowing lights that would lead her deeper into the temple’s interior, into the dark abyss. She swallowed and followed the trail of lights into the darkness.

The lights matched her pace as she walked across the cold stone floor, blinking into existence faster when she quickened her pace and slower when she hung back. She found soon enough that the ‘lights’—although she now saw that that was not perhaps an apt name for them—did little to illuminate her surroundings. When she had seen the first one, she had not noticed nearly as much because the atrium was somewhat illuminated from the light that shone under the great brass door and few small windows lining the ceiling.

As she progressed, however, down the dark hallway that lacked natural light completely, it became apparent that the orbs were not actually lights. Their golden light shone about one foot beyond the orb, showing her only the floor around her feet, which did keep her from tripping but failed to show her the rest of her surroundings.

The further she walked, even as her visibility lessened, Christine grew less and less afraid with each passing step. The lights were guiding her somewhere and she trusted them to take her where she needed to go, although she did not know exactly where that was. She also had a suspicion that these odd floating orbs would not appear for simply anyone, only the people who the oracle had granted access to. So, she knew she was fated to be inside that cold, dark, empty temple, even though under normal circumstances, it would have frightened and unnerved her. The dark, after all, always had.

As she followed the lights, the sound of her footsteps upon the floor, which had up until this point, echoed as if she were in a long cave, began to even out. The *tip-tap* on the floor began to *decrescendo* from the huge, booming sound it had been to a light patter on the stone. This, she
knew, was the end of the hallway which she seemed to have been going down for an eternity. But what she would face after it, she did not know. Her heart pounded at the thought of a new unknown but not with fear; with anticipation. Then, when the next light flared awake, she saw a large door towering in front of her.

Christine did not move for a moment. She did not know what to do. The orb quivered in front of her as she reached her hand out, brushing her fingertips against the metal of the door. It felt hot against her fingertips, so hot that she drew them back to herself, cradling her hand against her breast, more out of shock than pain. Metal was not generally hot, especially when the air around it was so cold. Carefully, she reached out again and touched the brass, this time prepared for the heat that seared against her palm. It felt like there was a fire behind the door—a strong, raging fire that would soon burn down the whole temple. She pulled her hand away again. A surge of uncertainty hit her—for the first time since she had entered the near dream-like state the lights had induced upon her: she had no way of knowing what this door hid until she opened it.

The light danced and flickered again, unlike its usually steady counterparts, fluttering towards the door. Christine knew what it wanted her to do—to open the door and go inside—but she was not sure if that was what she wanted, not yet anyway. Her hand had somehow made its way towards her mouth and Christine began to chew on her nails, thinking. She stared at that hot, brass door for a long time, prolonging her decision. But she knew she must go in—for there was no other way. One glance behind her told her that the lights that had guided her to this point had vanished, leaving her in total darkness, except her one light. Something told her that if she were to try and find her way back, she would have to do it blind. She had no other choice, except to open the door and see what lay behind it. Taking a deep breath, she reached out, her hand inches from the door. Then, at the same moment she was about to push it open and hear her destiny, something from the inside shoved the door open.

The room she saw beyond the doors was different from all the rest of the temple she had seen up until then. It was bathed in rich warm light from a thousand torches lining the walls and it smelled strongly of incense and spices and smoke, not the sickly abandoned smell she had encountered earlier. Furthermore, it was not abandoned. There was a man standing in the doorway, his fingers pressed into a steeple in front of him, wrapped in a dark cloak that almost made him look like a shadow in the torch light. His eyes surveyed her coolly and indifferently for a moment, during which time she was too surprised to do much of anything, before he said in high and rather reedy voice: “Enter.”

Christine entered.

“You have come to see the oracle,” he said; he did not ask it. Christine nodded, although she was not sure why she answered him, because she was quite sure from the way he spoke that he already knew.

“What is your name?” the priest asked, and at the same moment, two more men, also dressed in dark, billowing cloaks, emerged from a room Christine had not noticed before, the door hidden behind a cloak made of animal skin. Christine told the priest her name, all the while keeping her eyes trained on the other two priests. They regarded her just as coldly as the first, their faces betraying no emotion.

“Have you brought a sacrifice to appease the gods, Christine?” The priest looked her up and down and the look on his face told that he knew she had nothing on her person with which to make a sacrifice. He frowned at her.

“I—I have brought nothing, no. I am sorry.” Christine grabbed onto the skirt of her chiton to keep
her hands from shaking. She knew the priests already thought badly of her, although for which reasons she knew not, and she could not bear to give them any more reasons to do so.

“You must give something to the gods.” The man began to pace in front of her, his hands still steepled together. “If you have nothing, then it seems that the only thing you have left to offer is yourself.”

Christine felt cold fear run through her and she gripped her dress tighter, wishing that she could go back to that dark hallway with those peaceful floating lights, away from these cruel men with their cold eyes and dark cloaks. “Oh, I… Yes, I suppose so, yes.”

The priest stopped moving, turning his face towards her once more, fixing her with the sort of stare a predator might give its prey before it kills it. After a long period of silence, during which time the other two priests had both come to stand with the first, the first priest told Christine to please hold out her hand, so that she could become a human sacrifice. Christine, her hands shaking so badly that she knew there was no way to conceal it, did so, wondering if these men were going to kill her. Trying not to cry, she squeezed her eyes shut, her heart thumping wildly within her, waiting for the worst. She felt the man take her palm in his sweaty, meaty hands and heard the sound of metal on metal, a knife being drawn from its sheath. Surely, this was the end; surely, he was about to slit her throat and toast to the gods with her blood. Surely, she was about to die.

A sharp pain cut across her palm. Christine, in shock, snapped her eyes open in time to see a short knife ending its short journey across the length of her palm, a line of red already following it. He had cut her hand. She was not dead! Had the situation not been as serious as it was, Christine would have collapsed to the floor to catch her breath and recover. But now was not the time, and so she stood, her hand still captured in the priest’s, a thin stream of hot, red blood falling from her palm. It dripped onto the floor, echoing across the near silent chamber, the drops that fell collecting together in a dark puddle on the white marble floor. She shivered at that sight of the red puddle staring back at her.

“That is all we need,” said another priest, this one a tall, and rather bulky-looking figure with a deep, soothing voice. The first priest, who was still holding her bloodied hand, dropped it, letting Christine pull it back to herself and squeeze it into a tight fist to stop the bleeding. Still shaking slightly, she looked up at the three priests, too frightened to ask what would happen next but curious to know all the same.

The same tall priest with the deep voice told her before she could find the courage to ask. “Now, you have given us payment enough so that we may consult the oracle. What do you wish to ask her?”

Christine stopped, thinking about what she truly wanted to ask the oracle for the first time. Her father wanted to know if the gods were angry with him, if that was why she was not yet married, and what he could then do to appease them and give her a comfortable life. But ultimately, Christine was more concerned with whether she would ever find love, not if the gods were angry. That was what she wanted the most—to be loved by someone, and to love them just as deeply. She wanted the happiness that her sisters so often spoke of, she wanted to experience the joy of marriage, to understand that sort of smile she only ever saw on those who were in love. That seemed, to her, the highest good in the world, the most wonderful thing a person could ever experience and she had to know if she would ever experience it herself, despite her five failed marriages.

Taking great care to word her question well, Christine said slowly, tasting each word on her lips, “I wish to ask if…. If I shall ever find love.” She stopped but quickly added, “Or if I have done some
crime to anger the gods, which has caused them to refuse me the honor of ever being married. That is what I wish to ask.”

The first priest turned to the second priest with the deep voice, and for a moment the two consulted each other in a whisper. The third priest, who had remained silent since her arrival, glared down at her menacingly, his arms crossed in front of him. Christine, who was growing increasingly more uncomfortable at being regarded so closely and coldly, attempted a tight-lipped smile that she was sure must have betrayed how frightened she felt. The priest did not respond. Before the situation could get any worse, however, the second priest straightened, and, folding his hands neatly behind his back, said, “We shall consult the oracle with the questions you have asked. Follow us.” With those short words, the three left the large, circular room and entered the room behind the curtain, the tall priest motioning for Christine to follow, still frowning at her, and she did so, slowly slipping under the animal skin curtain that the third priest held open for her.

The first thing Christine noticed about the room behind the curtain was the copious amounts of smoke that drifted through the air, filling her lungs with heavy fumes and strange smells, so overpowering that she thought she might choke on them. She doubled over coughing and when she resurfaced, noticed the same strange floating lights that had led her through the temple. In the thick smoke, they almost could have been candles, their bases obscured by the mist, except for their golden hue, much unlike the soft whites and oranges of candles, and their lack of flickering. Even through the thick smoke, Christine could see the walls of the room, illuminated somewhat by the light-orbs. This room, too, was a circle, but significantly smaller than the first, probably only ten feet from wall-to-wall, just barely enough room to fit herself and the three priest comfortably. But there was a fifth person, she realized with a start. The oracle herself! A shadow moved in the middle of the room, short and low to the ground, and took the vague shape of a human form as if grew, rising from the floor to its full height. As the girl stood, Christine was able to make out her features. She wore a white gown and had grey hair, although her face appeared to be of a young girl, perhaps no older than Christine herself. Her body, too, was young looking, with no wrinkles or creases to be seen. Other than her grey hair, the oracle seemed the pinnacle of youth.

In the dim light, Christine saw the first priest move close to the girl, lean over, and whisper something in her ear. Immediately, the girl’s eyes, which had previously been closed, shot open, bloodshot and crazed, and her head jerked back, as if someone behind her had yanked on her grey hair. Christine took a step backward, steadying herself, trying to hear the priest’s words. After a few seconds, however, the priest, seemingly done with what Christine supposed was her question, tilted his head away from the oracle, although he remained standing very near to her. For a moment, neither the priests, nor the girl, nor Christine moved. Then, suddenly, the oracle’s head snapped forward, her eyes focusing on Christine. Christine’s heart jumped in her chest at those crazed eyes staring at her, freezing her in her tracks like a gorgon, turning her to stone. After what seemed hours of suffering under that red stare, the first priest leaned back over, severing the oracle’s gaze as he moved in front of her face, as if awaiting a whispered message like the one he had given her.

But the oracle gave him no such message. In a flash, she shoved the priest away from her, sending him into a sprawling heap on the stone ground, where he lay for a moment, too shocked to move. The oracle, meanwhile, stepped over the first priest’s small body until she stood in front of Christine, so close that the two could have touch, so close that Christine could smell the raw, heavy fumes on the oracle’s breath. The girl with grey hair grabbed her arm tightly, so tightly that Christine could feel her nails digging into her flesh, keeping her from running out of that strange, smoke-filled room and out of the temple, although she struggled weakly.

“Christine, daughter of Galenus,” she said in a low, raspy voice that sounded like metal grating upon metal, like the strings of a harp breaking, like fire singeing flesh. “You have asked my if you
will ever find love. This is the answer I have for you.” By this time, the first priest had found his legs again, and the other two priests implored her to stop talking, that this was not the way these things were done, that they must speak the prophecy for her. “Let me speak!” the oracle hissed, silencing the men. “Let me speak for myself this time. I do not need you hanging over me, acting as if I cannot be trusted to deliver a message myself. I do not need your interpretations.” The oracle spat out the last word, with such loathing that the priests did not dare stop her and when she turned back to face Christine, they did not try to reason with her again.

“Christine, daughter of Galenus,” the oracle began again, and Christine was suddenly stuck with the realization that she had not told the priests nor the oracle her father’s name. “The gods have found favor with you and you shall be married. You shall marry a monster who has no face, but who neither things living nor dead can resist. You shall find him when you are chained but free, when it is night but still day, when he is known but unseen. He shall carry death in his hands, but bring you life and you shall carry life in your hands, but bring him death. This is to be marriage; this is to be your fate.”

And with that, the oracle collapsed to the stone floor, silent and still.

Chapter End Notes

A quick note on oracles: Oracles were people, not just a specific place, although the temple of the oracle is sometimes just called the oracle. The oracle told her prophecy to the priests, who would then relate it to the person who had come to hear their fate. Although oracles were consulted by all the great men and women of their day, they were also consulted by common people, asking about love and other such things, so Christine’s experience would not have been too out of the ordinary. Now, many historians speculate that the oracles themselves were pretty drugged up on natural, intoxicating gases, and that’s how they were able to deliver such otherworldly predictions, but who really knows?

And don’t worry-- the prophecy itself makes things sound like they will be quite different than they will actually end up being.
An Uncertain and Unwelcome Future

Chapter Summary

In which Christine deals with the fact that her prophecy is not what she wanted to hear, and is visited by an old friend...

Chapter Notes

[6/30/17] Okay this note is only for the people who were following the original story and hope to pick off where they left off. If you have only been reading the newer version, then you're fine-- just ignore this. If you haven't... Well, I hate to be that author who's all: "Hey, I re-wrote this entire fic and I'm afraid you're gonna have to start again at the beginning," but I re-wrote this entire fic and I'm afraid you're gonna have to start again at the beginning. Otherwise, things just really won't make sense. I am very sorry for the inconvenience, though, and I hope none of you are too annoyed with me. On the upside, the last time I updated this was in, like, March anyway so it's been a while since you've read this (hopefully). If all goes well, this won't happen again. Lately, I've been writing at least 1,000 words a-day, so hopefully the updates will be far more consistent than they were last time, and hopefully the writing slightly better, too. Thank you for your patience and understanding!

Christine ran. She did not turn when she heard the priest shouting at the oracle, nor when the oracle rise to her feet, shouting back at them, nor even when she heard the girl saying her name. She ran and she did not turn back.

Her path through the temple was considerably more difficult than her first trip had been, namely due to the fact that there were no longer any floating orbs to guide her. The long hallway was completely shrouded in darkness, but although she could not see where she was going, Christine did not slow her pace. There were few—at least five—times where she tripped over objects she could not see in the dark, most of those times resulting in bleeding knees and palms. But those were small pains in comparison with the despair inside of her. A monster. She was to marry a monster!

She tripped over another object—what felt like the base of a large column—but crawled into motion even before she had managed to stand again, despite the warm blood she could feel running off of her ankle. She had to get out of the temple—that was all she knew. She had to distance herself from this crazed oracle with her wide, blood-shot eyes and grey hair, those three priests with their monotonous voices and neatly folded hands. They must all be insane, she decided. That was the only explanation for the oracle’s prophecy. It had made no sense, all riddles and contradictions, and it had been so horrible. To think that she would marry a monster! Oh no, it was too horrible to bear thinking about. It would not happen, for she could not let it happen. She would simply never choose to marry a monster, and then her prophecy would be nothing—only meaningless words that her and her future husband, who she would most certainly would have a face, could have a laugh over. It would not be anything more. She would not allow it.
A thin beam of light crept into Christine's vision and, without a second thought, she ran to it, desperate to be rid of this horrid, evil place forever. Perhaps the gods were testing her. Yes, perhaps that was it. Perhaps they had decided to test her devotion to them by giving her such a horrible prophecy to see if she would resent them, or even hate them afterwards. If that was the case, however, she decided that she would not. She would continue to worship the gods like she had not even received the prophecy, and would not give them a chance to find fault with her. She would be so good—the best mortal that had ever lived—and they would love her, and make her queen over every land. Perhaps she would not marry at all and devote her life to the gods instead. Perhaps then they would be satisfied with her and she would pass this absurd test they were giving her. And if she devoted her life to the gods, she could not marry a faceless monster. Whatever option guaranteed that her prophecy would be void, that was the option she would take. She would rather die than see this come to pass.

By this time, Christine had reached those great, brass doors and flung them open, leaving them clanging and creaking on their hinges. The light that streamed over her from the sun was a welcome change from those strange temple lights—those false things that dwelt there. Oh, the sun! She did not think she had ever been as happy to see the sun as she was at that moment. Nearly crying with relief, she bounded down the last few marble steps and lay down in the grass, running her fingers through the soft green blades, which although the winter wind had chilled them, were the most wonderful things she had ever felt.

“Oh, Ophelia!” she cried, turning onto her stomach to face the donkey, still catching her breath. “Oh, Ophelia, it was so awful. Never go to an oracle. They are horrible, and they tell lies, and other awful things. They are all false! Let’s never come back here—what do you say?”

The donkey said nothing, but turned away and looked at a nearby tree.

Moving into a sitting position, Christine carried on oblivious to Ophelia’s lack of attention. “It was so dark in there! And so cold! I shall never return, not ever! We should go back home now. I do not think I can stand being another second in this wretched place!” With one final glare at the cold, white building, Christine ran to Ophelia, adjusting the bags so that she could sit on the animal’s back. Even now, outside of the temple, Christine could feel a sort of coldness in her that her nothing to do with the season, because she still had her new cloak wrapped around her. It was a coldness that had reminded her of her mother’s body, after it had died, the coldness in the fingertips and face. It reminded her of the feeling of the abandoned forge on the edge of town she had been to once, the touch of cold, cold iron that had been made to be hot, to be in use, to be full of sparks and purpose, but was now empty and meaningless. There was something inherently wrong about that kind of chill that crept through her and, although she could not say why she felt it, Christine knew she needed to go and get as far away from this place as possible. So, tugging the cloak tighter around her shoulders, she and Ophelia began their long walk home.

It was, in fact, Christine thought as they descended down the mountain, much colder than it had been the day before. The sky was grey and cloudy, the sun shining through in a rare patch of blue. The wind whistled through the trees and the air nipped at her face. Fall, it seemed, had slipped away for good now, and winter was coming. Had she not had the cloak, the wind truly would have frozen her to the bone and she was very thankful for this new gift. Erik had been kind to give it to her.

But what of Erik? A frown creased her brow as Ophelia trudged through that same grove in which Christine had first spoken to that beautiful voice. Who was he? She knew next to nothing of him, other than that he possessed the voice of a god and that he was kinder to her than she had deserved, by giving her this cloak and a place to sleep. And that he, perhaps, felt something for her. He had
said as much last night, when she had confessed—oh, she had nearly forgotten about that embarrassment—that she felt some connection with him. He had said he felt it too, although perhaps he was simply saying that to make her stop talking.

But, more importantly, what was Erik in relation to her prophecy? Christine glanced at the now receding grove behind, searching for any sign of the man who had visited her last night but saw nothing. The golden eyes that watched her from deep in the shadows of the woods were, after all, very hard to see if one did not know what to look for. She was oblivious to them, lost in thought. She had not seen Erik’s face. That was not to say that he had not had one but she had certainly not seen it while conversing with him. Erik was not a monster, though—she was sure of it. He had been far too kind to her to be. And, moreover, she, a living thing, had been able to resist him. He had not held some sort of power over her, dictating her actions, or anything of that kind. So, certainly Erik could not be a faceless monster, whom neither things living nor dead could resist. She had also already met him and, not being chained at the time of their meeting, decided there was simply no way Erik could be the man her prophecy had spoken of. However, just to be safe, she thought that it would be best if she did not come to him again, because the prophesied facelessness of her future husband and the fact that she had not seen Erik’s face were too similar for her comfort.

Ophelia slowed on the path and Christine gave her a light kick to keep her moving through the forest path. Behind her, those same golden eyes that had watched her coming and going, flickered out of view again, disappearing into the dark forest. The prophecy had said that her husband would hold death in his hands, but bring her life, and that she would hold life in her hands, but bring her husband death. This line had frightened her more than any other. Did the oracle mean to say that she would kill her own husband? Perhaps, if he was a monster, as the oracle said, it was possible that she might, but killing one’s husband brought on horrible consequences from the gods. Christine had heard tales of people, after killing their spouses, being plagued by the Furies for the rest of their days, and having to endure other horrible things. She did not want to suffer through that. But what else could such a line mean, if she was not to kill her husband? And, moreover, what did it mean that her husband held death in his hands? Would he kill her, as well? Christine was not sure. She could not even hope to understand what the prophecy meant, but she worried about it all the same. As she and Ophelia walked, her mind could not seem to find anything better to do than circulate through the words of the oracle, over and over again, playing like a repetitive tune in her mind. And the more she thought, the more unanswerable questions she thought of. And the more unanswerable questions she thought of, the more Christine grew frightened. Frightened and angry that she was destined to have this horrible fate, that she could have had any number of handsome suitors but was cursed with this, that she could not understand the oracle, try as she might. She wished she had never come there in the first place. Her life would be much better now if she had not.

On the horizon, the shape of loosely scattered houses appeared, filling her with relief. She knew this town—this was her home. She knew which alley ways to run through to reach the hidden garden within the walls of the governor’s home. She knew which shop owners would give her free tastes and trinkets if she asked. She knew which cobblestones shook when she stepped on them, which people had a tendency to dump waste from their windows. This was familiar territory to her, something she did not have to endless puzzle over to understand. This was clear and real and certain. This was good and true. She breathed in the stale air that she had breathed for so many years now and smiled. This was home.

The journey through home was quick and easy. She took a path that cut through the most commonly used streets to ensure that she could get home in the shortest amount of time, and that she would not have to stop and speak with anyone. Her mind was reeling from her trip and it was not ready nor able carry on a conversation about the mundane things in life that Christine knew
would ensure if she met an acquaintance. So, after passing through the most populated part of the
city into the quiet, calm outskirts, Christine was relieved no such thing had happened.

“Come on, Ophelia,” she whispered, stroking the donkey’s soft ears. “We are almost home. Just a
few steps more and we will be there.”

Nearly as soon as she had told Ophelia that, her own house came into view, emerging over the hill
in a proud show of safety and comfort. Christine’s throat constricted with the feelings that came
with the sight of it—of the overwhelming relief that flooded through her. It was nearly enough to
make her jump from Ophelia’s back and run home, tears in her eyes, the breath burning in her
lungs. But it was not, and she sat on the donkey’s back, approaching her house with all the dignity
of a queen. Ophelia, herself, had even quickened her pace, knowing this place to be her home, and
being anxious herself to get back to familiar grounds. Without being led or directed where to go,
the donkey trotted over to the side of the house where she knew the stable to be, happy once she
was back in the hay that she knew, with a trough of water at her side.

Once Ophelia had settled back into her home, Christine leapt off the donkey’s back, pulling the
travelling bags after her in such haste that she dropped a large chunk of goat cheese into the stable
hay without noticing. Cloak billowing behind her, she raced to the side door and flung it open. As
she walked across the threshold of her house that she knew so well with all its creaking walls and
dirty floors, all the confusion and anxiety washed off of her, as if stepping through the doorway
had cleaned her anew. She was home and within these walls, she would be safe from all
prophecies, all faceless monsters, all unnamed and unknown threats. There was nothing that could
harm her here, not where she belonged, not where these familiar walls protected her. Sighing
heavily, she turned to drop her new cloak over the side of the wooden table on her left, and, when
she straightened, was met with the face of her sister, Eurydice, who seemed to have appeared from
thin air.

“Eurydice! Oh, I am sorry to have been gone this long. It is only that so many things happened and
I could not—”

“Christine.” Eurydice grabbed her hand tightly, her eyes opened too large and a forced smile on her
face. Something was out of place. A sudden rush of fear jolted through Christine. Was it Father?
Had he gotten worse?

“What is wrong?” She started to ask, fear beginning to form a pit in her stomach, but Eurydice cut
her off again. There was something she was clearly trying to communicate but Christine could not
understand what.

“Christine,” she said again, her words over-enunciated, her smile plastered on her face. “There is
someone here to see you.”

Before Christine even had the time to think of who her sister might be referring to, she saw a flash
of blonde hair pop out from behind a wall, followed by the form of a boy she knew better than the
back of her hand. Her hand stifled the cry of delight that sprung from her at his familiar face.

“Can it be?” he asked, smiling that half-smile she knew so well, his eyes light and playful. “Can it
be Christine? I have been waiting to see her beautiful face again for so long that I can hardly
believe this is really her. Tell me I am not seeing visions, Eurydice. Tell me this is real.”

“Oh, Rhal!” Christine cried, unable to contain herself any longer. Her hands found his calloused
ones and in a moment, her arms were pulling him close in a tight hug. All fear, all worry, all unrest
were distant memories when his arms were wrapped so tightly around her. All the world was gone
and it was only the two of them for a moment, holding on to each other so tightly. “Oh, Rhal, I
have missed you so!” She cried into his shoulder.

He sighed in reply, his hand brushing over her shoulders and back, lost in the wonderful safeness of that embrace. “And I you, Chris.”

Rhal was, of course, a pleasant surprise to Christine—perhaps one of the most pleasant she had had since his initial return months previous—but at present, she could not spend much time with him, although she wished otherwise. Her first and foremost duty was to her sick father, who had not gotten any worse during her trip to the oracle but also no better. He still remained bed-ridden and sore, chilled and tired. His time on this earth, Christine knew, was running out and she was determined to be by his side for every one of his last seconds.

“Would you like me to come with you?” Rhal was asking as the two of them stood outside of her father’s bedroom. Rhal’s hand had clasped onto hers after their embrace, in what Christine thought would be a simple, short squeeze of reassurance, but he had not released her hand since, still holding tightly to it, as if to make up for the distance that had been between them for so long.

Christine squeezed his hand. “No, Rhal, I think it would be better for me to see him alone for now. There are some things I must speak with him about and I think it would be best if I did so alone for right now. I’m sorry.” She moved to separate herself from him but he did not let go of her hand.

“Christine,” his eyes moved down to their joined hands and with a sigh, he dropped his hand from hers. “I am truly, truly sorry that you are going through all of this.” Christine tried to interrupt him, and tell him that it was not his fault, that he had nothing to be sorry for, but he continued regardless. “Please listen to me—I am serious. If there is ever anything I can do to make things easier or better for you in any way, or if would just like to talk to someone, please do not hesitate to ask me. It is my duty to make you happy.”

“Oh,” Christine whispered, startled by his kindness, unsure how to respond to his generosity. “Rhal, really, that is too kind of you. I—Thank you,” she managed at last, tears welling up in her eyes.

He shook his head, the corners of his lips tilting up in a small smile. “Do not thank me. I am just doing what is right of me. Now, go see your father. I will not bother you further.”

Christine nodded, her hand already on the door but as he walked away from her, she gazed after him for a moment, stopping to take in the sight of his noble figure of the man who had captured her heart already. It was only once he had disappeared around the corner that she opened the door.

Her father was almost in the same position as the one she had left him in. He lay on his back, propped up with a mountain of pillows, one hand resting on his stomach, the other twined into his beard. The room smelled like ginger and candle wax and that odd stale smell that just seems to come with sickness that cannot be found anywhere else. When the door creaked close, he looked up and catching sight of his daughter, his eyes crinkled into that smile she knew so well, pushing up the corners of his mustache just slightly. His hands left their stations and he held them out wide, welcoming her in a tight hug.

“Christine, my daughter! You are home!” She nodded, disentangling herself from his arms. “I hope the journey was not too difficult for you,” he continued, speaking in a whisper to keep from straining his voice and causing another horrible coughing fit. “It certainly took you longer than I had hoped but here you are again, safe and sound, and in one piece. But tell me, did you see the oracle? And what did the priests tell you? I could not stop wondering about it while you were away—I had nothing else better to do, after all, other than to guess what the oracle had told you. Ah, but here you are! Tell me, Chris. Tell me what it told you, as much as you can remember.”
“Of course, Father,” she said. A feeling of dread had formed in her stomach, however, like a rock weighing her down from the inside. Up until now, the prophecy had been her own personal burden, one that she alone had borne, one that she alone had known about. But now, her father was asking her to share with him those things that no one else in the world knew, other than herself, the oracle, and the three priests. To tell another would mean that her prophecy—those horrible things the oracle had told her—would exist outside the realm of her mind and, in doing so, could not simply be denied by her willing them to be. If only she knew the prophecy, she could ignore it, live as if it did not exist, and push it away until it hopefully went away for good. That had been her hope. But now, her father was asking her to share what she knew and once she did that, she could never go back. Then, all her family would expect her to marry some faceless brute and would expect her to do so with her head held high, knowing that she was fulfilling a divine statement sent by the gods. Oh, she did not want to! She wanted to live her life in peace, without anyone expecting her to marry horrible men, without any pressure to ‘hold life in her hands’—whatever that meant—, and without anyone expecting her to do such.

She must have paused a few moments too long because her father, looking at her with great concern in his eyes, whispered, “Chris? Look at me, dear. I do not know what this oracle has said to you. I do not know if it told you something good or bad, frightening or wonderful. But I do know this: whatever it said to you, it is not in your hands. Whatever it was, it does not determine what sort of person you are or will become. You do not need to be afraid to tell me what you heard. I do not care what it said to you, even if it told you that you had committed the worst crime known to man. I love you. I do not care. But, I do need you to tell me what you heard so that I can accommodate for what will happen, before anything happens to me. Please, tell me.”

Christine looked at her father with his sad, pleading eyes, looked at his hands clasped tightly around hers. She could have made something up that would have made him happy—perhaps a prophecy that said she would marry Rhal and be happy with him until they died. He would not have ever known she had not told the truth and he would have been so happy. He need not have had to worry about her well-being at all and, when he did die, he would rest in peace if she but simply changed the words ever so slightly. He would never know. But, looking into his fading eyes, she could not bring herself to lie to him. No matter what the consequences were, she could not bring herself to do it, not when his eyes were so weary, not when the time she had left with him was so short.

“It was so horrible,” she heard herself saying faintly, as if she was listening to another person talking in a different room. “It was so dark everywhere and there were these floating lights that led me through the temple. I do not even know where they came from. And the doors to the oracle—oh, they were so hot! They nearly burned my hands. And they cut my hands—those horrible priests! Look, Father.” She held out the palm of her hands so he could see the long, thin line that cut across it. “And the oracle… She had the strangest grey hair but she looked as if she were only a child. I did not understand. It was so strange and frightening I just wanted to run out until I was back home, and never look back again!”

“I know,” her father murmured, running his thumb over her un-scarred hand. “I know. But you must tell me what she said, Chris.”

She sucked in a deep breath and closed her eyes. “I think… yes. I think I still remember it all word for word.” She stopped, trying to ready herself to actually tell her father the prophecy, but then, blurted, “Oh, it was so horrible! I can’t, Father! I can’t! Do you think… do you think I will come true? I cannot bear it if it does.”

Her father sighed, his forehead creasing. “Christine. You must tell me the prophecy before I can tell you whether I think it will come true. Come, come—it cannot be as bad as you are making it.”
“But it is!” she cried, turning away from him again, unable to look at him. “It is horrible!”

“Christine.” Her father said again, his voice stern. “Take a deep breath. There you go. Now, this is something you must do. If you tell me, perhaps it will seem less horrible than it does now. We can work it out together, perhaps, and you will not need to be alone. But, that cannot happen if you will not tell me what the oracle said.”

Finally, with a few more deep sighs and hesitations, she relented. “I... I remember the oracle grabbed me by the arm and she looked at me with these large, bloodshot eyes. She said ‘Christine, daughter of Galenus’—I did not tell them your name, but they knew. I do not know how. But she said that and then she said that she had an answer for me, about if I would ever be married.”

Closing her eyes, Christine thought back and the scene replayed itself so vividly in her mind it was almost as if she was in the smoke-filled room all over again. The words seemed to spill from her mouth without her control, as if the oracle was speaking through her, and she was powerless to stop it. “She said: ‘the gods have found favor with you and you shall be married. You shall marry a monster who has no face, who neither things living nor dead can resist. You shall find him when you are chained but free, when it is night but still day, when he is known but unseen. He shall carry death in his hands, but bring you life, and you shall carry life in your hands, but bring him death. This is to be your marriage; this is to be your fate.’”

Her father stared at her, his mouth slightly agape, his eyes wide and unbelieving. He started once, as if he were about to speak, but he did not.

“Tell me that it is not so horrible, now,” Christine began, her voice low. “What consolation can you give me now? What deliverance can you offer me? My life is to be ruined and there is nothing that you nor anyone can do to stop it.”

“Oh, Chris...” her father began, after stifling a cough. “You do not know that yet. Perhaps,” he offered weakly, “it means something entirely different than what it seems. Something good.”

“How can it mean anything else? It could not have been more clear—I will marry a monster. There is nothing good about that—nothing. I do not know what I will do.”

“At least you have Rhal now,” her father sighed, glancing at the door, listening to the faint, happy voices of Rhal and her sisters just beyond. “Despite what this says, I cannot believe he will desert you. He is a good boy, Chris. I cannot think he will let you suffer if he has any choice in the matter.”

“Maybe but what if he does not? What then, Father? What will I do then?”

Her father shut his eyes, looking more tired than Christine had seen him look in many years. “I do not know, Chris. I do not know.”

And they sat there for some time, neither knowing what to say or do, both just as distressed as the other. No words of comfort were offered, no alternative suggestions as to what could be done. They simply sat, Christine’s hand in her father’s, her arm resting on his.

It was Eurydice who interrupt that moment between them—that moment that was full of both despair and tenderness, love and sorrow. It was time for supper. But, seeing father and daughter sitting together so forlornly, Eurydice paused, looking as if she wanted to ask what was wrong, but, at a shake of her father’s head, she left them in peace.

“Come, Father,” Christine said, standing. “You had best wash up before supper.”
Supper that night was interesting affair. Firstly, because of Rhalamanthos’ presence, which, Christine had gathered, had been entirely unexpected until he showed up at their door. Secondly, because the whole family was there, which was a rare occasion due to the fact the Eurydice and Psyche both had families of their own in town to provide for, and because Father was often too sick to join the rest of them around the table. More often than not, Christine ate her dinner alone, attended by a few servants, or with her father in his room. Thirdly, because both Christine and her father, who were generally both rather light-hearted people, looked pale and worried, and sat at the table in a sullen state of silence.

“So, Rhal,” Psyche began as she passed a loaf of bread around the table. “Tell us about the war! I think I speak for all of us when I saw that we are simply dying to know what it was like.” Eurydice nodded, but neither Christine nor her father responded in the least. Psyche carried on, oblivious to the silence that clearly disproved her earlier statement. “We do not get much news of what happens outside of the city, you know.”

“Yes, I would imagine so,” Rhal replied, glancing at Christine, who was more interesting in her grapes than she was in Rhal. He continued on despite. “Well, being a soldier is an exciting business. There is war, of course, but even when one is not fighting, one must remain alert and ready in case some situation should arise. There was one time, you know, when a whole group of us had to get up in the middle of the night, no warning at all, and try to stop Spartans who had gathered in the square. So, of course, we were half-dressed, scrambling to get our swords, not even bothering with armor—you know, that sort of thing.” He laughed half-heartedly and glanced at Christine again, who still showed no interest in his stories. Rhal cleared his throat and brought his story to a grinding halt, seeing that it was being so ill-received by the only one who he truly wanted to hear it. “Needless to say, every moment of it was an adventure.”

“Oh, yes, it does sound like one,” Psyche said, giving him the charming smile that Christine was denying him. “Tell us more!”

“Well,” Christine had still not looked up. “I think the worst day of the true fighting—as we called it—was without argument the second, although the first was a great deal of work, too. We were all excited, though, and ready to shed some blood for our fatherland on the first day, so things seemed less grueling. When we first got there…”

The words seemed to pass straight over Christine’s head. She heard Rhal talk of the military and of other such things she could scarcely understand—of armor, weapons, fallen comrades and generals, military tactics, and democracy. She could not understand a word of it. Of course, she did try to listen. Out of the corner of her eye, she kept noticing poor Rhal glancing at her, trying very hard to gain her attention. She did feel bad about the fact that he could clearly tell that she did not care at all about what she was saying but her mind was wandering. One cannot simply hear such a prophecy as Christine had and then, go about their normal life immediately after, carrying on and smiling as if all was the same. For it was not and Christine knew, somewhere deep within her that her life would never be the same, now that she had heard her prophecy. It was as if all her hope in the future had vanished, all her curiosity and wonder killed. It was the same sort of feeling one might have when one goes to read a new book but then by some accident opens to the ending and reads the cliff-hanger that the author has so careful concealed until the end. She heard someone say her name and started, putting an end to her thoughts.

“Christine,” Psyche was saying, still attempting to carry on conversation even though everyone at the table seemed keen on avoiding it. “I was just wondering: how did your trip to the oracle go? I did not think that you were gone so long! I am glad to see you home safe now. But, I think you did promise me that you would tell me your prophecy and I am so curious to hear it. Will you tell us, dear? I am sure everyone is just as anxious as myself to hear it.”
Christine looked up and was met with the eyes of everyone else sitting around the table, staring at her in anticipation. “Oh, I…” She looked helplessly at her father, wanting more than anything to not have to repeat her prophecy again, especially not with Rhal present, when she still had plans to marry him. If he heard her prophecy, she was sure he would leave her forever, thinking that the gods could not want him to marry her, since he was by no means a faceless monster whom neither things living nor dead could resist. And until a great and powerful force came between Christine and Rhal, she was determined that she would marry him.

Her father cleared his throat and the eyes turned to him simultaneously. “I do not think Christine wishes to dwelling on the oracle at present,” was all he said, his voice feeble and weak.

“Oh, Chris, why not?” Psyche cried. “It sounds so very interesting! Why will you not tell us?”

Christine began picking savagely at her finger nails beneath the table. “It… The oracle, that is, ended up being a good bit different than I had thought. And I do not think it would be best for me to tell you all right now. Perhaps some other time.” She tried to smile but, judging from the sympathetic look Rhal gave her, failed in her efforts.

“No! You promised me you would tell me! You must tell me!” Psyche continued, ignoring the pale look that crossed over Christine’s face, and Eurydice’s hushed pleas for her to stop. Rhal, too, looked immensely uncomfortable being caught in the middle of the trouble.

“But Psyche was not done. Her voice took on a teasing edge, as if she could not see the great distress that her sister was in, that everyone at the table, in fact, was in, as she said, “No! You must tell us now! I want to—“

“Stop it!” Christine screamed, jumping to her feet so suddenly she nearly fell over again. Everyone at the table was looking at her in shock, except her father who sat with his eyes averted, picking at his food. “I told you enough, Psyche. How many times must I tell you before you will listen?”

With that, she left the room, moving as fast as she could to escape that room, to escape Rhal. He must think that she was such a fool now, for blowing up as she had. Oh, she had acted no better than a child! Her father would be so ashamed. She fell onto her bed, thinking that she was going to cry, but found that no tears would come. She had felt far too much already that day and it seemed her body was unable to feel much more. So, she lay, numb, on her mattress, thinking of things that had come to pass, and of things that had yet to, both of which she found she could not change. It was as if she had become prisoner to her own fate.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, Rhal. I'm honestly really excited to write Rhal's character. I think he'll be a lot of fun, which means a lot, coming from a person who is usually not too interested in his character. But for all of you who are (and there's absolutely nothing wrong with that... I just have issues), there will be no Raoul (Rhal)- bashing or anything like that.

How are you liking this Greek AU? I always appreciate your feedback!
Chapter Summary

In which Rhal tells Christine dark stories of monsters and Christine deals with some of the harsher realities of life...

Chapter Notes

Unfortunately, this is the last chapter that I'm posting tonight, because it is 3:49 AM, and my eyes are burning, but I promised myself I would not sleep until I posted all of these. After this, the chapters will come out individually, probably about every week or so, as long as I keep write 1,000 words a-day, and I do intent to. That being said, I hope you enjoy this one...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next week or so passed in relative harmony—no one brought up this little episode that had happened over dinner, not even Psyche. No one, moreover, had asked Christine for any more details concerning her prophecy, a fact for which she was grateful beyond measure. She knew that her sisters, perhaps Rhal too, were curious about what the oracle had told her, especially considering how she had reacted when they had inquired about it, but they did not try to satisfy that curiosity. Several times, Psyche made some rather obvious hints about wanting to hear the prophecy, saying things like, “sisters do not keep secrets from sisters” and “Some things are meant to be shared, not stored away.” Besides that, however, the matter seemed to have settled itself. Even for Christine, the prophecy began to trouble her less and less, reaching the point where she did not think of it at all some days, and others only when something reminded her of it.

However, since her visit to the oracle, Christine had been plagued by strange dreams. None of them were exactly nightmares, or the sort of thing that made her awake screaming, covered in a cold sweat, but they were the sort of dreams that leave a vaguely unsettling feeling when one wakes up, even when one forgets what the dream was about. Her dreams the first few days after her trip to the oracle generally went something like this: she was in the woods, speaking with a man with the most magnificent and beautiful voice she had ever heard and she was laying on the ground, listening to him in perfect harmony, completely at ease. But then, suddenly, the voice would change from that beautiful masculine voice to a harsh, grating female one, and would begin repeating the words of her prophecy over and over, like some sort of disturbing chant. When this happened in her dreams, Christine was never very frightened, however, and, although when she heard the oracle’s voice, she lost the blissful haze that accompanied the man’s, she was not frightened and would simply sit and listen to the prophecy, hoping that it would eventually stop and that the man would come back. He never did. After nearly four days of this exact same dream, her dreams did have a slight change. In her new ones, she could hear the man’s voice again, just as she could in the first ones, but she was no longer in the forest. Instead, she was in a very dark place, so dark that she could not even truly figure out where she was, following that same string of light-orbs that had lead her into the oracle, trying to reach that man’s voice. She never could. In her dreams, she always had a feeling that he was just in front of her, that if she reached out her hands,
she would catch him, but no matter how much she reached, her fingertips never quite reached him. When she awoke, although she often forgot the specifics of the dreams and often just remembered small and hazy details, she always had the faintest feelings of disappointment and hopeless longing from wanting to touch that man, to feel some tangible evidence of his existence but never doing so. Each night, the man and his soft, hypnotizing tones continued to be an ever-present figure in Christine’s dreams.

Rhal, also, was an ever-present figure in Christine’s house over those weeks. He had sent to his father to say that he was staying with them and his father had approved, so Rhal saw no reason to leave. He enjoyed every minute of the time he spent with Christine, who proved to be just as adorable as companion as when he had left for the army. Her charms had not lessened in the least and Rhal found himself growing more and more fond of her with each passing day. They did not have much time to see each other, however, as she was often by her father’s bedside, helping him in whatever way she could, and Rhal was often out hunting for the family, because they still needed someone to provide for them, although they had told him many times that he should not consider himself forced to do any such thing. To make up for the lack of time to spend together, Rhal and Christine went on many walks, nearly every day when they were not too busy. They wandered around the hills sometimes, looking at the nature, sometimes through the city, but the scenery did not matter. The two were more enthralled looking at each other than anything else.

It was on one of these walks—this one through a nearby grove of trees—that Rhal said, after a long and comfortable silence, “Would you like to know why it is I have come here, Chris?”

She looked up at him, smiling, thinking that she knew where this was heading—that he was finally about to ask for her hand in marriage. Even after all the time he had stayed with her and her family, he had not brought up the topic of marriage or engagement and Christine was beginning to wonder why. She had considered that it was because of her father’s weakened state or perhaps because they had not been able to spend as much time together as they had on his previous visits before the war. Whatever the reason, Christine was growing more and more anxious for Rhal to propose. “Was it to see me?” She asked, playing ignorant.

Rhal paused, his steps ceasing for a moment as his brow furrow in concentration. “Well, yes, that too. Of course.” Christine felt her stomach drop. This conversation was not heading at all where she had hoped it would. She sighed and stopped, waiting for him to continue walking.

“But besides you,” Rhal continued, ignorant of the sinking disappointment that filled Christine. “I came for another reason. Would you like to know?” Christine mumbled that she did and Rhal continued. “It is really very interesting. I had heard reports of a monster running in loose in these parts.”

“A monster?” Christine asked, her disappointment still present but her curiosity piqued.

“Oh, yes,” Rhal said, and began to walk once more. “A very horrible kind, too. Like the kind the bards like to tell about in stories, but this one, I think, is true. I have heard it described as a sort of humanoid beast that can crawl around on all fours like a dog, but can stand and walk like a man, if it wishes. From what I have heard, it is a very tall, skinny thing with long limbs, so that it can use them to crawl around, and it has a long, pointy nose, rather like a beak. Its eyes glow in the darkness, the color of embers burning in a dying fire, swirling with all the hatred of the world, like black pits in its head. It is said to smell of death, so strongly that one can smell it from nearly a mile away, and that it can disappear at will, so its victims do not see it until it is already upon them.”

“That sounds horrible,” Christine said, linking her arm with Rhal’s and moving closer to him to
protect herself from the harsh winter air and from supposed monsters.

“Ah, but you have not heard the worst of it. They say it is a form of gorgon, this creature. Like Medusa. They say it can turn people to ash with just its eyes, so that the wind blows them away. No one ever finds its victims. They say that it lures them in with its voice—no one can resist its voice—and then, when it has them where it wants them—**bam!**” Christine jumped at the sudden noise “—it kills them. The worse thing about this beast, though, I am inclined to think, is that it does not kill for food or necessity or anything of that nature. How can it when its prey turns to ash? No. It kills for sport, for fun, Christine. It takes human lives for the sake of its own twisted enjoyment. And a beast like that must be stopped, if you ask me.”

“I agree, most certainly,” Christine replied, disappointment now almost entirely forgotten. She had always been one to be fascinated with myths and monsters, even if she was not entirely convinced she believed them. “It sounds very awful. And to think it has been around here this whole time… That is a frightening thought, indeed.”

“I intend to kill it.”

Christine waited for him to say more but he did not, so they continued walking in silence. Then, “So you truly believe in these rumors, then?”

“Oh, yes. A great many people told me about it while I was in Athens and none of them showed even the slightest doubt at its existence. Some of them even claimed to have seen it. Their descriptions were so vivid, Chris—to hear them, you would not doubt, either. When they told their stories, I almost felt as if I were there with them, trying to get away from the voice of this horrible beast, running for my life.” He sighed deeply. “Besides, there are many stories of people who angered the gods and were turned into other such creatures. Why should this not be true? Who knows what could be lurking in these woods right now, just out of sight. Who is to say that such a beast is not. Just because I have not seen it does not mean it is not there. And I intend to see it. I intend to see it and then, I intend to kill it. And I shall chop off its head and bring it back to you as a gift so that none can doubt it.”

“Oh, heavens, Rhal, I do not want any severed heads as gifts.” Christine shook her head. “I do not doubt that this thing could be real—it very well may be. Whether it is lurking around in these forests…” She shivered in spite of herself and drew her cloak—formerly Erik’s cloak—closer to her. “Well, I certainly hope not. But I have never even heard of such a beast and I have lived here my whole life. Surely, if it were real, I would have.”

“Perhaps, but it is possible it simply never came up in your conversations before. That sort of thing does happen. And just because you have not heard of it does not mean it is not real. You hardly leave your house, anyway. You are not a reliable source for these sorts of things.”

Christine gasped, pretending to be offended but, knowing that Rhal was only joking, did nothing more. “I do leave my house! I know nearly everyone in town by name! But perhaps, it is possible that the subject of this monster has never come up in my many conversations before.” She heard him chuckle, and, with a smile, she continued, half humoring him, half expressing serious concerns. “But even if it is real, how do you plan to catch it? And how do you intend to kill it if it is invisible and can kill with only one look? That seems very dangerous to me, Rhal. Perhaps this is the sort of creature that is not intended to be hunted. Perhaps we ought to just let it die on its own.”

“Nonsense! I am a solider, now, and soldiers do not turn away from distributing justice and peace. I have killed real men with my sword—how much worse can a beast be than those? I am not worried.” But he patted her head reassuringly all the same. “I am not sure how I plan to find it, though. I have thought about it some but I have not been able to come up with any solutions.
Perhaps, in time one will present itself. And until one does, I see no reason to waste my time trying to figure out how to kill it. Until then, I am perfectly happy staying here with you, Chris.”

Christine smiled at that and nuzzled closer to her dear companion. “And I with you.” She was content at present, having forgotten entirely about that mysterious, invisible stranger with his beautiful, disarming voice, that she had met with so long ago it seemed part of another life.

When they arrived back home, Christine, as she customarily did, went straight to her father’s room, only to find that he was visibly no worse (nor any better) than he had been when she had left him. Rhal came in with her, which was not something he often did, but on their way home, the two had decided to ask Christine’s father if he knew anything about Rhal’s monster. Christine could not believe she was the only one who had not heard of such a being, and that her own father certainly would be no wiser on the subject than she was, but Rhal thought otherwise. He was convinced that the monster was common knowledge, so her father must have heard of it. To settle their petty argument, they had decided to ask the older man.

“How was your walk?” Christine’s father asked as he saw the two of them enter his room, his eyes crinkling as he gave them a welcoming smile.

“Well enough,” Christine replied, kissing her father lightly on the forehead as she pulled off her woolen cloak. The room felt hot to her, since she had just come in from very cold temperatures, and the room itself was heated by a fire. She sat down on his bed, pulling her knees to her chest. “How are you feeling?”

“I feel rather cold myself. Help me with my blankets.” Christine did, pulling them up snuggly so that they were tucked carefully under his chin. “Ah, thank you.” He sighed. “That is much better.”

With her father taken care of, she cast a quick glance at Rhal, and began: “Father, you have not ever heard of a monster that lives around these parts, have you?”

“A monster?” He thought for a moment and then shook his head slowly. “No, no, I do not think I have. What sort of monster?”

Christine gave Rhal a triumphant look but he ignored it and clarified, “It is supposed to have eyes that turn people to ash and I have heard that it can become invisible. Skinny, long nose, smells of death—that sort of thing. I think, while I was in Athens, someone told me what the people call it but I have forgotten.”

Her father’s eyes lightened as a look of dawning crossed his face. “Oh, you mean the phantom?”

“Yes! Yes, that was it! The phantom.” It was now Rhal’s turn to give Christine the same look of triumph she had given him moments earlier.

“I have heard some stories about him, yes. Although,” he looked at Rhal quizzically “I cannot say I have ever heard of him being invisible. Evasive, yes—but not invisible. Your mother’s brother used to be quite the expert on the phantom, Christine, before he went off to war. He told me a great many stories about the thing. Although I think his favorite was one of the ones he had heard from an old traveler in some inn, or something of that nature. He said that the phantom gained its powers from a god—I cannot remember which right now—and that, when it received them, it made a point of tracking down all the people who had ever mocked or scorned it and killed them all on the spot. We used to sit around the fire at night—your mother, her brother, and I—and we would always tell each other stories like that, after you and your sisters had gone to bed. We liked to see who could tell the most frightening story. I never won, of course…” Her father began to laugh and the sound was quickly transformed into coughs. “Forgive me,” he managed, in between breaths, his body
curling further into itself with every cough.

Christine was already at his side, hushing him, telling him not to talk, her hand rubbing gentle circles on his back as she waited for the bout of sickness to run its course. She looked helplessly at Rhal as her father struggled to draw one uninterrupted breath, all thoughts of their former argument vanished. “Get me some water,” she demanded, not even bothering to look up, and Rhal rushed out of the room immediately.

“Just try to breathe,” Christine murmured, unsure if her father could even hear her. “Just try to breathe and everything will be all right. It will be over soon. Rhal is getting water. It will be all right.” Her words, however, were nearly as useless as the man’s futile attempts to stop his coughing. Neither did any good. When Rhal arrived with the water, her father was still coughing so much that he could not swallow any, and so that proved useless, too. Christine was forced to watch as her father suffered, until, finally, his coughs turned into hoarse gasps for air, and those gasps for air turned into wheezing breaths. Still, he struggled to get the water down his raw throat, spitting most of it out in a spray of pinkish mist—blood mixed with water.

Christine touched her hand to his forehead and bit her lip. “You are burning up. I did not realize it was this bad.” She reached to hold his hands, which were still trembling terribly, and gasped. “Oh, but your hands are so cold. So, so cold.” She looked at Rhal, her lip trembling, her eyes wide. “I do not know what to do. I do not know. Oh, gods, what do I do? He is so hot.”

Rhal only stared, his mouth half opened, as if he was trying to think of an answer but coming up with nothing. He knew better than anyone how to take a life, but how to save one… He knew nothing of that. War was his profession, not healing. But in that moment, with Christine looking up at him, looking as if the world was crumbling beneath her, he would have done anything and everything in his power to heal her father. He would have given all the military glory and honor he had received at so high a price, his prized sword that he had spent so many hours sharpening on those hot Athens nights, just to see her father get up and walk again, just to see Christine smile. And yet, he knew he was powerless—completely useless. So, he said nothing.

“What do I do?” Christine cried again, looking at her father now instead of Rhal. She brushed back his hair with her hands, she pressed the back of her hand to his face. “You are so cold, father. But your forehead feels so hot. What should I do? I must do something. But I do not know. Oh, gods, your hands shaking so horribly. Let me hold them. There now, give them to me. Do not shake so.” She held his hands close to her face and kissed his knuckles.

Slowly, weakly, her father pulled one of his hands from hers and found her hair, stroking it as he had so often when she was child. Then, his eyes began to close, blinking open slower and slower, like one who is utterly exhausted, whose body can no longer keep itself awake.

“No.” Christine grabbed his hands tighter, pulled his cold body closer to hers, as if that could keep him from leaving her. No matter how tightly she held onto him, it would not stop life from pulling him away from her. “Oh, no, no, no. Father, please… You can’t… You mustn’t… Oh, gods… Please, no. Please, don’t do this to me.”

He was trembling so violently in her arms that she was shaking as she held onto him. His eyes flickered open again, searching hers. There was no trace of fear in his eyes, not even of pain; he seemed almost relieved. He made a gentle hushing sound, shaking his head as she sobbed incoherent pleas. His thumb found her cheek and stroked it lightly. He had done that when her mother had died. She had been crying in her room, flung across her bed, and he had come in and comforted her. He had not said anything; he had not made any fruitless promises to her—he had simply sat, crying with her, his thumb stroking her cheek, as it was now. As if he was telling her,
again, that he was there, that the pain would pass.

“Please,” Christine murmured, clasping her hand over his, pressing it closer to her cheek. “Please, Father, do not leave me. I need you. Please… I can’t…” Tears spilled down her face and dripped onto his pale forehead, where they sat like drops of morning dew. She could not live without him. She could face the day without him, she could not be happy without him, she could not sing without him, she could even smile without him. She needed him, still. She had known this was coming for days now, weeks even, but she had pushed it away and pushed it away, and now, that he lay in her arms, dying, she kept thinking how she should have done everything differently. She had not been there for him. She had not taken him seriously enough. She had not cared for him enough. If she had only been there, instead of walking with Rhal, things would have gone for much differently, she was sure of it. He might have been all right. “Please,” she whispered again. “I cannot do this without you.”

Her father shook his head, his eyes closing slowly. “Yes,” he rasped, his voice raw and watery. “You can, Chris.” A weak cough rose from him and his hand fell from Christine's cheek, limp and cold. His head lulled against her chest where she held him, his muscles failing him. The life was slipping out of him.

“Oh, Father, no.” Christine shook him lightly, massaged his hand, but to no avail. He remained limp and cold in her arms, the only sign of life the slow and slight rise and fall of his chest. His head fell farther back, and she took it in her arms. She brought her face to his, pressing her forehead to his, feeling his shallow breaths on her chin.

“Rhal,” she managed, not turning her attention away from her father, her eyes closed. “Get the physician.”

When she heard no movement, her head snapped apart from her father’s, her tear-filled eyes consumed with a fire. “Now! Go! He is dying! Run!”

Rhal started, as if he had been smacked, tears running down his own cheeks, and did as she asked. He ran to the door, and was out of it before a moment had passed, leaving Christine alone with her father. She sat there, holding him in her arms, until the physician came, all the while thinking that this could not be the end, that they still had so much more to do. Her father had not seen her married yet. She had given him no grandchildren yet. He had always told her he loved children and would adore her own once she had them. She had given him none. She would never give him any. More tears trickled onto her father’s peaceful face.

The physician came with Rhal after nearly half an hour and found Christine bent over her father in the same position she had been when Rhal left her, her forehead resting upon his. It was only when the physician told her that she must move, so that he could pray over her father, that she did. She moved to wall and stood for a moment there, until her legs slid out from under her and she collapsed down the wall, where she remained until the physician had finished his rituals. Rhal tried to stir her a few times, and even tried to help her to her feet once, to guide her to a normal chair, but she did not respond, no matter what he said to her. She only stared forward at her father, her eyes bright with tears that she could not seem to cry any longer. Seeing that he would not be able help to her, Rhal gave up and stood next to her against the wall, both watching the physician in silence. After what seemed like hours, he straightened, his face lined and grim, his prayers completed.

“How is he?” Rhal asked, feeling that Christine was not able in her state to say much of anything. Her eyes still had not left her father.

“I am afraid it is bad news.” The physician looked concernedly at Christine for a moment before turning his attention back to Rhal, his old face even more lined than before. “Is she well? Shall I
gave her something for the shock?”

Christine, hearing this as if through what seemed another person’s ears—certainly not her own—did not respond. Nor did she see the long, concerned gazes given to her by Rhal and the physician.

“Yes,” Rhal said, nodding. “Yes, I think that would be best, especially if you have bad news. What did you find? Tell me. Spare nothing. It will be better for us if we know sooner rather than later.”

“He is dying. Really, he is almost gone. Unless Asclepius chooses to heal him or to forgive him of whatever wrongs he has done, I doubt he will make it through the night. There is nothing I can do for him. It is in the hands of the gods, now.” He looked at Rhal and bowed his head. “I am sorry. Truly, I am.”

Rhal replied that he knew the physician was.

“For her, however…” the older man began to dig through the leather pouch he carried and pulled out a root, looking satisfied. “This should help with the shock. Make it into a tea or simply cut some and give it to her to suck on. I know this is hard for her. Deaths always are.” He sighed, looking at Christine, who still had not moved. “Is she his daughter?”

“Yes. His youngest. She loved him very dearly, you know.”

“Of course, she did. He seemed a fine man. She looks just like him.”

With that, the physician gave Rhal some more instructions about certain healing sacrifices that sometimes pleased the gods in such cases, how to brew Christine’s root tea, and some final condolences. Then, he left, taking his leather bag with him, leaving the room that had that tell-tale sick smell that nothing else seemed to shake.

Rhal, after making Christine her tea and instruction her to drink it, and, after seeing her drink the first sip, went off in search of a servant to tell Christine’s sisters what had happened to their father. They did not live with him, after all, but with their own small families in the town, still innocent of their father’s now worsening condition. Rhal told the servant that he would go himself but thought it best that he stayed with Christine and the servant agreed, having heard about what everyone was simply referring to now as her ‘condition.’ The servant, then, left and returned nearly an hour later with both Eurydice and Psyche, and both of their respective families with them. When they had found their father, Christine had moved from the wall and had found herself back next to her father, sitting beside him, holding his limp hand. Her sisters embraced her and kissed their father’s pale head. They all cried.

It was nearly a day before he fully regained consciousness again. By then, the physician had come and gone a handful of times, to offer sacrifices and prayers, and otherwise see how the family was. Christine had recovered a great deal, although she remained distant and pale, and generally unaware of much of what went on around her. However, she spoke when spoken to, now, and was able to move about on her own. Neither she nor her sisters, however, had eaten much since their arrival, and all remained close to their father at all times, going so far as to even sleep in his room. When he awoke in the middle of the night, therefore, all the sisters were there and were immediately by his side, asking how he was.

“I do not think…” He breathed a watery breath and coughed. “I do not think I have much time left, I am afraid. Come, sit next to me.”

They did so, each sister settling themselves as close to him as they could manage. Eurydice, who was on his left side, held his left hand, while Psyche, on the right side, held his right. Christine,
who sat nearest to his head, smoothed his grey hair back with her hand where it stuck to his sweaty brow. He smiled weakly. He told them that they all must be strong—do not cry, so—, and that they should not miss him—that he would see them again in the afterlife. Then, after subduing more coughs, he told them each that he loved them and said his final goodbyes:

“Eurydice,” He squeezed the eldest’s hand gently. “Thank you for being there for the others when your mother could not. I cannot be more grateful to you, my dear, selfless daughter. You were—and will always be—my rock. Psyche,” he squeezed her hand and she kissed his, tears shining in her eyes. “Dear Psyche. You were always my wild girl, flying every which-way, like the wind.” She tried to smile. “Do not let my death dull you. Keep being that daughter that I love so very much. Tell your children that I love them, too—that their grandfather always will.” She nodded—of course—and wiped at her tears. Finally, he turned to Christine, his eyes sad. “Oh, Christine… my baby. I so would have liked to see you be married. But that does not matter now. You have Rhal, no matter what your prophecy might lead you to believe. He will provide for you. But, my dear girl, do not cease to live once I am gone. You are strong, just like your sisters. Do not be overcome with sorrow for my sake. Live. Live and love. We will see each other again.” He looked at his girls, one final time, his eyes crinkling in a weak smile. “I love you, my sweet children. I love you each so much.”

Shortly after, their father slipped back into a deep sleep. He stayed that way for a few hours before he died. Even in death, he looked so peaceful, he almost could have been asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, I know, I know! This one was very sad. I got a little teary-eyed myself reading back over this. But it had to happen, I'm afraid, and I'm sure you all knew what was coming. Even so, I hope no one suffered too terribly.

And a historical side note, for those of you who are curious: the Ancient Greeks actually had very advanced medicine, considering the time, and Hippocrates, the 'Father of Medicine,' who was the first to practice what we can loosely call 'modern medicine,' was from Greece. However, he lived after this story was set. In the 500s BC, doctors treated trauma, wounds, and poisons-- things that have obvious origins--and did so well enough. But they were not in the practice of treating diseases, which they thought came as a result of someone displeasing the gods. They did pray and offer sacrifices over their patients, but not much more, unfortunately. Asclepius is the god of healing, the son of Apollo.

For those of you (like myself) who feed off E/C action, do not be afraid! Next chapter (or maybe the one after that. I don't know for sure. But probably next.), there will be some more of that E/C action that you are so craving! And I sincerely hope it will not disappoint you.

Let me know what you think, if you want. I'm not here to guilt you into commenting. Only to give you something entertaining to read. :)
Death, Death, and Olive Oil

Chapter Summary

In which there is a funeral, a bit of a re-birth, and a re-acquaintance...

Chapter Notes

Hello again, lovelies! In the time I have been away, I've written not only this chapter but another, so you can expect to see the next one up tomorrow. For all of you E/C fanatics: don't worry! The E/C ball has finally started to roll, but I'm sorry it has taken this long for it to happen. But, ya know, background story and stuff...

Anyway, without further ado, Chapter Seven!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Christine did not remember much after his death. She remembered Eurydice, holding her father’s wrist, looking up at her, murmuring, “he is gone, he is gone,” over and over, as if she herself could not believe the words she had spoken. She remembered screaming—her own screaming—and Rhal trying to drag her back from her father’s body, his strong arms wrapped around her middle, as she fought to free herself from him. She remembered him telling her that her father was gone now, that there was nothing she could do. She remembered Psyche taking her from Rhal and wrapping her in her own arms, crying against her shoulder, their tears mingling together. And she remembered pain, horrible gut-wrenching pain that shot through her like poison, destroying her from the inside, bubbling out of her in the form of the tears that burned her eyes. Everything else was only vague feelings—odd smells, touches, and words—that she could recall but not in exact order or context, so they remained isolated and indistinct in her memory. They were little more than wisps of smoke in her mind, blowing away whenever she tried to reach for them.

She must have fallen asleep sometime after that. She did not remember anything else—how she had gotten back to her bed from her father’s room, what time it was, or even what day. All she could recall was the taste of salt water in her mouth from the tears and the memory of her father’s smile. She closed her eyes. The pain did not seem so horrible now. It was as if a darkness had taken over her, and all the emotions that she had felt so strongly earlier had gone to sleep. They were still there—she could feel the sorrow, the aching need to curl up and cry, the anger, and the pain—but they were all somewhat dulled. A new emptiness seemed to be creeping over her and although something inside of her told her it was an unnatural sort of emptiness, she let it take over. She could not bear the thought of the pain that she had known before coming back and crushing her all over again. Oh, she could not. Her father was gone. And now, she was leaving, too.

When she awoke again, what must have been hours later, her eyes stinging from all the tears she had cried, her heart heavy, it was to Rhal, shaking her shoulder and gently saying her name. For the briefest moment, her heart flared to life again, beating wildly, and the faintest trickle of happiness surged through her at the sight of that familiar blonde hair, those reassuring hazel eyes. But it sputtered and, with a sigh of defeat, that happiness was gone and her heart stilled back into empty
“What is it, Rhal?” She asked, her voice hoarse from lack of use. Could he not see that she did not want to be disturbed? That she was mourning for her father? That all the life had been sucked out of her? Could he not see that?

Sorrow clouded his face and he stood, knowing he was unwelcomed close as he was to Christine. “Your sisters are preparing your father’s body for the funeral and they need you to be with them. They cannot do this alone.” He turned as if to leave her alone to her sorrow, then after a pause, thought the better of it and stayed, looking at her with such concern that, had she been happy and whole again, Christine’s heart would have beat wildly and blush come to her cheeks. Now, she sat, matching his stare with her own cold, dead one.

“I do not want to. Tell them to continue without me. They do not need me.”

“Chris…” Rhal sighed and reached out to take her hand, before Christine snapped it back to herself. His brow furrowed but he continued, trying his best to look as if she had not hurt him. “Chris, this is your father. This is the last time you will ever be able to look at him. You must do this. I do not ask for myself, or even your sisters, but for him. This is the right thing to do. Please, Chris—you do not have to do anything more. Just help dress your father for burial and attend the funeral and no one shall ask anymore of you. That is all. And after that, you can do whatever you please. But this—this must be done. I cannot leave until you come back with me. Please, do not make this any harder than it should be. I do not want to trouble your sisters.”

“But yet, you can trouble me?” Christine glowered at Rhal. He could not understand the horrible pain she felt within her, the sheer amount of tears she had shed. Had he, she knew he would never have dared to wake her, to demand her to do such things, when her father was already gone. It made no difference what she did now. No matter what spices she rubbed on his body, they would not bring him back. No matter how many prayers she said over him, he would remain a corpse. Nothing mattered anymore.

“Chris…” he pleaded, searching her face for any trace of that girl who had spent so many hours walking with him through the forests, telling stories and laughing. He found none. “You must. You must do this. Please, get up.”

She remained silent for a long moment, before finally climbing slowly out of bed, as if every movement caused her pain. Even with both feet on the floor, she stumbled and shook, although she refused to let Rhal help her. “I am not doing this for you.” She said coldly, when he tried to reach out and steady her again. “I am not even doing this for Eurydice and Psyche. I am only doing this because somewhere there is a soul of a man whom I loved very much, wondering why his daughter is refusing to bury him as she should. And wherever that man is, he is very sad. I am only doing this to make him happy, because he is gone now.”

And then, suddenly, her façade that she had worn ever since Rhal had woken her crumbled. The cold indifference was cleansed from her eyes with new tears, the stone-faced and apathetic mask slipped from her face as her expression changed to one of sadness. She let Rhal steady her as her legs nearly gave out from under her, and let him wrap her in his arms and hold her close as her tears wetted his garments.

“Oh, Rhal, he is gone!” She sobbed into his shoulder as he tried to comfort her with careful caresses and murmured words. “He has left me! He has left me and I am alone!”

“I know,” he murmured, pulling her closer. “I know, Chris. But I am here—you are not alone. I am here.”
But deep within her, Christine knew he could not know. He could not know about the sorrow shooting through her like poison, the hopelessness and emptiness spreading through her body like wildfire, the tears searing her already raw face like a knife. He knew nothing of it, nothing of pain or death, nothing of all that was raging within her. Yet, within his arms, although none of the feelings within her lessened, and the pain still throbbed horrible, there was something about that feeling of being so close to one she knew so well that comforted her. It reminded her that these feelings would pass, that there were others who were there for her now, that life could still be worth living. So, she did not pull away but simply let him hold her and whisper empty words of reassurance into her neck.

The rituals went well enough, once Christine had recovered enough from her initial grief to participate in them. It was her and her sisters’ job to dress their father’s body—to anoint it with spices and oils to try and fight the stench of death that overcame every other scent. When they were finished, the room smelled faintly of olive oil, but even that heavy smell was blotted out by the deathly smell. No matter how much olive oil the three sisters poured over him, it stench remained. It filled the air, filled their lungs, choking them, and the olive oil only, in truth, made it worse. But there was nothing to be done about it.

The next morning, Christine found herself outdoors, her limbs aching, blinking in the faint sunlight that colored her father’s funeral. The men from the village, her father’s old friends, carried his body around the house, through the woods. Ahead of her, she saw her father’s body lifted high above the heads of the procession, stuck halfway, it seemed, between heaven and earth.

Then, of course, came the burning. Everyone came together to form a great mound of dry sticks, until it was nearly up to Christine’s chin. A torch was then lit, casting odd shadows upon the pale faces of the mourners, making their faces seem as sunken and dead as her father’s. Eurydice, as the oldest, was given the honor of lighting the pyre and did so well—the flame leapt onto it immediately and soon enough, flames stretched towards the sky, smoke billowing upwards for what seemed miles. It was Rhal who put her father’s body on the pyre, who set his dead form ablaze. No one said a word as they watched the flames consume him, slowly at first, then all at once, smoke pouring in all directions. All around her, Christine saw only tears and sorrow, but within herself, she felt nothing but relief. Relief that this cold imposter was being done away with for good, that she would never have to look at its bloated face again. Her own father had looked nothing like that. Her father had had the brightest face in all the world, his cheeks always flushed with the color of life, his eyes always flashing with a smile. The thing that burned and crackled in the flames was not him.

It was then that the smoke reached her, filling her lungs and making her cough as he had so much in his last days—dry, heaving coughs. But with each breath, the only thing that filled her was the smell of death and olive oil, twisting together in the most horrifying way. Nothing could be done but breathe it in. Death, death, and olive oil. She coughed and coughed, as the smoke billowed around her, like the shadow of an outstretched hand.

The next few days after the funeral slipped past in a blur. Christine alternated between sleeping, and a state of wakeful dreaming. Occasionally, Rhal or her sisters were able to persuade her to eat or drink something but Christine herself never truly felt hungry or even thirsty. Sometimes, she would even sit outside with them, in the courtyard, staring blankly into space as Rhal and her sisters talked about trivial matters, about stories of her late father. Christine could not bring herself to care. All she wanted to do, she realized, when she was awake, was sleep, because when she was asleep, her father was still with her. When she opened her eyes, the light tore all her happy dreams to shreds until she could, again, dream them back.

It was Rhal who eventually inspired Christine to begin to live again. After nearly two weeks of her
sleeping for nearly sixteen hours of the day, he and her sisters decided something must be done. Christine seemed to be in a state of decay—her eyes were sunken, her skin grey-ish, her lips cracked and colorless. Psyche, first, tried to get her little sister to come to her house with her and see her children, who were supposedly asking about their beloved Aunt Christine. When that failed, Eurydice attempted to get Christine to help her move their belongings from their house near the city to their father’s house—without him, it went to the next heir, who was, in this case, Eurydice’s husband. But Christine said that she was far too tired to help with moving things between houses, even with Ophelia’s help. So, Eurydice, not wanting to upset her sister further, let the matter drop. It was nearly a day later before Rhal tried his hand at waking Christine up, so to speak, from the strange trance in which her father’s death had left her.

“Chris,” he began one day during dinner. Christine had just asked to be excused, despite the fact that she had only eaten half a piece of bread and about three grapes that whole day. “Perhaps, you ought to do something besides sleep.” She fixed him with a dead stare, as he continued. “I know that your father’s death has hurt you terribly—we are all hurting, Christine. We all miss him terribly. But, sometimes, when we are occupied with other things, it helps take our minds off the pain, you see.”

Before he could continue further, Christine interrupted him a toneless voice, containing not a trace of the sweet, bubbly voice she had spoken with before. “I know what you are trying to do. You are worried about me. You all are. Well, I have said it before—I am far too tired to do anything right now. And sleep takes my mind off the pain better than anything else can. Sleep is the only thing that can truly make one forget. And even if I did try something new, it would not matter. No matter where I am, I smell it and it reminds me of him. The death and the olive oil. It hangs in the air.” Seeing everyone else’s blank looks, she asked, “Can you… can you not smell it?”

“Chris,” Rhal tried again, speaking before either of Christine’s sisters could make a remark about the phantom smell Christine spoke of. They had left incense burning for three days after the funeral just to make the deathly smell go, and it had. Now, the entire house smelled spices and flowers, so much so that it was nearly overpowering. There was nothing left of the death smell.

“Chris, perhaps we can go walking again. That way, you do not have to smell… whatever it is that you are smelling now. Remember our walks, Chris? Remember how much we enjoyed them? Would you not like to do that again? Just a short one today, of course. I will not let you get tired out.”

For a moment, she said nothing and continued to hover uncertainly in the dining room, considering the offer. Then, in a soft voice: “I should like that very much.”

Rhal looked at the two sisters, the whole group of them smiling at his success. This was the first offer that Christine had not turned down! This was progress! She was getting better! In no time, she would be back to that happy, lively creature she had been before, the girl that they all missed so terribly.

“Yes!” Rhal cried, unable to contain his smile. “Yes! We can go as soon as possible! I need only get my cloak—and I can get yours, too—and then we can go wherever you please! You need only speak the word, and I shall take you right where you wish.”

“Oh,” Christine murmured, the polar opposite of Rhal’s happiness and eagerness. “Oh, my only request is…” She trailed off, her brow furrowed.

“Yes? Tell me, Chris, and I shall do it! Tell me whatever you request in the world and I shall do it!”
“To go alone,” she blurted, still looking oddly confused. Rhal’s face fell almost instantaneously. “My only request is that I might go alone. I think… I think that would be best for me. Right now, anyway.”

“Yes. Oh, yes, of course,” Rhal said, trying to smile at her again but failing. He had been so ready to take her wherever she wished, to be whatever she needed. He had been so sure that he could help her on her way to recovery. That, with their two arms once more linked together, he would save her from her solitude and help her find life again, and she would love him for it. But no.

“Thank you,” she murmured. “Thank you, Rhal. I knew you would understand. I shall go now, if that is all right?” She glanced briefly at her sisters for approval.

“Just take your cloak,” was all Eurydice said. “It is still cold out there. And be safe, Chris.”

And in less than five minutes, the old wooden door of the house was being hesitantly pushed open by a girl—a child of the sun—who had not basked in her mother’s wintry warmth for weeks now.

Day after day, she continued to wander around in the outdoors with her cloak wrapped tightly around her shoulders, never with any purpose other than to escape that dismal house and Rhal’s sympathetic glances for a few hours. Nearly every time she announced that she was going out, he volunteered to come with her, although she always told him no. And although she always turned him away with the utmost kindness, his face always fell at her words. Had he come with her, however, she would not have been able to wander around in silence, she would not have been able to go as far as she did, nor would she have been able to sit down and cry when the memories became too much for her to bear. But he could not understand this, Christine knew, despite what he said, and she had to deal with the grief on her own.

One particularly warm morning, after an abnormally large breakfast, Christine rose from that table. “I am going out again. I hope none of you mind,” she said, looking half-heartedly at her sisters, carefully making sure not make eye contact with Rhal. “I shall be back sometime today. But you needn’t worry. I shan’t be gone that long. Besides,” she looked out the window, her face twisting into something like a smile, “It is warm out today.”

“Shall I come with you?” Christine heard Rhal say, his words sounded forced.

“No,” she replied quickly, her eyes not straying from the window. “No, I will be fine on my own, I think, for today.”

“Of course,” she heard him murmur, but she paid him no heed, and walked out of the room to get her cloak before she had to look at his sad eyes. She could not bear the sight of them, especially when she knew she caused their sorrow.

Once outdoors, she decided to go an entirely different way than usual. She would go north, she decided, around the town and then past it. She had not been that way before and she was sure to find new things that way, things that were untainted by her memories. She was fast finding that those were the sorts of things she liked the best now—not the things that were tinged with nostalgia and regret. Perhaps that was why she had taken up wandering in the first place.

As she had hoped, she did find many new things. There was a small creek that she had never noticed before some ways outside of the town, with a small waterfall that gurgled and sang happily, despite the winter. There was a little spot in the woods that had several large rocks all piled against each other, suggesting the possibility of a landslide in the past. There was a windy little path that meandered through the forest, that made her think of what her own path would have
looked like had someone mapped it out during her wanderings. Humming lightly, and feeling better than she had in weeks, she followed its odd curves and slopes, not truly caring where it took her, but for lack of anywhere else to go. And besides, this way, she thought, she would not get lost as she had so many times before.

The path climbed up and up, higher and higher into the sloping hills, and then little mountains, and each time she thought to herself, “I will turn around after this hill and return home.” But for some reason, she never did, because there was always a little bird ahead of her, or a brightly colored rock, or a broken sandal left by some traveler long ago that she felt she must investigate. And so, in that fashion, always being led just a little farther than she intended, she found herself in a beautiful little clearing on top of one of the mountains, a break in the trees giving her a view that stretch for miles and miles.

The world below her seemed so dead from where she was—filled with colorless, dead trees, and silent towns—but it was still strangely beautiful in its own way. The sun glinted off of ice in still ponds, the evergreen trees displayed their colors proudly against the backdrop of grey, big black birds flew aimlessly through the sky before settling back down again in the trees.

Just as she was turning to go—for it was far past noon by now and Christine knew that she had wandered for far longer than she should have—she realized something: this place was not new. The path that lay before her led to the temple. The grove she was standing in was the same one she had slept in so many nights ago. That tree with the thin trunk was the same to which she had tied Ophelia, her beloved donkey. And this very spot, right in the middle of the clearing, was the same in which she had first encountered the voice—the same in which she had met Erik.

“Oh,” she breathed, drawing her cloak tighter to herself. How had she not realized this path was the same she had taken to the oracle? How had she not known? But, perhaps she had, in an offhand way. Perhaps she had known deep within her the whole time and had followed the path, anyway. Perhaps this was where she had wanted to go. She knew that she had vowed not to visit this mysterious Erik again, but she could not entirely remember now why she had. Something to do with the prophecy, perhaps…? But that hardly mattered, now that her father was gone, and now that she felt nothing inside of her but despair. Besides, there was no one there except herself. The clearing was entirely deserted.

But had Erik not said to her that if she ever wanted to find him again, to simply come to where she was now and ask? Her whole visit to the oracle was rather distorted in her mind but she was sure enough that he had. She had not come here to see Erik, of course, but it seemed to her a waste to walk all the way to where he was and not attempt to call to him, even if she was not sure entirely what she wanted from him, or if she even wanted anything at all. He would not know of her father’s death, at least, which she found relieving because, since her father’s death, every conversation she had had included him in some way, whether it was someone telling her they were sorry for her loss, or whether it was the reliving of old memories with her sisters.

She stood quietly on the mountaintop for a moment. Then, softly: “Erik? Are you there? It is Christine again.”

Nothing.

Slightly louder now. “Erik? Do you remember me? I just found myself here and I thought… Well, I thought I would call upon you—like you asked—just to see if you are here.”

Still nothing.

She sighed. It had been worth a try, if nothing else. Erik was probably somewhere else entirely
now, not standing in this early spring ‘warmth,’ if it could even be called such a thing. He probably hardly had time for young, sad girls like her.

“Well,” she said, looking around briefly—far too briefly to notice the pair of amber eyes several paces away from her, half-hidden behind a tree. “I have a long journey back and I am not even entirely sure why I came here, so I’d best be on my way. May the gods bless you, Erik. Goodbye, again.”

“You are leaving so soon after arriving, then? I had hoped you would stay a while longer.” A deep, harmonious voice flowed around her, sounding so close to her so suddenly that she stumbled and fell backwards from the shock it gave her.

“Oh, heavens, Erik, you gave me a fright!” She cried, picking herself off of the ground with as much dignity as she could muster, hoping sincerely that he could not see her from wherever he was. However, the way her heart was pounding now, she knew, was not owed entirely just to the shock his voice had given her. The corners of her lips turned up in a small, slight smile.

“For me, Christine. That was rather rude of me. I hope I have not startled you too much?”

She not even realized how much she had missed that intoxicating voice. “Oh, no, I have recovered. I am fine, now.”

“Good,” Erik whispered, and the sound carried on the wind, as if it came from everywhere around her. “I did not expect you after so long, you see. Otherwise, I would have answered your calls far sooner.”

“I am sure you would have. It has been a while, has it not, Erik?”

“Indeed. But that is no matter.” He paused. “What has brought you back here, dear girl? Surely, there must be some reason for your arrival, other than to converse with me. Is there something you wish to speak to me about, perhaps? Something you wish to tell me?”

“Oh, well… No. Not really, anyway,” Christine wound one of her stray curls around her finger and tugged on it absently. “I found myself wandering, you see, and, somehow, I found myself here again, although how or why exactly I am not sure. My feet took me here; I simply obeyed them. And I thought it would be rather rude to walk all the way here and not address you in some way.”

“I see,” Erik replied. “That is a curious string of events. But I am certainly glad you have decided out of the kindness of your heart to stop and greet me, as an old companion.”

“It was no problem,” Christine offered hastily, confused as to why he thought that what she had done was a kindness. “While I am here, I suppose I should tell you thank you. I meant to a long time ago, but I never did for some reason.” She heard a questioning hum from somewhere nearby, and clarified, “For watching over me that night. And for the cloak, too. I like it very much.” When he did not speak, she added with uncertainty, “You did… you did give it to me, did you not?”

“Yes, you are quite right—I did give the cloak to you. I myself hardly had any use for it anyway, as I have no shortage of cloaks. But do not thank me, my dear—I was simply doing what was right of me.”

She realized something then that she had been entirely oblivious to before—a string of logic she had failed to grasp entirely. If Erik possessed a cloak, then he must possess a body. Up until then, she had still thought of him as some sort of spirit of nature or something similar, without a truly, corporal body. Now, however, it occurred to her that this was not the case and that he had some
sort of body, if he could not only wear clothes but experience discomfort from the cold. She frowned. “So, you have a body, then?”

“Yes…” Erik said slowly, sounding confused at the question.

Christine flushed at having asked such an inappropriate question but continued regardless. “Sorry. It was just… Until now, I had thought of you as some sort of nature spirit, or something similar, but I suppose spirits do not have any need for cloaks.”

“Yes, that is quite true.” Erik held out each word a like longer than necessary, it seemed, his beautiful voice still laced with confusion. Or perhaps uncertainty. Christine was not entirely sure. “I am not a spirit, certainly. You are a very clever girl, Christine, for noticing such things.”

“So, you are a man?” Christine asked, her heart suddenly beating faster.

A short silence followed her question, and Christine was left feeling more confused about the man (she was beginning to see that was, indeed, what he was) with whom she was speaking. When she had assumed he was a spirit, everything had been a great deal more straight forward. If Erik was a mere spirit, he could not manifest himself, he could not leave from wherever he was bound, he could not even touch her. But now, that she was learning he had a true body, she realized that he could jump out of the trees at any moment, and grab her, if he wished to do so, or any other number of things. But perhaps, if he was a kind man, like she had thought him to be, he would come out of the forests and let her look at him, like she so desired to do. Ever since she had heard his breathtaking voice, she had longed to see the face (or whatever it was she had previously thought him to have) to which it belonged. Now, perhaps it was possible.

Erik spoke once more, still slowly. “I… I would hesitate to call myself a man. That is such a broad term and it can be used to refer to a great deal of things, but I am not sure if I am exactly what one thinks of when one thinks of a man. If having a body is what makes one a man, then, yes, I suppose I am one, in the broadest sense of the word. However, if you mean more with that word—‘man’—such as having… Well, never mind all that. Being a man is truly a complicated term and I must request that you either define what exactly you mean more clearly, or simply withdraw your question, and be satisfied, for now, that my very existence is a confusing and complicated subject matter. Even my ‘being human’ is rather hard for me to accurately confirm or deny, without a great deal of thought. You see, I am not a human being in that same sort of way you are, dear child. I am…” He trailed off and said nothing more.

“You are what?” Christine asked, growing more and more curious about this strange man with each word he spoke.

Another long silence followed her question, this one longer than any of the ones she had experienced before while talking to this voice. There was only the soft sound of the wind through the trees, the quietly babble of water running over rocks somewhere far away. Christine looked around, searching for any sign of her strange companion, anxiety growing within her.

“Erik? Are you still there? I want to know what you are, if you can tell me.”

The water said something in a language that she could not understand, but Erik remained silent. With a sigh, she realized that he had probably left her, probably put off by her inappropriate questions about his body. She doubted she would ever see him again, but what did that matter? Now, he was just another person who would live on inside of her memory, like her father before him. She was being abandoned by everyone—why not Erik, too? It did not matter. She had already borne one parting, one that stretched far beyond the forests—one that was between life and what came after; what was one more? She turned to go, trying to dispel the disappointment gathering in
her heart, trying to tell herself that her relationship with this man—this thing—would have come to a close at some point anyway, and that she must be grateful that it had happened sooner rather than later.

Before she could leave, the same voice that had startled her earlier did so again, although she retained her balance this time. “Perhaps,” the voice said carefully. “Perhaps it would be better if I simply showed you what I am, and allowed you to make that judgement for yourself.”

Chapter End Notes

How do you guys think things are moving? Are things moving too fast, too slow, just right? Let me know :)
Masks

Chapter Summary

In which a first meeting takes a disastrous turn for the worst...

Chapter Notes

Hello dear readers! I know I promised to add this chapter earlier but then, I kept adding more and more to it, until it topped out at over 11,000 words. So, now, what was once one giant chapter has been turned into two, and this chapter that I'm now posting definitely could have been posted far earlier, since I ended up dividing it anyway. Oh, well.

At any rate, I think you all will enjoy these next two chapters. There's lots of stuff that's going to be happening in them, even if they do only take place over the course of about seven hours. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Christine could not move for several seconds after she heard Erik’s words. She could not think of a suitable reply for them, or even, if she found out how to make one, what she would do afterwards. She hardly knew Erik, after all. Of course, she had spoken with him, twice now, and when his voice surrounded her, she felt a sense of comfort that she had never before felt, and when he said her name, she felt more alive than she had since her father’s death. But this was not the same as meeting the man behind the voice. Of this Erik, who he truly was—both in form and in... well, everything else—she knew next to nothing. He did not seem to want to describe himself to her in any significant details and he had also neglected to tell her about his past when she had asked about it, brushing it away as an uninteresting, yet, at the same time, a dark, tragic thing. She was not sure how something ‘dark and tragic’ could ever not be interesting, but perhaps she simply did not understand. Still, however, meeting Erik now, when he had told her so little about himself, seemed premature to Christine.

Finally, having found her voice and thoughts, Christine replied uncertainly, “Are you… are you offering to let me see you… in person?”

“Yes,” came Erik’s voice, softer than it usually was. “How else can I show you myself if not by letting you see me?” At Christine’s soft ‘oh,’ Erik chuckled. “Do not be alarmed, my dear. If you do not wish to decide for yourself whether I am human, you need only speak the words and I shall depart from here and never bother you again. Or, perhaps, if you bear me no ill will, I might stay here with you and simply continue talking of small and insignificant trifles, never again to bring up questions of man and humanity. Which of these options would most please you, dear girl? Or, if there is another idea which you have in mind concerning our fates, you need only speak it and I shall oblige you.”

Her thumb found its way to her mouth, and she began to chew on it. What did it matter if she saw
Erik? She had already spoken to him, and seeing him would do no more damage to her than talking would. Moreover, had she not from the beginning desired to know what he looked like? Had she not dreamed, night after night, of trying to reach his voice and make him reveal himself to her? Now that he was offering to do just that, it seemed meaningless to turn him down, especially when she knew she would wonder afterwards what she had missed seeing. Oh, she had to know! Erik was her friend, after all—she was quite sure of it—and there would be no harm in her seeing him. At the very least, it would distract her from other thoughts, thoughts that she did not desire to dwell on anymore.

Dropping her thumb from her mouth, and raising her chin, she said in a voice much more decided than she felt, “I would like to see you in person.”

There was another short pause before Erik replied with a ‘very well,’ and a low sigh that she thought must come from him, although it sounded farther away from her than his voice ever did. Or, perhaps, it was simply the wind.

“Are you going to come out? Or make yourself visible to me? How shall I see you, Erik?” She asked, more speculating about how he would meet her than truly asking him. For whatever reason, she had pictured in her mind that he would appear in front of her out of thin air, just like those strange floating lights she had encountered at the temple. She had also pictured in her mind that Erik would be every inch as beautiful as his voice was, with red wavy hair, perhaps a short beard, soft blue eyes, strong pale arms. Something about the beauty of his voice suggested that everything about him was that breathtaking and ever since she had first heard his voice, Christine had half-suspected as much. Now, she would finally get a chance to prove her thoughts.

“I think,” Erik began, his voice interrupting her thoughts. “That it would be best if you followed me, if you have no objections to that. I think it would be more agreeable to speak face to face in a more… comfortable environment, and I, fortunately, have just the place.”

Christine hesitated, thinking of the first time of her family, of Rhal back at home. “Well, I… I am not sure…”

“Oh, Christine,” the voice said, so intoxicating that she instantly forgot all of her petty worries—for she did not want to go back to her home, anyway, not when memory that lived inside it was of her father, not when every corner stank of death and olive oil. “Come! You must believe in me!”

“Believe… Oh, yes, I do believe!” She replied, thinking now that following Erik was the most obvious thing in the world and that, really, she should have done it long ago, when she had first met him. It was so simple now—she was not sure why she had felt any doubt, at all! Erik was her friend and she trusted him—he would not lead her wrong. She believed in him, with all of her being.

“Then, you must follow my voice,” he said, now sounding some ways in front of her, as if he were just out of view. She followed the sound.

Each time he spoke, he sounded as if he were just feet ahead of her, almost within reach, but just when Christine was sure she would catch him, his voice had moved ahead of her again. It was the most annoying sensation, to feel as if something were almost in her grasp, then to have it slip away. But she kept following his voice each time it moved, knowing sometime, it would stop and she would at last reach him.

“Come, Christine,” the voice said. “You are nearly there! Just a little further.”

Almost like magic, a house appeared ahead of her. She wondered briefly if she had missed it before
being as caught up in catching Erik’s voice as she was, or if his words had made it appear. Either way, she decided, it did not truly matter because now she was nearly there and soon, she would see Erik. Perhaps then, she would ask him about the house. Had she not been so distracted, she would have stopped to admire the ornate columns and sloped roof, the soft buds of flowers-to-come, the strands of ivy that had wrapped themselves around just enough for the house to not appear overgrown, but twined harmoniously with nature. But, at present, she was very distracted.

She saw a flash of black against the white marble of the house before it slipped inside the doors, hidden once again from her view. She followed, pulling the doors open, her heart pounding against her ribs. She was so close to him now! She could feel it.

The place she walked into was dark, but not chillingly so, as the oracle had been. The darkness was a comfort here, that wrapped around her like and embrace, quiet and sure. Just ahead of her, she could make out the shape of a great doorway, presumably leading to the other rooms of the house. Shadows lived in the corners of that arched doorway, swirling and dancing, although she could not make out their shapes. One of the shadows in the doorway suddenly stirred, then peeled itself off the wall in a swirl of blackness. As it moved out of the darkness, the light from the windows fell upon it and it took a clearer shape. It lost its shadowiness as Christine saw the details of the black cloak hanging from its shoulders, the white hands hanging at its sides, its dark stone-like face. Erik.

She took a step backwards, losing her trance as she looked at him, and the comfort she had taken in the situation disappeared. “Erik?” She murmured.

“Yes,” his voice murmured back, although strange though it was, Christine could have sworn his mouth did not move. “Yes, I am Erik.”

“Oh, my…” her lungs failed her as she tried to breathe. “Erik…? Erik, where am I? What have you done to me?”

He stepped forward but when she shrank back, he halted, wringing his hands, his voice higher than usual. “Here? You are in my home! I have taken you to it, just as I said I would! You mustn’t be afraid, Christine! There is nothing that can harm you here, and nothing that will harm you.” He stepped forward again, this time more slowly to give her time to adjust, and the remains of the shadows dripped off of him. For the first time, she saw him for what he truly was.

Christine studied him. He was tall, far taller than most men she had seen, and perhaps a head (maybe two) taller than herself. He was thin, as well, giving her the image of something stretched out far more than it should have been, what with his unnatural height. His cloak hung and billowed around him, hardly touching his thin frame as he stood. His fingers, too, were so thin that she could see what must have been every bone in his hands under their thin skin covering. Yet, despite his stretched appearance, he stood tall and proud, his chin tilted up and his back straight, like royalty. There was an air of mystery about him that made her want to learn more of him, but that also sent fear spiking through her. Something about him seemed unnatural, although whether it was his height, or his thin, pale fingers, or his strange face, she did not know.

She looked more closely at his face, staring at him with such scrutiny that she could feel his discomfort after only a few moments. His face, like his hair, was dark, like a shadow, completely unlike his pale hands and feet, and did not move when he spoke—now she was sure of it. Only his golden eyes moved—darting around the room nervously, growing larger as he spoke, blinking periodically. His face was nearly perfect, too, she realized—both sides of it were perfectly symmetrical, his forehead high and sloping, his nose long and straight. Then, she understood: what she was looking at was not his face at all, but a mask, and a very life-like one at that. Had it not
been for its dark brown coloring that was so different from that of his skin, she might not have realized he wore a mask at all, with so many shadows to obscure it. She began to feel uneasy—this was all wrong! Surely, he must have simply forgot he was wearing whatever this thing was. Surely, he did not intend to keep it on while she was with him. Surely, it was all a misunderstanding. What she desired to see was what lay beneath the carefully molded façade he wore, to see the face of the man with the beautiful voice. To see it, she needed to do only one thing—remove the mask. She was sure he would not mind, because she was sure that he was wearing it by mistake. And the thought of seeing him without anything between them… Oh, it made her heart race within her chest to think about peeling away the layer of mystery. She reached up, her breathing heavy, her eyes wide. This was what she must do to see him, and see him truly as she needed to. Her fingers curled around the edges of the leather, feeling the warmth of what lay beneath, so close. Then, suddenly, he stumbled backwards and pushed her lightly away from him, severing her contact, yanking her fingers away from their goal. She had been so close…

“No, no!” He gasped, his eyes wild as he straightened. “Nothing will harm, so long as you do not touch my mask. That is all I ask of you, my only request. You must not move, nor even touch my mask. If you try to, I fear there will be grave consequences, that I have no desire whatsoever to inflict. That is my only rule. You may do anything else you please and I shall make no mention of it. Only my mask… you must not touch it!”

“Why?” She looked at him, resisting the urge to reach out and pry the mask from him again. But something in his tone frightened her and gave her pause—desperation covered with a careful layer of ease, pleading veiled with a thin coating of demanding.

“Because…” He trailed off, refusing to meet Christine’s gaze. “Because of certain reasons, which, for your personal welfare, and my own, I am unable to disclose to you at present. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” She swallowed, her head spinning. Suddenly, this whole situation—her, at Erik’s house, after only having known him for a few short hours—seemed very stupid and she wished she had stayed in that safe little clearing on the mountain instead. She did not like this mask, or this secrecy that enveloped Erik’s very being.

After a moment, Erik cleared his throat and said, his voice now sounding as calm and composed as ever, “Come, Christine. Come sit with me. I shall explain everything to you that I am able to at this moment. You shall see—you needn’t be frightened of Erik.”

After a hesitant nod, she took his outstretched hand with some unease and allowed him to guide her through the dark rooms, where shadows still lingered in every crevice, where everything still seemed like something out of a dream, until he found the one for which he was searching. He led her over to what appeared to be a chair, although it was hard to make out with so little light, and helped her into it.

“I request that you remain her for a moment, dear girl, while I light some candles for you to see by. I know light is scarce in here,” he began to back away from her slowly, the shadows still lingering in every crevice, where everything still seemed like something out of a dream, until he found the one for which he was searching. He led her over to what appeared to be a chair, although it was hard to make out with so little light, and helped her into it.

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and the same. Perhaps under his mask, he would appear different. Perhaps in time, he would trust her enough to remove it, or perhaps she would simply do it herself.

Somewhere far in front of her, a yellow light flickered into existence, and then another, and the two grew closer until Erik emerged with two little oil lamps in hand. They did little to brighten the room, however.

“If you would like,” Erik suggested, his eyes following hers as they looked about the room with worry, “I can get more lamps. I have very many, after all. Do you find it too gloomy in here, Christine? I apologize for the lack of windows—the room is on the inside of the house. If you would prefer it, I could take you to another?” He wrung his hands as he looked at her.

“No, this is fine, I think,” she replied, straightening herself in the chair. There was something in his fretful mannerisms that calmed her somewhat, that reminded her, despite his odd mask, he was just as human as herself, and he did not seem the sort of human who was particularly dangerous, either. Yet there was still something about the way he moved that tugged on something deep within her memory, something that she did not like.

“You must be wondering why I have brought you here,” Erik said, finally sitting down in a chair opposite her, and crossing his long legs.

“Yes. You told me that you would show me what sort of… person you are, but you have already done that, I suppose,” she replied, tugging on one of her curls. “You appear to look just like me. Other than your…. Your, ah, mask, of course. So, there must be some other reason for your bringing me here, mustn’t there?”

“Indeed.” His golden eyes followed her every movement, but she found she did not mind his stares. He seemed to be just as curious about her as she was about him. “You must know, Christine,” a shiver snaked through her at his use of her name, “that—it is rather odd, I suppose—but I have taken a liking to you.” He stopped and watched her carefully before continuing. “You, out of the kindness of your heart, have allowed me to become your companion—I dare say, even your friend. You have sought my presence not one, but twice, and such offerings of goodness have not, you may rest assured, gone unnoticed by me. Because of that gentleness you possess, I have found over the past few weeks that you—forgive me, Christine—that you are not the type of person that I can easily forget, although I have tried and tried. So, I had hoped that you feel the same towards myself as I feel towards you—that is, a general liking, and nothing more, of course—and I have hoped that you would be happier here, with myself, than out in the cold. In fact, if you do not mind my saying so,” at this, he leaned forward, gazing at her intently, “I have hoped that you would be happy with me for a long time, that we can amuse each other, and get to know each other, and talk, and do other such things that hosts and visitors do. Would you… would you like that, Christine? Would you be happy to do that?”

“I…” She fiddled with her nails, trying desperately to think of something to say to him, but her mind kept coming up blank. “I am not sure, to be completely honest with you. I think… I think I would like to know you better but this is all happening so suddenly and truly, I hardly know you at all!” She sighed and turned away, trying to compose herself.

“Yes, but that is precisely why you and I must talk to each other. In time, we shall be the closest of friends—you will see! Yes, I will be your best friend and you will never be afraid to be with me again! I do not want you to be afraid.”

“And I do not want to be afraid!” She put her head in her hands. “I am not sure of this is the way to do it. Perhaps, it would be better if you came back to my house, with my family, or we met with some other people around—perhaps at a forum, or something. It is just… it is just that I do not
know you.” She looked at him, hoping he saw how sorry she was that she was not already his best friend, and that they could not already be a peace with each other. She wished it could have been that simple, but for some reason, things never seemed to be.

“But you will!” He cried again, his hands gripping tightly to this chair, so tightly she thought the thin skin would break over his bones. He sighed, and shook his head, and tried again in a quieter voice: “You will know me in time, if you allow me to keep you here.”

“Keep me here? You cannot simply lock me up in this house, Erik! I understand you want me to stay here with you, and I understand you want to become friends, but that does not give you the authority to make me your little doll, that you can play with and talk to with every passing whim! I am just as human as you are, and I will not let you keep me here against my will. If that is what you intend to do, I will run away from here and never return.”

“No!” He let out an exasperated hiss through his teeth. “No, no—that is not at all what I meant. Please believe me when I say that I would never keep you here against your will and that I would never think of you as a… doll.” He sounded horrified that she would even suggest such a thing. “No, Christine. Please, if you wish to leave, I shall take you home at once, and you need not ever return here again, if you do not wish to. I would be a monster to force you to remain here.”

Monster. The word struck something within her, something that made her break out into a cold sweat. She looked at Erik again, truly studied him as she thought, memories rushing through her. She saw Rhal again, standing in front of her, saying something of a monster with long limbs, eyes the color of embers. She heard the oracle again, telling her that she would marry a monster with no face. And she saw Erik, with his mask, his golden eyes, his lanky form—and heard the word monster over and over again. She tried to breathe but her lungs did not seem to be working properly. She tried to stand but the world was spinning and she was sure if she did, she would collapse.

“Why did you hesitate,” she managed, “when I asked you if you were a man? Why did you hesitate?”

“Well, because I am not one, in truth. I might appear one on the outside but within… I am missing several things, so to speak. I have had dealings in the past that have left me damaged and lacking many things which men take for granted, things that I can now never have. Because of that, I am known as many things: a god—although I assure you, I am not one—, a phantom. Some even call me a monster, although I assure you—“

Christine did not hear what he said after that. Her brain seemed set on repeating that word over and over—monster, monster, monster. Some called him a monster. He had hesitated to call himself human because he was a monster—a phantom. The very same that Rhal had told her of that day in the forest, that day before she lost everything in the world she held dear. The very same that the oracle had warned her of, a monster with no face. Surely, this was him. Surely, this was the man she was to marry. This was him and he was a monster. Somehow, she found herself on the stone floor, although she had no memory of having gotten there. His mask was his face, surely. He had nothing behind it. He was faceless, merciless, and she was to marry him. Oh, gods, she was to marry him.

“How did you hesitate,” she was saying, his hands outstretched as if he wanted to touch her. “Christine, what is wrong?”

His hand nearly defiled her back before she crawled away from him, trembling so violently she almost collapsed again. All she could see in the shadows was his cruel mask that hid his lack of face—that must be why he wore it. His mask that sealed her fate. His eyes that glowed and killed.
“Get away from me!” She screamed, crawling farther away. “You are the phantom! You are the faceless monster! You are a murderer! You are a monster! How could you dare to touch me, you monster! Get away!”

He shrank back at her words, and if she had not been so full of fear, and so full of contempt for what he was, she might have felt pity at the tears forming in his eyes, the way he seemed unable to breathe. But she would not—oh, she would not feel pity for this thing! She heard him make an odd choked sound, as if he wanted to speak, but no sound came out of his still, carved mouth. Her back collided with the wall and she huddled against it, shrinking away from his looming shadow.

“Monster?” He whispered, his voice shaking as he fell to his knees, like a person begging for forgiveness. “Please, Christine, please, I am not, I am not. Let me prove it to you. I am only Erik, not a monster. I would never murder, never. Please. I am no monster, Christine. Please—oh, please, just let me show you…”

“Then, show me,” she whispered, more to herself than to him, and rose once more to her feet. Almost of their own accord, her fingers reached down, seeking the mask. She would pull it off, she would pull it off and expose him for what he truly was, whether that be monster or man. She would pull it off and see the truth. She would pull it off and see what awaited her beneath it. He was so weak at this moment, so vulnerable. All she had to do was pull it off. Her fingers were already wrapped around the edges, already skimmed what must have been some sort of face beneath—cool warped skin. She felt it slip off his head and was about to kneel down to stare at the face of this thing, to truly see who and what he was, when he grabbed her, lowering his head from her view.

She cried out and tried to pull away but his fingers tightened painfully into her forearms, until she felt something hot beginning to run down them. Blood. She kicked whatever parts of him she could reach but his grip did not lessen in the slightest.

“Drop the mask,” he hissed, and it occurred to her that this was the voice of the phantom Rhal had told her of. All its former beauty was twisted, forming something horrible, something that made her want to run and hide. This was the voice of a murderer. Oh, gods, he must be the phantom.

“Let me go!” she yelped, kicking him again. “Let me go!”

“Drop the mask,” he countered again, lowering his head even further, obscuring what she knew she needed to see from view. He was hiding himself from her—but it would not work! She would see him, eventually, for what he truly was, without all his defenses and walls. Oh, she would!

“No! I will never! Look at me! Let me see you! Then, tell me you are not a monster. Speak the words to my face without that mask to hide you. Look at me, and then tell me.”

“Drop it. Now.” His voice was a command now, leaving no room for disobedience. But she would not—oh no—no matter what he said. She must know for certain what he was, if she was truly going to be his wife, although she would rather die than allow that to happen.

“No.” She said, her voice matching his—cold and final.

His fingers tightened further on her arms and she whimpered in spite of herself as blood trickled over her skin. “Let go of the mask now, Christine, or I will do what I have to in order to retrieve it.”

She only kicked him again in reply, trying to force him to look up, but to no avail. “Have it your way, then,” he growled. And suddenly, faster than Christine could comprehend, his hands had let go of her arms, and were prying the mask out of her hand before she even had time to stop him. She felt the leather rip out of her hand, although she tried desperately to grab it back, her arms searing
with pain.

By the time she tried to pry it off of his face again, it was too late and his hands were holding it onto to his face like it was the last thing keeping him alive. He stood, and straightened, his eyes glowing like embers from a fire.

“Let me see!” She cried again, continuing with her attacks. “Let me see your face, you monster. I must see it!” She swung at him desperately, and was satisfied with the dull pain that throbbed through her hand when her fist collided with him.

As she was about to hit him again, he suddenly grabbed her hands and forced them behind her with such force that she was unable to move them at all. She cried out in pain, but he only ignored her.

“So you know why,” he hissed, “do you know why it is that I wear this mask? Do you know? Have you considered that I do not wear it for my own benefit, but for yours? Have you considered that? Do you think that it brings me any joy to wear this… this thing over my face every hour of the day, to keep myself hidden from you? Do you think that it was my choice to wear this?” He laughed a cold, humorless laugh that made Christine’s blood run cold. She struggled against him but he overpowered her easily, forcing her hands farther behind her.

“I do not care,” she growled, trying to sound braver than she felt, staring into the eyes of this man, who hardly even seemed sane to her now, in all his twisted fury.

“So you think any human being chooses to become a monster, Christine? Do you think I enjoy being reviled by humanity?” He shook his head, and she felt his grip on her wrists loosen ever so slightly. “No. If I had any sort of choice in this matter, any sort of choice at all, I would do whatever it was in my power to do to at least seem a respectable man. But all that has been ripped from me. It is all gone.” His voice dropped to a mournful whisper as he looked at her, the fire slowly fading from his eyes. “It is all gone.”

She attempted once more to pull her wrists out of his now-loose grip and succeeded with such ease, she realized that he must have let go of her. For a moment, she thought about attacking him again, trying to pull his mask from him again to see what lay beneath, but she paused, rubbing her numb wrists instead.

“I know that I am a horrible, monstrous being,” Erik whispered, glancing at her with his sad, golden eyes one final time before walking over to the other side of the room, his back to her. “I know that. I know that people hate me, that people make up horror stories concerning me. I know that men try to hunt me for sport, to see which of them can carry my head back as a trophy to their wives. I know that. I know that I am hated and reviled by all. I know even you must hate me by now, Christine.” Slowly, Christine crept over to the doorframe, and leaned against it as she listened, just to be ready should he decided to come at her again. But the way his back was bent, the shaking sighs that left him, told her that he would not do so again.

He sighed again and continued, “I wish it were not so. Oh, Christine, I wish more than anything in all the world that it were not so. I have wished upon every star in the sky that I could start anew, or at least for some sort of change to this life I live. I have begged to the gods for some happiness, even just the dregs of it. I have dreamt at night of having friends, of having a family—of simply having someone who will accept me. These things are the only things I want, Christine.” He turned, and Christine was shocked to see tears running down the dark leather of his mask. She inched closer to the doorway, although in truth she had no intent to run. She wanted to hear what he had to say, now that he was no longer full of that fire that had shone in his eyes.

“A man may ask for love, may he not? A man may hope for such a thing. A man may desire happiness, do you not think, Christine? Even a man as wretched as myself. For I am…” He voice
shook. “I am a man, in spite of everything. The heart that beats within me is still a man’s heart—a heart that desires comfort, warmth, happiness, and—even sometimes, when the world has dissolved around me and there is not a soul for miles around—love. Even after all that has befallen me, after all the horrors that have shaped me into who you now see, that remains. I am not such a monster. There is still a face beneath this mask. There is still a soul within me that longs and begs. There is still a heart that aches and beats. And now, Christine, that heart is breaking.”

“Oh,” she breathed, her pulse racing. She almost felt pity for him, despite the fury that had taken over him earlier that had made her fear for her life. Whatever he had experienced was far worse than anything a normal person could bear, she was sure of it. They had both, it seemed, had their fair share of sorrow. They had both felt what it was to cry until there was nothing left, to be consumed by that emptiness. Christine could see it in his eyes and she was sure, in that moment, he could see it in hers.

“Oh, Christine…” He pressed his hands to his eyes, and she heard the sound of sobbing coming from him, raw and weak. She hesitated, her heart telling her she must go to him and comfort him as she had needed someone to comfort her when her father had died, but her mind told her no—that this man had hurt her, that he had murdered, that he was a monster and a phantom. She did not move as he wept.

“I am sorry,” he moaned after a long minute. “I am so, so sorry for bringing you here. This was all a mistake. I am so sorry. I will… I will take you back now, to your world, if that is what you wish. You cannot stay in the presence of such a demon as myself. Please, you must leave now. I am sorry.”

Christine stood for a minute thinking about his words, making no effort to move. She did not like Erik at this present moment—her wrists ached and she thought that her arms were still bleeding from his tight grip on her earlier. But the sorrow that pooled off of him and the hopelessness that slipped into his every word made her realize that perhaps he needed her, no matter what he was. He was very unhappy, she saw, just the same as she was. He was breaking inside, searching desperately for some solace in another, the same as she was. Perhaps he needed her, but perhaps they needed each other. Besides, what comfort did her home have to offer her, now? Painful memories and the smell of death, nothing more. That place could not heal her anymore, like it used to with all its familiar comfort and quirks. No, there was nowhere else for her to go, and, in truth, the thought of being with an entirely new person, who seemed to need healing, sounded far better to her than anything else. Perhaps the gods had destined her to be here, perhaps this was her place, now. For she had no desire to go anywhere else.

“No,” Christine murmured at last.

“What?” he stammered, meeting her eyes for the briefest of moments before looking back at the ground.

“I would like to stay. I cannot go home now. Perhaps just for the night, but I would like to stay.”

“Oh.” He blinked his teary eyes several times in rapid succession before nodding. “I will make arrangements for you, then. I will make your stay here as comfortable as ever you could dream. And I will not bother you. You need not ever even leave your room.”

She nodded, turning away from him, unable to look anymore at that horrid mask. He told her to follow him, so that he could show her where she was to stay, and Christine nodded again, watching him carefully as he crossed the room. When he reached her, however, she could not help herself. With the lightest touch of her hand on his arm, she stopped him just long enough to murmur, “I am sorry.”
He stared at her, spellbound. Then, suddenly, as if he had realized her touch was burning him, he jerked away from her and pulled his arm back to himself, severing the small threads of contact between them, already moving again through the shadows of the house. With no wish to be left alone in that dark room, she followed him.

Chapter End Notes

As it turns out, writing the unmasking scene is much harder when there's not actually an unmasking, but I tried. How do you think it went?
A Conversation in the Dark

Chapter Summary

In which a fragile skeleton of reconciliation is formed between Christine and Erik...

Chapter Notes

So, here is part two of Chapter Seven, as promised. Whereas the last one was more about actions and appearances, this one is about words and emotions, but I hope you enjoy it all the same.

Also, since I doubt I'll get another chapter up before Sunday, I just wanted to let you guys know now that I'm leaving to go on vacation on Monday, and won't be back for five days (I think), so there won't be any updates for a little while. But I'll be back soon enough ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This is your room,” he told her once they had reached a lone doorway at the end of a long hallway. The air between them felt cold and Christine, suppressing a shiver, drew her cloak tighter around her shoulders. “I apologize if it is not to your liking, but this is the only other suitable bedroom I have in my house at present, besides my own, of course. I hope you will excuse the fact that it has not been lived in for some time—it is very rare here for me to have visitors—but it should be clean. I do not like to leave my house in chaos.”

She nodded, looking at the stark contrast of her pale feet against the dark stone floor. Erik had refused to look her since they had begun their little journey to her room, and she had returned the favor, not wanting to see his eyes, in case there were still tears in them. Those tears almost made her want to feel pity for him, as hard as she tried to ignore it. “Thank you,” she murmured, shuffling her feet.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him wave his hand dismissively. “There is no need to thank me for simply doing what is right. You must have a room, since you are staying here”—his voice quavered at that—“and I have done my duty by providing you with one. There is nothing that warrants your gratitude about such a small action. But, come. There are a few things about this room that I would like to show you.”

With a slight nod, she followed him through the open door.

The room was exquisite. There were windows lining the walls that let in the dying light of the sunset. Since she had stepped foot in Erik's house, she had forgotten that it was still daylight outside and the light took her by surprise, now, after traveling though dark room after dark room. There was a small carpet on the floor that had an oriental look to it, something Christine quite admired, and she wondered where Erik had gotten it. There was a small table in the corner with a small bowl filled with water resting upon it, and a large chest that rested against the far wall. But the thing that truly captured her attention was the bed. It was huge, far larger than any other bed
she had seen before, with more than enough room to fit two people comfortably. The covers on it were clearly silken and very expensive, all colored in a deep, majestic purple, the likes of which she had always thought reserved for royalty. She drew in a sharp breath—this was all hers, now.

“Erik,” she managed, catching his eyes for the first time since she had touched his arm and he had jerked away so suddenly. “Thank you. This is all so beautiful.”

He shrugged as he looked around, clearly feeling none of the awe that she did at his surroundings, and replied with a flat ‘I suppose.’ Then, he showed her what everything in the room was for, and where to find essentially anything she wanted—the room seemed to have within it any object she desired. Then, he closed the door, instructing her to look at him.

“This,” he began, pointing to an odd wooden contraption that was mounted near the edge of the door, “is a bolt. I installed it many years ago, after having a bit of trouble with a… guest, but that is a matter for another time. What you should know, however, is this: once you put it down, like this”—he showed her—“I cannot enter this room. No one will be able to open the door from the outside, no matter what, and there is no other way into this room. Once you lock the door, you will be entirely alone and safe for as long as you should choose. If it is your wish, you may bolt the door until you leave this place, if you wish to have no further interaction with me after what has happened.” He sighed. “I would certainly understand if you did.”

She nodded, relief flooding through her that she would be entirely safe here, from Erik and the rest of the world. She wanted to trust him, as she had that night he had watched over her, but she did not, after seeing his mask, after seeing the fury his eyes, after seeing the pain he was capable of inflicting. Although she felt some guilt about it after looking at his sad golden eyes, she knew she would be bolting the door that night, and perhaps every night she was there. This room lacked absolutely nothing.

“And now, I think I shall leave you alone,” Erik said, his voice sounding subdued. “It has been a long day for you, and I am sure you have no wish to deal further with my presence. Should you need anything, do not hesitate to come to my room. Simply follow the hallway we came down, then turn left and the door will be directly in front of you, although I doubt there will be any need for that. Sleep does not come easily to me, I fear. If you need me, it is far more likely that I will hear you before you reach me, or that I shall be somewhere else entirely. But if that is the case, have no fear—you need only call for me, and I shall find you.” He began to walk to the door, his posture no longer as straight as it had been when she met him, his head not held nearly as high. “I will leave you now, Christine. Goodnight. Dream well.”

And with that, he shut the door and she immediately bolted it behind him, without telling him goodnight. She sat against that door for a long while, feeling safe with the feeling of hard wood behind her back, and her knees pressed against her chest. She wondered if she was doing the right thing—the right thing in not saying goodnight to Erik, the right thing in trying to pull off his mask and see his face, the right thing in coming to his house and agreeing to stay with him. And the more she thought about these questions, the more she found that she did not know the answers to any of them, except that she did feel badly about not wishing Erik goodnight. Everything else, however, was still colored in grey.

She had no idea why she even wanted to stay with Erik. He had been cruel to her when she had tried to remove his mask, and had frightened her, with his raving eyes and desperate manner. It was true that she was partially to blame for breaking his one rule, but he should have told her who and what he was far earlier than he had, so she did not feel badly. Any sane person would have done the same thing, faced with the situation she had been in earlier. Idly, she began to wash the dried trails of blood off her arm as she thought, the pain so dull now so could hardly feel it. She had only
been trying to discover the truth about her host, and there was nothing so wrong with that. Yet the memory of his breaking voice and pleading sobs still instilled pity in her, for whatever reason. Perhaps her own feelings towards the man were not warranted but it had nearly broken her heart to have heard him say such things to her. He had told her that no one ever asks to be a monster and now, that she sat and thought about it, she supposed it was true. She was not sure exactly why Erik had been labeled as a monster, but whatever the reasons, there must still be some good in him. He did not seem nearly as bad as the monsters she heard about in tales, that killed and mangled without a thought. He did not even seem like Rhal’s stories of the phantom, if he was, in fact, the same as the character he had told her about. If he was—and Christine was quite sure he was—, then she was spending the night under the same roof as a murderer. At least, then, she had the bolt across her door.

And, moreover, what if he truly was the man the oracle had destined her to marry? The similarities were striking—a man with no real face—his mask did not count as one—and labelled as a monster. So, if he was the one of whom her prophecy spoke… did she even have a choice? Would she ever love him? Was the prophecy even about him? Her head was spinning so she took a deep breath, trying to stop the thought swirling about in her mind. Prophecies were hardly predictable things and it seemed futile to dwell over hers, when she knew so little about the things it portended. Perhaps she ought to just put it behind her, and see where fate took her. There was really no reason to concern herself with gibberish from the oracle, when she could hardly understand or even escape from it. The path she followed now was a river and she was powerless to escape its current.

Sometime later, the allure of that huge, soft bed proved too powerful to Christine and she flung herself into it, meeting it with outstretched arms. She had been right—the mattress was stuffed with feathers and the blankets were silk. This was a bed fit for a queen, and Christine thought she had never felt anything so wonderful against her skin in all her life. Perhaps she would just stay with Erik so that she might get to sleep in the bed. It sounded a fair bargain to her, as she buried her face in the smooth, cold fabric of the pillows, sighing heavily.

But despite the comfort of that bed, Christine found she could not sleep. She could not seem to stop thinking about Erik, about the prophecy, about everything that had happened, and although her body was tired, her mind did not have any interest in sleep. She tossed and turned for what felt like hours on end, wanting nothing more than to go to sleep, to be dead to the world for a couple of hours and forget this whole mess, but she could not. Finally, when she thought she might have tired herself out enough to sleep—for she had reached that stage where the world seems warped, and one cannot truly tell if what they are experiencing is reality or a dream—she heard music. For a moment, she thought that she might be dreaming and that this music was part of that, because it sounded so beautiful and so far away from her. But when she opened her eyes, the music continued, now sounding as if it was coming from somewhere down the hallway, and Christine, who suddenly lost all urge to sleep once again, decided to investigate. This music that flooded her senses was the most enchanting sound she had ever heard, and it made her want to dance, want to grow wings and fly again, want to wander through the forests, want to sing. Not even her father’s music had inspired that amount of feeling within her. Humming lightly, she unlatched the door and walked out of it, following the sound of the music through the night, the world around her still deciding whether it was dream or reality.

The music led her down the hallway, past the door that led to Erik’s room, through two other rooms, then to an open door, revealing a small space bathed in soft golden candlelight. Her bare feet made no sound as she padded close to the opening, her curious eyes taking her the sight before her. In the middle of the room, settled comfortably on a chair, was Erik, cradling a lyre close to his heart, his fingers tracing over the strings with a surety and refinement, his eyes closed as he swayed to the sound of the music he created. He was every bit as enchanting to her as the music in that
moment, and she would have been content with watching him for years. Far too soon, however, his eyes flickered open and caught sight of her, betraying his shock at seeing her resting in the doorway. His fingers faltered and stopped, the lyre nearly falling out of his hands, before he recovered and regained his composure, although his fingers remained still after that.

“Christine,” he gasped. “I did not expect to see you wandering about so late at night. Forgive me.”

“I heard your music while I was trying to sleep,” she explained, taking his words as an invitation to cross over to him, settling herself on the floor. “And it sounded so beautiful that I followed it. I am sorry if I surprised you, though.”

He shook his head. “You did, but that is no matter. It was just that I expected you to be sleeping by now. Otherwise, I never would have dared to play, for fear of waking you.” His fingers travelled just above the strings as he spoke, in what Christine guessed was a habit, since he did not appear conscious of his own doing it. “I am touched that you think my music is beautiful.”

Christine smiled, glancing up to meet his glowing eyes before looking down again. “It is. I have not heard anyone play with such skill since my father, and he is the best musician I have ever heard. Where did you learn to play?”

“I taught myself. But I have always been rather gifted in music. Some say it is a hard practice, and a grueling one but I have never known it to be so. It has always come naturally to me, as easily as breathing. The music seems to flow out of me sometimes…” As he trailed off, his fingers plucked absently at the strings again. “Your father—does he play the lyre?”

Christine sighed, drawing her knees up to her chest, his words cutting a wound into her heart, a wound she had thought perhaps to be healing. A single tear rolled down her cheeks as she saw her father again, seemingly just inches before her, his lyre perched on his knee as he played, his eyes shining and happy. “Yes,” she murmured. “Yes, he did.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Christine saw Erik’s hand still on the lyre, and realized that he must have noticed her sorrow and was now going to offer her words of comfort that meant nothing, just like all the others did. She hated it when they did that, offering her useless pity. Their pity would not bring her father back to life; their pity could not heal the gaping wound in her heart. She turned away, ready to retire back to her room again, when he spoke.

“I am sure he was one of the best who ever lived, dear girl. But come! I shall play you something.”

Sighing, she relaxed back into a sitting position, happy that he was not going to pry for more, or offer her empty words of consolation. Music was a far better means of comfort, one that did not require her to speak or even move, but simply sit and allow herself to be carried away into a world where only herself and this lyre existed. As he began to play a soft, but rather melancholy tune, she closed her eyes, and let the music wash her away. For some time, the two sat like that—Erik, plucking at the strings of his lyre, glancing at Christine whenever he was sure she was not looking at him, and Christine, her knees pressed against her chest and her eyes closed as she listened.

“That was beautiful,” she murmured, after his fingers had finally stilled and the music had ceased. For the first time since she had arrived at his house, Christine was beginning to feel something like peace spreading through her, and a sense of belonging that she had not felt since the funeral.

“Thank you.”

He inclined his head. “It was my pleasure. I do not often get the chance to play my music for anyone besides myself, which gets rather tiresome after a while, I am afraid.” He said nothing more and neither did she, so the two sat in a comfortable state of silence for a while, before Erik,
his voice faltering, said, “I am sorry.”

Christine glanced up at him, her brow furrowed. “Why on earth are you sorry? I enjoyed your music very much. There is no need for you to apologize.”

“No, no.” He shook his head. “It is not because of the music that I am apologizing. I am sorry for the whole situation that occurred tonight, with the mask…” She thought he would continue, but he remained silent.

“Oh. Well,” she stretched her legs out in front of her, trying to think of what to say to him. “I guess it would not have happened had I not tried to grab your mask in the first place.”

That was the farthest she was willing to go as an apology. If that was what he wanted from her, he would gain nothing more. She did not regret her actions, only the way things had played out.

“This is true.” He plucked the strings thoughtfully, and short, empty notes filled the air. “But even so, I feel much regret over what has happened. I tried to convince that I was not what you thought I was—a… monster—but in acting the way I did towards you, I am afraid I have only confirmed the opposite.” He exhaled sharply. “How are your arms?”

Christine touched the sore spots on her arms where his fingers had dug into her flesh. The pain was nearly gone now, but she dared not press on the little, red half-moon shapes when they still ached as they did. “I will be fine. It really was not so bad. I am… I am sorry for punching you, too, and kicking you. That was a bit cruel. Did I hurt you?”

He shrugged. “No, but I am inclined to think I deserved it. But I am glad your arms are not in any terrible pain. I truly do feel very badly for having hurt you—that was never my intention. If I could go back and refrain from doing so…” He sighed again, and rested his forehead on his lyre. “It was only that, I cannot let you see me without my mask. If there was any way I could, I would remove it in a heartbeat and let you stare at me for your hearts content, but that is something that is entirely out of my power to offer. This thing that you see must now and forever serve as a sufficient excuse for a face, regardless of what my own wishes or yours might be concerning it. I regret it, Christine. Please believe me when I tell you that I do.”

“I do.” There was something in his voice that made Christine think he was telling the truth, and the way he had reacted when she had tried to take his mask from him had reminded her more of a caged and desperate animal than a person acting out of selfish intent. “I believe you. But may I ask why you wear your mask, then? If you refuse to ever show me what you hide behind it, I think the least you can do is tell me why you wear it.”

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He shifted in his seat, her fingers now drumming on the wooden frame of his instrument. “I suppose you are right, but I must confess, I do not think I will be able to inform you of the entire story for some time, at least until I am sure I can trust you with it. I believe I have told you before that my past is a rather dark and tragic thing, yes?” She nodded. “Good. I fear that much of what caused that tragedy is the very reason I wear my mask, the very reason my existence is a cursed one. For, you must understand, Christine, I have had dealings with gods. This mask, and what I hide behind it, is the product of one of those encounters, one I will never be able to forget, until I have breathed my last, and one with consequences I doubt I will be able to shake until death removes them from me.” He looked at her, his golden eyes searching hers. As he looked at her, Christine thought she had never seen such extraordinary eyes—they were every bit as beautiful as his voice.

She thought about his words for a moment. She believed in the gods, of course, but believing in the gods in a far-off place where they did no damage to mortals was a different sort of belief than one
that suggested the gods walked among men. It was not that she doubted Erik’s story—she saw no trace of doubt in him—but it all seemed rather extreme for her taste. She much preferred the versions of the gods who sat up on Mount Olympus and let people like herself live unmolested.

“So, a god punished you, and that is why you wear the mask?”

“Yes, that is the gist of it, I suppose,” Erik replied.

“Is that the whole story, then?” Christine asked, her curiosity piqued. “Why were you punished? And what is your punishment—simply to wear a mask? Or is there more to it than that?”

Erik leaned his head back against his lyre, his posture now slumped. “Yes, there is a great deal more to it than that.” His voice sounded very tired, and Christine suddenly remembered that it was the middle of the night, and the both of them really were supposed to be sleeping. “The only things I have revealed to you are truly the most vague details of the whole affair, but I am afraid I cannot tell you much more than what I already have. You must, I think, be content with what I have shared you with you for now, dear Christine.”

His tone stated clearly that he wanted to speak no more on the subject, but Christine was certainly not ready to be finished. If he chose to hide himself in a mask, she thought it was only fair that he told her why he did so, even if he did not want to. She could not continue to stay with him if he continued to make himself a stranger to her, and never let her any farther in than past skin-deep.

“But can you not at least tell me why you were punished? You have only let me know the smallest bit of your story, and now all that has done is make me even more curious. You cannot simply tell me that you have had dealings with a god, and assume I will be content with that, when there is so much more that you are unwilling to tell me.”

“Christine…” She saw his fingers tighten around the frame of his harp until his knuckles turned white. “This is really not something I wish to share. I know that I have aroused your curiosity greatly, and I am sorry for it, since I really cannot tell you what you wish to know. Perhaps it would be better if you simply went to bed, and thought no more on this subject.”

“Perhaps,” she admitted. “But, really, I see no harm in you telling me at least what you were punished for. I have already heard tell that you are a murderer”—he trembled—“But I am still here, aren’t I? I do not care what you have done, I just want to know. And I cannot see why you refuse to tell me.”

He rounded on her suddenly, his eyes flaming again, as they had earlier in the evening, and fear spiked through her stomach, cold and overwhelming, at the memory of the anger that had consumed him. But there was something in the way he acted, something in the pain she saw in his eyes that told her that his anger was not directed at her, but at himself, for whatever he had done in the past. Whatever his past crimes were, they still haunted him, and she could see their ghosts in his eyes. The fear began to dissipate within her, and, instead, something that felt remarkably like pity took its place for the broken man in front of her, who was only barely stitched together with his anger and resentment, the only two things keeping him from falling into despair.

“Because,” he cried, “I had the stupidity to challenge a god! Because I was a child and I could not see past my own pride. Because I thought nothing could ever stop me, so long as I stood my ground.” His anger slowly began to dissipate as the despair that always threatened to swallow him up crept into his voice, as he whispered, “Because I was stupid, Christine… So, so stupid. And now, I must pay the price for my actions for the rest of my life.”

His voice quavered and she realized that he was near crying again, and the memory of his tears
earlier was still fresh enough in her mind to tell her that she did not want this to happen again. She hated seeing those tears drip down onto his mask, hated seeing the heartbreaking pain in his eyes, when she could see now that he was not going to let her close enough to comfort him, if she ever grew strong enough to offer it to him. And it frightened her—she had not seen a man cry, not since the death of her mother, when her father’s heart had broken, and his tears had hardened his usually bright, happy eyes.

“I am sorry. Please, do not cry. I do not want you to cry. I will ask you nothing else about your past, I promise. But do not be upset! I am sorry.” She stood and reached out to him, wondering if her touch was welcome. His back was so close to her—she could have easily reached out and touched it—but when she had touched his arm earlier, he had flinched away as if she had burned him, and she did not want him to react the same way again.

Before she could make a decision, however, he stood, and she pulled her hand back to herself, not wanting him to know that she had even thought of instigating any physical connection between him and herself.

“I am well. There is no need to apologize. I simply do not like to dwell on that particular part of my life, as I am sure you can understand, from what I have told you. It is still rather painful to me.” His voice sounded empty to Christine, and despite his assurance that he was fine, and despite his dry eyes, she could tell that whatever memories she had brought up had been more painful than he wanted to let on. She began to chew on her nail, wishing she could somehow calm him and soothe the fear and fire in his eyes.

“I am sorry,” was all she could think to say again. And then, “I will not ask you about your past any more, then. And perhaps you were right—perhaps it would be better if I went to bed. I am sure it is getting very late now, and you must be tired.”

“Yes,” was his only reply. But as she turned to go, he stopped her, with a soft “Christine?”

“Yes?”

“I…” He pressed his hand to his eyes. “I believe you called me a ‘faceless monster’ earlier, during that, ah, miscommunication we had. Was I correct in my hearing?”

“Yes,” she replied again, blushing as she heard him repeat the insult she had called him earlier. From his lips, the words sounded cruel and even a bit childlike, and Christine realized that was probably how she had sounded to him. She bit her lip.

A soft hum resonated from behind his mask before he spoke again, his voice soft and careful, “I thought… I thought that you may wish to know that I am not that. I know it may seem hard to believe but beneath this mask, there is a face, much like your own. I do… I do have one. I promise.” He looked at her again, and as he did, his eyes softened, and Christine realized with a start that he was smiling at her beneath his mask.

She smiled back, her heart beating heavily against her chest, although she was not entirely sure why. He had only smiled after all, and she could not even see his mouth so it did not truly matter anyway. Her fingers found a stray curl to occupy them, and they tugged on it.

“I am glad.” His eyes twinkled. “Goodnight, Erik.”

“Goodnight again, Christine.”

She had nearly exited the room before she realized that there was something she had not yet done,
something that she must do. Taking in deep breath, she blurted as quickly as she could, “Oh, and I am sorry for called you a faceless monster, and I hope you can forgive me.”

Erik took a step closer to her, his head tilted slightly as he looked at her, his hands knotted together in front of him without the lyre to occupy them. “Oh, Christine,” he sighed, “believe me when I say that I already have.”

Chapter End Notes

Also, if any of you are interested in hearing what the Ancient Greek lyre sounds like, there are lots of videos on YouTube of people playing it like it used to be played. Look it up, if you're curious: The Ancient Greek lyre of Classical Antiquity. It has such a hauntingly beautiful sound.
The next morning, Christine awoke feeling oddly rested considering that she was not in her own house and, moreover, that the house she was in, she shared with a man of ambiguous past. For a long moment, she sat in her bed in a state of comfortable bliss, considering if she wanted to leave the room and face Erik again. Last night, he had seemed so open with her, as he sat there, his hands fiddling with his lyre, and she had felt nearly comfortable with him. He was not all bad—she was certain of that—and no matter how she felt about him, she had no food in her room and she was, at present, feeling ravenously hungry. So, she left her room, still not entirely sure what she was feeling towards this man with whom she was staying. She followed the scent of sausage cooking until, after padding down numerous hallways and through countless rooms, she reached what she supposed must have been a kitchen. It was an odd one, however, being both very clean, compared to how her family’s kitchen looked at home, and very empty, the only two people standing in it being herself and Erik, who was preoccupied cooking the sausages, although he glanced at her briefly when she entered the room.

“Good morning!” He said to her cheerfully, keeping his eyes on his breakfast. So, there would be no mention of the incident with the mask, she supposed? He seemed to be ardently ignoring the tension between them, and his voice sounded a bit too cheery to Christine, considering everything that had happened since she arrived at his house. But if he wanted to pretend that all was well between them, she did not wish to stop him. There was no need for unnecessary unhappiness, and while she was staying with him, she decided that she might as well make things as comfortable between the two of them as could be. So, if he wanted to ignore last night, she would, too.

“Good morning,” she yawned, and looked around the room in confusion before seating herself at a sturdy wooden table. “Do you not have any servants to cook for you?”

“Hm? Oh, no. No servants at all, I am afraid. I have not had any for years, in truth, because most of them ran away at one point, and the rest I simply had no use for. So, yes—I cook for myself.”
“Oh,” she said, resting her elbows on the table. She had never been to a house that had not had servants before—only the very poorest people lacked them. She traced her finger over the rough wood, and asked, “May I have some of those sausages, too? They smell very good.”

“I am making them for you, so, yes, dear girl, you can. I have, in fact, already eaten.”

Her stomach growled when she heard them sizzle over the fire, but it was soon appeased, when Erik presented her with a plate full of them. She ate her breakfast in relative silence, which was only broken when Christine commented on how good Erik’s cooking skills were, or asked a question about how he prepared such foods. She knew very little of the art of cooking, after all, since her servants had always done it for her, but she had always wished to learn if only to be able to appease her own hunger at any time she wished.

After breakfast, Erik told her that he must clean their plates, so that they would be ready to use for the next time they ate, and told her he must get some water to do so. This concept of washing the dishes after eating was something Christine had never even considered to do before, since at home her servants did all of that sort of thing for her, but now that she thought about it, she supposed it did make sense to wash things after eating off of them. Needing something to do, she asked if she could get the water for him, although he could still do the washing afterwards if he wanted, since she had no idea how. He accepted this idea with some convincing on her part—Erik seemed to loath the idea of her doing any sort of labor while she stayed in his house—and told her how to find the well near his house, and gave her a wooden bucket to take the water back again.

In no time, she had completed her task, even if the water was far heavier than she had anticipated, and when she found Erik again, he was in the kitchen, stacking the bowls back on a table in the far corner of the room. He looked up when he heard her come in, his eyes shining.

“I see you have succeeded in fetching the water, then. Although I am terribly sorry I do not possess servants to simply do it for you, as I am sure you are accustomed to.”

“Oh, it is fine. I will survive.” She offered him a tight smile, and she placed the bucket on the table next to him. “You know, I never had to do this sort of thing at home, but now that I am doing it, I think I rather like it. Getting water certainly feels more useful than sewing, and cleaning, and all those sorts of things that I would be doing if I was at home.”

He shrugged and took a seat opposite her, assuming an air of nonchalance. “Yes, doing things that must be done does give one a sense of purpose—does it not?—even if the work done is rather mundane. Even so, thank you for so readily volunteering to help me. I do appreciate your concern.”

“It is no problem, really,” she replied, watching as he dunked the first little bowl into the water. “It is not as if I have any other tasks to do here, anyway, so I may as well help you.”

He nodded curtly and remained silent after that until he finished washing each and every dish. After that, Christine asked if he might give her a tour of his house, as something to pass the time. He agreed readily.

Most of the rooms had little or no special significance to Christine. He showed her the music room—the room in which she had found him playing the lyre—, his bedroom—a room very much like her own—, long hallways and entertainment rooms. None of these, however, captured her attention until they reached a dark stairway, tucked away in a small room next to his.

“What is this?” She asked, gazing into the deep shadows below her. It almost seemed as if the stairs stretched forever, down to the center of the earth, with so little light to show her otherwise.
“Would you like to see?” He looked at her carefully, his head tipped slightly to the right, reminding Christine of the curious stare of a cat.

She nodded, the idea of exploring the depths of the unknown sounding very exciting to her with so little else to do. In no time, he had procured two oil lamps for each of them, and with those in hand, he led her down the steep staircase, which ended up not being very deep at all. They only had to descend about thirty or so stairs before their footsteps reached solid ground and her oil lamp revealed a small, earthy room, carved out of the rock beneath his house.

She sucked in a breath. “To think there was a whole other part of your house beneath my feet this whole time, and I never even would have guessed, if you had not brought me here.” The lamp showed a little pile of blankets on the floor, arranged in the shape of a sloppy bed against the damp, stone wall. She turned to Erik, her lamp casting odd shadows on the planes of his mask, making it look even less human than before. She shivered. “What do you use this place for?”

He wandered over to a small cavity in the stone, and pulled out what appeared to be an old wineskin. Brushing the dust off of it, he opened it, and poured it upside down, letting whatever the previous contents of it was pour out onto the dirt floor. “It is a hide out,” he replied, “should I ever have need for it.”

“How would you ever need such a place?” She asked, shining her light of the dirty walls, and the raggedy bed again. It did not seem a fit place for any creature, much less a human being. It reminded her more of a tomb than anything else, with its musty smell and so little light.

He put the wineskin back in its spot in the wall. “One finds that when one lives a life of constant vigilance, one must have an escape plan at all times. This place locks from both the outside and the inside”—he shined his light on an old wooden door in the entry way—“so that, I can lock myself within it, should I choose, or keep others from coming up into my house.”

“But you cannot live in here!” Christine said, touching the cold walls that surrounded her on every side. “No one should have to live in this horrible place. Besides, if you lock yourself in here, would you not starve after a while, if you cannot escape again?”

“Ah, but, you see, I will not. That is the genius of it all. You see, Christine, if I simply move this”—he pushed the pile of rags out of the way with his foot, revealing what appeared to be a wooden door in the floor, a square hardly large enough to fit a human body through—“There is a trap door beneath. This trap door leads to a tunnel a few feet beneath us, which then comes out in the middle of the forest, some way from here. So, there is really no way that I could starve in here, with another exist concealed so close by—do not worry. I would show you the tunnel, but I fear it is really rather dirty down there, and cramped. Although it is possible for a person your size, and even mine, to walk through with relative ease, it is not the most comfortable journey you will undertake, so unless you are set on exploring further, perhaps we should go back up. I never particularly enjoyed this little room, at any rate, and I do not like being in it for prolonged periods of time.”

Christine could see why. “Let’s go back up, then. This place has a bit of a chill to it, anyway.”

As they walked back up the stone steps, Christine asked a question that she had been thinking about since Erik had told her about the room. “You have not ever used that, have you?”

“The room?” He paused for a moment on the stairs before continuing up.

“Yes,” she whispered, thinking of him, locked alone in that cold, little room, afraid of whatever was chasing him down there, like a cornered animal. The thought of him—or anyone, really—
being stuck down there, like a person buried alive, made her upset, and she found herself sincerely wishing that Erik had never had to undergo such lengths to escape whatever chased him.

He sighed and murmured, “Yes. I wish I could say that I have not ever had to use such animalistic methods to escape from my hunters, but I have on one or two occasions. It is not the sort of life I had hoped to live, of course, but one must do what it takes to stay alive, even if sometimes, the reason for which I struggle to keep myself breathing evades me.”

They reached the top of the stairs. Christine felt her heart sinking within her at his words, although she could tell he was trying his hardest to keep his tone light. The knowledge that he lived like that, in a state of constant vigilance and fear, made her want to do something—change the way the world viewed him so that she might keep him safe. No person, she felt, should ever have to fight to live, and she nearly told him so, too, passion rising within her for her cause. But he took her lamp from her, and went to go put it back before she could, and by the time he returned, her courage had left her and she had remembered that whatever Erik had done to cause men to hunt him as they did was most likely some horrible crime. He deserved this treatment that he now received, even if she did not know for what reason yet.

It was not until far later that night, after they had eaten dinner, and retired to Erik’s living room, that she found the courage to ask him, although she did feel rather bad doing it. She could already tell that there were certain subjects that were a taboo for Erik, things such as his mask, his past, and his curse—whatever that was—that he did not wish to speak of, despite the fact that he would often answer her questions about them, anyway.

“Earlier, when we were in that room beneath your house, you said that you live a life of constant vigilance, that people hunt you,” she said slowly, watching to see his reaction. “Who? Who would hunt you like that?”

He blinked and straightened in his chair, his finger curling around the edge of it. “Due to the fact that you had any knowledge of me being referred to as the Phantom—you did call me that last night, did you not?—I dare say, you know quite well who chases me and why.”

“What do you mean?” She thought back to the conversation she had had with Rhal and, except the fact that he himself had said he wanted to kill the beast, she could not remember any mention of any certain hunters. Perhaps, there were many people like Rhal, who wished to capture and kill such a monster as they had heard about, that turned innocent people into ash with its eyes.

“Only those who wish to see me dead call me ‘the Phantom,’” He leaned back in his chair and adjusted his mask with a sigh. “For some reason, there are a great many horror stories concerning me, although I do not why, or who made them up. I am afraid I am not even entirely sure why people commonly refer to me as ‘the phantom’—I certainly did not make up the title—but I have gained it nonetheless. I suppose it is because of my mask, or my appearance, which, I know, is not a pretty one. But a great deal of those men who have heard these stories about me wish to prove their manliness and chop off my head, as unfortunate as that is for myself.”

Christine nodded slowly. “I see. So, you cannot… you cannot turn people to ash with your eyes, can you?”

He shook his head slightly and leaned forward, his face mere inches from her own. “Look at me, Christine. Look into my eyes.”

She did so, and he looked back at her, his eyes practically glowing amber in the evening light. Sometimes, they almost seemed brown, and other times, they appeared to Christine as liquid gold, always changing and flowing. They were the only feature of his body, that Christine had yet
encountered, that reflected the same breathtaking beauty as his voice.

“Now, look at your hands.” He instructed. “Have they turned to ash? Feel your face. Is it flying away beneath your fingertips? Are you still completely whole?”

She nodded; yes.

“Then, therein lies your answer.” He leaned back again, and closed those golden eyes. “If my eyes had the power to do any such thing, would you not have already been turned to ash? Even if I had the ability to activate my power, as it were, by my own will, would I not have made you crumble when you tried to reach for my mask? No, Christine, I do not possess any powers like that in my eyes, you may rest assured. My eyes pose you no danger. The stories you have heard about me are all lies.”

“So, I suppose I should not ask you if you can become invisible, then?”

“Invisibility?” She heard him chuckle lightly, a true, pleasant laugh. “That is certainly a new one. I have not heard that before. I am sure that these tales get more and more ridiculous with every passing year. Invisibility, indeed.” He laughed again.

“Well, I thought it was worth a try.” Christine smiled, feeling a great deal more relieved to know this man did not have supernatural powers to kill others. Although, how did these stories come about if they did not have some truth in them?

“Did they ever catch you? These people, I mean. Clearly, no one has succeeded in… killing you because, well, here you are.” She hoped for his sake that he had outsmarted them at every turn, for he did seem very smart.

He nodded, his attention now focused on the table sitting between them. “You are certainly right that no one has succeeded in bringing about my destruction. But yes. I am afraid I have been caught, as you put it, and on more occasions than one. I assure you, it is not an enjoyable experience to be at the mercy of one’s enemies, and I have quite a few scars that will testify that for me.”

“Scars?” Christine felt another, sudden need to protect this person, this fully-grown man sitting in front of her, although from whom or even why, she knew not. All she knew was that it sickened her to think of people abusing this man and calling him a ‘monster,’ when the person who sat in front of her now, despite his mask, was certainly not that, whatever else he might be.

“Yes, and a great many of them, too. I would offer to show them to you, if you would like, but I fear that would be a bit too much for you, having only known me a short while. And I, moreover, have no real wish to go about showing my guests my own mutilated body, if I do not have to. I would rather not make a habit of doing so, if it is all the same to you.”

“Oh, no. Trust me, I can take your word for it.” It seemed Erik had a dry sense of humor, if she could even call it that, dry as it was. Still, despite his little joke he had made concerning his scars, she hated to think about how many there were concealed under his cloak, covering his body. Desperate to take her mind off the image she had formed in her mind of Erik screaming as people cut into him with a knife, she asked, “How did you escape from these men? I am sure the tales you have are all very exciting.”

“Oh, yes, very.” His eyes narrowed slightly in what she guessed was a smile. “But, unfortunately for you, like everything else about my past, those are not tales I will be sharing, and, believe me, dear girl, not ones you would like to hear, either, if you knew what they concerned.”
“Oh.” Christine leaned her head on her palm. Everywhere she walked seemed to be covered in thin, eggshells and now, although she was trying her best not to step on any and break the fragile bonds between herself and Erik, she felt that everywhere she put her foot was precarious. She did not know what to speak to him of, how to act with him, and everything she tried seemed to go wrong.

Perhaps he could see it in her face that she was upset, because he said, in a light tone that sounded forced, “Let us try and speak of happier matters, hm? There is so much darkness in the world—let us concern ourselves with the light and clear. Come, tell me, child, what do you enjoy?”

“Well, I am no child,” she replied, picking her head off her hand. “I am nineteen years of age—a grown woman, now.”

He spoke again before she could think of what she enjoyed. “Indeed, Christine? You look so young and full of life, I had thought perhaps you were younger, but… Yes, I can see. Nineteen, then. Your life is only just beginning to unfold. You can still fall in love, and be married, have children… That is, if you have not done so already?”

“I have not.”

He cleared his throat, suddenly looking sheepish. “Ah well, you are very young, after all, and that is to be expected. There is much ahead of you, Christine, and the world, I am sure, is still full of wonder for you, with so few years to tell you otherwise.”

“I suppose so,” she replied, thinking of when her father died, how she had thought the world was ending for her, how she was still not yet sure if life was friend or foe. “But how old are you, Erik? I cannot tell with your mask, although I do not think you are nineteen.”

“No.” He shook his head. “No, certainly not nineteen, although I do remember what life was like when I was that age. I hope that the nineteenth year of your life goes better than mine, although the way that mine went, I suppose next to anything would be better. But as for my age: all that you need know is that I am far older than you. To be completely honest with you, dear girl, I stopped counting my years long ago, after I realized they did not matter, so I do not think I could answer your question even if I wanted to.”

Of course, he could not, because anything she asked him about himself, he would not answer, or claim he could not. She was not sure why she had asked in the first place. She managed a tight smile. “I enjoy singing, you know, if you want an answer to your earlier question. My father used to play his lyre for me and I would sing with him. It was my favorite way to pass the time.”

“He died,” she replied shortly, curtly, pushing all the emotions beginning to bubble up within her away. She would not cry in front of Erik, no matter what. She would not think of her father in his last moments, coughing painfully, or taking her hand in his cold one, telling her to live and be happy once he was gone. No, she would not think of that.

“Oh.” The silence that passed between them was so heavy that Christine felt as if there was another presence in the room. After what seemed like an eternity, Erik broke it, his voice soft. “I am very sorry to hear that.”

She breathed in deeply, trying to swallow the lump forming in her throat. “I cannot do anything to change it, now, so what does it matter? He is gone.” Her voice was beginning to shake terribly, so she shut her lips, praying that Erik could not see the tears forming in her eyes.
“He is.” He agreed. “He is gone, but the sorrow often lingers long after the soul leaves. My father died, as well, when I was near your age, and it hit me rather hard. I do understand what you feel, Christine, if you ever wish to speak any more on the subject.” His eyes dropped to her hand resting on the table and for a moment, Christine was sure that he would take her hand in his, but he made no move to do so.

“Thank you,” she sighed, closing her eyes. She suddenly felt very tired, and wanted only to sleep for a very, very long time.

“Anything I can do for you, rest assured that I will. And perhaps, sometime, if you are feeling better, I can play my lyre for you, and you can sing, if you wish, like you used to before. Would that please you, my dear?”

“Maybe. Oh, I do not know. Not anymore.” She opened her eyes again and saw that he was looking at her with such concern, it nearly made her want to cry all over again. “Thank you for trying, though. You are kind to try.”

After that, there did not seem much of a point to attempt to carry on with conversation, not when things were already so strained between them, so Erik and Christine parted their ways and retired to their rooms. This time, neither came out until morning.

It was then that Christine found Erik once more in the kitchen, carving out pieces from a loaf of bread, what would presumably be her breakfast. Again, when he presented her with her plate, he did not take one for himself, but simply sat down opposite her, watching her intently as she ate, his eyes following the trail of her fingers to her mouth and back again. The whole of it, for Christine, was very awkward.

“So,” she began in between bites. “Do you ever eat?”

“Oh, yes. I simply make mine earlier than yours, because I am up far earlier than most, and because of the mask, which, as you might have guessed, prohibits me from eating very effectively,” he replied, motioning vaguely to his covered mouth.

She continued eating after that, not knowing what else to say to the man sitting in front of her. Finally, she finished her breakfast, and was glad to get the water for washing the dishes again, so that she would not have to endure anymore of Erik’s staring. It was when she stood, however, that she saw Erik’s eyes travel down her form in such a way that it was hard for her to miss. Blushing, she turned away, hoping to go outside before this situation turned any more awkward, when she heard a slight ‘oh, dear.’

“What?” She asked, crossing her arms in front of her as she turned back to him, hoping the redness had left her face.

“I am afraid I have been very foolish,” he said as he reached to collect her empty plate. “I suppose you only have with you that one dress that you have on currently? You did not bring any more with you, I presume?”

“Oh, no,” she sighed, starting to understand where he was going with this. She had searched last night for something else to wear, as her own dress was beginning to get dirty to the point where it was noticeable, and had found nothing within the chests and drawers in her room that had been of any help. So, she was still dressed in the cream-colored chiton she had come in. He had only just realized she had nothing else to wear when he had noticed she was still wearing her clothes from yesterday, which explained why he had looked at her so obviously. He had not done so out of... desire or any such thing like that, although Christine’s heart still fluttered at the thought of it.
“Yes, I fear I completely failed to think this through. Hm.” He looked at her again, his golden eyes travelling up and down as he measured her, completely oblivious to the way Christine flushed and fidgeted. “I suppose… Yes, I suppose that I might have a few things that _might_ do but I will have to see. You are so much smaller than myself, after all, so this will be a bit of a trial, but do not worry, sweet Christine! I shall find more for you to wear! I refuse to let you live in discomfort while you are in my house.”

And with that, he walked off, leaving a very bewildered Christine lingering in the kitchen, wondering if he meant for her to follow him. With nowhere else to go, she decided she might as well, and ran to catch up with his lengthy strides.

She trailed behind him until he came to the door of his own room, and entered into it, motioning for her to follow him in when she lingered outside. The design was very similar to the room he had given her to stay in, but there was more furniture in his, and more objects, which made things appear altogether more lived in, and gave off a more homey atmosphere that Christine’s room lacked. As she looked around, he opened a chest at the foot of his bed and began to dig through it, searching very intently for something. Every few seconds, there would be a soft _thump_ on the floor as he dropped a bundle of cloth onto it, until there was a large pile of different colored fabrics laying next to him.

“This should be enough, I think,” he said at last, standing to survey his work. “Yes, I think this will do. Come over here, Christine, and I shall see how I can make this work as pleasantly as possible for you.”

She moved over next to him, and did as he instructed—sometimes lifting up one of her arms, sometimes both, as he held a large piece of fabric up to her. When she tucked it under her chin one way, it was so long that it trailed on the floor, but when she turned it the other way, it was just long enough to brush the tops of her feet.

“Ah, this is satisfactory, indeed! These will work quite nicely, I think, with a few modifications,” Erik said, lifting a few more of the fabrics and holding them up to her.

“Good,” Christine replied, smiling as he worked. “It would be a shame if I could only wear this old thing during my stay here.”

“Yes, indeed. What color do you desire?” He asked, motioning to the fabrics laid out across his arms, and the few still strewn on the floor.

She chose a brightly colored blue one, the color of the sky on a summer’s day.

“Lovely!” He cried, clearly proud of his problem-solving abilities. “Yes, this will do perfectly. Although… Hm—I suppose you might have trouble getting a thing so large as that on by yourself, and I suppose you will need someone… to, ah… help you. Oh. This is why people possess servants, I am now beginning to realize.”

Christine might have laughed at how quickly his manner had slipped from excited to embarrassed, had she not been feeling the same way as he did. “Yes, that is one reason. Ah… Let’s see…” She lifted the piece of fabric, trying to gauge how she would tie it about her with no one to help her. Perhaps it could be done, if she tried hard enough, and possessed at least two extra hands…

Erik began to wring his hands. “I did not think of this either, I am afraid.” He watched as she struggled to lift the heavy fabric around her, sometimes taking a step forward, as if he wanted to help her, before stepping back again. “Perhaps,” he said at last, once she had the blue fabric draped about her in such a way that resembled the chiton she was currently wearing. “Perhaps, you ought
to try and do it by yourself first, and if you truly cannot, I can attempt to help you as best I can.”

She agreed with him quickly, but she had already decided that no matter what, she would succeed in putting on this giant cloth by herself, because the thought of Erik seeing her in any state of indecency made her blush all over again. Besides, she was sure that if she worked hard and long enough, she would be able to tie it well enough. So, taking the blue fabric in her arms, she crossed back to her own room and found that she was correct—after nearly fifteen minutes of fighting to tie back the cloth in such a way that it would not slip off her shoulders, she succeeded unaided.

She presented herself to him in the kitchen where she found him once again, washing the dishes while he waited for her. His head shot up when she told him to look at her, so quickly it almost would have been comical, had Christine been comfortable enough to laugh at him. She spun around once, showing him her new outfit, which she had found she really quite liked, despite the fact that she knew he had worn it, and that it had an odd but not entirely unpleasant smell to it that she knew must belong to him.

“Thank you,” she murmured, smoothing out the fabric again after her spin. “I really do like this. The color is so pretty.”

“But of course! If you wish, you may keep all those clothes, as well. The ones I gave to you really do not suit me much anymore, although I assure you, they are still in prime condition. It is just that such bright colors, like that blue, are not entirely to my taste. I prefer darker colors,” he said, and Christine noted his dark brown toga. “You, however, look beautiful in blue.”

“Oh!” Christine smiled at him again as she began to pick at her finger nails beneath the table, hoping for all the world she did not look nearly as pleased as she felt. “Thank you.”

He gave her a curt nod before turning his attention back to the dishes. “There is no need to thank me, dear girl. I am simply stating a fact.”

Christine left the room before he could see how terribly she was blushing.

Besides that, however, the rest of the day passed without incident. Although Erik was strange with all his odd mannerisms, Christine was beginning to find that she liked him all the same. He went out of the way to get things she desired, whether it be clothing, food, or anything else, truly, and was far kinder to her than she thought she deserved. Despite the fact that the tension between them was constantly there, clouding the space between them, there was something else growing between them, too, something that greatly resembled friendship. With so little else to do, Christine was obligated to sit and listen to Erik’s stories—of which he did have a great abundance, even if very few of them had much to do with concerning his own past—and exchange questions with him. She found that he was a great lover of poetry, specifically the epic kind, but he loathed the story of Ilium. When she had asked him why he felt so towards it—for she enjoyed the story, herself—he had only said something along the lines of ‘there is enough bloodshed in the world; there is no reason for people to romanticize mindless killing more so than needed.’ Aside from simply playing music, he also built his own musical instruments, as well, and occasionally sold them to earn some money for the few things that he needed. He was able to cook, to sing, to craft instruments, to clean, and to play, and Christine was quickly beginning to wonder if there was anything in the world which Erik could not do.

Christine also found it surprisingly easy to open up to Erik about her own life, even though he refused to do the same, and he would listen to her eagerly for hours on end. She found herself telling him everything about her sisters, what she remembered of her mother, about the time an unknown passerby had offered to make her a queen after he heard her sing, about childhood fantasies and mature realizations both. And he listened happily. The only things she could not bring
herself to speak of were her father and, for some reason, Rhal, her dear old childhood friend. Speaking of her father was too painful for her even now, but as for Rhal—she did not know why she avoided mentioning him. Something, however, felt wrong about her doing so, especially to Erik, with his soft golden eyes and his gentle care for her. So, those two subjects she left quietly tucked away in her mind; he had his secrets and she had hers.

That night, after Christine ate her dinner (Erik neglected to do so in front of her once again), he brought her back to his music room and entertained her with his lyre for some time, long past when the sun had slipped below the horizon. But there was power in his music that made her feel something warm building inside of her, and made her want to close her eyes and bask forever in the peace it brought to her. It did bring her peace that stemmed from the memories of her father playing the same instrument, but happy sorts of memories, memories that did not hurt to think of again. She treasured these moments with Erik the most, when the two of them could sit for hours without talking, when music was all that existed between them.

Lying in bed afterwards, the sound of his music still ringing in her ears, Christine could not help but think that perhaps she and Erik had started off on a bad foot, and that he was truly not so bad after all. Yes, he wore a mask that hid him from her, and yes, it was very possible that whatever had occurred in his past involved murder or other monstrosities, but he had never shown her anything other than kindness, except, of course, when she had tried to remove his mask. He had felt so badly after that, and apologized so profusely that she had put the matter behind her for the most part. It had been her fault, too, after all, and if she had not tried to remove his mask, he would not have been desperate enough to attack her. And, yes, it was possible that he was the man she was destined to marry, but as she lay in her bed, halfway between dreams and reality, no dread flooded through her at the thought of him as her husband. Perhaps, it would not be such a bad thing. Perhaps, she thought, as she closed her eyes, they could be friends, like he had wanted. She would not mind it…

When she awoke again, it was to the sound of screams, coming from down the hallway.

Chapter End Notes

How are you liking things so far? Are you into the story? And sorry about the little cliffhanger, especially because tomorrow I'm going away on yet another vacation where I will have neither wifi nor service, so no updates until next Saturday or so, unfortunately. But after I get back, hopefully I can crank out another chapter before school starts up again!
Of Promises and Rings

Chapter Summary

In which more than one dream comes to pass...

Chapter Notes

Hello again, my wonderful readers! Sorry for the long delay, but here is an extra exciting chapter to make up for it! Also, thank you so much for the comments last chapter... they were lovely!

Just so you all know, I have started school again (no!) so chapter updates might come more slowly than they did before, due to mental exhaustion and such, but hopefully it won't be much of a problem. Anyway, enjoy...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Christine sat up bolt upright in her bed, as those horrible screams echoed off the walls of her room, surrounding her and trapping her in them. She broke out in a cold sweat, and pushed the covers off of her, letting them drop to the floor in her haste to leave the confines of her bed. Erik must be in danger. Those people who hunt him must have come and now they were hurting him again, and he was probably bleeding and in a state of near-death in his room down the hall, wondering where she was, why she was not coming to his aid. Oh, gods, he was probably dying and she was just sitting in her bed.

Pulling another one of Erik’s cloths around her into something that resembled a robe, she rushed out of her room, her pulse thudding in her ears. What would she do if he died? What would she do with his body? She could not have a funeral for another person this soon after the first, she could not. She could not prepare another body, she could not deal with that smell of olive oil again. Oh, but what if he was already dead?

And if he was not? What would she do then? How would she ward off his attackers? How would she heal him? Oh, gods, what was she to do?

Another scream as she rounded the corner just in front of his door, which was closed tightly still. The attackers must have locked it when they went in to keep her out. How would so get in? He was trapped inside there with those horrible people, and she would not be able to get in there and help him. She would have to listen to his screams all night until they broke and faded and died with him as he breathed his last, and she would be powerless to do anything about it. But she could not stand having another funeral. She could look at Erik’s cold stiff body, she could not bear the stench of death that she knew would come if he died. She could not let him die, not if she wanted her heart to keep on living.

Nearly in tears, she rammed the door with her shoulder, expecting that it would remain closed, that she would fall back on the ground, the door too hard against her shoulder. She expected that she would have to try again and again to get the door open, and reach the man inside, who she knew
needed her to rescue him so badly. But the door did not offer any resistance at all. Nearly as soon as her shoulder collided with it, it fell open and Christine, unable to stop herself, crashed onto the floor of his room, her hands bearing most of the weight of impact. She would have to fight, now. She would have to fight off those attackers and save Erik—she would not let them kill him, when he had been so good to her. No, she would fight them all, if need be, and she would save him. She refused to let him die.

But when she stood, ready to face whatever awaited her, there was no one there. The room was entirely empty, except Erik’s silhouetted figure in his bed, curled into the wall as if something had cornered him there. There was no one there except herself and him. She moved shakily forward, her courage quickly wasting away now that she knew she had no use for it, as Erik did not appear to be in any danger from anything. Why, then, had he screamed?

She moved closer to him, trying to get a closer look at him and figure out what on earth was happening to him, when he screamed again, so suddenly that she nearly screamed, as well, her heart hammering within her chest. When she looked him closely, she could not see anything wrong with him, except that way he was pressed so tightly against the wall, his arms covering his head.

“Erik?” She whispered. “Erik, what is happening? What is wrong?”

As soon as she spoke, his head shot up, his eyes wide open, staring at her from the shadows of his mask. She recoiled, his sudden movements frightening her even more so, and he crawled closer to her in his bed, nearly falling off the edge as he stared at her, pure fear in his eyes. She took a hesitant step forward and he screamed again, pressing his hands over his eyes, and then shoving his face into his mattress.

“No!” He screamed, his voice muffled from the mattress covering his mask. “No, no, no!” He thrashed around some more on the mattress, mumbling unintelligible things into his blankets.

“What? No! I am Christine! What is happening, Erik? You are scaring me.” She crossed her arms tightly in front of her, looking around the dark room desperately for anything that seemed even the slightest bit menacing, wishing all the while that she had brought a lamp with her.

When she turned back to him, he was staring at her again—although it did not appear like he was truly seeing her. It was as if his eyes were looking past her, through her, at something just behind her, although when Christine turned, there was nothing there.

“It’s there!” He whimpered, his voice suddenly becoming a cracked whisper. “It’s there. Please don’t…”

“What? What’s there? There’s nothing, see, Erik? Nothing! Why do you keep screaming? You’re scaring me.” She felt like crying, as the shadows swarmed around her, taking infinite shapes in the darkness, each one seeming to be whatever it was that was there. She clutched her own blanket tighter to herself and tried to breathe, despite the panic threatening to overwhelm her.

He moaned and backed into his corner again, his entire body shivering as his terrified eyes continued to stare past her. “Please,” he cried. “Please, please, leave me alone. Please, do not hurt me.”

“I am not here to hurt you, Erik. If you would only tell me what is happening.” Nothing was making sense and she could not tell if he was talking to her or something else invisible to her, if he
was in terrible danger or if something else entirely was happening here.

In reply to her pleading, he only screamed again, cowering in the corner, as Christine pressed a hand over her own mouth to stop herself from sobbing aloud. She did not understand what was happening, and she did not know what to do, why he was not responding to her, why he was so frightened, if he was truly awake at all—she did not know. Then, as suddenly as if it had started, a cloud seemed to pass from his eyes as he looked at her, and he slumped against the wall, his breathing sounding labored.

“Erik?” She murmured, tears streaming down her face, her hands trembling as she reached out to him.

“Christine?” His eyes still held a trace of that fear in them that had filled them earlier, and his thin body was still shaking, but he seemed more aware now.

“Yes,” she sobbed, beyond relieved he even recognized her. “Yes, it’s me. It’s Christine.”

He let out a shaky breath and closed his eyes. “Christine.” The word fell like a prayer from his lips.

“What happened? You were screaming and screaming and you kept saying that something was here, and you nearly scared the life out of me. I had no idea what was happening, and I thought you were dying, and I was so scared, Erik!” Her voice broke, and she felt ashamed for crying in front of him, when whatever horrors had entered the house that night had been visible solely to him.

“A dream,” he gasped, his eyes flickering open again. “A dream. That is all it was.”

“A dream? You mean to tell me that all that was a dream? Erik, you were screaming like you were being tortured, and your eyes…. Your eyes were open!”

“I know, I know. That is how they all are.” He grabbed a handful of blankets and drew them to his chest, clutching them tightly. “I do not know why it happens like that, but when these sorts of dreams come, that is how they all are. Please, do not be distressed. I will be well enough once I go to sleep again, and have some time to forget it all. Do not be so frightened.”

She tried to take a deep breath but her heart was still pounding far too quickly for her to effectively do so, and she only managed a weak inhale. “You were screaming, Erik. I thought… I really thought you might be dying. I was so frightened.” She felt ridiculous for being unable to stop her tears, for being unable to calm her heart but that fear still lingered within her, those quiet thoughts that had sprung up within her: ‘what if I lost him?’ She knew loss now, and she knew death, and those memories were what tainted her mind, that would not let her out of their grasp. Those were what caused her the same sort of wide-eyed fear she had seen in Erik this night.

“You would… you would care if I died?” he asked. “Even after all that has happened? Even after how cruel I have been to you?” His voice was so soft and so shocked at the prospect of care, real human care, that Christine almost began to cry again.

“Yes, Erik! Yes, I would care if you died!” She sat down on the bed next to him, and felt it when he shrank away from her, the mattress dipping as he moved away. “You are my friend, now, and friends do not wish for friends’ deaths, no matter what.”

She heard an odd sound from his direction, something like a cough or a strangled exhale, and turned to look at her companion. He stared at her with wide eyes, his arms still wrapped tightly around his knees, his body still racked with tremors. To her at that moment, he seemed the most pitiful man she had ever encountered, and the most sad and damaged. It was almost as if, at that
moment, his carefully crafted glass barrier he had constructed was beginning to break and the torrents of his past were finally beginning to stream out of his being. She could nearly see the cracks on his pale skin.

“Why?” His voice was choked with emotion, although what emotions exactly, Christine could not distinguish. “Why do you act like this towards me, Christine? Why do you sit here without fear next to me? Why have you stayed here when every action I have made should have deterred you? How can you still be here after seeing this? How, Christine? You must tell me, because I am afraid I could not in a million years ever be able to understand why, on my own. How can you stay?”

The cracks on his skin were growing now, and the pain was beginning to spill onto his bed, revealing to her for the first time the person he so carefully hid away. Perhaps it had taken a nightmare, and a great deal of screaming on his part and tears on hers, but for the first time, the shroud of mystery around him was beginning to fade, and Christine felt almost as if she could understand him in that moment. Broken, scarred, and confused, but as he was truly, without the mask. But the truth was, she did not know why she stayed. It was not because of his voice, nor because of his strangely alluring presence—had it only been that, she would have left long ago, when she had seen him in all his fury and self-hatred. No. Nor was it because of the pity she felt towards him, nor the fear she had felt when he had flown into his rage—had it been that, she never would have cared so much about whether he lived or died.

She sighed, looking away from him. “I do not know, Erik. I really don’t. But I do know this: there is something that keeps me here, something deep within me that I cannot pull away from, even if I wanted to. There is something that tells me you are not nearly as bad as you think you are, and I cannot ignore that. There is something within me that tells me this is right, that this is where I am supposed to be right now, although I do not know why. I am sorry I cannot explain it better. But, Erik, the truth is, I do not want to leave.”

She looked at him, searching him for a reaction but found none, other than the shallow breathing and the closed eyes. She reached out to him then, wanting to comfort him, to connect with him, to let her fingertips brush that breaking façade, that cold skin that so badly needed to be warmed. But even at the first instance of her touch, Erik flinched and recoiled farther into the corner, his body shaking far worse than it had before, his breath coming in gasps.

Christine snatched her hand back to herself, feeling ashamed at her actions, wondering if she had done something wrong. “I am sorry… I only wanted… Do you want me to stay with you longer? I can, if you want. I can stay.”

“No,” he snapped, his voice tense. “No, no. You should go, Christine. Go to sleep. Leave me.”

When she left him, the glass covering him was already beginning to reform and whatever he was hiding underneath it was hidden once more from her view. Once again, they were little more than strangers. She regretted it.

Morning showed that Erik clearly had no desire to speak about his nightmare last night, and every time Christine tried to bring it up, he brushed it away and moved onto another subject. But morning came and went, dipping slowly into afternoon, which found Christine and Erik outside in the courtyard, because for the first time in a while, the sun not only shared his light, but his warmth with the world, after a long period of winter, and Christine had been excited to take advantage of it. Erik had only obliged her, she thought, because he seemed to find her excitement endearing, not because he truly wanted to go outdoors. But even so, now they sat beneath the sun, Erik still wrapped loosely in a woolen cloak, and Christine laying on her stomach, her arms bare. It was there, laying in the sunlight, that Christine began to think of things she had tried to ignore for some
Life with Erik had been, in its own strange way, an escape from her usual life, a new little world where her old life had no real significance. Of course, she had not forgotten her family waiting for her back at home, probably sick with anxiety over her sudden disappearance, but neither did she wish to return to them, so she had prolonged her stay as long as possible. But now, guilt was beginning to gnaw through her, at the thought of her family’s worry for her, of how cruel she had been to disappear without telling them where she was. It was still true that she not had reason to return home, and had her family not been unsure of where she was, she would have stayed with Erik for far longer, if only to escape the sorrow and meaninglessness that lingered in her own house. Four days had passed since she had left her home, however, and she knew, despite wherever else she might have felt, that she could not keep living with Erik in a state of ignorant bliss while her family waited anxiously for her return. Something had to be done.

She sighed and looked over at the man next to her, her companion over these last few days, who she had hardly known at all before, but who she now felt a deep regard for after these four days. The pale sunlight shone on his delicate skin, shining through so that she could see the traces of blue veins beneath the thin coverings of skin on his arms and neck. She had a sudden, strange desire to run her fingers over those webs of veins, but she quickly shoved it away, wondering where such an idea could have ever come from. Positively indecent.

“Oh, Erik.” He looked at her, the sun making his eyes appear even more gold than usual in his leather mask, concern etched into their ever fiber. “I think… Well, here it is. It has been so lovely, staying here, with you—it really has, and I have enjoyed every moment of it. You have been so kind to me, and so welcoming and I really cannot thank you enough for that. You have made my stay here so pleasant, beyond anything I could have ever imagined. But, I think that… You see, my family—I told them when I left four days ago, that I wanted to go on a walk, and that I would not be gone long, but that was four days ago, you see, and they must be so worried about me by now. I have not wanted to leave, so I did not mention it to you, but I think now, I really should, or else they might begin to think that I have died, or something horrible like that. They have no idea I am here, of course, or otherwise, I truly would have liked to stay longer. But as it is, you know, I think it would really be best if I… Well, if I leave.”

“Leave?” He rocked back on his heels, blinking rapidly. “Oh, but, my dear Christine, you have only just arrived. Would you not like to stay here just a few days more? I could send word to your family by means of a messenger, if you would like, so that you may stay here longer without any guilt tying you down. You would be happy to do that, would you not? You said that you would, if I am not mistaken, yes?”

“I would, Erik, I really would, but…”

“Then, do!” His hands flew about him in desperate motions as he spoke. “Do stay here, then, Christine, if that is what you wish to do! There is nothing stopping you that I cannot solve. I can make it so that you can stay here, so why would you not? You would be so happy here, I know that you would; I would make you so happy, if you will allow me to. So, why do you deny yourself that?”

She frowned. “Because… Oh, because, it is so cruel of me to leave my family wondering about me. They are probably so worried! I can’t just let them continue to be that way. And even if you could send a messenger, or something like that, what if they think that you kidnapped me? No, I think it would be best if I came in person. And besides, we are not… we are not married, so all of this—all of what is happening here—is a little bit odd, I suppose. Were we,” she blushed furiously, “man and wife, it would be different, and I suppose it really would not matter how long I stayed
here, but we are not. And it is wrong for two unmarried people to live together like this! I have enjoyed it, though—I have—but we must accept the facts! I should go back. It is the best way for both of us, really.”

“You speak of marriage,” Erik said, his voice now soft and hesitant where it had once been passionate and pleading. “You say if we were man and wife, things would be different. How so, my dear? How would it be different?”

Christine shifted uncomfortably, picking at her fingernails as she replied. “Well, first of all, I suppose, it would not be so indecent for us to live together like we are now, since that is how married couples live anyway, and so that would be far more normal. And, were we man and wife, I suppose I would not feel the same obligation to go back to my family, since we would be family—the two of us. And I suppose, that if we were married… I would never have to leave again, of course, because my home would be with, ah, you.” She stopped, the words burning in her mouth: that her home would be with him. That the two of them need never be parted again. That they would always be together, and always have each other, as the prophecy had said. The thought of marriage had scared her so terribly when she had heard it from the oracle, so why did it now not do so? Why did she feel a sense of longing for the thing she had once so feared? She shook her head, suddenly. “But that can never be, of course, because we are not married, and so, it can never happen. We should not dwell on it, since it cannot happen. I have to leave.”

Erik nodded, wringing his hands, as if he was satisfied with the answer she had given him. A moment later, however, he began again, “It is true that we are, indeed, unwed, so these things can never come to pass. But, what if—please, listen to me, Christine—what if we could be? What is stopping us? Would you… Would you like to be my… to be my bride?”

“What…?” She shifted away from him, her heart hammering in her chest. “No! Oh, no—we can’t be married! We can’t! Not now! You cannot simply ask me a question like that and expect me to have an answer! Oh, gods, Erik…” She sighed, and glanced at the raw and pleading eyes that stared at her. “I don’t know. But, no. I can’t. I can’t be married.”

“But, why not? You must answer that, at least. You say that you wish to stay here with me, that you enjoy my presence, that I bring you happiness, even. But now, that I have suggested a possibility of prolonging such feeling further, of never having to part ways, you shun it immediately. I know this is all very sudden— I am simply thinking out loud—but why do you say no with such immediate certainty? Please, my dear, tell me.”

“Because! Oh, because… It would not be blessed! Not by my sisters, not by their husbands, not by anyone at all. And we have only been together four days now, Erik! I hardly know you at all! And because you and I, of course… I mean, I am your friend, and you have been so kind to me, and I do enjoy being with you—I do—but love? That is another question entirely, and one I cannot answer right now. But a marriage without it is hardly a marriage at all, so there would be no purpose in our own.” Her own marriage. The thought made her tremble, although why, exactly, she could not understand, not with all the present emotions coursing through her body.

“Love.” She heard Erik exhale deeply, his voice hardly more than a whisper now. “Oh, Christine—my dear Christine. Do you truly believe after all this time that all my affections for you do not stem from that exact sentiment of which you speak? Can you not see in scrawled all over my body as clear as the sunlight that it is true? That you are the one being who consumes my thoughts, who dictates my actions, who has caused my heart to feel things of such nature I have never experienced before? Was it truly not clear to you?”

She shook her head, hardly breathing, hardly comprehending, and he reached out to her carefully,
his fingers curling into his palm just before they reached her skin. She was shaking so terribly, and she could hardly think, hardly able to think of words to say to him, hardly able to even move, to bridge the gap between them.

“Oh, Christine,” he breathed, pulling his hand back to himself, his fingers trembling. “How can you ever say that our marriage would not be loving, when I am so full of love for you already, when I already love you so much that I do not know what to do with it all? I have never loved any human being—anything—more than I love you. My very heart beats for you, if you will have it. I have never felt such feelings—such happiness, such joy, such love, and such torturous sorrow—even before in my life to this degree. I am filled to the brim with it, and all for you. I would be the most devoted of husbands, the most caring of companions, the most understanding of friends, even…” he paused, and looked at her uncertainly, his thin chest rising and falling rapidly. “Even, for you, the most affectionate of lovers, if that is what you desire. I would be the most wonderful husband who ever lived, and you should never find any fault with me, if you would marry me. And I would love you so dearly—even if you do not now—nor ever—love me in return—because I would have enough love in me for the two of us. And perhaps… Oh, perhaps in time, if you cannot love me now, perhaps in time you will, as I love you. Oh, Christine. I have never spoken such words before in my life.”

She stared at him, gasping in breaths, so shocked that she could not find the words to answer him. Had she truly not known that he loved her? She supposed that perhaps, in an offhand sort of way, she might have—for she knew that he had a great affection for her, and doted on her in ways she had scarcely ever experienced before. But, oh, she should have known it! She had been so stupid for not seeing it! For not seeing the way his eyes followed her every move, for not seeing the clear adoration in them every time she spoke to him. For not seeing the way his body trembled when she neared him, the way he said her name, as if it were his only prayer of salvation, his only hope of redemption. How could she ever have been so blind, and so naïve? She was no better than a child for not noticing, and for living in her own ignorant world while he had been loving her from afar all the while. Of course, he loved her. Of course. She could see it all now.

“Oh, my.” She managed at last. “I… I don’t… know what to say.”

“Oh, of course, I would only do that which you, my dear, desired, and never anything more,” Erik was saying, his voice rushed, his sentences fragmented by shallow breaths. “Even if we were married, it need never be any more than what it is like between us right now—we need never be any more than companions. If you were only to grace me with your presence for now and always, I should be the happiest man on earth, even if you never spoke a word to me. Or, if you like, we need only speak, and never even mention the fact that we were married at all, and simply carry on talking to each other as we have done before, as friends. It could be as if we were not even married! But we would be so happy, would we not? I would never do anything that you did not wish, not even touch you. I should never ask for a kiss, nor an embrace, nor anything more, nor would any such thing ever be expected of you. In fact, we need never even consummate the marriage if you did not desire to do so—I would be completely happy to never have to partake in such a thing for you, my dear. It would be the most happy marriage—I would never ask anything of you, you see! You would be the happiest bride in all the world! I would be like a dog to you, if you wished, ready to come and go at your beck and call, always at your feet, your obedient servant for anything you liked! You would be a goddess, and I your humble follower, worshipping you. You should have anything you ever wanted! See, Christine, were we to be married, you would be so very happy.”

Her head was spinning so terribly that she thought she might collapse. “Oh, no. Please, Erik… Gods, this is all so sudden…. I do not know what to say… You cannot ask this of me now! Please, don’t. Please, please, don’t ask this of me. I cannot even answer. I do not know what to do, not right now! Oh, Erik, please don’t!”
He shook his head violently from side to side, his voice rushed and panicked now. “Oh, but listen, Christine! Just stay here with me, as you said you wanted! Forget all I have said! We do not even have to be married, if you do not wish, and you need never hear me breath a word of affection ever again! Just, please, if you feel any kindness towards me, do not abandon me now. Stay! Ah, you look so frightened! So horribly frightened! I did not mean to scare you, my dear—truly, I did not. Please, forget all I have said about marriage, erase all that talk of love from your pretty mind! It did not happen! But, you must stay with me, because, my dear, dear Christine, I cannot bear to have you leave me. Oh, I truly cannot! Please…”

He gazed at her then with such sad, pleading eyes that Christine could nearly feel her heart breaking for him, because she knew she could not give him what he wanted. That love of which he spoke, she knew that the sort of love she had in her was not the same. Where inside him were oceans of love and adoration, for her no less, she had no more than a few uncertain drips, far less than he needed. She knew that he might claim that, were they to be married as he wished, he would need nothing from her, but she knew this was not the case. She knew he longed to hear her speak words of kindness, words of love to him, words that, as she judged it, he had not heard for far too long. She knew that he craved her touch and attention, even if he perhaps was uncertain about what to do once he obtained it. She knew he promised that he needed nothing more than her presence, but she also knew that if she did nothing to match that burning love within him and did nothing to quell it, the heart inside of him would slowly begin to burn away, until, in time, there would be no love left within it, only a desperation she could not calm. And that, she knew, was not what she wanted at all, and, despite the fact that he did not seem to realize it yet, neither did Erik. She could not sit idly by and watch him as the life faded from his eyes, as he realized she did not love him, but neither could she marry a man whom she did not know, whose face she had not even seen, whose very being seemed to be made up of an endless amount of secrets and sins.

She shook her head, feeling tears welling up in her eyes. “Oh, Erik… I am so, so sorry, but I cannot do this. This is all coming on too fast, and I can’t…” She took a deep breath. “You cannot just tell someone you feel this… this overwhelming love for them one moment, and expect them to marry you the next! You simply cannot, Erik! You cannot expect that of me!”

“Please, forgive me. I did not mean… I did not mean to upset you. I had only thought that perhaps…” His voice broke and did not continue, and for a moment, the only sound was their own labored breathing, heavy in the silence.

She closed her eyes briefly. “I know. I know you did not mean to upset me. I’m sorry. I just… I do not know what to feel, or what is right, and I am so confused right now, more than ever before. It is not your fault, of course,” she said quickly, seeing the panic darken in his eyes. “It is my own, really, but… all of this so fast is…” She trailed off, unsure of what entirely it made her feel. Scared? Confused? Guilty?

Erik put his hands over his eyes, groaning as he slumped down at her feet. “Oh, forgive me! I have ruined everything! Now, you know of my horrible, twisted love for you, and you have rejected it, as any sane person would, I expect, and now you know! Oh, you know! I am sorry for it! If I could push it away, or ignore it somehow, know that I would in a heartbeat. But I cannot. Oh, forgive me!”

“Forgive you? Why? You cannot help love, I do not think, and you do not need to apologize for it, either. It is true that knowing about… that does change things a bit, but it is not wrong.” She reached out to him uncertainly, to the dark head resting on the ground near her feet, wanting to comfort him in some way, but having no idea of how to do so. Thinking it best not to push the fragile, little boundaries Erik had set between the two of them, she drew her hand back to herself, wishing she could take away all the emotion between them. She wished everything could just go
back to the way it was, without talk of love or leaving, when everything was simple, and detached, and easy.

“You must understand, Christine,” Erik said to the ground, “that I hate that I love you. I hate that I am vulnerable to you, that there are feelings within me so strong to make me act and feel like another man. I hate that I have to be who I am, and you—you, sweet girl—have to be who you are. It is torture to me that I feel such things, when I already know that such emotions are fruitless, in the face of such circumstances as those which come between us. I know you cannot love a demon like me, and that I should never pretend such a thing could happen.”

“Oh, Erik,” Christine breathed, the raw emotion in his voice cutting her to the core. Although she could not admit it to him, she hated that he loved her, as well. She hated to see him suffer, when she held the key to his happiness, but knew she could never use it. She hated that everything he said was true—that she could not love him, and that they were far too different. She hated that now, everything between them was confusing and strange, now that love had become a spoken part of him.

“But even so,” he looked up from the ground then, his eyes simultaneously pained and hopeful as he looked at her. “Please, tell me you will not leave me like this. Believe me now, when I say that I need you more than I have ever needed anything before. Before you, I had not had a true conversation with another living soul in… years, so long I had forgotten what it was truly like. Now, I have been offered that again, and I cannot bear to see it all leave, now. Forgive me, but now that you know how I feel towards you, I believe I can safely assume you will never return to me. I will be left alone here in the house, with nothing here besides my own twisted being for company. And do you know, my dear, how truly horrible it is to only have oneself as company? Better men than myself have lost their minds completely under such circumstances, and before you came, I thought the same thing might come of myself. I cannot go back to that, Christine. I need you here, with me. You would not leave you poor Erik here to suffer his life alone?”

Christine felt the tears sliding down her cheeks for Erik, for how she pitied him, for how she pitied herself, for how she pitied the both of them for the Fates stringing them together in such a way. If he truly needed her as badly as he claimed, she could return. Just because she had to return to her family did not mean she had to leave Erik alone forever, nor, now that she had seen his desperation to not be alone, did she think that she could. Trying to clear the tears from her face, she whispered, “It will not be forever, but—I’m sorry—I really think it is for the best…”

He let out a low groan, his hands clenching into fists. “No, please. Please, do not leave me. If you leave me, I shall die, Christine. I need you, see? Please. I cannot go back to life alone, now that I have tasted companionship. Do not sentence me to that cruel fate.”

Christine tried to stop her tear as he spoke, trying to think of a way to calm him and herself. “It will not be forever. I promise. I will return. You will not die alone. I only need to return to my own house for a while, and let them know what has become of me, and then, I can return here. Not for forever, of course, but perhaps, I can share my time between you and my family, so that you will not be left alone for too long. But you must trust me, Erik. If I say I will return, you must believe me.”

“I do want to. Truly, I do. Yet when one has lived a life such as I have, full of rejection and scorn and fear, it becomes hard for one to accept another’s word, even with the assurance of promise. Oh, forgive me, Christine! I wish I could believe! How do I know that if I let you go, you will return to me? How do I know you will not leave me alone forever?”

“I…” Christine searched her mind for some way to show him that she would not sentence him to
that cruel fate of loneliness, when she came upon it. “My ring! Take it. Here. That is my promise to you, that I will return, and when I do, I will take the ring back with me. As long as you have it, I will return.”

Carefully, she pried the ring off of her finger. It was a simple thing, just a few strings of bronze braided together to fit around her finger, a present from Rhal when they had been younger, but she had worn it ever since he had given it to her. Slowly, she placed it in Erik’s outstretched hand, her fingertips nearly touching his as she drew her hand away. His fingers curled around the ring as if it was the most priceless gift he had ever received and, in some ways, Christine supposed it was. It was the promise that someone in the world cared for him, and would not leave him alone. The ring was truly such a small thing, but in that moment, it seemed it carried the weight of an entire future in it.

“I promise you, Erik, I will come back.”

Chapter End Notes

What Erik experiences in this chapter is not so much a nightmare as a night terror, which, as the name suggests, is really terrifying to witness. My little brother used to get them, and he would just sit up and scream, eyes open and everything, and it really is pretty scary.

I wasn't 100% sure if I was satisfied with this chapter, but I really wanted to post it anyway, so tell me what you thought of it! There was a lot of stuff happening in this one, wasn't there?
Chapter Summary

In which Christine returns home again...

Chapter Notes

An update! At last! I'm sorry that this one isn't going to be as exciting as the last, but I hope you all enjoy it anyway. But the next chapter after this one is already finished too, so I'll try to have it up soon, after some editing and whatnot.

Oh, and thank you all so much for the lovely comments last chapter! They mean a lot to me, and I'm so, so happy to see how many of you care about this story! You guys are the best :)

And so, they parted. Erik, for the most part, seemed satisfied with the ring as a promise of return, and Christine, for her part, did intent to keep true to that promise. She could not bear the thought of Erik, her friend now, being left alone for the rest of his sad life, hated by, it seemed, almost everyone. And, moreover, her visit with Erik had been enjoyable, and she now felt a sense of peace and acceptance about life that she had not before. Her soul appeared to be healing, although whether it was Erik’s doing or nature’s, she did not fully know.

Their parting was a rather awkward one, considering that Erik had not only asked that Christine marry him, but had proclaimed his love for her, in terms far too passionate for her comfort. Erik seemed more ashamed of his own previous behavior than eager to say goodbye, and did so with only a few rushed words, something along the lines of these:

“I hope your journey back to your home is swift and pleasurable, and I hope most sincerely I shall see you again in times not too far from this present moment, and until that time comes, I suppose I must say goodbye.”

To which Christine responded: “Oh, Erik! I will miss you, though! My stay here has been so nice, and I really have enjoyed it! I wish that we could have stayed together longer, but my family, of course… But I will be back soon! I am not sure how soon— it could be a few days, or even weeks—but sometime, I will return, and get my ring back. Keep it safe for me while I’m gone! Goodbye!”

After that, it seemed natural that they should embrace, or at least shake hands, or something of that like, since they had stayed together so many days, and since they had become friends. So, Christine, wanting to let Erik know in her own way that she did not resent him, or hate him after his confession of love, wanted to reach out and hug him, perhaps just for a second, just so he would know, of course. As she reached for him, however, he put up his hand instead, slowly and unsurely, more resembling a sign of resistance than anything else, but a weak one at that. Not knowing how to respond, Christine ended up simply squeezing his hand with both of hers in the...
space of a moment, her hands lingering on his just long enough for him to exhale in sharp surprise. It shocked her just how cold his hand was in hers, like ice, or the touch of the dead, and just how prominently the bones in his hands felt under his skin—she was sure that she could feel all of them individually. Shivering, she released his hand, and with a tight smile, and another soft goodbye, she turned and left, his cloak billowing around her small frame, and his discarded clothes still covering her body.

The trip back home proved a short one—not in time or distance, but in her perception—because Christine had many, many things to think about as she wondered back home through the woods. First and foremost, Erik loved her. Not only that, but Erik wanted her to marry him. And, Erik was the man from her prophecy—she was quite sure of that now. He, the man without a face, loved her; he, the monster, wanted to marry her. Some of what the oracle had told her still did not entirely measure up—like how she was ‘chained but free’ when she had met him, and how he ‘carried death in his hands, but would bring her life’—but those things made so little sense, dwelling on them seemed fruitless.

Secondly, she was not sure how to feel about, in short, anything. She liked Erik, with all his strangeness and mystery, all his affection and sorrow, all his talents and flaws, but she did not love him. Or, at least, she did not think she did. What she felt towards him was more along the lines of intrigue than anything else, she decided, and certainly not the same happy feelings, the likes of which she had once felt towards Rhal—that had been love. And, of course, the question of marriage. If she did not love Erik, she certainly could not marry him, but, if he truly was the person from her prophecy, did she even have a choice in the matter? It seemed that she was destined to marry him regardless of what she felt or wanted, although she could think of worse alternatives to marrying Erik. But all of this predestination and prophecies was beginning to make her head spin, so she began to think of other things. After all, if she could not change her fate, there was no use upsetting herself over what had already been predetermined for her.

It had been four days since she had seen her family, and she felt terrible for it. She was sure that they missed her terribly, that they were worried sick about her, and that they had sent out search-parties for her, while she had been happily entertaining herself with Erik, ignoring these facts. Oh, how could she have been so cruel? It was as if only now that she had left Erik’s secluded house that the full force of her actions hit her, and the knowledge that what she had done would harbor consequences. Her family would be upset at her for leaving, angry that she had been gone for so long without informing them where she had gone, and they would, therefore, be anxious to let her leave again. And, of course, they would ask where she had been, and what would she say? She could not tell them she had been dwelling with the infamous Phantom, the villain of children’s bedtime stories. Nor could she even tell them, now that she considered it, that she had stayed with a man for four days at all, because that would be horribly scandalous, since she was not married, and that would provoke a horrible uproar. More than anything, she did not want her family to be upset at her, even though she knew that they would be, considering what she had done, and she could not, in all honesty, blame them for it. And Rhal… It would break her heart to see Rhal’s sadness, because she knew she had hurt him. Oh, if she had to look at his sad eyes when she returned, she was sure she would cry, because she had betrayed him. She had promised him she would return soon, and she had not. She had stayed with his greatest enemy, the Phantom, and she had befriend him. She had given his ring, the one he gave her so long ago as a token of his affection, to another man. She had betrayed him, and she was sickened at the thought of all she had done to her dear Rhal, when all he had ever been was good to her.

With all of this to think about, the time passed far too quickly, and in almost no time at all, she had managed to sneak undetected through the woods near her house, and around the town, to her front door, where she stood, hesitating. She hated to know that she had brought her family pain, that she had been bad to them, and that there would be consequences for what she had done. But even so,
taking in a deep breath and steadying herself, she opened the door and entered into her house, already ashamed of what she had done.

The first one to find her was Psyche. It was almost funny (in a strange, humorless way) how similar the situation now was to one that had occurred so long ago, when Psyche was sixteen and had run off with a boy to marry him. When she returned—Christine still remembered it—with her arms crossed and her stomach swollen with a child, she had come to Christine first, tears running down her face, sobbing words of apology so fast they were nearly incomprehensible. But now, it was Psyche who stood frozen in the narrow hallway of the house, her eyes wide and unbelieving, and Christine who stood trembling in the doorway, picking savagely at her nails.

“Psyche…” she began, unsure of what to say, of how to explain away the wrongness of what she had done, of how to tell her sister how badly she felt now for abandoning them, but Psyche silenced her before she could decide.

“Christine!” she screamed, and ran towards her sister, dropping whatever it was she was carrying to the floor with a resounding crash. In a matter of seconds, Psyche had captured her sister in a tight embrace, both gripping each other so tightly it nearly hurt, both holding back tears.

“Christine.” Psyche pushed Christine away from her at arm’s length, studying her for a moment with red-rimmed eyes. “We thought we had lost you, too. We were so worried.” Her expression hardened, and she suddenly punched the younger girl in the shoulder, with a surprising amount of force. “Where were you?”

Before she could respond, a second face appeared in the doorway, his brow furrowed and his beard slightly longer than she remembered it being before. Rhal. He hugged her too, even tighter than Psyche had, so tightly she could hardly breathe, murmuring her name into her ear, telling her, in that low, pained voice, how afraid he had been, how much he had missed her, how he thought he had lost her.

Christine had never felt so guilty before in her entire life.

From another room, there was a sudden pounding of footsteps, which caused the three huddled in the hallway to separate for a moment, and then, a high-pitched voice called, “What is happening? I swear, I heard someone say ‘Christine,’ but I might not have, and I might just be hearing things, but if I am not…”

Eurydice came into view, clutching at her heart, her eyes, bright with hope, and fear, and concern, taking in the scene in the hallway.

“Oh, gods, Christine! My baby!”

Her arms swallowed Christine up, and Christine sobbed into her sister’s shoulder, breathing in that familiar scent of flowers, the vision of the concern in Eurydice’s voice, and the fear in her eyes flashing through Christine’s mind as she cried. It was not until after they broke apart that the storm hit.

“Where have you been? It has been four days—four days since you left to go on that walk. You said you would come right back, and it has been four days! I was so worried, Christine! What were you thinking? You could have been dead—we thought you were dead! No one had seen you, no one knew where you had gone, no news of you anywhere! It was like you had disappeared off of the face of the earth entirely! And we had no idea what to think, because we thought you would be back, and then you weren’t, and people were telling us you must be dead, and we did not know
what to think because you were gone, Christine! Four days! And so soon after Father’s death—my heart cannot take another heartbreak like that again. I was so afraid…"

Christine could only cry in response, the knowledge that all of this was her own fault, her own selfish desires making her cry harder.

Seeing the tears running down her sister’s face, Eurydice took her hand, holding it tightly, and, after taking a deep breath, tried again in a slightly softer, less frantic voice, “Where did you go, Christine, dear? Were you kidnapped? Were you lost? Tell me what happened.”

“I… I…” She could not go any farther. She had not been kidnapped, she had not been lost, she had simply chosen of her own free will to live in the house of a stranger, leaving her family alone when she knew exactly what she was doing. There was no excuse.

Psyche wrapped an arm around Christine’s shoulders, squeezing her in a reassuring way, as Rhal looked on with his sad, green eyes. “It’s okay, Eurydice. She is back now, and that is what matters. When she feels up to it, she can tell us what happened, but right now, it’s okay.” She looked at Christine, and began to wipe the tears off of her cheeks. “Come on, let us go to the living room and sit down. How does that sound, honey? Good?”

Christine nodded, sucking in a shaky breath in an attempt to stop her crying.

“Good.” Psyche smiled at her. “Come on, then. You can lean on me, if you want. There you go. It’s okay. You are here now, and everything is going to be just fine. We will just go to the living room, and you can sit down, and the servants can make you something to drink, if you want. There, there. It will be okay.”

So, the four made their way to the living room in a clustered group of tears and hugs, their progress slow and awkward, but happy nonetheless, because the lost child had returned home again. Once they reached the living room, Eurydice’s husband and now the true owner of the house, Felipe, greeted them warmly, and squeezed Christine’s hand in his own as he told her just how very happy he was to have her back with them. After some more gently spoken words, all members of the family (Rhal included) sat down, and Christine was brought a cup of wine by one of the servants. As she sipped at the vinegary liquid, she tried to concentrate on the way it burned her throat going down, instead of the guilt that had dug a hole in her chest and made a home there, each moment reminding her more and more of her faults.

After a little while, long enough for Christine to have stopped crying and for everyone to have calmed down enough to engage in conversation, Eurydice asked again, clearly still desperate for answers, “Really, Christine, where did you go? You have not told us yet, and I would like to know where you disappeared to these past four days, and I think I have a right to know, as does everyone else here.”

Every pair of eyes turned almost simultaneously to Christine, each just as curios as the next, each waiting to hear her answer to Eurydice’s question, because it was true, they did all have a right to know where she had been, after she had put them through so much worry. But Christine dreaded to tell them, because the truth of the matter was: she had no real excuse for leaving. She could have lied to them, and made up some grandiose story about how she was not able to return home because of horrible reasons, completely outside of her power, and no one would have had any evidence with which to disprove her. No one would ever even know she had lied, and the lie, she knew, could have satisfied them well enough, so that they felt little or no resentment towards her. It would be so easy. She already knew what she would say. She would tell them that she had been caught in a storm, a terrible storm, which had caused her to get lost somewhere very far away, and she had had no idea where she was until she came across a small town, where she had been taken
care of for a few days, and then she had tried to return home as quickly as possible. They would all believe her. It would be so easy.

But no.

She stopped herself at the last moment, letting the story die in her throat, never to see the light of day. She had already done enough wrong, and she could not do more to her family, not when they loved her so much. It was true, perhaps, that they would never know the difference between the truth and her lie, but she would, and the guilt that she knew she would carry from that small lie would crush her from within. No, she could not be so horrible. Perhaps, they would all hate her when they heard what she had done, but she did not care, because then at least she would have told the truth.

She took a deep breath, and began to speak before she even truly knew what she was going to say. “I am so sorry. I have done bad, bad things, and you all have no idea how badly I feel now that I have done them. I know you were probably all so worried where I had disappeared to, and if it had been anyone else besides me, I would have been sick with worry myself. But here is what happened: I was walking, and I went up this sort of trail I had never been on before, and I was following it up a mountain, and it just kept going and going, so I simply followed it. I am not sure why, but I did. And then, after hours of walking, I reached the top of this mountain I had been walking up for hours, now, and I saw a house.” The story she was telling, she knew, was not entirely the truth. It was true that she had climbed a mountain, and come across a house, but the situations had been different in more ways than one. Her family, however, did not need to know all of these realities, and Christine thought it would be better if she simply kept some of the facts to herself, like Erik’s voice speaking to her through the trees, and how she had met him before, how he had lured her to his house… Yes, that would be best if she did not speak about it. This was not lying, though, because she was not making up falsities; instead, she was simply not speaking the entirety of the truth, which, of course, was far better than lying.

She continued, her voice rushed. “Yes, I saw this beautiful house, sitting on the mountain, and I was so tired, so I thought to myself, ‘Perhaps I should just stay here for the night, since it is almost evening anyway, and then tomorrow, I will return home.’ And so, I knocked on the door, and it opened, and I saw a man standing inside. So, I told him my story and he, of course, told me I was welcome to stay with him. And so, I did. And here is the truth of it all: I had no real reason to stay as long as I did, but I did anyway. I stayed, even though I knew that you would be worried about me, and even though I knew I was being horrible, but I was so happy in that house that I could not bring myself to leave. I’m sorry. I have been so awful. I am so sorry.”

For a moment, there was only silence as all those pairs of eyes stared at Christine, all their expressions shocked, and some, even, vaguely horrified. Psyche looked bewildered and betrayed, Rhal gazed at her with his brow furrowed with sad understanding, but Eurydice—Eurydice looked livid with anger.

“I’m sorry,” Christine murmured again, now addressing the words solely to Eurydice, to try and cool the fire forming in her eyes, but the fire would not be quelled so easily.

“Do you mean to tell me that you ran away for no real reason? That you simply decided that you liked one place better than another, and that your own home was not good enough for you? Do you mean to tell me that you put me through all this worry for no reason?” Eurydice stood suddenly and began to pace in front of Christine, her hands tightened fists at her side.

“Eurydice, I’m sorry, I really am,” Christine begged, tears threatening at her eyes once more.

“Stop it, Christine! Don’t pretend like you are sorry when you made the conscious choice to not
come home. I know you are not sorry. Not in any meaningful way. You ran because you were sad about Father’s death. Well, Chris, we are all sad, but not all of us are running away, and making utterly stupid decisions because of it. You are acting like a child and I am responsible for you, now! Since Father cannot watch over you anymore, I am the one who has to. And it was under my watch that you ran away! Do you know how heartbroken I was that I had lost you, when you—my little sister—were under my care? I thought I had failed you, that I had failed Father, and—and myself. I thought that this was all my own fault, that if I had only been a little more careful with you, a little more observant, none of this would have happened. I thought I had lost you forever! And now—and now, you come back home, wearing someone else’s clothes, saying that the only reason you were gone was because you chose to be! I was so worried, Chris! I cried so many tears for you, and you hardly had time to care about us at all!”

Christine shook her head adamantly, sobbing, “No, no. I did. I’m sorry. I do care. I do. I’m sorry.”

“No!” Eurydice’s whole body shook as she spoke. “You did not, because you did not care enough to even tell us that you were not dead!” She opened her mouth, ready to say more, but then closed it again, screwing her eyes shut. “I’m sorry. I cannot do this right now.”

And with that, Eurydice left the room, her footsteps rapidly receding to her own room until the sound of a door slamming closed silenced them.

“Psyche.” Christine looked at her other sister pleadingly, her heart already breaking at Eurydice’s words, that, although harsh, she knew she deserved. “Psyche, I am so, so sorry. You believe me, don’t you? Do you see how sorry I am?” The tears streaming down her cheeks were evidence enough of that, she thought.

“Oh, Christine. I know you are sorry, and I do forgive you. But Eurydice is right: you should have told us, somehow, where you were, and the fact that you did not, hurts. I wish you had. But I forgive you. I am just happy you are home again.”

Christine managed a watery smile. “I am, too. And thank you. I really am so sorry. And, Rhal,” she looked at her friend, at her dear Rhal. “Oh, Rhal, I am sorry for putting you through so much misery, and for not letting you come on my walks with me, because if I had, I am sure that none of this would have happened at all. I’m so sorry. I should have been better to you—to all of you. You forgive me, don’t you, Rhal? I feel so bad about what I have done, especially to you. Will you forgive me?”

Rhal put his head in his hands and sighed. “How could I claim that I do not forgive you? Of course, I do, Chris. But I do wish that we could have been more open with each other to prevent this whole thing. From now on, we will have to be, and it will spare us both a great deal of trouble, I think. But I forgive you. All that matters is that you are here now, and that you are safe again, and that we are back together again.”

Christine let in a deep breath, a crushing weight feeling like it had been lifted from her chest. Her family did not hate her. Eurydice, perhaps, but the rest had forgiven her and all would be well, because Eurydice, too, loved her and soon, things would be made right. She was welcomed here with her family, no matter what she did, and she knew that however far she might wander, they would always be waiting for her when she decided to return. She had never known anything different, after all.

“Thank you,” she sighed.

It was not until far later that night that Eurydice emerged from her room, with some persuasion from her husband, and not until later after that took place, that she finally accepted Christine’s
tearfully apologies, and hugged her sister, finally welcoming her back home. All seemed mended within the little house—all occupants were together and happy once more, the smell of death had left the house, and although there was still a cavity where there had once been another, a man well-loved, that cavity was being closed, slowly but surely, and their hearts no longer ached nearly as bad as they had once. It seemed to Christine, as she sat idly in the courtyard, that, for the first time since her father’s death, all might be well, and that life would still go on just as it had before, even without her father. She had begun to grasp happiness again, tentatively and barely, but it was beginning to return to her now all the same.

Chapter End Notes

*Useless A/N* Did any of you guys ever watch that movie Homeward Bound about the two dogs and the cat that talked and got lost, or whatever? That movie was my childhood :)
Christine was allowed only a few more happy moments of solitude before another entered into the courtyard, his golden hair shining in the sun. Rhal. He looked like a god in the afternoon light, with his bronzed skin and chiseled face, and Christine found herself thinking she had never seen another human being look so beautiful, although this thought stirred nothing in her, even as she thought it. There had been a time once where she knew she would have felt something, seeing him look this way, but perhaps her heart was still too damaged to feel such things, despite the fact that she was recovering. Rhal took his spot beside her, crossing his legs as he looked at her.

"Chris," he began, knotting his fingers into the frail grass. "There is something I need to talk to you about."

"Oh?" She smiled at him. "And what, pray tell, is that?"

The corners of his lips turned up slightly, but his smile did not entirely reach his eyes. "You said, when you came back here after your… little vacation, that you stayed with a man. What sort of man was this? Were you alone with him, Chris, that whole time?" His voice had an air of nonchalance to it that sounded altogether too forced for Christine to believe that it was, in any way, natural.

"Oh." She had known that this conversation was likely going to occur, but now that it had, she did not want to talk about it, or even know what to say. It was necessary that Rhal should ask such things, because if he still planned on marrying her—and Christine thought that he did—he needed to know that she was still an honorable woman, and she needed to convince him of this. Of course, she had not done anything wrong during her stay with Erik, but the whole of it would sound improper to someone who did not know Erik as she did, someone who did not know that he was the most nervous, self-controlled, and proper man she had ever met, and that he would never do anything to her that harmed her or her reputation in any way. But Rhal did not know Erik, so she would have to, perhaps, stretch the truth, so that things did not sound near as ambiguous as the truth might to his ears.

"Oh, well, yes. I mean, I did stay with a man—yes—but it was never close to me like that. He had servants, you know," she lied, looking away from Rhal and instead at the little flower buds that had begun to form. "And his servants were almost always with us. And even when
they were not, he was never anything besides honorable to me, like a good host should be. I promise you, you have nothing to worry about, concerning my, ah… purity, or anything like that.”

The flower buds were turning out to be very interesting to her, and it occurred to her that she had never truly studied one before as she was now. There were little lumps on the thin, green stems where she knew leaves would later appear.

“Oh, I believe you, of course. I do not doubt your word, or anything, Chris.” Rhal’s fingers tightened on the grass, and in one sudden movement, he tore out both handfuls of grass, and let them scatter around him, leaving them to die. “But I really would like to know more about this man. You stayed with him for four days, after all, and neither I nor anyone else seems to know anything about him. So, who was this mystery man that you liked so much?”

Christine flushed, keeping her eyes on the flower buds. “Well, for starters, his name is Erik—he is not a ‘mystery man.’ And Erik is one of the kindest men I have ever met, and one of the best hosts I have ever stayed with. He saw that all my needs were taken care of, that my every wish was met—he was good to me, Rhal! And I know you might not believe me, but he was not the sort of man who would ever do anything without my permission—he never laid so much as a hand on me during my entire stay there.”

“Oh, Rhal, please,” Christine implored. “You know I do not lie about such things. You know I would not say something like that if it were not true.”

“Good,” Rhal said flatly. “I am glad that he was so wonderful towards you, and that clearly adored him so much. He sounds like a great man, and I am sure that I could never contend with him, at all, since he was clearly just so great!” He broke off bitterly and ripened another handful of grass out of the ground, unaware of the anger rising in Christine.

She tried to bite her tongue, to simply let him speak what he felt until the jealousy wore off, but his attitude bothered her in a way that it should not have. He knew nothing of her time with Erik, how the two of them had bonded through sadness and joy, nothing of the strange sense of other-worldliness Christine had experienced in that house—nothing about anything at all, in fact. He knew nothing of how Erik had fallen to his knees before her, begging for her hand in marriage, and how she had said no, in part, for Rhal himself, when she could have very easily said yes. But she had not, for Rhal, and now he was doubting her in his jealous rage, and insulting her like he knew anything about what she had experienced with Erik, how complex and confusing her feelings had been towards him. And this made her angry. But she did not wish to start an argument, so instead of retaliating with some ill-thought out comment, she stood and exited the courtyard, leaving Rhal with only his piles of uprooted grass for company.

He apologized later, of course, but Christine was of the opinion that he had only done so because she had clearly been offended, not because he felt any real remorse for his actions. She did not blame him for this, however, because she was not sure if this was true, and because, had she been in his position, she would have been jealous of his mystery woman, just as he was her mystery man. So, when he did apologize to her, with a quick ‘I’m sorry,’ she did forgive him, although some of her annoyance still lingered within her.

More than that subtle annoyance, Rhal’s presence also stirred confusion now, something that she had never experienced before. There had been times when she was younger when she had wondered if she truly loved him, and times more recently when she wondered if he would finally propose to her, but this new confusion was not like that sort of confusion. This new confusion ran far deeper than whatever she had previous felt, and she could not figure out why exactly she was confused. There was not a concrete reason for it, or at least not one she could easily discern. Every time he spoke to her with that special sort of kindness he had for her, or when one of his hands brushed hers, she found herself filled with that confusion, which made her suddenly uncertain of how she felt towards him, or if even, she felt anything at all. Perhaps it was not as odd as she
thought it was, but before, she had always known deep down in her heart that she and Rhal were to be married, and that they would love each other, as a fact of her life. She had never before been uncertain of her own feelings towards him, not since the day they met—bright and young—when she had found him the most beautiful, most courageous boy she had ever set her eyes on. Now, he was no longer a boy, of course, but a man, one who was still beautiful, and one that was still courageous in the face of all odds. It was in her, then, that the change must have happened.

The heart of it, she supposed, boiled down to Erik. Whatever had changed in her had done so when she met him. Christine, you see, had been engaged more than once, and proposed to as many times as she had been engaged, but Erik’s proposal had been different, somehow. None of her suitors had ever got down on their knees and begged for her love, as he had, and of their need for her. Before, it had all been promises of a good marriage, and many children—both desirable and good things, yes, but these did not hold any of the raw desperation and adoration of which Erik’s promises had spoken. She had experienced a depth in his words that she had never known before, and a depth which she did not entirely understand. But somehow, it had changed something within her. She did not love him—she knew that she did not—but she did feel something, something which made her unsure about what she felt towards Rhal, and she did not like it.

Perhaps Rhal could tell, over the next few days, that something was amiss with Christine, because he followed her like a devoted dog, always trailing behind her, always making off-hand comments to her, as if he were trying to win back her favor. He was almost like a shadow, and whenever Christine turned, he seemed to be just behind her, and smile already on his handsome face. Even when she went out to take her walks, just as she had before, he followed her, although she half-suspected her sisters had set him up to this task, to ensure her safety. He would often try to make conversation with her as they walked, even though Christine would have much rather have been left alone to think, and she usually only responded to him half-heartedly. Nothing seemed to put him off.

Her sisters, too, seemed more interested in her than usual, often striking up conversations with her whenever they saw her, when, before, they had often just gone about their tasks, only speaking a few words to each other. Perhaps, this was due, in part, to the fact that she had been gone for four days, and her sisters had probably thought she would never return, and Christine would have thought this the sole reason for her sisters’ attention, aside from one thing: they spoke to her almost entirely of love and marriage. It went like this: she would be sitting in the living room, working painstakingly on weaving a basket, all her focus on doing so, when Psyche would walk in, and begin immediately talking.

“What are you making, there?”

“A basket.” Christine had thought it obvious, and she had no desire to start a conversation, so she continued to work on her basket.

“Ah.” Psyche sat down beside her, and she groaned internally, wanting nothing more than for her sister to leave her once more in peaceful silence. “Do you want children, Chris? I only ask because I was playing with Helena and Perseus today, and I realized that I could not remember ever asking you if you wanted children. I always thought that you did, because you are always so good with my kids, so I always thought… And I guess it does not really make much of a difference whether you want children or not, but I thought I would ask. When I was pregnant with Perseus, you know, I was terrified, and I wished more than anything I could just get rid of the pregnancy, but once he finally came, I was the happiest mother there ever was. Children can be a burden, you know, but I think they are the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

“I don’t know,” Christine replied, forcing the wicker strands under each other. “I like children. I
have always been able to picture myself as a mother, I suppose.”

“I have, too, now that you mention it. You were always just such a sweet girl that it was easy to picture you with children. But, of course, it also depends on who the child’s father is, because that makes a world of difference, if you ask me. Lysander and I, when I found out I was pregnant with Perseus—we were going through a rough time, but once I told him about the pregnancy, things got so much better between us, and I thanked the gods immensely for that. Lysander is such a good father, Chris. Do you think Rhal would be a good father? I think I can picture him being the doting sort of father, but I don’t even know if I have seen him with children, except mine, so I do not rightly know. What do you think, Chris? Can you picture him being a father?”

Christine sighed. “I don’t know. I guess I can. He is good with Perseus and Helena.”

“Oh, isn’t he? They adore him, you know. They always ask about Rhal, whenever they come here. I have seen them playing together, with their little sticks they use as swords and such, and it is the most precious thing! Perseus acts all serious, like a true solider, and Helena is always squealing and laughing… Rhal has always had a gift with those two. He is like you, Chris—he is so kind and sweet that it just comes naturally to me to think that he would be good with children.”

“I guess,” Christine said again. Then, “Psyche, why are you talking about this? Recently, I feel like everything you have said to me has been about marriage, or children, or something like that, and I honestly do not really care right now. Why should it matter to me if Rhal is a good father or not? I am just trying to make this basket, and you keep distracting me.” She forced a piece of wicker aggressively under another.

“Christine!” Psyche exhaled, and rolled her eyes. “Can you stop working on that basket just for a minute? I think you will want to hear this from me, rather than Eurydice, so you had better listen. Both Eurydice and myself were already married at your age, and even though part of the reason that you are not is excusable—with all your failed engagements and… and Father—Rhal is here now, and you need to be married. Eurydice and Felipe cannot provide for you forever, and Eurydice is starting to get worried. You know how she worries, Chris. But we were talking about it, see, and we decided it would be best if you married Rhal, and soon. I mean, it is what Father wanted, and Eurydice and I both think it best if we follow his wishes. Besides, I know you are very fond of him, and we all are really, so it does not make sense for him to continue staying here if you do not agree to marry him.”

“What?” Christine sat down her basket. “How soon do you mean, Psyche? Father only just died, and I am still mourning for him, and it seems far too soon for me to get married now. And… and Rhal has not even asked me yet, so I cannot even know if marriage is an option for us, yet. I do not even know if Rhal wants to me marry me.”

“Are you entirely blind? Of course, he wants to marry you! Chris, he has loved you since he was fifteen years of age! And you have loved him, too! I know you do. Besides, we have talked to Rhal about this. Eurydice and I came to him once we decided that it would be best for the two of you to marry, and he agreed. He said he had only been waiting because he was unsure of how long you were going to grieve for Father, and how long is an appropriate time to wait. But, trust me, he does want to marry you. We have been asking you all these questions because we have been waiting for you to announce that you are ready to be married, before we hand you off to Rhal, because I know both of you would like it far better that way, without all the hardship. But we have not been able to get a proper answer out of you, yet. Just say you will marry Rhal! You will be so happy, Chris, I know you will. Rhal is a good man. And he is the only suitor you have right now, so who else do you have to decide between? Just say the word, and we will start preparing the wedding! Oh, Chris, it will be so amazing!”
Whatever else Christine felt about this marriage, ‘amazing’ was certainly not the word she would have used to describe it. She could only think of Erik’s sad eyes, gazing into hers as she promised that she would come back to him. He was, in a way, her other suitor, because he had been willing to marry her, but her sisters did not know that, nor could they. It was true that Rhal had been the object of her affections for some time now, but for some reason, something had changed between them, and she needed more to figure out what exactly she was feeling, before she was rushed into a marriage. She had to be sure of herself, and in between what she felt for Erik, and the vanishing past feelings she had had towards Rhal, she felt she could not be sure of anything. She was not ready for this! Her palms began to sweat.

“I don’t know. Psyche, what if the marriage does not work? What if I think I love him, but I don’t? What if he thinks he loves me, but he doesn’t? Once I say yes, we will be stuck together forever, despite what either of us feels, and that frightens me! I used to be sure of what I felt for Rhal, but now I do not know if I am anymore, and now, I am not sure if I can do this. What if I cannot please him, Psyche? What will I do, then?”

“Oh, dear.” Psyche took her hand, looking at her with gentle concern. “I felt the same way you did when I married Lysander. I was not sure of anything, and I nearly ran away from the wedding. But I did not, and I am so happy now that I did not. Chris, I know you love Rhal. I know that you are scared now, because suddenly you have to make a commitment—and that is scary—but you just need to calm down. You still love him, and once you are married, you will see. You just need to get past this period, and everything will be clear to you. You will not doubt anything after the wedding, and you will be happy, I promise. Just take a deep breath. This is not all happening now, anyway, so you don’t have to be worried. I am just telling you so that you can prepare yourself for when it does happen, soon. Because, Rhal will ask you, and you need to say yes, Chris, but we would not ask you to do that if we knew it was bad for you in any way. You do love him, and he loves you. You will make a perfect couple—just wait and see.”

Christine swallowed past the lump in her throat and tried to smile. But the truth of it was that Psyche had no idea how she felt. Her feelings for Rhal were a jumbled knot now, and one she could not seem to untangle, and Erik… Oh, Erik. She did not know how to feel about Erik. She felt guilty for leaving him, she felt guilty for having stayed with him; she felt guilty for even thinking about him as a potential husband, and equally guilty for shunning his proposal. Why should she even think about his proposal, after all, if she truly loved Rhal? If she did, then it would have been clear to her that they should marry, and she would not have felt any confusion about it, either. There was a point in her life when to marry Rhal had been the one thing she wanted, and she knew that then, she would not have thought twice about accepting his proposal. Why, then, had things changed? Did she truly not love him as much as she once had, or was this just all a case of fear of commitment, as Psyche had said? Christine was not sure.

“I will,” she said at last, trying to keep the subtle shaking out of her voice. “I will think on it, and I will tell you what I feel about marrying Rhal tomorrow. After that… Well, I suppose we will see what happens.”

“I suppose so,” Psyche replied, her eyes sparkling. “But, Chris, do remember—however you feel about marrying Rhal, he is your only suitor as of right now, and you do need to be married. I am not trying to force you into a decision… Just keep it in mind.”

Christine nodded, a tight smile stretching her features, and, after Psyche left her, she sat on the floor for a long time, her basket forgotten.

The next day, unfortunately, came much too soon for Christine’s liking, and she felt, by the time the sun was high in the sky the next day, that she had hardly had any time at all to think about this
subject that she knew would determine the rest of her life. Erik was still what gave her pause upon considering her marriage to Rhal and, although she had thought and thought and thought about it, the answer was no clearer now than it had been before. But, even so, when Rhal asked if she would like to walk outside with him after lunch, she agreed, despite the fact that she knew what the purpose of this walk would be, and what she would, most likely, be agreeing to by going with him.

“Christine,” he began at last, once they were safely away from her sisters, his arm linked in hers. “Christine, what do you feel towards me?”

Christine stopped, her mind working rapidly as she fought to figure out what exactly she would tell him, when in truth, she did not know the answer herself. She knew of what she had once felt for her childhood companion, but all after that was clouded in grey. Taking in a deep breath, she assumed a tight smile and continued walking, Rhal in tow.

“What do you mean?” she asked, although she knew perfectly well what he meant. He was wondering what she felt towards him romantically, because her sisters had told him that she needed to be married soon, and that she would come to a decision today, because they did not know just how very confused she was about all that was happening within her.

“Well,” Rhal cleared his throat, “I mean, do you still feel the same towards me as you used to? I know these last few weeks have been far hard for you, but you are looking better every day, Chris, and life is moving on. As you probably already know, I still feel the same towards you as I did... I mean, I never really stopped loving that pretty girl who I gave that bronze ring to so long ago.” Christine felt a sudden rush of guilt at that, thinking of how she had given that very ring to Erik.

“But,” Rhal continued, “I feel as if the love I had towards you once has changed into a different sort of love, and I was wondering if you... if you, ah, felt the same.”

Christine wished she could just escape into the woods, and never have to answer his question, but, unfortunately, Rhal’s arm was still linked tightly with hers, and she could not simply escape him. “I... I think so,” she murmured weakly, hoping that he could not see the doubt written in her eyes. She still did want to love Rhal, and have everything be easy for the two of them—that they could simply love one another, and get married, and be happy together forever—but she was no longer sure such a thing could happen at all.

“Good!” Rhal smiled at her, stopping his steps so that he could look at her fully, his eyes bright. “That makes me very happy to hear. You see, Chris, I had wanted to tell you earlier, but your father was sick—so I dared not to. And then, your father—gods bless him—left us, so I could not tell you, then. But now, you are mostly recovered, and things are looking up again, and it seems that I need something to keep you from running off with strange men.”

She managed a forced laugh.

“But all joking aside, I love you, Chris. More than anything in the whole wide world. And I want nothing more than to be your husband from this day forth and forever more. And if you will have me, that is what I am offering. What do you say? Will you marry me? Will you agree to be my bride?”

He was smiling, and happy, and his green eyes were so full of life and love—the eyes of the boy she had run with, carefree, through the forest as a girl—and in that moment, it seemed as if those two people, that young and wild boy and girl, still existed, and there was nothing that had changed at all. She had loved him once, could she not do so again? She knew she could be happy with Rhal—Rhal was so good to her, good to everyone, really, and she knew she would never be able to find a thing that would make her dislike him. He was golden, and good, and familiar—so familiar that
she felt sometimes that she knew him better than she knew herself. But could she be happy with that? Could she be content?

She closed her eyes, imagining, for a moment, that she was her young self again, so heartsick for Rhal that she could think of nothing else, her only desire to marry him, and be his wife. She could feel the recesses of that child within her as she was re-awakened, stirring feebly within the body of another—a woman, now—who was so unlike herself. But all she needed to do was pretend. Pretend, for one moment, that she was sure and confident of herself and her choices. Pretend that she still loved the man in front of her without any doubt. Pretend that she had never given away that bronze ring to another, and that it was still wrapped around her finger, her most beloved possession in all the world.

And, in that moment, pretending came easy.

“Yes,” she whispered, her eyes still closed, and a sense of peace overwhelming her that stemmed from nowhere she knew. “Yes, I will be your wife, Rhalamanthos.”

And then, she opened her eyes, gazing on the face of the bearded man—not boy—in front of her, beaming at her, and pretending was no longer easy. She felt as if someone had just dumped ice cold water on her—her lungs contracted, she gasped for breath, all her muscles tightened of their own accord—but she had spoken. She had agreed to marriage with Rhal. And with that agreement, there could be no going back.

“Oh, Chris…” Rhal’s hand took hers, holding them close to his broad chest, where she felt the beat of his heart—steady and strong. He laughed, joy shining across his face. “Thank you! You have made me that happiest man in the world! No, in the universe! This is the best day of my entire life, the day my Christine decided to become my wife!” He laughed again, and she felt him pulling her into an embrace that, try as she might, she could not relax into.

When he pulled away from her, she smiled up at him, but she knew it did not reach her eyes. “Yes! Yes, we will be married! And you will be my husband. And we will be happy, won’t we, Rhal?”

“Yes!” He cupped her cold cheek in his hand, gazing at her with all the love in the world. “Yes, Chris, we will be the happiest couple that ever lived.”

He stepped closer to her, his hand still holding her close to him, in the circle of that familiar embrace which seemed to Christine a second home now, and he laughed again, a low, soft sound, the air from his lips caressing hers, close as they were.

“I love you, Christine,” he murmured, and all Christine could think was that the words had sounded better coming from Erik’s voice, before his lips met hers. He tasted sweet, like honey, and his skin felt so very soft against hers, like silk. This was how she would be spending the rest of her life—with lips that tasted of honey, hers to kiss whenever she might wish, with skin like silk that was hers whenever she wanted to touch. But her heart did not beat for joy, even as she tried to tell herself that this was what she wanted, that she loved Rhal, that the only reason she felt so unsure was because she was nervous.

Rhal deepened their kiss, and Christine kissed him back, letting her hands run over his back, through his hair, touching him wherever she pleased. There was nothing between them, then, all barriers between them having dissolved, all lines vanished. This life, without secrets or fear, could be her life, now, and although the thought comforted her, as Rhal broke the kiss at last, she could not help but think that there must be more than what she was feeling at present.

After dinner, after Rhal had announced their engagement to the rest of the family, someone—
probably Eurydice’s husband—had decided to get out the best wine they had stored in the house. And so, the family now sat around the table, lips stained by wine, laughing and talking all at once, before Rhal silenced them enough to speak, his hand on Christine’s.

“We can be married as soon as I go to my father’s house and tell him of the news. I would have liked to be married before that”—he gave Christine a sly smile—“But I dare not do so until my father knows what is happening. It will only take two, perhaps three, weeks for me to make the journey and come back, which is not too long, but if I could, I would have it shorter. I even thought about taking my lovely wife-to-be with me, but the journey is difficult, and there is much to do here to prepare, and whatnot, so I thought it better if she stayed. I will miss her, of course, but it does not matter much, in view of things, because we will get to spend the rest of our lives together, anyway.”

Christine smiled as everyone else looked at her, clearly beyond happy in her choice of husband, clearly thinking her the happiest girl in Greece for getting to marry her childhood sweetheart. She should have the happiest girl in Greece, but for some reason, she was not, although she tried to push away that subtle knowledge. She would be in time, she was sure of it.

“Yes,” she heard herself say, her voice light and carefree. “Three weeks is hardly any time at all, when I have the rest of my life to look forward to.”

“I will miss you, of course, Chris,” Rhal was saying, looking at her tenderly. “But I will go home and come back as fast as I can, and then, after that, we shall be married.” He took a long drink of wine.

“So, when are you leaving, Rhal?” Eurydice looked from Rhal to Christine, clearly overjoyed at the first real happiness there had been since the death of their father.

“Oh, I think tomorrow, at sunrise. Because, you know, the sooner I return, the sooner Chris and I can be married.”

“So soon?” Eurydice took Rhal’s hand in hers. “We will miss you, brother, but it will all be worth it in time. I know you will be great husband for Christine, and I would trust her with no one less that you, and now, I am so very happy to welcome you into your family officially.”

Rhal beamed, and Christine hoped she was, too. “Thank you, Eurydice. This family has already been more of a family to me than any other I have ever known, and I count myself blessed to be a part of it.”

Psyche laughed, and held up her cup of wine. “A toast to the happy couple! To Christine and Rhal! May their marriage be one of happiness and love!”

Felipe raised his cup with another hearty call of “here, here!” and soon, everyone around the table followed his and Psyche’s suit, laughing as they banged their cups together, sloshing wine all over the table and each other. Even Christine had to laugh, despite the storm of feelings raging inside of her, because this was her Rhal, her best friend, and even if she was confused about her love for him, she could be happy with him.

“Here, here!” She echoed, before taking a gulp of the red liquid, savoring the burning sensation as it ran down her throat. Before she had hardly finished swallowing, Rhal’s lips were pressed to hers in a kiss that tasted of vinegar and grapes, and all around them, the other members of her family were laughing at the two of them. She could tell that he was drunk from the way his hands fumbled heavily on her back, and because this kiss was, in truth, far too passionate for her and Rhal to be sharing in front of her entire family. Had everyone else not been equally as drunk as Rhal, she
would have separated herself from him, but as it was, she doubted anyone cared, and she herself was curious what she would feel from kissing him. When he had kissed her immediately after his proposal, she had been too nervous to feel much of anything, but now that she had recovered somewhat and had time to think on this new development in her life, she wondered if he could make her feel anything at all.

It seemed that he could, judging from the way her heart was pounding, and from the strange flood of heat coursing through her, but she was not entirely able to differentiate that from the effects of the wine. Even so, it was not a bad kiss, and she found herself feeling somewhat disappointed when Rhal pulled away from her, his breathing labored.

“Come with me,” he rasped, pulling her up from her seat at the table and after him, as he stumbled down the hallway. From behind her, she heard her sisters laughing and calling after her, before the space between them swallowed up their words, and she found herself in her room with Rhal, the door closed safely behind them.

“Chris,” he murmured, and kissed her again, this time far more gently and calmly. After a moment, they separated, and he began, “While I am away, stay here, and do not wander off again. I will not have betrothed disappearing on me, will I?”

“Oh, no, of course not. I will stay here. Do not worry about me.” She gave him a smile to convince him that was not lying, and that her thoughts were not on the other person she was going to visit even now, as she promised him she would do no such thing.

“Good,” Rhal kissed her cheek, obviously persuaded. “Will you miss me, Chris? Tell me that you will miss me. I will miss you so terribly. Every time I close my eyes, my thoughts will be of you. And until I return, I think I will be thinking of you rather a lot, but thoughts are not quite as good as reality, you know. Will you miss me as much as I miss you?”

She nodded. “Yes! Oh, yes—I will miss you, Rhal! I will be waiting for you until you come back.” There was no lie in her words, this time. She would miss Rhal because, after everything, he was her closest friend and whenever he was not around, she felt like a piece of herself was missing.

His lips turned up in a smile at her answer. “I will try not to make you wait long, then. I love you, Chris.”

“And I love you,” she replied, as easily as the world, because it was true. He was her best friend, and she loved him with all her heart. Whether she loved him in the same way as he loved her, however, she was not sure, but there was no reason for him to know this. He was so very happy right now, and so very much in love, that she never would have dreamed of telling him anything that might cause his heart pain. She hated to see him in pain, especially when she was the one causing it. Nothing made her feel guiltier. But when he was happy, she was happy, and when he smiled, she did too. And if she had to choose between giving him happiness or giving him pain, despite her own wishes, she would choose happiness every time.

He rewarded her answer with another long kiss, which Christine tried her best to reciprocate in passion. Then, “I… I suppose I will go to my room now. I don’t know why I came with you in here… Oh, well. I will be back as soon as I can, Chris, and then, we can be married. I cannot wait for it. You are all I have ever wanted, you know. Ever since I met you, that is what I dreamed of. And now, it is all coming true, and I can hardly believe it. I love you.”

And after she had echoed his sentiments, he left her, alone in her room, feeling tired, conflicted, but pleased that Rhal was so happy with her. She would be a good wife for him, she knew it, and in time, the confusion would lessen and their marriage would be a happy one. She knew it. In time,
his kisses would make her feel alive instead of guilty, and his ‘I love you’s would make her feel comforted instead of torn. She need only give it time, and everything would clear itself out. She knew she could love him—she was sure of it.

Yet when she fell asleep that night, the man that met her in her dreams was not Rhal—not her betrothed—but Erik. He reached for her, with his thin, cold fingers, and this time, she took them in hers with no hesitation, no embarrassment. His eyes were glowing in his mask, not like they sometimes did at in the candlelight, but truly glowing—like fire in the night—when his other hand pressed against her back, holding her close to him. And then, she noticed (in that detached and unsurprised way that people often do when they are dreaming) that she was dressed in purple robes like a queen, and he like a king, looking even more mysterious and alluring with a black, iron crown atop his head. They began to dance, then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, as if they had done it a thousand times before, even though they had scarcely ever even touched before, even though there was no music to accompany them. They danced and danced in that dream land where only they existed, never speaking, and never ceasing the spinning of their bodies, until Christine awoke in a haze, cursing her mind for betraying her— all she wanted to do was go back to sleep and find her way back to that silent dance hall, and never leave again.

Chapter End Notes

I know some of you are probably dissatisfied with this chapter, but (and I feel like its safe to say this without spoiling anything) I am always an E/C shipper. So, just wait...

Just to clarify things a bit, purity back in the Greek day, for women at least, was a big deal, not as much so, as, say, the Victorian Era or something, but it was an issue. So, whether or not Christine had been faithful to Rhal would have been an issue of concern.

I really tried to make Rhal's character likable, though, even though Raoul in the Phantom is kinda... eh for me, I guess. I kinda imagine Rhal as this big, sweet, over-affectionate puppy, who people get annoyed with from time to time, but never really mad, because he's just the sweetest thing. He is kind of oblivious sometimes, and a little bit too full of himself, but I think deep down, he has a good heart. What do you guys think?
A Promise Kept

Chapter Summary

In which Christine employs all her faculties to ensure that a promise is kept...

Chapter Notes

Hello again, readers! I'm so sorry for the long update wait time! I kept meaning to post this, and then day after day slipped by and I never really got around to it, unfortunately. But this one is a bit of long one, so maybe that will make up for it :)

OH, also, the very lovely ktzen drew me some pictures of Greek!Erik and Christine that I would 10/10 recommend checking out... They're very cute and the artist captured both their characters perfectly. I have it up on my tumblr page, and here's the link if you wanna check it out! ( https://phantomfluffandstuff.tumblr.com/post/165382013145/hey-everyone-so-the-wonderful-and-exceeding )

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Christine stared after Rhal as he left early the next morning, waving to his retreating shape long past the distance she knew he could see. She stood and watched him until he had disappeared from her view on the back of his white horse, looking like a prince in the morning sun. She missed him already, perhaps less than she should have, but she most assuredly did. She missed his familiar smile, and the way he spoke—so well-known to her that she could pick up his voice anywhere—, the gait of his steps as he walked beside her, and she would miss it until he returned again, sauntering towards her in that familiar, self-assured way she knew so well. And then, they would be married.

While he was gone, she and her sisters could waste no time making preparations for her wedding, because there was so very much they needed to accomplish, and so little time to do it all. They would need to prepare the feast, of course— because that was perhaps the most important part of the wedding for everyone besides the happy couple—, Christine needed a new chiton, there were many sacrifices and libations to be made, and, the house would need sufficient cleaning. It would be a taxing three weeks, with so much to do, but it had to be done.

But besides the preparations for the wedding, there was also Erik to attend to. Christine had not forgotten her promise to him over the past weeks, and she did intend on keeping it, despite what she had told Rhal, because she had promised, and Erik did still have her ring. In her way, she missed him, too—not in the same way she missed Rhal, where all the usual familiarities that surrounded her suddenly vanished—but in that sort of way that, when her mind wandered, she often found herself often wondering how Erik was, if he missed her, if he was happy, and that sort of thing. With Rhal gone, she felt an odd sort of hole inside of her where he usually was, happily chatting with her about some trivial matter, but with Erik, she only thought after him curiously, because she had not known him well enough to know, exactly, what to miss.
However, in order to return to Erik, she had to gain her sisters’ consent to do so, because she would not run away from them again, and leave them only guessing where she had gone off to. No, she could not be that cruel. So, since she could not do that, she would have to convince her sisters to allow her to return to Erik, a man they had never before met, and a figure that Christine purposefully left in shadow when they asked after him. Her sisters did trust her, but trusting her enough to go stay at a strange man’s house for a few days was another matter entirely. Even so, Christine began to formulate an argument in her head and worked on it steadily for the first day after Rhal’s departure.

Her argument went something like this: She had already stayed with Erik before, and she had returned home in fine shape before. Erik was a good host, and would never harm her. She was now engaged, and so, even if she had had some sort of romantic relations with Erik (which, she would make clear, she had not), she would not have been able to continue them. Erik had servants (which was a lie) so, they would never be alone together (another lie), and therefore would only act properly around each other (which was true). And besides, she had promised him she would return, and after her marriage, it would not be proper for her to do so, so it would be best suited for herself and him if she return sooner rather than later, before her sisters could miss her too terribly while planning the wedding. As a whole, Christine thought she had done a good job constructing the whole thing, and laying out good reasons why she should be allowed to return to see her friend.

However, when she told this all to Eurydice that night, her sister did not see the matter as clearly as she did.

“So, you are asking to go back to the man that you disappeared with for the better part of a week, and now you are asking for my permission?” Eurydice crossed her arms as she stared at Christine from across the table, one eyebrow raised.

“Well… Yes.”

“You cannot be serious, Chris! You are engaged, now. You must start thinking like a married woman, now, and running off with other men is one of the first things you must not do! If not for my sake, then for Rhal’s. You must be true to him.”

“But, I am!” Christine raked a hand savagely through her hair. “I promise you, I would never do anything like that! I love Rhal, and I would be true to him in everything, but Erik is my friend. You do not know him like I do. He is a good man.”

“Is he? Why do you not let us come with you, then, and visit him? I am sure he would not mind more company, if he is truly as good a host as you claim he is. And I should like to know this Erik, since you seem unable to describe him in any significant detail.”

“No!” Christine felt her heartbeat quicken as she tried to think of a reason why her sisters could not come under any circumstances. “No, he would not be expecting you and he… would not have been able to prepare for you. So, you cannot come. And besides, you must work on planning the wedding while I am gone.”

“Was he prepared for you when you came to his house the first time?” Eurydice leaned forward in her elbows. “But you are right—I need to tend to the wedding arrangements. But even so, I do not trust this, dear. I trust you, but even this whole thing seems rather unlike you. But I do not trust him at all. How should I know he is a good man? I will not let my baby sister run with open arms into the home of some common barbarian! No—I have no idea who this man is, and until I do, I cannot trust you to go back with him.”

“But, Eurydice!” Christine reached for the place on her finger where her ring had once been, and
traced her fingers over it. “You have to! I promised him I would return, and I cannot lie to him! I must go back! He is a good man, I swear.”

“Perhaps, you should not have promised if you were unsure whether you could keep it,” Eurydice replied, her voice hard but not uncaring at her little sister’s obvious distress.

“But, I am! Even if you do not want me to, I can go back to Erik’s house, and you cannot stop me. I do not need your permission, Eurydice, and asking for it was clearly stupid of me. I am a grown woman now, and I can come and go as I wish without your consent. And if you think you can stop me, I shall run off again.” Her voice shook as she finished speaking, but even so, she could tell she had gotten her point across. Satisfied, but also feeling somewhat sick to her stomach, she sat back again, praying that she would not need to run away.

“You most certainly will not!” Eurydice cried. “You are my sister, and under my care, and while you are, I will not let you run off again. If I have to chain you up to ensure that you stay, then so be it. But I will keep you here, Chris. You may think you are an adult, but you are not—you are no better than a child, right now. And I suggest, if you ever want my permission to do anything of this nature, you learn how to better control yourself, and start thinking responsibly for a change.”

“But, Eurydice…” Christine’s voice broke and she was struck, at the moment, with how young she sounded.

“No!” Eurydice cut her off. “And what of Rhal, dear? You cannot honestly think that he would be comfortable with you going off and visiting other men before the two of you are married. I’m sure he would never agree to that, and, for his sake, if not my own, you must stay! You need to start acting like a married woman. You have to put an end to these childish whims and fancies, and start taking responsibility for yourself, and for your family, because faster than you know, you will have one.”

“I’m not even married yet, though, and you are not being fair!” Christine cried, but before she could continue, Eurydice spoke again.

“I am being fair. Perhaps you do not realize it yet, but I am trying to do the best thing for you, and for your marriage. I know that you are upset with me now, but when you are my age, and know what I know, you will see why this sort of behavior cannot go on any longer. Really, it would be best for you if you stayed here. What if people start to get the wrong idea with you running off every couple of weeks, and start questioning your faithfulness to Rhal? We cannot have that.”

“If anyone questions my faithfulness with Rhal, then they can take it up with me, and I will prove myself to them. I would never betray Rhal like that.” But she already had in so many other ways that it made her heart bleed just to think of them. She took a deep breath. “Please, listen. I know you do not like what I am asking you to do, but I promise, this will be the last time I ever see Erik again, because after this, I will be Rhal’s and it will not be my place to see other men. But now, all I ask is that you let me see him one last time. I promised him I would, Eurydice. And I will only be gone a few days, and I will not do anything that you would think badly of me for doing. But I have to go, one last time. I have to.”

Eurydice shook her head, but there was pity in her eyes. “No, Chris. No, and that’s final. I am sorry that you have to break your promise to this man, but I cannot allow you to do this. I am sorry, but it is for the best.”

A deep and desperate hopelessness rose up in Christine then. Erik would die if she did not visit him. He would be waiting for her, day after day, always expecting her to return, and she would not, and he would wither away watching for her. Oh, it broke her heart just to think of it! He would
suffer, and it would be entirely her fault. And they would never get to see each other again. Part of what had made their last parting easier for Christine was the knowledge that it was not going to be their last parting, but that there would be another sometime in the future. And so, she had not said a real goodbye to him, and she had not even fully answered his proposal for marriage, and she had left him letting him think that she hated him. She could not let him continue to live with that thought! Moreover, if she never saw Erik again, what did the prophecy mean, if he was not be her husband? Perhaps the gods had gotten it wrong, after all, and Rhal was truly who she was supposed to marry. But the prophecy had seemed so clear up until this point…

The prophecy.

Fueled by the desperation within her, Christine cried, “Wait, no! Eurydice, you do not understand!”

“Understand? Christine, dear, I think I understand perfectly well”

Christine spoke over her, before she had time to think about what she was saying, or had time to regret it. “No! Do you remember that prophecy I received from the oracle before Father’s death? The one that I refused to tell anyone? Well, this man—Erik—he is in that prophecy! The oracle told me about him—and I know it was him; trust me, I do—and see, I knew it was him while I was staying with him. There is something strange, something special, even, between us! But the gods have twined our very fates together in this prophecy, somehow, and if I were to not see him again, it would ruin everything. This is something I must do because, however odd it might seem, there is something between us I must resolve, and something which pulls us together, and I must answer that call! See, Eurydice, I must!”

Eurydice’s brow furrowed, and she sat forward, looking as if, for the first time, she was beginning to understand Christine’s desire to return to this man. “What do you mean?”

“This man was spoken of in my prophecy!” Christine knew she must sound insane, but this was actually the truth, and the fullest extent of it she had shared in a while. “Our destinies are woven together! I cannot say why, or even how, but they are—I know they are. The oracle told me that much. And there is something I must solve between us—two things I must choose between—but I left him before I was able to do so. I know this must sound… ridiculous, but I promise it is true! I doubted it, too, at first, but after I knew Erik, things just started to fall into place, and now I must see where this leads, once and for all, so I can complete my own future. This is what I have to do, although I do not expect you to understand exactly what I mean. But it is very important that I return, I promise.”

Eurydice frowned. “Is this true? Was this man involved in your prophecy? Please, do not lie to me. And if he was, why did you not say so earlier? I think that little bit of knowledge would have helped all of us better understand why you disappeared.”

“It is true! I would not lie to you, Eurydice—not about this. My prophecy spoke of a man, who, it said, I would have… dealings with”—she had no desire to mention the word ‘marriage’ to her sister – “and I now know that man to be Erik. I am not sure what will become of the two of us, but it is him, I know. And I didn’t tell you earlier because I was afraid.” She drew in a deep breath, ready to shed some light on her prophecy for the first. “Eurydice, the prophecy scares me. It is like… It is like I am being controlled by some outside force, and I have no power to do or say anything that matters. It’s like my whole life has already been set up, and I am just a little doll being pushed around, thinking I have the power to change things, when my whole life has already been planned, word for word, second by second. It scares me. I want to have my own power. I want to be able to choose for myself how I feel about this man—Erik—and how I want to progress in
my own life. I want to be able to do that for myself, and... and *feel* as if I am, too. But that prophecy... It made me realize that perhaps, we have no say in what happens to us at all.”

“Oh, Christine, dear,” Eurydice patted Christine’s hand, looking concerned. “I know that must be frightening for you, to feel as if all your powers are stripped from you. But... But perhaps, it is comforting, too, if you think about it. At least, it makes me feel comforted. The way I see it, if the gods have truly planned out our lives, as you say—word for word—then, where can we go wrong? If we have no freedom to truly choose, then we need never worry! Everything that needs to happen to us will happen to us, regardless of your own actions. I’m sure you are frightened by your prophecy, and feeling—as you said it—as a doll. But, perhaps... Perhaps, you would feel better if you simply relaxed about it all. If your Fate is connected with... Is it Erik, did you say? then, you need never worry. Prophecy or no prophecy, the result would have been the same. If something is supposed to happen between the two of you, it will happen. Do not be frightened.”

Christine nodded, but the same sense of hopelessness still clouded her, despite what her sister said. She had thought that, if she voiced these opinions, then perhaps she would feel better about the prophecy, or receive some understanding, or some sympathy. But she had not, and now, she only felt worse. Even so, she managed a smile. “I will try not to be. Still, though, I do not like the way this prophecy makes me feel. But I know I must go back to Erik to settle what is between us, and to choose, somehow, what will become of us. I know something has to happen, I just do not know what.”

Eurydice remained silent for a moment, and then nodded slowly, her brow still creased in worry. “I know you would not lie to me, so you must be right. If this is what the gods have intended for you, you must go back. There is no way around it. But, Chris, I do not like this. I do not like the sound of this man, and I most certainly do not like you returning while you are engaged to Rhal. If it was up to me, I would not let you go at all, but I think there are higher powers involved in this, as you say, although I am not entirely sure why.”

Christine was not sure she had heard correctly. She had thought that the prophecy might prove a persuasive argument, but she certainly had not thought her sister would believe her so easily. “So,” she said, “you are letting me go?”

“I suppose I am,” Eurydice replied, sounding vaguely surprised at her own choice. “Yes, I think you must go back, if the gods want you to. But, be very careful, Christine dear, and watch out for yourself. I know you think of this man as your friend, but I caution you to be wary of him. Something about him discomforts me. And come back within five days. If you are not back by the time the sun sets on the fifth day after you have left, I will go out searching for you myself, and when I find you, I will never let you leave my house again. And that is final. Five days. Be careful.”

“Oh, Eurydice!” Christine pressed her hands to her heart as she spoke, her happiness nearly threatening to take over. “Thank you for understanding! Thank you! I will be back in five days, I promise! And if I am not, chain me up, as you please, because I will deserve it! But thank you! I will be careful, too—don’t worry!”

Eurydice smiled, but those lines of worry did not leave her face. “I’ll try not to, dear.”

Just as Christine got up to leave—she would have a long journey ahead of her in the morning, after all, and she needed to get some rest—Eurydice stopped her again. “Christine dear, when you said that you believed you had dealings with this man... Should I be concerned about Rhal? Your marriage to him, I mean? Is that in jeopardy?”

Christine blood ran cold at the question. She had tried her hardest to ignore the prophecy, to ignore
Erik’s proposal, and pretend that her own marriage with Rhal would come together perfectly. But ever since she had agreed to be his wife, something deep within her continually seemed to whisper that this was wrong, that it would never work, that it was all going to fall to shreds.

“No,” she said at last. “No, not those sorts of dealings. Rhal and I will be fine. Erik is not… It’s not like that. Do not worry! I will still marry Rhal, and everything will be perfect!”

Eurydice seemed content with that answer, and wished her a goodnight, but Christine herself hardly believed her own words. Would everything be perfect, or was she a fool for believing so? Would she and Rhal be fine, or was she ignoring her own fate? She did not know, and again, that helplessness washed over her, and she felt she was drowning.

The next morning, Eurydice seemed even more hesitant to let her leave again, and Psyche, who now knew that Christine was leaving again, although for which reasons she had not yet been told, was very upset, demanding to know why Eurydice was letting her little sister go and wander off into the woods again. After Eurydice told Psyche why Christine was leaving, however, Psyche was no more calm than before, and objected firmly to the meeting. It was Christine who came up with the idea of telling her sisters where to find her, should they need to, and giving her directions to the place on the hill where she generally met Erik, although she told her sisters not to use them unless absolutely necessary. This bit of knowledge seemed to calm them somewhat, and both relented, but Christine hoped they would have no use for the directions to the hill—this was a journey she needed to make alone.

Right before she was about to leave, Eurydice came to her, pulling her close enough to whisper in her ear, “I prayed about this last night, dear, and I asked that if this was the right thing, if the gods would send me a sign, or something. And this morning, I heard the cry of a heron, just as the sun was rising. So, in spite of my own feelings, I know this is right—the gods have told me! You are doing the right thing, I think, Christine dear. But, please, be careful, and come home soon. We love you.”

Christine nodded, happy that her sister at least now thought she was doing the right thing. Whether the gods truly had meant to send a sign at all, or if it was just a coincidence, she did not know, and she was not sure which frightened her more—the gods watching over and guiding her decisions, or the strange ambiguity she was left in if they did not.

“I love you, too,” she murmured at last, and hugged Eurydice before and Psyche before slipping back out the door, back into Nature, back into the Wild.

Relief was the first thing she felt. She was alone again, without ties to anyone or anything, without anyone to tell her where to go, or what to do—out here, she was free. She was free to think what she wanted, say what she wanted, and free to go wherever she wanted, although she would not stray from her own journey. Out here, there was no marriage—no Rhal or Erik—only herself, and her thoughts, swirling around with her in the wind, her only companions the trees that surrounded her. She loved it.

They sky was grey that day, a swirling mass of clouds and dull sunlight, all displayed in fast wisps over her head, twining and twisting together. The air was chilly, but not bitterly so, although Erik’s cloak kept much of the biting wind from her. It was a freeing sort of day, the kind that made her hair whip around her face, the kind that flicked her skin with tiny raindrops, the kind that pulled her wherever the wind wanted her to go. She wondered if there could be any person who did not experience a sense of power from such weather, and who did not immediately desire to run away from the rest of the world, instead taking refuge in the forest for the rest of their days, when the wind blew so, and the sky possess such a deep and picturesque stance.
As she walked up the trail that was now beginning to become commonplace to her, thinking about these sorts of things, she saw in the distance two small birds, struggling to flap their delicate wings against the opposing wind, and, although they struggled, they hardly moved forward at all, but simply stayed—flapping their wings pointless against a force they could not oppose. She felt sorry for those birds, and longed to help them in some way, although in which, she knew not how. But their small efforts made her feel pity for them.

She heard another noise—the caw of yet another bird—and glanced up, her eyes following an eagle, now, as it made its way through the wind. It was powerful and graceful, strong but delicate, and Christine thought she had never seen anything so beautiful as that eagle. It dove and rode of the waves of wind, hardly flapping its winds at all, and yet, in a moment, it had soared out of her view, leaving her with only the two small birds, who still flapped and flailed against the front of the oncoming storm. Perhaps, in time, they would free themselves from the forces that pressed against them and fly away, but perhaps, they would not, and the wind would force them to the ground, their delicate wings destroyed and useless, their small bodies broken and battered. She hoped for the former.

She was not even halfway to Erik’s house when it began to rain, hard and heavy, the grey clouds dumping the whole of their contents onto her. Sighing, she looked up into the falling rain, wondering if it would be worth it to return home after how far she had come, or if she should simply accept the fact that she would soon be soaked to the bone. The latter seemed the better option—even if she turned back now, she would still get wet.

So, she drudged up the now muddied trail, her clothes already clinging to her body, her hair plastered to her face. She liked the rain generally, but this was a cold, heavy sort of rain—the kind she generally watched from the safety of her own house, appreciating it from afar. Now, it dripped through her skin and to her bones, freezing her through and through even as she worked to make her way to Erik once more, desiring another’s warmth and company more with every passing moment. Ah, to wrap up with a blanket in front of a fire—that would be bliss! To feel the warmth seep back into her bones, to unthaw—that would be the most divine blessing she had ever received.

After what seemed like ages, she arrived at the top of the hill, where she desperately hoped to find Erik, because she could not for the life of her remember how she had found her way to his house the first time from here. All she recalled from that journey were vague memories, and warped desires—ones that she could not fully place or understand.

“Erik?” Her teeth chattered violently as she tried to speak, her hands working to wipe the rain water off of her head. “Erik, it’s Christine! Christine is here! Can you hear me?”

She shivered forlornly in the rain for another long minute, waiting to hear Erik’s reply. But, alas, none came. She groaned inwardly: if he did not come for her this time, she would surely get sick from the chill this rain was giving her. She pulled her feet from the mud that was sucking them in, and tried again, yelling as loudly as she could over the howling of the rain.

“Erik! It’s Christine! I’ve come back! Erik?” She drew his cloak tighter around her shoulders, wondering if she should attempt to find his house on her own, or if that would only result in her being terribly lost. She thought that, with a little effort, she might be able to find his house on her own, and if he could not find her out here, she had no choice but to find him herself. And the sooner she got out of this icy rain, the better.

She called for him again, one last time, as loudly as she could, praying to every god she knew of that he would hear her and come to her, if this was really what was destined for her. After everything that had happened—the prophecy, and Erik’s proposal, and Eurydice’s agreeing to let
her return—it would be a shame for it all to come crashing down here, all because Erik could not
hear her calling for him through the rain.

“Please, if you can hear me, please come. I cannot find your house on my own, and I do not really
want to try, either. So, if you are out there, Erik, please come out.”

It was then she heard a voice through the rain, and, although what it said was muffled by the
continual weeping of the clouds, she knew it was Erik. She had never felt so relieved before in her
entire life. A smile came to her face as the drops of rain coursed down her cheeks, and she called
his name again, running towards the dark shape materializing through the trees that she knew to be
him.

“Erik!” She cried, her foot spraying water every which way as she ran to him over the wet grass.
“Oh, Erik! I missed you! I thought you would not come!”

She was in front of him now, looking up at the man who was a friend, a mystery, a monster, and a
lover all in one. His hair was already dampened from the rain, and its usual thin curls now stuck
against the top of his mask, although much of his clothes still remained dry. He had not been
outside long, then. The way he looked at her was the same he had always, his golden eyes soft and
burning all at once, and Christine forgot all at once what had happened since their separation. She
forgot that she was engaged, she forgot that she was confused, she forgot that she did not want the
gods to control her, and suddenly, all that existed for her was the present, him standing in front of
her.

In a moment of sheer abandon, she wrapped her arms around him in a tight embrace, like the ones
her sisters had always given her, like the ones she had given Rhal. Whatever dryness might have
remained in his clothes was lost when she held him against her. But, she felt his muscles tense
against her, and his arms remained frozen at his sides, and he hardly seemed to be breathing at all,
and Christine realized, all at once, this was not her place. He did not like her affection or her touch.
She had forgotten.

She stepped back from him, blushing heavily, and pulled her water-heavy chiton off of her front,
where it had stuck from her embrace. “Sorry,” she murmured, pulling her cloak in front of her to
hide the way her dress clung to her. The material was thin, and the dress itself was very wet.

He shook his head, now gasping in breaths to make up for the ones that had stopped while she had
embraced him. It was then that she noticed something entirely new about his person, something
that made her look twice, to make sure she had not simply imagined what she was seeing. His
mask, it appeared, now had a new design. Where he had once only had a mold of a mouth covering
his own, now there was a rectangular cut in the mask, revealing his mouth. That was all of him that
was exposed to her, however—his chin and jaw both remained covered by his mask, although it
appeared to be attached to the rest of the mask like a normal jaw, with a sort of clasp mechanism on
either side, enabling him to open and close his mouth, while not uncovering any skin besides the
little bit visible to her. But however little that bit was, she was still gazing openly at a part of him
she had never seen nor thought to see—his lips. They were thin and nearly purple from the cold,
and his mouth was long and stretched-looking, almost disappearing beneath the cover of the mask,
but, somehow, it seemed very natural to her that he should have that sort of mouth, despite the fact
she had never seen it before.

“Your mask…” She began, unsure how to address the change politely, and how to move pass the
undeniable discomfort between them.

“Yes,” he replied in a hushed voice, barely audible over the sounds going on around them. Then, he
exhaled deeply, his body losing that stiff tension she had caused in him, and cried in that soft,
melodious voice she so loved, “But, my dear girl, you are soaked to the bone! It has been raining all day, and yet, this is the one you choose to return here on. You should have waited for the rain to let up, Christine! Ah, you will become sick! It is so very cold out here! I do not know how you managed to come all the way here in these abysmal conditions.”

“I was already halfway here, though,” she explained, eager to forget the unwanted embrace, “and once it started raining, I did not want to go back home, so I just kept on going. It wasn’t so bad. I mean, I do like the rain, sometimes…”

“I, however, do not,” he said before she could continue, “and now, I must get you out of it. Here.”

Before she knew what he was doing, he had pulled his old cloak off her shoulders and replaced it with the one he had been wearing, which was much drier than hers, even if it was not entirely without effect from the rain. Still shivering, she pulled it tightly around herself, relishing the feeling of dry fabric against her skin. The sight of Erik attempting to put on her sopping wet cloak made her feel badly for not insisting that he keep his own clothing, but his cloak was so warm that she could not now take it off of her.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“My pleasure, Christine. But now, come. I must get you out of this rain before you freeze. I suppose I could… Well, it would take longer that way but I could… No. No, I think I will go the other way. That way, at least, my dear, you will be out of the rain. Tell me, how do you feel about tunnels? I hope you do not mind them?”

She shook her head, smiling through her chattering teeth. “Oh, no. I have never been in one before, but I am sure I will not mind. They sound very exciting.”

His lips turned up in a small, slight smile, the first she had ever seen him wear. It made his mouth seem even more thin and stretched than before, but she rather thought it was a becoming look for him. “That is very well, because I have in mind for us to use one. If you would follow me?”

He held out his hand to her, and she took it, wondering if her hand felt as cold to him as his to her.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know, I wasn't particularly satisfied with this chapter either, but I didn't really know what exactly to fix, and I really wanted to go ahead and post, so here we are. I felt kinda bad about using The Prophecy *insert dramatic singing* as a Deus Ex Machina kinda thing, but I figured that since I really have forgotten what other uses it might serve, I may as well use it for that. Hurray for prophecies.
That Which Comes From Rain

Chapter Summary

In which Erik and Christine are reunited in the pouring rain...

Chapter Notes

Hello again, readers! So, as one of my wonderful readers pointed out, my portrayal of Ancient Greek marriage I have in here is entirely inaccurate, and that is something I am aware of, in case any others of you are doing research on Ancient Greece after reading this. So, I just wanted to make sure that you guys know that this isn't, like, super accurate, this-is-exactly-what-happened-in-Ancient-Greece-at-this-time kinda plot in every aspect (although in a perfect world, maybe it would be). Think of it more as going off of the portrayal Shakespeare has of Greek marriages in a Midsummer Night's Dream, because that's a little more the feel I'm going for, here. Sorry for any confusion!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Erik and Christine slushed through the muddy underbrush for only a few, rain-drenched seconds before they arrived at a patch of rather odd looking grass, that appeared a little too green and a little too dry to be the same as the grass that surrounded it. Erik bent down and pulled on the green stuff, and instead of pulling it out of the ground as Christine suspected her would, a perfect little rectangle came up from the ground, which, Christine realized, was the door to the tunnel. Had she not known that there was a door there, she never would have suspected it, despite the odd-looking grass.

“Here we are,” Erik said briskly. “This is the entrance, as you might have suspected, to my little tunnel, quite cleverly hidden, if I may say so myself. I shall go down first—I would not make you stand in that dark little space alone by yourself—and I shall help you down; you needn’t worry. Once I am down there, wait for me to call for you before entering, so that I may be ready for you. I will not be more than a minute, though.”

In so saying, he jumped nimbly into the small space of black abyss below him, and Christine could not see him at all, even when she bent down to look inside the tunnel. It was as if he had vanished into thin air, although Christine knew he was still very near, just out of her sight. As promised, in a minute, he told her that he was ready for her, and told her that she must jump into that hole, as he had done, but that he would catch her, and that she should have no cause for worry.

Christine nodded and took a step closer to the hole, wondering just how deep this tunnel was, and how far she would have to fall for Erik to catch her. But the more she thought about such things, the more nervous she knew she would become, and so, wanting nothing more than to simply get out of the rain, she closed her eyes and jumped.

For a moment, there was only falling and a sensation of weightlessness, and then, there were arms
grabbing her from her flight. She felt herself collide with something hard, something she thought was Erik’s chest, and the both of them stumbled backwards as Erik fought to keep his balance. After a few long seconds of their chests being pressed far too close, his hands on her waist to hold her steady, and hers on his shoulders, he lowered her carefully onto the floor of the tunnel.

Christine was relieved to feel solid ground beneath her feet, because she had been afraid that Erik would fall from her sudden weight, which would not have surprised her, thin as he was. But strangely, she also half-longed to be caught up in Erik’s arms for a minute longer, just long enough for her to be able to savor the newness and closeness of it—he had not been so close to her before, and she doubted he would be again. There had been something comforting about him being there to catch her, and something—well, she was not entirely sure—but something good about being so close to him. But Rhal. She was engaged now. She could not think such thoughts. She shook her head.

Erik, meanwhile, had pulled the trapdoor to the tunnel shut by a rope that hung down from the door, and had extinguished all light in the tunnel, enveloping the two of them in a deep, wet darkness. When the light disappeared, Christine, who had been too busy thinking about other things to notice Erik was shutting the door, let out a startled cry of “Oh!”

“Forgive me, Christine. I am afraid it is rather dark in here, but thankfully, I can see rather well in the dark, and shall have no trouble guiding us safely back to my house. I know this tunnel quite well, after all, both in darkness and in light.”

Christine nodded, wondering if he could see her in the darkness.

“I will lead you,” he continued, sounding as if he were very close to her. “But you may… hold onto me, if you wish. That way, we will not get separated, and you will not have to feel any fear. I shall be right in front of you the whole time, dear Christine, and we need never even let go of each other for a moment, if you wish.”

“I do, I think,” Christine whispered. There was no reason to feel guilt. She was only holding his hand so that they would not get separated, and she would not get lost, not for any reason of affection, or anything of that kind. She saw no reason why she should not accept his offer. So, she reached out tentatively in front of her, until her fingers twined with his thin, cold ones.

“Come,” he said, and she felt him tighten his grasp on her hand. It was not painfully tight, but secure, and for that, she was thankful. As they walked, her shoulders brushed continually against the sides of the narrow tunnel, wiping mud onto her cloak and arms, making her shiver. She did not want to be alone in this tight, dark little tunnel. She gripped Erik’s hand tighter.

“I am sorry my hands are so cold,” she said after a minute of silence, more to simply lessen the tension between them than to actually apologize.

She heard a soft humming sound in front of her. “It is no matter. I, too, apologize because my hands tend towards coldness more than heat, and I fear they often feel more like a corpse’s touch than a true human being’s.”

Christine had forgotten how cruel this man could be to himself, even while keeping his tone so casual. “No, your hands are fine. They feel just as anyone else’s would, I imagine, after being stuck in the rain.”

Their footsteps thudded on the packed dirt floor for a while longer before he replied with a “I suppose so.”
After what felt like ages of cold mud being scraped against the cloak covering her shoulders, and of water dripping onto her head from the ceiling, Erik stopped walking, telling her to do likewise, because they had arrived at the end of the tunnel.

“You do remember that small room I showed you, do you not? The one that I informed you is connected to this tunnel, and the one you seemed most intent on leaving as soon as you possibly could. Do you recall that place?”

“Yes,” she replied, her hand trembling slightly in his. Their fingers had not separated yet, and Erik continued to cling to her tightly with no obvious signs of desiring to let go, so Christine did not either. She liked being able to, for the first time, touch him, not, of course, in an inappropriate way, but in the way that people do often touch each other—the casual brush of fingers, hands touching arms to get another’s attention, quick but affection hugs. She liked being able to have that with him, even just for these few moments.

“We have arrived at that room,” Erik continued, slightly in front of her. “Now, it is a good bit above us, I am afraid, and getting into the room will require a bit of physical exertion for both of us. There is a ladder just ahead of me that we will need to climb in order to reach our destination. As before, I think it will be best if I go first, and then you, dear girl, so that, should you need help, I will be there to help you. Does that suit you?”

Christine replied that yes, it would. Nearly as soon as she spoke these words, however, she felt Erik’s hand release her own, and she felt a small sense of disappointment at their parting. She doubted Erik would allow her to touch his hand again, and that this would be the first and last time such a thing would ever happen. This saddened her, because she did wish to have a normal relationship with Erik, one that did not require her to always be checking the boundaries he had set up for her, and constantly debating whether she should reach out to him. She wished that she simply could, and not have to worry about the consequences. But even so, as he let go of her hand, she let go of his, as well, isolating herself in total darkness of the tunnel.

In a moment, he had climbed up the ladder, and from inside the room, he told her that he was ready for her, as soon as she was ready to join him. “Take care to be cautious climbing up, my dear. The rungs are rather slippery, and even more difficult to climb in the dark, and I do not wish for you to fall. Climb slowly, if you will, and when you have gotten high enough, I shall reach down and pull up the rest of the way, to lessen the chance of you falling prey to some misfortune, if you will let me.”

“Of course,” she replied, and felt in front of her until she felt the damp wood of the ladder. Slowly, she placed her hands on a rung and began to climb, taking each step with the utmost caution. The ladder seemed to be coated in mud, or something of the like, and it was difficult to climb. But she made it safely to the top, where, as promised, Erik lifted her gingerly up from the ladder. For a moment, his hands were wrapped under arms, and hers grasping tightly into his arms, before their small connection was severed once more, and Erik put her safely on the ground of the room.

“Thank you,” she murmured, rubbing her dry, mud-covered hands together. She sincerely hoped Erik had some sort of bath where she could wash off all this filth that covered her, and perhaps warm up some, too. At present, she felt as if ice had begun to grow under her skin, chilling her to the bone to such a degree, she was not sure that she would ever be warm again. She shivered.

“Now, we must only go up the staircase, and we shall be back in my house, back in warmth and comfort. Come, Christine.” Erik’s hand found hers again, the lightest, gentlest touch, urging her to follow him up the stair until they came to the door that led into his house. The golden light shone through the cracks around the doorframe even before they reached it, and Christine felt that she
had never seen so beautiful, nor so welcoming a sight in her entire life. In those moments, she would have given many, many things just to put on some dry clothes and curl up by a fire for a while. Erik pushed the door open, and suddenly, they entered back into the world of light and dryness, despite the rain still padding softly outside. The light caught Christine off guard, after being stuck in the dark for so long, and she had to blink a few times to get her eyes to focus on the candlelight and smooth, white stones. But even so, she was beyond grateful.

“Here we are, at long last,” Erik sighed, letting go of her hand again. There was a small smudge of mud where her hand had been connected to his. “My house.”

“Thank you for bringing me back.” Christine attempted a shaky smile as she pulled her soaking, muddied cloak tighter around her shoulders in an attempt to secure some warmth, no matter how small. There seemed to be none left in her own body, after all.

Erik seemed to notice this, because after she did so, he said, “Ah, dear! You are soaking! Please, let me take that from you.” He peeled the wet garment off of her shoulders and threw it unceremoniously over a wooden chair.

Without the cloak, Christine had nothing to conceal the way her gown clung to her figure, which she knew must have been far too revealing, but she had nothing else to cover herself with. Blushing, she stared resolutely at the cloak on the floor, until she heard Erik say, “Now, you must take off those clothes.”

She looked up at him, her heart beginning to beat rapidly, despite the fact that she was sure he did not—he could not—mean that. He would not ask that of her, would he? Oh, no—of course, he would not. Erik was a friend.

Seeing her wide, shocked eyes and the way she crossed her thin arms over her shaking body, a dark blush rose to Erik’s face. Christine probably would not have noticed other than the fact that much of the color gathered on his ears, making them appear much darker than usual. The situation was almost humorous—she had not known he could blush. His eyes travelled over her body, as if he was only just realized what he had spoken, and he turned away from her, twisting his muddied hands together.

“No, no! That is not what I meant! Forgive me, Christine. That is not what I meant to say at all. I only meant to say that you should, ah… take off those wet clothes before they make you sick, that is all. Forgive me. Poor choice of words.” He adjusted his mask slightly before continuing. “The clothes I gathered for you last time you were here are still in your room, if you would like them. And… and perhaps, I can draw up some water for a bath, if you would like. Would you like that? I just do not want you to get sick, you see, from the cold and the rain. I meant nothing else.”

“A bath.” She pulled on the fabric of her dress, which had someone stuck itself to her stomach once again in the space of a moment. “Yes, a bath sounds nice. Better than nice, really. That would be wonderful. Thank you.”

Erik nodded, but seemed intent not to look at her. “Good. I will fetch the water, then, and prepare it for you, while you put on some dry clothes, and try to warm yourself up a bit. How does that sound?”

“Lovely,” Christine sighed, crossing her arms tightly around her as another bought of shivers snaked through her.

With another nod, Erik walked off into another room, his soft footsteps quickly receding into silence, leaving Christine standing the hallway in the puddle of rainwater that slowly dripped off of
her. Desperate for some warmth, she did as Erik had suggested and wandered back to her old room, peeled off her wet clothes, and wrapped a piece of dry cloth around her, just until her bath was ready. Mud covered her hands, hair, and shoulders, as well as her ankles and feet, which had accumulated so much during her trip to Erik’s house that she could no longer see the skin they concealed underneath. Bending down, she attempted to rub some of the grime off, but was rewarded only with getting much of it under her nails, and making a mess of what she did get off on the floor. Sighing, she exited her room, not knowing what else to do in there, and went to find Erik and her bath.

It was only after a short exploration that she found the bathroom, which was tucked away in little room near hers, where she found Erik, a bucket sitting beside him, and his arms filled with small, glass bottles of spices. He met her eyes, and quickly set down all the bottles around the tub, before coming to stand next to her, his ears still faintly red.

“I believe I have supplied everything you need. There is oil in that jar, there—the red one. And your soap is in those two platters, there.” He pointed to the two piles of ash and pumice. “You may use as much of it as you desire. And over there is your towel. The water should already be heated—I put some hot rocks beneath the tub, and those should have warmed it up sufficiently by now. If there is anything else you may need, do not hesitate to call for me, and I shall bring it immediately.”

Christine nodded, pulling her makeshift robe tighter. “That looks perfect—thank you, Erik. I am sure that will be fine.” And it did look perfect. The bath looked like the most perfect thing she had ever seen. Mist floated off of the water’s surface already, and she desired nothing more than to climb in the tub and soak until her skin steamed like the water.

Erik inclined his head, already drifting towards the door. “It was no problem, my dear. But I am most glad it looks acceptable to you. Well, I do hope you have a satisfying bath, and I will be waiting for you out here once you have finished, although you may take as long as you wish.” And with that, he disappeared through the doorway, closing the door behind him, leaving Christine to her bath.

After getting as much of the mud off of her with the soap provided, Christine slid into the water. It nearly burned her skin, but even so, she had not felt such a lovely sensation in all her life. The burning began to fade after her skin adjusted to the heat after being in the cold so for long, and slowly, she felt the warmth trickling past her skin into her bones, gradually washing away the cold that resided there. Sighing, she closed her eyes and leaned her head back into the water, until all her curls were safely submerged in it, drifting around her in tendrils.

She stayed in the bath for some time, simply relaxing, until the heat began to subside back into cold, and until her fingers and toes had all wrinkled up. It was only then that she managed to force herself out of the tub, and even then, she had her towel wrapped safely around her in seconds, shielding her from the cool air of the outside world. Humming to herself, she dried herself off a bit before taking the bottle of oil in hand and pouring it onto her body. Her skin glistened as she massaged the oil in, using her fingers to rub it all over her body and, after that, her hair. Her skin was a pinkish color afterward, from her deep cleaning, and it stung a little, but she felt unbelievably clean. Even her mind felt refreshed, leaving her feeling calm and composed after so many days of confusion and unrest. She was still humming softly to herself as she wrapped Erik’s clothes back around her and left the room, leaving a puddle of dirty water on the floor.

She found Erik sitting on a couch in his living room, staring pensively at the fire in the brazier, which he glanced up from at her approach.
“How was your bath?” He asked, still gazing at her openly, his eyes unblinking.

“It was perfect. I feel very clean, now. And a great deal warmer, although I think it is colder out here than it was in the water.”

“Oh?” He rubbed his hand across his mouth. “I apologize for it. I have even lit a fire, you see, to attempt to make things comfortable for you.”

“I am comfortable,” she said quickly, trying to assure him that she meant no offense to him by her previous statement. “It was just that the bath was so warm…” She sat down next to him, and ran her fingers through her damp hair.

“I see.” He stood, and Christine was afraid that he was going to leave her. But he did not, and instead, he simply pulled the blanket he had been wrapped up in off of his shoulders and dropped it into her lap again, before taking his place beside her on the couch. “Perhaps, that will keep you warm.”

“Oh, but Erik, this is yours! Really, I am fine, I was only joking with you. Keep your blanket,” she said, feeling bad that she had made him give up his warmth. She tried to take it off and give it back to him, but he stopped her, carefully wrapping the thick material back around her shoulders, his hands never quite touching her skin.

“You need it more than I do, rest assured. I am quite warm now, and would have most likely taken it off in a moment, anyway. Do not worry yourself over it, but please do keep it. Regain your warmth, dear one.”

At that point, she decided it would be futile to argue with him on the subject because clearly, he was unwilling to take the blanket back, so she curled up in it, accepting the warmth it provided. Snuggled safely in the blanket, she began to comb out her hair, casting occasional glances at the newly exposed portion of Erik’s face while doing so. She had not noticed before in the rain, but she could see a little sliver of his skin around his mouth. It was oddly discolored and at first, she thought his skin was simply pale, but a second glimpse told her it was very nearly grey in color. She was not entirely sure how long he had been wearing his mask, but if his face had not seen the sun in years, she supposed it made sense for his skin to be such an odd color. His thin lips, too, were discolored, more of a purple or a blue color than any shade of pink, and, although she could not tell without being far closer to him than she had any wish to be, they seemed to be very dry and cracked. She continued to study him for a moment, before she realized he was watching her do so, and probably had been for some time. She looked away rapidly.

“Are you admiring my new mask?” he asked, sounding vaguely amused.

She flushed, wishing he had not noticed her staring so brazenly at him, especially at his lips. “Yes,” she admitted quietly, and she heard him chuckle beside her.

“Now, as you might have noticed, my mouth is in plain view at all times, so now, I can speak to you openly. And this way, I can also eat meals with you, unlike I was able to do before, if you would like that.”

“That would be nice,” she said, still feeling somewhat flustered. “It would be a lot less uncomfortable if both of us could enjoy a meal together, instead of just me, while you sit and stare.” Her statement sounded a bit accusatory, so she attempted a laugh to soften it a bit. “But may I ask why you decided to change your mask? Is there any particular reason?”

He shrugged, his lips drawing together in a tight line, before he said, “Not a particular one, no. I
simply thought that you might be more comfortable if my face was more visible to you.” He was quiet for a moment. Then, “I should also like to be as close to human in your eyes as possible, my dear, and if there is any semblance of normality that I can create for myself, I will not hesitate to do so.”

“Oh.” She never knew how to respond to him when he said such things, if there was any right way to respond at all. Should she reassure that she only thought him a little bit monstrous? That she saw him as almost normal? What kind of reassurances were those, other than the sort that affirmed that she felt exactly as he thought she did towards him. No, she could not do that to him. Instead, she settled on telling him, “Well, I do like your new mask, at any rate.”

And although this was true, his new mask did nothing to lessen the curiosity she felt concerning his face. It is, perhaps, human nature that, when one sees a mask, one wants to rip it off and see what it hides beneath, no matter what the mask or who the person—it is an odd quality that all seem to possess. Christine was no different. The tiny sliver around his mouth that she now was able to see only heightened her sense of longing to see what was beneath it, to exposed the rest of that greyish, pale skin that she knew he hid. She knew he had forbid that she ever even touch his mask, and she knew he had reasons for this, and she knew that were she to break his one rule, he would be consumed with that same desperate fury he had been last time, but even so, her fingers still itched to reach up and pry it off his face. It would be so easy! The mask was held onto his face by only a little leather faster behind his head. But perhaps… Perhaps, if she waited, he would let her see his face on his own terms, ones that would not involve anger or betrayal. At least for now, she would control her fingers and wait.

“Thank you. I am glad to hear that,” he said, oblivious to her longings, and began to twist his hands together. Then, suddenly, as if he had only just thought of it, he pulled the ring that she had given him off his smallest finger (it appeared that his pinky was the only finger the ring could fit on), and dropped it into her lap.

“Your ring, my dear. I had entirely forgotten about it, or I would have given it to you earlier. I grew used to it while you were gone, you know, and I had gotten to the stage where I no longer felt it on my finger. But I thank you for giving it to me. When I lay in my bed at night, wondering of you would ever return, thinking that I had frightened you off forever with… Well, that ring offered me something tangible to remember that you would return, and I was able to rest in peace because of it.”

“Good.” Christine fit the ring, the one her betrothed had given her, back onto her own finger. “That what it was for. But, I was planning to keep true to my word, with or without the ring, you know. I would not promise you something, and then never follow through with it.”

“Of course, of course. I never meant to imply that you would not. But sometimes, my dear Christine, I am afraid that my mind doubts, even if there is no cause for it. I knew within my heart that you would not break your promise but sometimes, it is hard for my mind to believe such things. I am sorry for it.”

She shook her head. “Don’t apologize. I know exactly what you mean. Perhaps it is simply human nature that we doubt… I do not know.”

He shrugged again. “Nor do I. But tell me, how was your time at home?”

She told him, eager to talk about something that was not uncomfortable for her. She told him of how her sisters had been so upset at her when she had returned, and how badly she had felt at leaving them, and how she promised never to do so again. She told him of how she had braided Psyche’s little girl Helena’s hair four separate times in one day, because the child kept telling her
that the braid was not good enough. She told him of how she had woven nearly half a dozen baskets during her idle time, when she was not performing other tasks. But she left out all the parts about Rhal and about their engagement, because she could not bear to tell him when he listened to her with such clear adoration, his eyes wide, and his chin propped on his hand. She could not break his poor heart.

After she finished, he sat up, tapping his index finger against his mouth. “Tell me one thing: how is it that you convinced your sisters to allow you to return here? I know this must not sound like the most, ah… normal of relationships, and I doubt your sisters entirely approved of you coming here, and of me. So, tell me, how did you do it?”

“Oh, well, I thought it would be difficult at first, and for a while, it was. And I was afraid that Eurydice—my oldest sister, you know—was not going to let me return. But then, all I had to do was tell her that this is what the gods destined me to do, and she decided almost immediately that I could return! So, in the end, it was easy enough.”

Erik frowned, and it was only then that Christine realized that she had mentioned her prophecy to him, and that he was now going to ask her what she meant, and that this was not something she had wanted to share with him at all.

“The gods destined you to return here, Christine? That is certainly a weighty claim… What exactly do you mean by that, if I may ask?”

“Oh! Well…” Desperately, she tried to think of a way to escape from the claim she had just made. Oh, she had been stupid. She should have thought before she had spoken, and now she was going to be faced with sharing something with Erik that she had no desire to. In fact, she still had not shared her prophecy with anyone other than her dear father, and he was gone.

After a rushed mental deliberation, she managed to come up with, “Well, I have been having these dreams lately, that involve the two of us, and they seemed so powerful that I thought I must be meant to come back here. And—you might not know this, but they day I met you, I was on my way to the oracle to hear a prophecy, and I think you may have been mentioned in it, possibly, but I am not sure. But, yes… The dreams, I think, were really more the cause of the whole, um, bit about me being destined to return here.” She prayed that this was enough not to warrant a further investigation on his part.

Unfortunately, it was not.

“Oh? A prophecy, you say? That is very intriguing, indeed! I had not the faintest notion you were going to the oracle that day. And you say, you believed this prophecy included myself in some way, if you are not mistaken?”

“I… I think so, possibly. Yes. I mean, I think it mentioned you.” She began to twist her fingers in her lap.

His lips tipped up in the faintest of smiles. “How odd! You had not told me that I was involved in a prophecy of yours. That is very interesting. Come, you must tell me what it told you, if it involved me. I think it is only fair if you do, since it might involve the both of us.”

“Oh!” She could not tell Erik! Oh, no—she could not! “I… I do not think I am supposed to tell others my prophecy… You know, privacy and things like that. I do not think the gods would be very happy with me if I went around telling others about it. Even if they were involved in it. I’m sorry.”
He nodded slowly, and said, “Yes, I suppose you are right. I apologize for pressing you on such matters of secrecy, but I must confess, I am very curious about this now, Christine. But… If you cannot tell me at least what your prophecy said, at least tell me this: was it good what the oracle had to say to you?”

“Good?” Christine frowned, puzzling over the question. In truth, it seemed a very simple one, but she had never once thought about her prophecy in terms of good or bad. It only ever was a force that pervaded her life, and took her freedom from her in the most natural ways. Was such a thing good? She thought it good that she had met Erik, and even that they had grown to be friends, but had that happened because of the prophecy, or had the prophecy simply predicted what would inevitably happen? She did not know.

“Honestly, I am not sure,” she said at last, still trying to decide her feelings. “I suppose… I suppose that it was not really good at all. It was neutral. It told me my future, and the rest, it left up to me. It did not tell me how to handle it, and I still am deciding how. It told me, I suppose, what would happen, but it never made any comments on how such things would occur. So, I do not know. Perhaps it is good. Perhaps not. I’m still trying to decide, myself.”

“That is a fair answer.” Erik looked at her, studying her for a moment. “You are a clever girl to say such things.”

She smiled a little, turning away from him so that he could not see it. “Thank you. But, honestly, Erik, I wish I had never gotten my prophecy at all. It has only ever caused me grief. Not the prophecy itself, that is, but having the knowledge of the future. It made me feel chained down, in a way, and for weeks, I worried constantly about it, even though I knew I could not change it. So now, I think I have decided to dismiss it altogether. I mean, if my prophecy truly did tell the absolute future, then nothing I do will change it. I will just live my life as I wish, I think, and let what happens happen. I would rather at least believe myself to be my own person, even if there is a destiny guiding me that I cannot escape from.”

He nodded. “That is a wise philosophy to live by. Personally, I find that if I dwell on such things as fate and destinies, I grow very confused and very resentful at what life has given me thus far. So, I think I will follow your suit. I would rather consider myself my own person, as well, even if I am, in truth, not.”

“Me too,” Christine said, glancing at her companion, feeling happy that he would not press her to reveal any more information on her prophecy. But, that did not matter now—she had rejected it! She would live her life without the constant fear of what her future held, and she would be free, even if it was only in her own eyes. She smiled, and Erik, who was still watching her, smiled back, his thin lips cracking as they stretched.

“But enough of me.” Christine pulled her feet underneath her on the couch. “What did you do while I was gone?”

His smile vanished. “Nothing of great importance, I can assure. When you are not here, my life is not an exciting one. Each day, I accomplish the mundane tasks that I need to, and then, after those are completed, I waste my time for a few hours before I go to sleep, and start the whole cycle over again. My life is really very dull, I fear—not like yours. I have no family to keep me company here, so each and every day, the only thing that provides any entertainment is, of course, me, and I tend to become tiresome even to myself after a while.”

“Well, I am here for a while, so hopefully your life will not be nearly as boring, now.” Christine offered him a smile in hopes to make up for the awkwardness hanging thick and heavy in the air around them.
Erik did not return the smile, but there was a lightness in his voice when he replied, “My dear girl, I am quite sure that while you are here, my life will be an adventure to be had.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, dearest readers, how did you feel about that one? Are you happy that Erik and Christine are together again? Or is it just stressing you out that Christine is engaged? Do you think she's betraying Rhal by doing this? Let me know!

Also, just for some clarification, pumice and ash were essentially an early form of soap, that worked basically the same as ours does now. And oil for the Ancient Greeks was kinda what lotion and conditioner are to us now. Now you know!
Chapter Summary

In which Christine dwells on many things that she regrets as she and Erik grow closer...

Chapter Notes

Hello dear readers! Again, sorry for the delayed update! I had been trying to post a new chapter every week, but as you might have noticed, that hasn't been happening so much lately (whoops). Anyway, I'll try to do better, because I do actually have the next like four chapters finished (but not edited) so, hopefully I can get things rolling faster next time :)

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this newest installment...

“I suppose I should tell you,” Christine began as she stood in the doorway of her room, “that I can only stay here for five days, and no more. I made a promise to my sisters that I would be back in five days, and I cannot break it.”

The moon was already up and the sky already dark, and Christine was feeling very tired. Erik must have noticed how tired she appeared earlier, but he had said nothing about it until she had drifted off momentarily, and had awoken again with her head resting on his shoulder, seeing his eyes looking down at her with clear distress. So, now the two of them stood outside her bedroom, because Erik had told her that she needed some sleep, and that she had best get that sleep in her own bed.

“Oh.” Erik’s mouth shifted into a frown, and he adjusted his mask. “But five days is such a short period of time, and I am sure it will all be over before either of us have hardly had time to enjoy it all. Do you not think five days is short, Christine? Do you not agree?”

“I do… I mean, it is rather short in the grand scheme of things. But, I cannot really change it, anymore. I am sorry, Erik—really, I am. But I cannot break my promises, and I think that if I am not back in five days, my sisters will chain me to my bed, so I will never be able to leave my room.”

She did agree with him, however. Five days was a short time, especially after the many days in between their last visit. It hardly felt fair for her to stay so few days, but there was nothing she could do, as she had told him.

He shook his head. “No, no—do not be sorry. It is not your fault, and I do not want you to be chained to your bed. But, you will come back, will you not? This will not be your last visit, will it, dear Christine?”

“Oh, no!” She cried, too hastily. “Of course, I will come back here. This will not be the last time.
There will be others, I am sure, in the future.”

She was getting better and better at lying, it seemed. Now, it was so natural to her that she hardly had to think twice about doing it. But she was doing it for Erik’s protection, so surely it could not be so bad. She was only doing it to save his fragile heart for the time being, because she knew there would come a time when she would have to break it. She would have to tell him sometime that she was now engaged, and that visiting him would no longer be something she could do after her wedding. She needed to tell him eventually that there could never be anything between them, romantically or otherwise, after this visit. But now was not that time, and until that time came, she would lie as much as necessary to keep Erik’s gentle heart intact. She was not sure that she could bear to break it.

“That is a consolation at least,” he murmured, his brow creasing just under his mask. “But still, my dear Christine, I wish you could stay longer. I am sure that you are already aware of this, but I enjoy your presence here in this lonely house immensely, more than, perhaps, you could ever guess or know. You are like a little sunbeam here, and you brighten my whole house, just with the beauty of your smile.”


“As am I, but it is not your fault, nor does it warrant your apologies.” Erik began to shift, his hands twisting violently together. “Christine, dear girl, forgive me for asking, but have you, perhaps, thought any more on my offer from last time? I am most sorry for asking, but I was only wondering, since, if you said yes, you could stay here with me forever. Of course, the decision remains entirely yours, and you need not say a word, if you do not wish.”

Christine quickly focused her attention on Erik’s restless hands instead of his face, and watched them diligently. “I… I have not. I am sorry. I wish I could give you a better answer, but I cannot right now. I just need to think on it more, I think. But I will tell you at the end of the week before I go, if you still want to know.”

From the corner of her eye, Christine saw him nod vigorously. “Oh, yes, certainly. Whenever you are ready, my dear, I should love to hear your answer, but do not rush into anything too quickly. Think about it for as long as you please, and I shall be waiting for you once you have figured it out, whenever that may be.”

“Good. Thank you.” Christine wished more than anything that she would simply never have to give him an answer, and therefore, never tell him that she was engaged to another, but she felt the waiting would cause him more pain than perhaps even the news of her engagement, so she could not. Eventually, she would tell him the truth.

They stood there for a moment in silence, before Christine yawned and Erik began to usher her into her room, telling her that she needed rest, and that he should not have kept her up so late.

“You recall how to use the lock, correct?” His hands fiddled nervously with the wooden mechanism, as he back himself further into the walls of her room.

“I do,” Christine replied, sitting down on her bed, “but I do not intend to. There is no need for the lock anymore, I think.”

His head shot up for a second, and she was met briefly with his golden gaze. “Are you sure, Christine? You needn’t pretend for my sake—I will not be the least bit offended if you use that lock. It is entirely your choice, my dear. Do not consider what you think I might feel about it.”
She nodded slowly, stretching her feet out in front of her. “Yes, I am certain. I trust you, Erik. I do not feel as if I have to be afraid anymore. Not of you.”

She offered him a sleepy smile, which he did not return, and then said, “Goodnight! I hope you sleep well. I know I certainly will. And thank for welcoming me back here again. You are very kind.”

He shifted, his hands still idly playing with the lock. “You are very kind for returning, Christine. I hope you sleep well, my dear, and that you awake feeling refreshed and happy. I shall see you in the morning, then.”

He turned as if to leave, and had almost disappeared from the room before Christine called him back with an “Erik, don’t go yet.”

He paused in the doorway, his frame darkened by the shadows, and then turned to face her, his eyes swimming with silent questions.

“Come here a moment.”

Perhaps it was the sleepiness, or perhaps it was her happiness at being back at his house, or perhaps the cold rain really had gotten to her, because when he approached her, she patted the spot in the bed next to her, motioning for him to join her. In truth, she did not know why she was encouraging him to sit so near her, or why she was doing this at all, but neither did she want to stop.

“I will not hurt you, you know,” she told him lightly, when he continued to hesitate. Slowly, after casting her a wary look, Erik sat down on the edge of her bed, all his muscles tensed as if he were about to flee. He was still a little ways away from her body, but she thought that she could have poked him with her feet if she wanted—the bed was not so big that he could easily escape her.

“What is it, Christine?” He asked, the discomfort he was feeling obvious in his clipped tone. He began to fidget, too, his restless motions shaking the bed slightly.

“Will you sing me to sleep?”

Oh, she was in an odd mood tonight! She did not know what had taken over her. Usually, she never would have asked for such a thing—innocent though it was—simply because it was an oddly intimate request, but tonight… She longed to be sung to sleep by the tender notes of another’s voice, to be lulled away into the world of sleep by song, like she had with her father for so many years. Of course, he had stopped singing her to sleep once she had grown out of her childhood, but every now and again, he had come and sang to her again anyway. A pang of sorrow twisted through her then, so overpowering that she could hardly breathe for a moment. She missed her father so, so much, even after all these months, and sometimes, the sorrow still hurt like she had only lost him yesterday.

“Sing to me, Erik,” she whispered again, a trace of that crushing sorrow finding its way into her request.

He was quiet for a long moment, so Christine, still feeling utterly exhausted, settled back into her pillows, drawing the blankets up to her chin and closing her burning eyes, wondering if she would get a song out of Erik at all. She doubted it.

But then, she heard soft notes coming from his lips, so sweet and pure that they erased all the sorrow from her. She thought she had never heard a voice so beautiful in all her life—if his
speaking voice was nice, his singing was absolutely breathtaking. Deep, rich tones, all wrapped in quiet warmth, and each note hit so perfectly, she wondered if she was not already dreaming. But, no. There was a slight, nervous waver in his voice that let her know that, no, this was reality, and this was her Erik singing with his beautiful voice.

A smile crept onto her face, but she did not open her eyes, or even acknowledge that she was hearing him at all. She lay perfectly still, basking in that glorious voice, fading in and out of wakefulness until he stopped singing, making the world lose all its magic. Hardly awake, Christine felt him rise from the bed, but before he could go, she turned over to face him, her eyes fluttering open just long enough to look at him, as she stopped him from moving further with a hand on his arm, her fingers tracing lightly over his skin before falling back to her side.

“I never knew your voice was so beautiful. Thank you, Erik. I’m sure I will hear it again in my dreams tonight.” She was hardly awake enough to form words or fully express what she wanted to say, and yet, that was enough. She could tell by the small smile on his face, as he touched his arm in the same place that she had moments earlier, as if he were trying to relive the moment over again.

He bent down, his face suddenly closer to hers than she thought it had ever been, poised only a foot above hers. She blinked up at him lazily, wondering what he was doing, when his hand drifted into her peripheral vision, hovering inches over her cheek. Her tired eyes slipped closed again, and she waited expectantly to feel the gentle brush of his fingers over her cheek, that she knew she should have felt guilty for desiring, but it never came. Instead, she heard him sigh above her—her eyelids were proving too heavy to open again—, and felt his breath ghost over her forehead, close as he was.

“I am sure I will dream of you too this night, Christine,” he murmured, his soft voice growing softer as he drew away from her.

Christine only had time to wonder what exactly he meant by this, and to imagine what perhaps it would have felt like if he had traced his fingers over her cheek, before she fell asleep completely, not to wake up again until the sun rose the next morning.

When she awoke, there was pale light already streaming through the windows, shining rudely on her face. Groaning, she sat up, running her hands through her tangled hair, wondering how she would spend this, the second day of her stay with Erik. Still trying to banish the sleepy dullness from her mind, she got dressed and meandered out of her room until she found the kitchen, and with it, Erik.

They ate their breakfast together for the first time that day, instead of Erik simply watching as Christine ate hers, for which Christine was grateful because his tantalizing stare had unnerved her greatly. It was refreshing to be able to eat and talk with him, as normal people do, even if he did eat very little. At least now, they were attempting this new concept of normality, and, even if it was sloppy and forced at times, they were succeeding. Christine pointed this out to him later in the afternoon, as they sat together in the living room, each working silently on their respective tasks.

“Look at us! See, we are almost like ordinary people, now. I think we have both improved a great deal from our lasting meeting together. Now, I am no longer a fugitive running away from my home and taking refuge here, and you… Even that little change you made on your mask has made a difference. Now, we can eat and talk together, and I do not have to guess whether you are smiling. Now, I can just look and see. It is quite nice, really.”

“It is, yes.” He glanced up at her from across the room, watching as she weaved. “This is perhaps the most normal my life has been up until this point, and I am enjoying it immensely— I will admit
it. My only wish was to have a normal life, but I have never truly been granted one up until this point, which is disheartening considering how mundane such a wish is. Others, I know, wish for greatness and fame, and perhaps if my life had been different, I might have been the same, chasing after wealth and other such frivolities. But, given the way things have turned out, I am not that way, and all I want instead is simply that normal life that so many others have taken for granted. I would give nearly anything to have such a life, Christine.”

She frowned, but did not lift her eyes from her work. “Really? You do not want fame and glory? I have never heard of a person who does not want such things. In fact, I have never heard of a person simply wanting a normal life. Surely, you want something more than that?”

She heard him make a slight noise. “No. Not really, anyway. I only wish that this curse, the one that forces me to wear this mask, was gone away with. Then, I could live as anyone else lives, and I would be beyond happy with that, small though it is. I could have a house in the city, with servants and parties, with lots of acquaintances that I could invite over when I want to distract myself from my work. I could have even a wife, perhaps, one that embraces me and kisses me like other women do their husbands, one that is not frightened by my mask.” Christine glanced up at him to see if he was looking at her, but he was only staring pensively out the window, lost in thought.

“Perhaps,” he continued, as she looked away, “I would even have children. Little ones that would run and play outside, shouting and laughing at each other, as my wife and I watch them. It would be a very normal life, but a very good one—the kind that no one truly remembers one by, but all would consider a ‘life well-lived.’ That is the sort of life I want to have, Christine. I have never wanted anything more than just that.”

Christine heard him sigh longingly, and again, she began to wonder how he had lived for so long in such a sad and dejected manner, and how he could continue existing in that way without any sign of change. She never would have been able to attempt such a thing. It was unfathomable to her to live a life completely alone, without sisters or friends to count on, even if hers annoyed her sometimes and she often simply wished to be left alone. But even then, she had never wished for or experienced complete solitude. Even when she had been at her worst, there had always been someone nearby, who would accept her with open arms and assure her that she was not alone, and that she would never be alone.

But Erik had never experienced this, and he was alone, and because of this solitude, the only thing he wanted, the only thing he had ever wanted, was something so mundane she had always looked down on it. It was rather ironic, really, that the one thing he wanted the most was what suffocated her. To only live a normal life, to only ever know normal things, familiar things, would not be any life to her, and she felt that, if she could only have that, she would rather not have lived a life at all.

“Well,” she said at last, “I hope that someday, some time, you achieve your wish, and get that life you have always wanted. It is not so far out of the realm of possibilities, you know. It could very well happen. And I hope that, if it does, you can be happy, really and truly.”

He inclined his head. “Thank you, dear Christine. You are very kind to wish such things for me. I think, if life finally offers me some good fortune, and I truly am blessed to understand what a normal life is, I shall be happy. Perhaps, I would not be constantly smiling or always filled with this unreasonable, incessant joy, but I should be… content. Yes, I would be content, and I would never need anything more.”

She wondered, as she continued to work on her weaving and he continued to gaze out of the window, if this was actually true. She knew that Erik truly believed he would never need anything more if he had the normal life he so craved, but if he ever attained it, would it still prove true?
Would he truly be content with something so small as a family and a mask-less face? Sighing, Christine glanced up at him, although he did not notice, his eyes still focused on something that she could not see. Perhaps, all he needed was as simple as that—a normal life. All he needed now was someone with whom he could create such a thing…

Christine quickly turned back to her weaving.

Minutes slipped into hours, and hours into days far quicker than either Christine or Erik would have wished. Before they knew it, the second day of their time together had passed, and then the third, as they sat and talked the day away, speaking of things of little significance. On the third day, however, Christine allowed herself to do something which she had not done for a long time.

They were sitting at the table in the kitchen, having just finished cleaning up after themselves and talking about various things, when their subject matter turned, as it often did, to music.

“I am just wondering, since I sang for you,” Erik was saying, waving his hands around in vague, distracted motions as he spoke, “if you are ever going to sing for me, since I recall you telling me that you quite enjoy singing, and that perhaps, I might be able to hear some of yours in time. And I would happen to like that very much, my dear, if you would be willing.”

“Hm.” Christine smiled at him, considering it. It had been a long time since she had sung, truly sung as she had used to with her father, not just humming simple melodies as they came to her. In truth, she was not even sure if she still wanted to sing, if it would bring the same joy it once had, and after such a long period of inactivity, she was not sure she could sing, even if she had wanted to anymore. But she did miss it.

“Perhaps,” she answered. “Yes, perhaps I will. Since you have already sung for me, I suppose it would be only fair, after all.”

Erik narrowed his eyes. “Yes, that would be fair. That way, we will have both granted each other a request, and we will be on equal terms. So, what do you say to my proposition, Christine? Will you sing for me?”

She concluded that she would agree to his proposition, and followed him to the music room, trying to think of what song she would sing for him. It must be something good, something she could sing well, but not something that reminded her of too many lost memories, because she did not want to cry while singing, but she wanted to choose something that he knew… In short, Christine wanted to please him with her voice, and prove to herself, through his approval, that she could truly sing, even after all this time.

They arrived at the music room, and took their respective seats opposite one another, Erik taking his lyre in his lap, plucking absently at the strings. “Do you have any particular song in mind? Shall I play an accompaniment on my lyre?”

“No… No, I think I will do it alone,” Christine decided, thinking that it would be best not to draw too close a similarity between this current situation and the many times she and her father had sang and played music together. After another brief moment of thinking, she chose a song that she had known well for many years as a lullaby her mother had once sung to her before she had died, and that her sisters had later picked up and continued. It did not hold the same sorrow for her in it that many other songs now did, namely because her father had never sung it with her, because he had told her that it hurt him too much to do so. But it was a pretty little piece, and complex enough so that it offered some room for Christine to demonstrate her wide range of talent.

Taking in a deep breath and closing her eyes (she was always able to concentrate easier when her
eyes were closed), she began to sing, the familiar tune flowing out of her easily as anything. It came to her almost like second-nature now—she did not have to think about the words, or how to hit the notes, or which parts to keep quieter, which parts to emphasize, even after all this time. Seconds drifted by and she lost herself once again to the world or music, re-embracing it with such passion that she wondered how she had ever let it go in the first place. But, in only a few, short minutes, she came to the final chorus of the little song, and the melody dropped off to nothing, leaving only silence in the music room.

When she opened her eyes again, Erik was staring at her, his thin lips slightly parted, his eyes wide. His hands had long-since stilled entirely as well, which was a rare and blessed occasion for Erik, who seemed to be constantly full of nervous energy. Now, however, he was as still as a statue, looking so shocked that Christine very quickly grew confused and uncomfortable.

“What? You look like you have just seen a ghost, Erik—heavens! Why are you looking at me like that?”

His lips clamped together again at her comment, and his eyes lost their initial wonder, but still, he sat completely still. “Christine… I do not know what to say. That was… that was extraordinary. Christine, that was perfect! I have never heard such… such… angelic a tone ever before in my life, and I do not throw such phrases around lightly, as you well know. But, you… You are a muse! Where did you learn to sing like that?”

Blushing, but a smile tugging incessantly on her lips, Christine said, “Oh, I didn’t really. I just sort of… Well, sang. I never really learned, I suppose. I just practiced and practiced until I got good at it. But, thank you.”

“Oh!” He cried, his hands now becoming re-animated to their usual, fly-about selves. “I fear no word that I can think of can ever do it justice! My ears have been graced by your voice this day, Christine, and I doubt anything so heavenly shall ever grace them again. I had never known a person to have such a lovely, perfect, ethereal voice as your own. I did not think it was possible for a mortal to possess one! But, oh… Yours is better than any god’s!”

She shook her head, laughing now. “Oh, no! And don’t say such things! The gods will hear and grow angry at me! But, surely, I am not the best you have ever heard? You have heard others better than me, have you not?”

His lips stretched into a thin, rare smile. “No. No, my dear girl, I have not. You are the best I have ever heard in all of my life, and believe me, I have heard many singers. You are the pinnacle of all things musical and harmonious, Christine! There will never be another as gifted as you are.”

Christine blushed at this, feeling a spark of light flaming happily in her chest from his compliments, which had infected her face with a smile that she was entirely unable to cure. Truthfully, she could not tell if Erik was simply indulging her because he knew she liked to sing so that she could feel good about her voice, or if he truly did like her singing as much as he claimed he did. But either way, she treasured his compliments greatly, and until he told her that he had been exaggerating his praise, she would take it as honest, and all the kind words that came with it.

The rest of the evening passed far too quickly for Christine, who wished desperately she could take time and hold it in her hands for a while, so that she could savor this last time with Erik for a little longer. It seemed to her that she had only just gotten to his house, but now, suddenly, she had only one night left to stay with him. Then, her visits would be over and then, she would have to face the inevitable fact of her marriage to Rhal, and her future with him. But until that day, she was content to ignore these facts under the roof of Erik’s house, so far away from the rest of the world, it seemed, and so disconnected from real life.
While she was with him, nothing else seemed truly real, and those things which occupied her mind continuously in her own house, disappeared when she was with him. She felt a sense of peace tucked away in his little corner or the world that she did not feel anywhere else, and although she knew in some far-off place in her mind that this peace was fake and unnatural, she loved it all the same, and craved it. Sometimes, she found herself wishing that she would never have to return to the world of problems and petty anxieties in which she so often dwelt, but instead that she could stay here with him forever.

It was this wish that prompted her, for the first time, to truly think about his offer of marriage. True, she was now engaged to Rhal, so it was ultimately fruitless to think on Erik’s proposal now, but what did it matter? As she lay in bed that night, the third night she had spent with him, she asked herself the question she had been avoiding for weeks now: could she be truly happy with Erik?

Yes, she was happy with him now, but could she be happy as his wife? Did she even want to be his wife? Could she stand it? He was so very odd at times, with his strange mannerisms and questions, and so cruel to himself that she could hardly stand it. Then, there was also the fact that he still seemed entirely unwilling to tell her of his life, although he often spoke of it in vague and unsatisfactory terms, never fully answering her questions. And besides that, there was his mask. It was not so much that he wore a mask that unnerved her, but the fact that that mask was a constant reminder to her of the person he was unwilling to disclose to her. It was a sign of the parts of him that he had yet to, and perhaps would never, share with her. It was physical proof, in short, of all the secrets and unspoken things between them, and that was what Christine was not sure she could live with. She knew it would only be a matter of time before that mask, and the reminder of all the secrets it carried with it, would tear her apart, until she could remove and see what he hid behind it.

But… Oh, but, there was so much more to him than his mask. Ordinarily, she would not think of these things, especially now that she was engaged, but under the cover of darkness, safely tucked away in what she had begun to think of as ‘her room,’ she thought it would harmless, just this once. He was so kind to her, and always so considerate, that she sometimes forgot that she was nothing more than an ordinary girl while she was with him. He genuinely listened to what she had to say, and valued her opinions, more so than anyone she had ever encountered before, even Rhal. With Rhal, she was unable to have these sorts of long conversations she often had with Erik, about wishes and wonderings, and nature and gods, and those sorts of things. She knew Rhal was not the type of person to sit down and talk about deep subject matter with, because he was active and easy-going, and because the world was a great deal simpler in his eyes, but she valued her talks with Erik greatly, perhaps more than anything else.

Erik understood her on what she thought was a deeply personal level. They shared a deep appreciation for music that Rhal just could not understand, since he was not a musician himself. Erik was the first person she had been able to simply sit with and make music with since the death of her father, and she had begun to realize that her soul needed music. She needed someone who could play her music on a lyre and not demand anything in return, a person who would let her sing to her heart’s content and never demand for her to stop (not that Rhal would, of course, but he did not understand it in the same way as Erik did). Besides music, he seemed open to just listening to her, trying to understand her, in a way that few people had before.

She did enjoy her time with Erik, that she knew, but could she marry him? Could she… love him? Marriage, perhaps, seemed possible, in the terms of simply existing forever under the same roof and being compelled to endure one another until death. That was essentially what they were doing presently, without the added stakes of ‘until death.’ But otherwise, living together did not seem so very bad, and Christine was nearly convinced she would have been able to do it. Not that it mattered now, of course, but had things gone differently, she thought she could have.
But love? Could she ever love him in the way a wife does her husband? She loved him now in her own way, as friends do, but not romantically, she thought. But could that change? There was the mask to consider, first of all, and if she would ever be able to disregard it completely, if he never trusted her enough to let her remove it. Then, there were all the secrets between them, and all the mystery that enshrouded his own person—so many, in fact, that she did not know if she would ever uncover enough to see him through. And then, there was the fact that he not only seemed ill-accustomed, but truly terrified of her touch and her physical affection. If she married him, and he continued to flinch away from the feeling of her hand on his shoulder, she was not sure how long she could endure. Moreover, if they did get married, how could they ever act as husbands and wives do if he could not touch her? But besides all that, could she love him?

The truth of it was, she did not know, and to find out, she would have to invest herself fully into him and into the relationship that was forming between them. To truly know whether she could love him, she would have to forget Rhal entirely, and give her attention wholeheartedly to Erik, because she knew once she attempted to love him, there could be not going back. Once she gave her love to him, there would be no way to somehow steal it back from him and give it to Rhal instead, or to split it between the two men somehow. No, to know she would have to choose him, and she could not now. Perhaps in another life, she could have been happy with him, and even loved him, but in this one, it was too late.

And in that cover of darkness, curled deep within her blankets where it seemed nothing could see her, she realized that she regretted it.
“Erik?” Christine began the next day, hoping beyond hope that her tone sounded casual, and not teeming with the anxiety she so keenly felt.

“Yes, my dear?” He did not even look up from the lyre-like thing he was making.

She took a deep breath, trying to reassure herself that she needed to know this, and that it could not possibly hurt to ask, since this was her last full day ever with Erik, and that afterwards, it would not matter anyway. Before she left, she needed to know the answer, and if this was the last time she could ask her question, then ask it she must, before all her opportunities disappeared for good.

“Do you, um… Do you feel the same way towards me now that you did before… I mean, last time I was here, when you, um, told me about how you felt about me. Do you still… feel that?”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Erik’s hands come to an abrupt stop over the wooden instrument, and his head shot up to look at her, but she would not meet his gaze. She could not, not when she knew how he would be staring at her with those wide, golden eyes, so soft and sad, so pleading and frightened. She could not bear it.

After what seemed like hours of stifling silence had passed between them, Christine began to babble, if only to break the heavy silence pressing between them. “I’m sorry. It is rude of me to ask, I know, but we have not really had a chance to talk about it, so I thought… I thought that it could not hurt to ask, even though it is rude of me. But I just feel like this… this knowledge has been a barrier between us, as it were, since I returned here, and I know you do not want to talk about it, and I do not really either, but I feel like we must, even if we do not want to, so I thought I must ask, but do not hate me for it. I just… I just really think it is at least fair of you to tell me…”

“Christine.”

At the sound of his voice, quiet though it was, Christine immediately stopped her chatter, and looked at him, the sound of his voice drawing all her attention to him with a single word. She could
feel her heart pounding in her ears for that moment, a moment which felt like a thousand years, in a world with only the two of them, and not a thought of anyone else.

“Yes?”

“How could you even ask me such a question?” His voice trembled and he turned away from her, exhaling sharply. “What I felt for you previously, what I confessed to feeling about you, it has only increased in the tenfold since I told you. If I loved you before, I burn for you now. If I needed you before, you are my very heart now. Christine... Oh, Christine, I wish you could understand that when I told you that I—forgive me—that I loved you, that it is not the sort of feeling that disappears or even lessens with time. The love I have for you is not some kind of over-passionate burn-out, where my feelings will be strong for a while, and then fade away in time. No, dear Christine. Do you not see? I have never loved another before, and I do not think I ever shall again. I think you are the only person my soul was ever meant to long for, and that, if I cannot have you, there will be no one for me, not now nor ever.”

He paused to take in another shaky breath, his eyes closing as he did so. Slowly, taking the time to think about each word before he spoke it, he continued, “You ask me if I still feel the same about you now, as I did last time you were here, and the answer to that is ‘yes’—a thousand times ‘yes.’ It seems that every second I am in your presence, the force inside of me grows stronger—even now it threatens to overtake me—and it seems that every time I think that surely, I cannot have any more room in my heart for another drop of love or affection, you inspire a greater amount in me. Whatever this is—be it love, or something greater—rest assured, it will never go away, even if, perhaps, by some miraculous turn of events, it lessens over time, there would always remain traces within me that I would never be able to entirely banish, until the end of my days. Even if you—and I pray you will not be, because I do not think my heart could take it—were terribly cruel to me, and toyed with me and tortured me to your lovely heart’s content, I should still love you and crawl after you like a dog does its master. Oh, my love,—forgive me, but you are—regardless of your own feelings towards me, I fear I shall always be your affectionate, devoted, adoring servant, unable to feel anything but love for you, until I die. So, do not ask again if I still feel the same towards you, because the answer will always be ‘yes’, no matter how many times you ask, no matter what you do to me, no matter if you choose to return my love or to flee from it. I fear I am doomed to love you for eternity.”

He met her eyes again briefly before turning away from her again, pressing his hands to his face as his chest heaved with uneven breaths. Christine did not know what to say, for the second time now. The love Erik spoke of broke her heart and made her want to weep, because it was the most hopeless, devoted love she had ever heard of. But she also wanted to wrap her arms around him, and tell him that of course, she would never be cruel to him, and if she could, she would try and return his love. It made her want to go to him and be what he needed her to be for him, to make him happy, to return his love, but she knew she could not. So instead, she simply stared at him from across the room, wondering how on earth she of all people had met such a man and gained such a love, when she knew she never could have deserved them.

Suddenly, Erik stood from his place on the couch, the instrument that he had spent so many hours slaving over falling unceremoniously to the floor with a discordant *clang*. “Forgive me. I need some time alone.”

His long legs moved him across the room before Christine hardly had time to react to his words, but she stopped him as he passed her, her hand reaching out to clasp his gently in her own. The shock of it stopped him, and he looked, speechless, at her hand holding onto his, his body still frozen between steps. The bones in his hand were evident, even in her gentle grasp, even with the added layers of skin and wiry muscle in between, which was now taut and rigid in shock, tensed as
if he were about to flee from her.

She did not know, exactly, why she had stopped him, or what she even wanted to say, but her lips supplied the words before her mind did, and she heard herself saying, “I would never be cruel to you. Never, Erik. I would not take advantage of you like that. I would never toy with your heart, even if… even if you could forgive me for it. I would not do that to you. I could not.”

But the real irony of it all was that even as she told him that, she could not find it in her to tell him that all his pleading words were in vain, and that his love was entirely fruitless.

Slowly, she withdrew her hand from his, glad that at least he had not shied away from her touch before she could do so. Nearly as soon as she had moved her hand away, Erik unfroze and straightened into a more normal position, his eyes focusing again, and his lungs gasping in breaths.

“How,” he managed at last, “Can you say that you would never be cruel to me, when I am the one who is burning away, and you are the one who is holding the water?”

And with that, he was gone, leaving Christine holding back tears, wishing that it were any other woman in the whole world who was holding the water, and that it were any other man who was burning.

Erik did not re-emerge from his room until around dinner that night, which he prepared and ate in silence, with the exception of what absolutely needed to be said, such as asking for the honey on the other side of the table. Christine, also, could not bring herself to try and make conversation with him, not when she felt such deep regret at her own actions, and such loathing over the way things were playing out presently, because she could not change them. It was her, she knew, who was causing Erik so much pain and love—she was the root of it all, and had she not gotten momentarily lost in the woods that fateful day, he need never have endured such pain. She had caused all of this, for better or worse, and perhaps even worse than being the one to cause it, she was the only one who could right it. She hated the knowledge that she held the power to make Erik the happiest man alive or the most wretched, and the same power over Rhal, and that, wherever she chose to use that power, there would invariably be heartbreak and pain for one of them. She wished that it could have not been so, that she could have been someone—anyone—else, but she could not run from the weight the role she had been given, even if she wanted to. So instead, she sat silently, mourning her fate.

After they had finished their dinner, Christine wordlessly began to help Erik clean the dishes, hoping to distract herself from the thoughts that were plaguing her, but to no avail. His hands were so very close to hers as they scrubbed the plates in the same water, so close that her fingers could have brushed his with ease. How easy it would be to simply take his hand from the water and hold it in her own! How simple to kiss those boney knuckles and tell him that she could love him! How natural to hold him in her arms and press her face into his chest!

But things were never easy, and she was only just beginning to truly understand that. Her actions had consequences, often ones she did not intend or foresee, but once she had done those actions, she had to be willing to live with whatever consequences fate dwelt her—and she knew that now. Things that seemed easy and natural to her now would cause her a knot, that she doubted she would ever be able to fully extricate herself from, later, no matter how badly she wished she could simply act without abandon or with any thought of the future, now.

And she had a future. She had a wonderful and simple future already laid out before her, in a path that she would tread with Rhal and Rhal alone. That was the future she had chosen, and that was the future she had to follow, despite her regret, despite her misgivings. Soon, it would be as real to her as Erik was next to her, or as the roof over her head, and then, Erik would fade into her
memory as a phantom of what had almost happened, and what could have perhaps been. And Erik had no idea of this, and she had, rather cruelly, let him live with the hope that such a future was possible, and that, perhaps, she could love him, when in reality, she could not. Perhaps, she had toyed with his heart after all.

“Erik?”

He put a wooden plate onto the pile beside her. “What is it, Christine?”

Already, she felt tears rising in her throat. If there was any way that she could avoid telling Erik of this part of her life, if there was any way she could avoid completely and irrevocably breaking his heart, she would have taken that route without a second thought, but as it was, she could not. She could only hope that she could tell him the truth as gently as possible, and that, perhaps, someday, he might forgive her, even if she never forgave herself. But she could not continue to let him live with the hope that she could ever marry him when, in truth, there was none.

“There is a man I know named Rhal. Rhalamanthos, really. I only call him Rhal for short.”

Oh, she could not! She could not bear to say more! She could not bear to speak it! She could bear to see that light blink out of Erik’s eyes, to see the tears that would drip down his masked cheeks! She could not be so cruel, she could not! Not when she had promised him she would not be! She would not—oh no, not for all the world!

When she stayed silent, Erik asked, “And, what of this Rhal?”

“I…”

She took in a deep and shaky breath, and squeezed her eyes shut, comforting herself that at least this way, she would not see his pain. She could not continue to let him live in the pretty fairytale world she had woven around him, when in reality, they were stuck in a grim world, with no real hope of love or happiness. She had to end it, if not for her sake, for his, because she could no longer string him alone after her, letting him think that such worlds were real. No, she had to tell him, even it broke both their hearts, because he had to know, and she had to be the one to tell him. She had promised him that she would not toy with him, after all. It would only be a few words, only a second of speaking, and then it would all be over and he would know, and she need never have to tell him again. Slowly, she opened her mouth.

“We are to be married in two weeks’ time.”

Nothing. There was nothing for what must have been minutes at least, and the only thing Christine could hear was the frantic beating of her heart in her own ears, and she dared not open her eyes to see anything else. She wondered, for a moment, if Erik had gotten up and left so silently that she had not heard him leave at all, before she heard him murmur in the softest of voices:

“What?”

At that sound, the heartbreak a singular syllable could convey, her façade broke, and she began to cry, all the emotion from that day, all the regret of her engagement leaking out of her.

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry,” she cried, her eyes still closed.

“Why,” she heard him say, his voice still so soft it was hardly more than a whisper, “Did you not tell me of this before?”

“Because I couldn’t!” She opened her eyes, tears clouding her vision. “I couldn’t bear to!”
“Why? So, you could let me make of a fool of myself in front of you, talking of affection and... and love when you knew there was never any chance of it? So, you could see how long you could drag me along after you, clinging blindly to some thin thread of hope? So, you could cause me the utmost pain and torment? So, you could break me just as all others do? So, you could see if there truly is anything even remotely human enough left in me to feel pain? Why did you do it, Christine? Why?”

He was staring at her hard now, his eyes carrying all the sympathy of stones, his tone icy. Here, again, she was met with that creature of tales, that thing which haunted children’s nightmares: this was the Phantom again, in all his cold, cruel glory. Slowly, he stood, bearing down on her like a god, all his humanity lost. But she knew this phantom, and he frightened her no longer.

“No!” She shook her head adamantly, and stood to meet him. “I did it because I could not bear to see you in pain, Erik! Because I could not bear to be the woman who broke your heart! I wanted to spare you. I never… I never would think to hurt you. I only wanted… I only thought… to keep you happy, for as long as I could, before you had to know the truth. That was all I meant.”

She glanced up at him, and saw that some of the coldness had left his stance, that she had begun to melt something within him. As she turned away, wiping desperately at her tears, she heard him exhale. And then, “And yet, all I feel now is pain. I have never felt so much of it before in my life.”

She looked up at him again, and he shook his head at her. “You should have never come back here. You should never have returned, Christine. All you have brought me, and all you will ever bring me, is suffering.”

Anger flooded through her, then. How could he ever believe that she was not suffering every inch of what he was? “Do you think I enjoy this? Erik, it brings me no pleasure to stand here and tell you that nothing between us could have ever worked. It brings me no satisfaction to break your heart, either. I hate, more than anything, that I have to do this. But if there was any way, any way in the whole world that I could bring you happiness… Oh, Erik, I would. I would.”

Their eyes met, and Christine felt her anger dry up, seeing those sad eyes she had come to know and love, those constant eyes, visible despite his mask, the one part of him she felt she truly knew. “Then, run away with me. Be my wife. Leave your... your boy. Let us grow old together, you and I, and live in love for the rest of our days. Your fate is not set in stone, Christine—we can still change it, if we choose. Let me make you happy. Let me be everything you need me to be. Come with me. Please.”

“Oh, Erik…”

“No!” He searched her eyes desperately, and she turned away from him, picking at her fingers with a savage dexterity. “We can, Christine. We can. Do not look so sad. All you have to do is speak the word, and you and I can be together always, without any more thought of this boy. Do not turn away! Do not cry so! We can change things, you and I, my dear Christine, and we can make each other happier, I promise. Just say yes, and I will follow you forever. Just say that you will want me with you, beside you, and I will be yours until Death pries us apart.”

“I can’t…” she whispered, moving away from him, to a place where his eyes could not stare at her so, with such sorrow and pain. “I can’t.”

He shook his head, taking a step forward as if to walk towards her, but he never did. “Yes, Christine, you can! I promise you that if you wish to— if you truly do—you will be able to. You need only say the word, and I shall take you under my wing, watch over you, care for you, protect
you from this boy, if need be. Do not tell yourself you cannot, because you can, if you”—

“Erik!” She rounded on him, the cry tearing forth from her without her intention. But each word he spoke was like a dagger to her heart, when everything he said was hopeful and believing when it simply could not be.

She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself, before she continued, softer than before. “No, Erik. I can’t. It is not… I… I think I…” She fumbled with her words, trying to figure out what it was she wanted to say. “Rhal is a good man. He was my best friend when I was a child, and he still is a friend today. I cannot simply run off and leave him. I owe him more than that. He is a good man.”

“A good man,” he echoed mournfully. “Does…” he fingers trembled as he began to twist his hands together. “Does he love you, Christine? Does he care for you?”

She frowned. “Why… yes. I think… No, he does. I know he does.”

“Of course.” Erik let out a bitter laugh. “How could he not love you? How stupid of me. How could any man look upon you— with your… your kindness, and your beauty, and… and your voice— how could any man see that and not love you? How foolish of me to think that I would be the only one to notice these things! Of course, there was bound to be another!”

She turned away from him, biting her lip to keep from crying again, because no matter what happened, it seemed tears were always springing up just behind her eyes. She knew she owed Erik nothing, that she had never agreed to his proposal, nor alluded to the fact that she would, but even still, her heart was breaking for him. And perhaps not just for him, but for her own sake as well. Perhaps, that was why she hurt as terribly as she did.

“And you.” She heard a sobbing gasp issue for him and knew he was holding back his own tears without even looking. “Do you love him, as well?”

“I think so.” She took in a deep, shaking breath. “No… I do not know anymore. Perhaps, I do but, oh… I don’t know, Erik. But he is my betrothed, and I cannot leave him. I cannot and I will not.”

A sob came from Erik’s direction, and she looked up at him again, her heart aching. “So, you do not love him, and he is still better and more desirable to you than I am, despite all the kindness I have shown you. What have I done wrong, Christine? Why do you not love me? I have given you everything you have asked for, I have treated you with the utmost courtesy and respect, I have worked to make your life here as pleasant as possible, I have shared things with you that I never would have dared to share with another. And yet, I am not enough. Why, Christine? Please, at least tell me why, so that I might know which fault of mine it was that drove you away. At least, give me that small knowledge.”

There was no venom in his voice, poisoned though his words were, only a sense of heart-wrenching sorrow, the pain of man who had never once found love where he had looked and begged for it.

“There is no fault in you,” Christine said slowly, her voice still wet and shaky, even though her tears had somehow stopped. “There was nothing that drove me away from you, as you put it. I have known I was going to be married to Rhal for quite some time now, and when he asked, I could not simply refuse him. It had nothing to do with you. You were the best you could have been towards me, and I am sorry that it ended up this way for you. You are a good man, too, Erik.”

“No.” His voice trembled and broke, and he lowered his head, hiding his face from her view. “No, there must be a fault. I must have failed you. It must be me. It is my mask, I know it. You cannot
fathom that such a creature as that hides his face can ever be capable of human emotions. You are frightened and curious of what my mask hides beneath it. The stories you have heard told of me are far too horrific for you to ever be able to look on me with any semblance of affection. You know I am monstrous, and you shun me for it, just as all the rest of the world has. That is why, is it not? That is why you cannot love me? You needn’t be afraid to tell me; I already know what you must think of me. You needn’t conceal it with your pretty lies.”

“It is not your mask, nor even the stories about you, if you can believe it.” She took a step nearer to him, but he did not look up. “It is simply the way things happened. There is no other reason for it. I am sorry if you want more than that, but I have nothing else to tell you. I am marrying Rhal because I must, because that is what my father wanted for me while he was still alive. It is true that I do not love him as perhaps I should, but he is my friend even still, and I think I can learn to love him in time. That is all.”

When he stayed silent, she took another step closer to him, so close now that another step would have brought her chest to his. She thought she saw him drift forward slightly, too, his body bending forward as if it wanted to meet hers, but it did not. “But I almost…” She trailed off uncertainly, not entirely knowing what she was trying to say. “I almost wish that I… I’m sorry…”

He looked at her for a long moment, his golden eyes obscured by tears, his thin lips quivering. Then, slowly, carefully, he reached down and found her hand, pressing it into his own, bringing it up to his chest, where he guided her palm to the place above his heart, his hand still cradling hers, sending an odd thrill through her body. Beneath her fingertips, Christine felt the faint pounding of his heart, the very thing that kept him living and loving. Confused, she looked up at him.

“Oh, Christine…” he sighed. “Oh, Christine, do you not feel it? Oh, it hurts so terribly! It is pumping pain through my body now, and the worst pain I think I have ever felt. I am afraid you have broken it… It hurts so terribly. Can you not feel it? I think I am dying, now, for my heart has surely withered away.”

His hand lingered on hers for another moment, before he pulled it away, and Christine let her hand drop from over his heart, cradling it over her own breast. The same liquid pain pumped through her as did him, but unlike him, this was a pain she could not wallow in for as long as she pleased, but had to bury down deep inside her the moment she left his house, because no one else, under any circumstances, could ever know that she had loved another. It would have to be the type of pain that only lingered as a phantom within her, the type that would haunt her but stayed always invisible, neatly concealed under a smile, or cleverly hidden under a kiss, but it would remain, she knew, always there, never fully leaving. This day, her heart had broken, too, but this, she could never admit.

At that moment, a faint cry sounded from outdoors, close enough so that it could be easily heard, but not that they could make out any words, sending a jolt through Christine as she was suddenly and forcefully reminded that there was a world besides her own. But then, a strong sense of unease flooded through her at the sound, normal though it was, and she realized with a start that this was the first time she had heard evidence of any other living person while at Erik’s house. Frowning, she turned, glancing out the nearest window, ignoring for a moment the deep and throbbing pain in her heart.

Perhaps Erik felt the same sense of unease she did at this echoing cry, because he stepped forward, walking a few paces closer to the window.

“Did you hear that, Christine?” He turned and looked at her, his face devoid of all traces of heartbreak, except the redness in his now hard eyes. She nodded slowly, straining to hear whatever
had made the noise again, but outside there was only silence.

“What do you think it--” she began in a whisper, but he cut her off, shushing her with a swift gesture, his eyes never leaving the open window.

And then, she heard it again, that cry that came from the outside, that cry that was so unwelcome in that great marble house that sat on the hilltop all alone. This time, however, the voice was clearer, and she was able, albeit just barely, to make out what it said:

“Christine!”

“Rhal.”

The word slipped out of her mouth without her meaning for it to, hardly more than a whisper, as her breath faltered in her lungs. She knew that voice! That was Rhal, her Rhal, her betrothed-- the last person she wanted to see at present. How had he managed to find her? How had he even known she was there? Shocked, she met Erik's eyes briefly, saw the anger, the hurt, the heartbreak- all evident in his eyes-- and turned away, unable to look at him.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Erik open his mouth, looking as if he were about to speak, but then Rhal’s desperate cries came again, silencing him.

“Christine, please! Where are you?”

“Erik, I…” Oh, she did not even know what she could say to make any of this better! No, it was all ruined now. He would never forgive her after this, and if there had been any chance of reconciliation between them, it was destroyed now.

He turned away from her, shaking his head, his shoulders rising and falling rapidly with uneven breaths. “No. No.”

“Erik! Listen to me!” She grabbed his arms, forcing him to stay with her, willing him to hear and understand that she had not brought Rhal here, that this was entirely out of her control. “I did not know that this would happen! I had no idea. I do not even know why he is here.”

He tried to pull away then, moaning low on his throat, but she held onto him tighter, her nails digging into his skin to the point where she knew she must be causing him pain. “No! Erik, listen! I did not bring him here. I did not know”—

“Christine, by all things good and divine, if you can hear me, answer me! Christine!”

“Why?” Erik hissed, snatching his arms from her grasp. “Why have you done this to me? You have led him right to me! You have betrayed me! What have you done, Christine?”

“No! I would not! I promise!” The frustration she felt, along with all the pent-up sorrow, all the pushed-down pain, was enough to make her want to scream at him—how could he ever believe she would do this to him after all she had done for him? After all the kindness and care she had shown him?

Another cry sounded from out in the woods, this one nearer to them, so near that it was almost threateningly close to the house. It almost sounded as if Rhal were about to come through the thick line of trees, and although she knew he was likely a great deal farther off than that, Christine realized she had little time to waste. Soon, he would find them, whether she wished for him to or no. She had only minutes—seconds, really—to decide what she was going to do, before Rhal decided it for her.
Desperately, she grabbed Erik’s hand, searching his golden eyes, memorizing them one last time, trying to etch the picture of his masked face into her mind one final time before she left him forever.

“Erik,” she murmured, trying to decide what it was she wanted to say, what he needed to know before she disappeared from his life for good. She felt his hand tighten slightly on hers.

“Christine!”

Oh, she did not know! What could she say to redeem this—all of this, all of what had happened between him—in his eyes? What words could she tell him to ever bring him any joy again? There was nothing! She cast one final glance over that leather mask, the way his thin lips had formed that ever-present frown she knew so well, the soft curls that fell over his covered forehead. Her Erik…

She turned.

“Rhal!”

As she pulled her hand from his, she felt his grasp tighten further, as if he meant to capture her hand and not let it go, but her fingers slipped free nonetheless, and without a second glance back, she ran for the door, ignoring his pleading cries, even as her heart broke and bled within her.

“Christine! Please, wait! Do not go! Do not leave me! Please!”

No, she could not listen! If she turned back, if she even looked back, she would never be able to leave again. She had to go, and at least keep him hidden from Rhal’s prying eyes, if nothing else. She could at least give him that, if nothing else.

“Rhal, I’m here!”

She was nearly at the door now, and she could hear no footsteps following her, even though she half-wished that she could have, even though she half-wished Erik would pull her back and tell her to stay with him instead. But he did not follow her, and so, she slipped out of that great brass door, out of the marble house, out of Erik's domain, leaving so much unsaid between them.

“Christine?”

“Yes! Rhal, I'm here!” She bounded forward as quickly as she could, trying to get as far away from Erik as possible, from his intoxicatingly voice, from his broken murmurs. No, she had to keep running. She had to find Rhal again, before the temptation of this alternate life swallowed her up completely, and blinded her to reality. She could not look back!

The canopy of leaves overhead offered her at least some sanctuary from the overly-bright sun, which shone down on her mockingly from its place in the heavens. And behind her, although she dared not look, she knew the trunks of the trees were covering the sight of Erik's house, hiding her little paradise from view. It was almost as if, besides the aching pain in her chest, there was no real evidence of Erik at all. He could have truly been a phantom, for all the traces of himself he left on the physical world.

Somewhere ahead of her, she heard the rustle of footsteps the on the forest floor, of Rhal moving towards her. She braced herself inwardly, knowing he would be angry at her, knowing that she had lied to him, knowing that she had betrayed him. But the first thing he did when he appeared in front of her was pull her into a tight hug, his strong arms wrapping tightly about her waist, his voice murmuring her name desperately into her neck.
“Christine… Christine…. Oh, gods, Christine…”

“Rhal?” She separated herself from him, glancing briefly over her shoulder to make sure that Erik’s house was out of view, before she began to speak again. “Rhal, what is going on? Why are you--”

“Christine,” he cried again, stopping her speech. “Christine, I was so worried that he had caught you, that he had killed you! Oh, gods, I thought you might already be dead! I thought he had you…”

She shook her head, her guilt instantly telling her to whom he was referring, why he was acting as panicked as he was, why he had come out into the woods to find her, but even so, she feigned ignorance. “I do not understand you. Why are you here, Rhal? Why are you not at your father’s?”

He frowned, his brow furrowing in deep distress, and Christine noticed that there were terrible dark circles under his eyes, and that his face lacked its usual flush. “Because,” he said. “Because I have heard who this Erik is now. Christine, I know you have been staying with the Phantom.”
The first word she managed to form in the jumbled mess of all her heartbreak and confusion and sorrow was: “What?”

Rhal shook her slightly, his hands still clasping her shoulders, as if he were trying to expel this mist from her head. “Christine, I know you have been staying with the Phantom. I know it. Do not lie to me.”

Shaking her head, she stumbled back from him, her heart coming alive in desperate, hammering beats once more. “No! No, not the Phantom. Erik is not the Phantom. He is not.”

“Christine!” Rhal reached forward as if to grab onto her again but she pulled away, shrinking back into the shadows of the trees, hiding behind their thin, grey branches. He took a deep breath. “Christine, I know Erik is him. I know you have lied to me—to all of us. Don’t try and cover up for yourself anymore. There is no point in it.”

Christine expected him to be angry at her, furious even, and perhaps, in his own way he was, but it was certainly not the type of anger that screamed and shook and seared—no, this was a different type altogether. His was a quiet sort of anger, almost disappointment, and, although his words were not malicious by any stretch, or his voice even raised above its normal volume, she could see the anger in his eyes, and the evidence of her betrayal. But, even this quiet anger cut her to the core, perhaps worse than the wrathful kind, because she could hear the disappointment and the pain in his voice and his motions. She would rather have endured no end of screams and accusations to this. She shrank back away from him until her back collided with the sturdy trunk of a tree, leaving nowhere for her to flee.

“I didn’t lie… I didn’t… He isn’t….” She gasped desperately, trying to somehow convey that she
had not meant to lie, that she had not meant any of this, and that she was sorry for everything. But Rhal’s gaze seared her guilty heart like fire, and she could not meet his burning eyes, no matter how badly she wanted to. Instead, she stared only at the ground in front of her, looking hopelessly for some forgiveness in the dirt.

“He is, Chris. I am willing to give you the benefit of the doubt here—maybe you really didn’t know, but I am telling you now, in truth, that this man, Erik, and the Phantom are one and the same.” He paused before asking in hushed tones. “Did you know it? Did he tell you?”

“Yes,” she whispered at last, feeling the blood run down her hand from the raw spot where she was scratching her finger. Then, “How…? How did you know?”

“So, you don’t deny it, then? You knew that this man was the Phantom? And you still… You still sought his company?”

"I did."

“You did,” Rhal echoed sadly. “Why, Chris? Why did you? You knew this man was horrible—a monster even—and yet, you returned to him. How could you?”

“Because he isn’t, Rhal!” Christine cried, finally finding her voice. “He is not a monster, whatever else you might say about him, he is not that. I do not know what fate life has given him, or even why he acts or looks like he does, but there is not an ounce of monstrosity in him! Not one! I do not know—and frankly, I do not care how these stories originated, because Erik is my friend, and I will not believe that any of those stories have a grain of truth in them. He is a good man, Rhal!”

“No!” Rhal pressed his hands against the sides of his face, letting out an involuntary bark of humorless laughter. “No, he is not! He is a monster! I don’t know what the man you met was like, but—listen to me, Chris—the Erik the rest of the world knows is a murderer and a demon. He is not human, Chris! I would not lie to you about that. Sure—maybe he once was human, but now he is not, and now he is a freak, and a dangerous one at that. No matter what he does or says, you must believe that he is, at his core, a monster, and nothing will ever change that.”

Christine pushed herself off the tree trunk she had been leaning against, coming face-to-face with Rhal, her arms now pinned at her side with her hands knotted in tight fists. “And how do you know that? I am the one who knows him, aren’t I? I am the one who stayed with him. You cannot make those judgements—you do not know him. I do! I know him, and I say he is good, and you cannot argue with me on that.”

“Well, if the rest of the world is anything to go by, then—yes, I can. Do you know what the locals here say about this Erik? Do you, Chris? No, of course you don’t. They call him a murder, monster—a shade of death and destruction. They fear him, and, mind you, I am not talking about the Phantom. I was told these things about Erik, before I ever mentioned anything about the Phantom.”

Christine felt her throat constrict at hearing the dark thoughts she had kept stored away in her mind for so long spoken out in the open. “They… They said that about Erik? The Erik that I stayed with?”

Rhal nodded gravely. “Yes. When I was about a day’s journey away from your house, something reminded me of that strange Erik you had befriended, and I thought to ask a stranger in hopes that he would know something about the man that you refused to tell me about. And so, I asked. And even as I said his name—‘Erik’—, I saw that man’s face grow pale and fear shine in his eyes. Erik scares them, and I do not mean simply gives these people a good, scary story to share at nighttime.
He is a real threat to them, a terror that lurks just outside of their town. Listen to me, Chris—that man I talked to told me that Erik had murdered people—people that he had known. He told me that he had seen him once, and that even seeing him had made his blood run cold and his heart race, because he had thought, in that moment, that Erik would kill him, too. Your Erik is a man without mercy, or goodness, or soul at all.”

“Don’t talk about him like that!” Christine cried in spite of herself, Rhal’s cruel words making anger rise up within her that she could not push down. “He is not bad. Trust me, Rhal—I know him!”

Before she could say more, however, Rhal cut her off. “Do you, though? Do you truly know him? Have you ever even truly seen him? Tell me, Christine—does he not wear a mask? Does he not always hide his face from you? How can you say you truly know him at all, if you have never seen him?”

She shook her head, not daring to speak now, not daring to admit that he wore a mask, that he kept himself hidden from the world. If she told him that, he would never believe that there was good in Erik, and perhaps, she too would cease to believe in herself.

Her silence spoke louder than any number of words might have at that moment, and Rhal looked at her knowingly. “Ah, so you have not seen him, have you? And you do not want to admit that he wears a mask. But I know… There is no point in denying it. You have never seen him, because of this mask, and so, why defend him? If you have never even seen him, there is no point in you pretending that you know him well enough to say that he has not done all these horrible things. Honest men, after all, do not wear mask.”

“Oh, what difference does it make?” That same uncontrollable anger spilled forth from her lips again, and she spoke before she knew what she was saying, her only thoughts to defend her own choices. “Yes, he wears a mask! And yes, it is true I have never seen his face. But how can I really know anyone at all? Just because one person does not wear a mask does not make them anymore honest or genuine than him. There are people I have known for years now—people whose faces I know very well—who I know almost nothing about compared with Erik. When he spoke to me, he was always genuine and kind, even if I could not see his face. Mask or no, he was a good man, and I will continue to stand by that.”

“Are you defending him?” Rhal asked, his anger coming through his voice for the first time, twisting his words into growls. “Do you not understand? He was wearing a mask only to prevent you from seeing his true nature, the evil in his soul. There is nothing good in that. Nothing.”

Christine shook her head. “No. I knew from nearly the beginning what people like you believe he is. He told me. He told me that people think of him as a monster, that people hunt him for sport, but there was not a grain of truth in it. So, yes, I did know about the rumors—I knew his nature! There is nothing about him you heard in that town that he did not tell me while I was with him.”

Rhal’s hands flew about as he spoke. “Then, how—how on earth—could you have stayed with him?”

“Because…” Christine waved her hands around, searching for the words she wanted to say. “Oh—because, he redeemed himself to me, Rhal! Because he proved to me that there was a goodness in him that no amount of stories or masks could hide. I do not know what he has done in his past—I do not know the half of it—but as I know him, he is not the Phantom. He is just a man, Rhal.”

Rhal stared at her hard for a moment, his eyes betraying none of the emotion that must have been raging in his head. Then, “No, Chris. He has fooled you. He has tricked you into believing he is
something that he is not. No, this man is evil. If you had seen the fear in those people’s eyes, you
would understand as I do. And now, I plan to do what I have been meaning to all long—I am going
to rid the world of this Phantom. Like it or not, I am going to kill him, Christine. And you must
help me.”

For a split second, Christine could hear nothing but the vague echo of the word ‘kill’ in her head,
distorted images flickering through her mind’s eye all the while of screams of pain, of blood, of a
dark head bowed in defeat, a sword flashing. Kill. He meant to kill Erik.

Distantly, as if coming from miles away, she heard Rhal saying in a much gentler voice that he
needed to get her home, and that they must go, now. And she registered, somewhere in the back of
her hazy mind, Rhal taking her hand in his and guiding her back down the trail through the woods
on the mountain. But even as her body seemed to shut off entirely, giving itself up to Rhal’s gentle
leading, her mind began to work desperately. Surely, Rhal did not mean he would kill Erik. Surely,
he did not. And yet, had he not spoken of this to her earlier, back in those times when she was still
a child, her cheeks still flushed with happiness and life? In the forest, in those cold winter days,
when he had told her that he would kill the Phantom, she had laughed because what was this
Phantom to her, other than a potential trophy for her dear Rhal to collect? Then, she hardly would
have batted an eye at Rhal telling her of, or even doing such a horrible act. But, now… He spoke of
killing another human life! Taking the life, the memories, the thoughts of another human being,
and not just one whom Christine knew in some disconnected, casual way. No, this was her Erik,
hers friend, her confidant. This was a man she knew, a man who had shared with her his hopes and
his dreams, a man who had looked into her eyes and confessed his love to her, a man who had
broken in front of her eyes from the shards of his own dreams—this was not just any person, but
Erik.

She gasped, nearly choking on the breath, stumbling backward, as her knees threatened to give out
from under her, her hand slipping out of Rhal’s as she stopped her movement. Why was this
happening to her? Of all people in the world, why was it she who was caught in between these two
opposing forces? Why was it she who had been given the worst of all situations? She was Helen
now, the harbinger of war among men, the emblem of beautiful bloodshed, put up on a pedestal so
high above the both of them that it was like she now longer existed in their eyes. She now had the
power, which had been thrust so suddenly into her hands, to choose between one’s death and
another’s life, one’s love and another’s heartbreak. The knife had been given to her, but now,
seeing the options laid before her, she would have more readily stabbed it into her own breast than
cut either of the men. Oh, would that it had been anyone besides herself! Anyone in the world!

“Christine,” Rhal was saying, shaking her gently, as if trying to wake her from a trance. “Chris…”

But whatever he was planning on saying to her, she never heard, because suddenly, the world
began to spin around her, and all her ears seemed able to pick up was the quickened thrum of her
pulse, and her vision darkened at the corners, ebbing with the beat of her heart. The last thing she
remembered before the darkness took over everything was Rhal’s breathless ‘Oh, no.’ Then,
nothing.

When she awoke again, she was back in her own room in her own house, without any memory of
how on earth she had gotten there. The last thing she remembered was Rhal telling her that he
planned to kill Erik—her Erik—and she was able to fill in what had happened from there. She had
passed out— why exactly, she did not know— and Rhal had likely carried her home again, and had
left her to recover here, in her room. With a sigh, she sat up, but her head spun violently, making
stars swim before her eyes and pain explode behind her temples. Even after she stopped moving,
and curled herself into a ball against her headboard, her head ached horribly, and her mind seemed
unable to settle as it replayed images of Erik, each one now tainted with the ever-present
knowledge that Rhal wanted to kill him, Rhal wanted her to help kill him. There was no way—no way at all—she would ever allow herself to be responsible for murder, especially not his, and when it all came down to it, she would not be the one found holding the knife. That was all she was certain of, before the door creaked open and Eurydice entered, her face a picture of concern.

“Oh, Chris…” she sighed, sitting down next to her. “Oh, my sweet Christine… What have you done?”

Christine shook her head, unable to come up with any explanation for her own actions, and buried her head in her sister’s shoulder. “I do not know, I don’t know.”

“I don’t know, either.” Eurydice’s hand patted Christine’s hair, but Christine did not have it in her to wonder how her sister could still love her after she had found out what she had done. “Oh, my dear—why did you do it? I cannot for the life of me understand why. You knew, did you not? You knew what he was? And yet…” Eurydice trailed off, clearly wanting to hear Christine’s reasoning.

Christine withdrew herself from Eurydice’s shoulder, her eyes closing as images flashed through her mind, faster than she could perceive, of oracles and masks, or ivory pillars and wooden instruments. “I knew, and yet I stayed. I wish I could tell you why, but the truth is, I do not know myself. He told me who he was… he told me… and I was horrified, and shocked, and terrified, and yet… I did not leave.”

She opened her eyes and looked desperately at her sister, searching her face for some sort of answer for her own actions, for some sort of justified explanation that would solve everything. But she found none, and Eurydice offered none, but only shook her head, murmuring under her breath, “I don’t understand you, Chris. I do not think I ever will.”

“Oh, I don’t understand myself!” Christine cried, and put her face in her hands, the throbbing inside her head nearly audible now. “Everyone keeps asking me why—why did I do that, why did I stay—and I don’t know, and I don’t understand, and I have no reason for it. I look back at that night that he told me—that he looked me in the eye and told me he was the Phantom—and I try to remember some of the reasoning I had at the time, and yet I cannot remember any at all. Oh, Eurydice—is there something wrong with me? Am I going mad?”

Eurydice looked at her sister for a moment, taking in that beautiful, wild face, those dull, dead eyes, the trembling, colorless lips. “No,” she said after a long moment. “No, I do not think you are mad at all. Sometimes, we make bad choices. It is just what happens. And sometimes, we cannot understand how on earth we ever thought that choice could have possibly have been a good one. And yet, we all do it. But tell me, Christine, dear: when you told me that your prophecy included this man, in some way or another, and that your fate was somehow intertwined with his—was this true?”

Christine sighed and nodded miserably, still wishing more than anything that she had been lying and that there had been no prophecy, and that Fate was not leading her towards Erik like a lamb towards the slaughter. “Yes, that was all true. I knew it was him in my prophecy because of his mask, so it was rather obvious. I was not lying when I said there was something between us, something I needed to figure out, but I do not know what—still, I do not—and I fear that I never will, and that whatever this… this thing is between us will never work itself out, and that the two of us will always be bound by something that we do not understand and that we are entirely unable to sever. And that frightens me. I do not know what to do.”

She looked away, fixing her eyes on the blankets that were strewn across her, although she did not resist when Eurydice pulled her close and tucked her head under her chin in a calming embrace. “I know. I know that must be hard. But, dear, I know this is not what you want to hear right now, and
most likely probably ever, but the more I consider it, the more probable it seems. Do you…and be honest with me, dear; I will not judge you. Do you feel something towards this man? Do you… Well, do you love him?"

Her throat constricted without warning, and a lightning-like shock ran through her at those words, that possessed such blunt honest in such a gentle way. The words that named her greatest fear as if it were nothing, as if it were not the most horrible thing that could have ever happened to her. Did she love him?

A choked sob escaped her as she shook her head adamantly. “I don’t know, I don’t know! I don’t know at all anymore, and I am so, so afraid to find out. Oh, Eurydice, I do not want to find out! I do not want to! I cannot, I cannot! I don’t know!”

Eurydice’s arms tightened around her, and Christine heard a faint hushing noise, trying to soothe her, as if her very world was not crumbling. But, unable to do anything else, Christine clung to her, letting her sister rock her gently and stroke her hair, like a vessel floating on a churning sea, the only thing keeping Christine from drowning amidst her own pain and confusion. At least for now, she had something to cling to, and, at least for now, she could continue to avoid, as best she could, all that was happening. But even so, the simple act of sitting with another in quiet understanding had brought a sense of life back to Christine, and at least some hope, that she would not be alone, no matter what.

The next morning, it was Rhal who sought her out, although Christine had tried her best to ignore him, to ignore what he had told her, hoping he would change his mind about this—about everything. But when he called her to him, in those dark tones that she had never heard in his voice before, she knew he had not. But even so, she came, taking the seat across from him the living room, knowing full-well that he was too far gone in his lust for revenge (or perhaps, it was justice; who could tell?) to ever change his mind for her sake.

“Just sit for a moment, and try to listen to what I have to say.” He reached out and took her hand in his, caressing it gently, trying to draw some warmth back into her cold fingers.

“I do not want to,” Christine said, but she did not have the energy to so much as pull her hand away from him, much less leave him.

“Well, Chris,” Rhal said, sighing deeply, “You are here, and I must talk to you, and so, we will talk. Do you understand why it is I have to do this?”

“No! Because, Rhal, you do not have to do this. This is not some mission that has been given to you by the gods. This is not something that you are being forced to do. You do not have to kill him. So, do not talk like that. At least, be honest, and say that you want to kill him, because that is the truth of it.”

Rhal let go of her hand, and Christine snapped it back to herself. “That is fair,” he conceded at last. “I do want to kill him. I want to be the one who cuts through his neck with a sword, the one who sees the light leave his eyes as his blood drains all around him. I do. But—listen to me—this is my duty—I must do this! I must be the one to put this monster at rest.”

“Why?” Christine demanded, searching his kind, handsome face for an answer. “Why do you have to?”

“Because… Our fates have somehow connected with each other. When I told you, in the woods that day, that I wanted to kill the Phantom, I said it half as a joke, because I did not think I truly would. But now, I have found the Phantom, and, more importantly, he has found you and put you
under his spell, and so, it is up to me to free you from it, I think. Who else besides me? It could not
be any clearer! Life has presented me with an opportunity to kill this beast, and I would be the
worst sort of man not to take it.”

“No.” Christine shook her head. “You would be the worst sort of man to take it.”

At those words, she saw him flinch, as if she had burnt him with a red-hot poker, and something in
his green eyes flickered out. It was then, Christine realized, that this was the first time she had ever
been blatantly cruel to him. Never before had she been able to say anything that had not been all
compliments and sweetness, love and admiration, and even after she had grown older, and found
that she was able to use a greater variety of words and emotions towards Rhal, she had never before
said one cruel thing to him that was not in jest. But now, she had, and she regretted it, because she
had hurt him, and despite his muscles and hard exterior, he was really just as fragile inside as
anyone else.

She put her head in her hands. “No… I am sorry. I don’t mean that. It is just—why do you have to
kill him? Is there not another way for you to do this? Something that does not involve taking
another’s life? Surely, there must be! Rhal, please, you must know—I cannot bear to see him
killed.”

Something of that fire came back into his eyes at her apology, but the hurt was still there, written
plainly across his features. “I don’t know, Chris… Perhaps, there is another way, but I have not
found one. And I do want you to be happy, you know. I am not killing this man because he is your
friend, and because I have been driven blind by crazed jealous, or something. But he really is a
monster, and a murderer. He has forfeit his place on this earth with all the other lives he has taken.
He must go, now, and the world will be a better place for it. Perhaps, as you say, this Erik is good
enough, but the Phantom is not, and unfortunately, the two seem irrevocably stuck together.”

“Perhaps they are,” Christine murmured, more to herself than him. She remembered the rage she
had seen in him, all the self-loathing he directed at himself, all the sorrow he had stored away in
him—far too much for any regular person. Perhaps, he and the Phantom part of himself were too
far twined together for them to be pulled apart now. “But I know Erik, not the Phantom, and I will
not let you kill that part of him. Just… Just do something else, instead.”

“But what?” Rhal asked. “What else is there to do? Should I capture him and drag him along next
to me until the day I die? Is that what you want from me? Or maybe just send him off to some far-
off place, where he can terrorize the people there instead of those here? Clap him in irons and
chain him up in some prison? There are not many options. You must be real about this, Chris.”

“Actually…” Christine looked up, the thoughts spinning carefully through her mind. “Those are
not bad ideas. Why not just send him away somewhere where we will never find him? He would
never bother us, nor anyone from these parts, ever again. Can you be satisfied with that, at least? It
would be almost like he was…. He was gone, but he would not be.”

Rhal tugged absently at his beard for a moment. “If that is what you want, then fine. I will not kill
him, since you do not want me to. I will capture him, and send him away, if that would make you
happy, because, Chris, all I want is your happiness. I know that now you probably do not believe
me, but it is true. I want you to be happy, and I want you to be my wife, and I want things to be
peaceful between us again. So, if I promise to not kill this man, will you be happy?”

“Yes,” she said, taking his hand once more in hers, a forced smile tearing across her face. “Yes,
that would make me happy. And then, after you have sent him away, you and I can get married,
and enjoy our own happiness here, without him.”
But their marriage would not be entirely without him, because no matter what happened to Erik, Christine would always hold a piece of him in her memory, a secret love stored away that Rhal would never know of. He would never be entirely gone from her life, even if she and Rhal did get married, even if they were the happiest couple on earth—she would still remember her Erik.

Then, suddenly, without warning, he kissed her, a slow, deep kiss, the first they had shared in a long while. But even with his soft lips on hers, when they were connected with what should have been a bond of the deepest love, Christine felt nothing except guilt, gnawing more painfully at her heart with every passing second. Finally, unable to take it anymore, she drew back from him, unable to meet those sweet green eyes, that were entirely innocent of the thoughts that stormed and raged within her own mind. He could not know, and for as long as possible, she would hide that from him, and his innocent, dear eyes.

“So, Chris,” he breathed, his voice low, “Will you help me catch this man? Will you help if I promise not to harm him?”

Feeling another twinge of guilt rush through her, she replied, “Yes. Yes, I will help you, but only if you promise you will not lay so much as a hand on him.”

“I promise. I will not touch him, if I can help it. But still, I will confront him, and I will make him leave us— how, I do not know. But I will.”

“No, I do not want it to be only if you cannot help it. Swear to me now that whatever happens, no matter what he does, you will not hurt him. That is the only way you will have my help in this at all, and even if you do swear that, I still don’t feel good about this, Rhal. But do that for me, first. You cannot hurt him.”

Rhal began to massage his temples. “I will try, and try my best. But if he tries to hurt you, Chris, I will not refrain from killing him. I swear I will not hurt him if I can help it. But I also cannot account for everything that might happen.”

“No!” Her hands curled into fists. “That is not good enough. I know you do not want to promise me that—not when so many things could happen—but know this: I do not want to have to choose between you two. Right now, you have my hand, and you will, so long as I do not have to choose. Because, dear Rhal, I am afraid that if you make me choose, you will not much like my decision, and I do not want it to come down to that. Erik will not hurt me—I do know that much. But if you still cannot make me that promise, then you must accept whatever I choose to do. Will you, Rhal?”

He looked at her for a long moment, studying her, before he replied, “Then, I swear I will not hurt him. No matter what happens. I will not harm him. Are you satisfied with that?”

She nodded, and stood, wishing for nothing more than to be alone, to be able to think through the choices she had just made, and justify them in her mind, because at present, she was lost on whether she had made the right choice at all. With one final, sad smile, she left Rhal and stumbled back to her room as she wrestled with the thought that she had made the choice to betray her friend.

Had it been up to her, she would have left him to his suffering, and would have never looked upon his amber eyes or his leather mask again—not because she hated him now, but because she could not bear to see the ever-present reminder in him of what could have been. That is what Erik would always be to her now—what was almost hers. And had it been up to her, she would have liked to let that memory bury itself away, and never again resurface to see the light of day. But now, it was Rhal—her own Rhal—who was forcing her to confront it again, and to meet face-to-face with the same choice that had taken so much of her last time. Rhal meant the best by it—she knew he did—and yet, he had no idea that even seeing Erik again would inevitably cause what little resolve she
had to crumble away.

And yet, it was for the sake of her and Rhal’s relationship that she did this. Somehow—by some series of unfortunate events—Erik had become the final barrier for both herself and Rhal. Perhaps she could have forgotten Erik and passed the barrier he had created in time, after the pain lessened some, and she grew more secure in Rhal’s love. But for Rhal, Erik was now an obstacle he had to conquer before he could marry her, and Christine knew that no amount of persuasion could ever change that. He saw Erik as his prey, and that would never change until he defeated him. There could be no rest for Rhal, if not herself too, if he did not confront Erik, and if she tried to marry him without his doing so, she knew the end result would be bad. There would be a barrier between them—a taboo—that would exist until addressed, and this was the way he needed to address it.

Christine hoped that after Rhal had confronted Erik and sent him on his way, that she and her dear childhood sweetheart could be married, and that they could settle down and live a happy life together, with the shadow Erik cast far, far away from them. She did want that happy life with him, even after everything that had happened, but facing Erik again frightened her. Her feelings were unstable, and her decision to marry Rhal was soaked in regret, and she did not know if she would have the strength of mind, when it came down to it, to choose Rhal over Erik a second time. She truly did not, horrible though it was for her to admit. But this was the only way to get Erik out of the picture, and with as minimal damage to his person as possible, and Christine knew she must follow through with the plan. If there was ever a hope for happiness between her and Rhal, it would only be created after Erik was gone. But it still broke her heart to think about.
The Plan

Chapter Summary

In which the plan is made...

Chapter Notes

Hello, readers! I am very sorry for the long wait, but it has been so busy lately! I just can't wait for Christmas break so I can finally have a little time to actually write things that aren't school-related. But thank you for your patience, and a special thank you to ktzen on tumblr for prompting me to actually get some work done, haha! I am very happy that you did :) 

A rather political side-note: I'm not sure how many of you guys are from America or if you are, if you are following the news, but if this whole issue of destroying Net Neutrality passes, things might change a bit for me on here, although I'll have to do some more research to really be sure. What I'm hoping is that it won't pass, but if it does, it's possible I won't be able to update very regularly on here anymore, but again, I'd have to do some more research to be sure. But I do promise that I will still update, even if it takes a while, because this fic is my baby, and I can't just abandon it or you guys now. BUT hopefully Net Neutrality won't get taken away, and none of this will be an issue at all!

All that aside, I hope you enjoy this chapter...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Here is what I have so far: I think we will have to bait him. That is where you will come in, Chris. We can’t just run out and fight him directly—no, he is far too cunning for that. And I do not want to take any chances, if he is actually as dangerous as the people say he is. So, we will bait him. We must make him feel like he is saving you, Christine—since you tell me he will do anything and everything to keep you safe. So, you, as we have discussed, will be tied to something—a tree, or a rock perhaps—so that it will appear that you are in some sort of situation. It is only once he is exposed, out in the open, that we attack. I will have Felipe and Lysander with me, so you do not need to worry. You will never be in a moment’s danger. Before he has time to do much as bat an eyelid, we will be on him. And we will chain him up, so he cannot escape, and then you—I think it will sound better coming from you than us—will tell him that we will not have a murderer running around free in these parts, and that he must leave. And then, we shall be married.”

Rhal leaned back, a satisfied smile on his face as Christine turned away from him, frowning. “And what do you suggest I tell him to make him leave? I can’t just tell him to pack up all his belongings and leave, simply because you do not want him here.”

“Well,” Rhal said, “You could. And I shall provide the force behind your words, so that no matter what you say, he will comply. But what you say is up to you. Tell him something you think will
convince him, I suppose.”

“So, say I do find some words to say to him. What if he does not listen? What if he wants to stay here, and nothing you or I say changes his mind? What will we do then?”

“We would force him out of the country, I imagine. The point is, Chris, once we capture him, he cannot really refuse what we tell him to do. He will be at our mercy. He will do what we want, I think, and if he does not, he will suffer the consequences.”

“Fine.” Christine leaned back, and covered her burning eyes with a sigh. “And how do you propose we bait him? Should I just stand outside and call for help like some damsel in distress until he responses? Because that sounds horribly like lying and taking advantage of him to me, Rhal. You are going to rely on him coming to save me, your betrothed, and then when he does, like any good self-respecting man would, you are going to capture him for his efforts. That is cruel.”

The triumphant smile faded somewhat from Rhal’s lips. “I am sorry, but I do not see any other way to do it. If you can think of another way to bait him, then I am all ears. But unless you can, then we have no other options to go with other than what I suggested. I agree—it is rather sneaky, but it is the most effective way for us to do it, I think.”

“Perhaps it is. But Rhal, I feel awful about all of this. I really do. I know that you do not like Erik, and you cannot imagine that he is capable of any goodness at all, but I know him. And it seems very cruel, to me, to attack a man based solely on some far-fetched rumors, when he has not shown himself to be anything like that to those who truly know him.”

“Yes, but what of his mask? And you said he told you himself he was a monster—that he was the Phantom. So, more than just rumors, or otherwise I would agree. But he has admitted to being the Phantom, you have admitted to him being the Phantom, and nearly everyone I talked to in that town has admitted to him being the Phantom. That is reason enough, I think.”

“Maybe he has had a change of heart,” Christine said softly, hardly daring to speak her own views out loud to the one who so diametrically opposed them. “Maybe he has repented of his ways, and has decided to live a good life.”

Rhal looked at her for a long moment before shaking his head. “No. He has murdered innocents. There is no way he can ever be good now. I do not care how he chooses to live his life—it does not change the fact that he is a monster. I am sorry, though, if it pains you, Chris. This is for the best.”

Christine closed her eyes, and collapsed back in her chair, the nearly constant headache she had had since her return throbbing behind her eyes. “Perhaps,” was all she could manage to say. And perhaps it was for the best, if Erik was truly the monster Rhal said he was.

She heard Rhal breathe deeply, and then felt his gentle touch on her arm. “Is there anything I can do? I know this is hard for you, but, really—and you agree with me, don’t you?—this has to be done. Even if it is hard for you, we must do it. I’m here for you, Chris. Remember that?”

She nodded, her eyes still closed, as she massaged her aching temples. “I know.”

From somewhere in front of her, she heard Rhal moving, and then his hands touched hers, moving them from their place, and continued their task as he rubbed her temples. Christine opened her eyes, and managed a tight smile at her dear Rhal, who was trying so hard to bring her some comfort at least, even in the face of so much hardship. Slowly, she felt the tension beginning to lessen behind her eyes.
“When will we do this? I want to be done with it as soon as possible,” she told him, tilting her head back so he could massage her forehead instead.

“I do too. I think, if we can, we will do it two days from now. That way, we will have time to sort out the plan, but we won’t have to wait too long, either. There is, of course, the issue of the secret getting out, and the Phantom hearing and getting away, somehow, and we don’t want that. How does that sound to you? Is two days enough time?”

She nodded, interrupting the movement of his hands on her head. “More than enough. I’m serious—I want to be done with this as soon as I can be, and I want to put it all behind me. I do not think I will be able to rest completely until I do.”

“I feel the same way.” He was quiet, and the only sound was the soft brush of his fingers on her skin. Then, “So, you have decided to do it, then? You are certain?”

An image flashed before her eyes of Erik, bowed at her feet, gazing up at her with his eyes full of only love and adoration for her. A stream of liquid fear coursed through her as the image receded, and she bit her lip. “I think… Yes, I think I must. I cannot rest until something has been done with him. I think I have to do this. So, yes—I suppose I am certain.”

He remained silent, so she continued to speak, hardly registering her own voice. “I suppose I must, because if I do not do this, Rhal… If I cannot do this, then what will become of me? If I cannot banish him from my life, what will happen? Will I ever be separated from him at all? Will I ever experience freedom? I must… Yes, I must fight it. Because I want the opportunity to choose for myself. I do. And I want the opportunity to choose you, Rhal, because you are my choice. He is…” She trailed off and opened her eyes, only to be met with his confused face. “He is not.”

“Chris, I am sorry, but I do not understand a word of what you just said. Is there someone… Is there someone keeping you from choosing me, somehow? I do not know what you mean.”

She shook her head. “I would not expect you to understand. How could you? It is just… It is only that there a more things at stake here than I can explain to you at present, Rhal. There are more things I am fighting than just the Phantom.”

She heard Rhal try to speak again, asking her what these things were, if he could help her. But, of course, he could not. He could not battle Fate, after all, nor could he battle her prophecy, or the oracle. That was a battle she must fight herself, even if, in the end, it did prove to be entirely in vain. But if she could separate herself from Erik, if she could banish him and manage to find happiness in Rhal, she would have done exactly that—she would have fought the prophecy and won. Now, she was sure—completely sure—that Erik was the man from her prophecy, and she was sure that, if things were not as complicated as they were at present, and if she were not already engaged herself, that they could have been married. But as things were, she could not let this prophecy take this little life she had built for herself, and so she would fight to keep it. It was not that she thought she would be happier with Rhal than with Erik—because in truth, she did not—but because Rhal was her choice and hers alone without Fate’s intervention. Perhaps it was entirely insane to try, but she wanted to achieve her own freedom, her own choice, and she was determined to at least try, even if she knew she would not be the better for it. She wanted to at least try to give her prophecy some resistance, even if, in the end, it came down to nothing.

“Yes,” she said again, more to herself than Rhal. “I think I must do this—for myself, if no one else.”

She felt Rhal’s lips press against her forehead where his hand had previously been, in a wordless ‘thank you,’ the sort that he only ever shared with her. Yes, he was her choice, and still, despite
everything, she was convinced she had made a good one. The best one? Perhaps not—and perhaps she would regret it—but a good one nonetheless.

She stood on her toes to meet him, nose-to-nose, chest-to-chest, and kissed him fully, running her hands through that golden hair that had once looked to her like liquid sunlight. And despite the passion that seared between them, despite how wonderful and soft his skin felt on hers, there was still something that seemed amiss to Christine, even if she doubted she would ever be completely able to figure out exactly what. Like two strings of a lyre pulled a little too tightly to make the chord, they did not seem to fit right together, no matter how much they pushed or pulled. She wondered if such things would ever change, or if he felt it, too.

The two days passed swiftly. In the little house on the hill, everyone was rushing around in various states of urgency. Lysander, Felipe, and Rhal seemed perpetually together now, talking of swords and fighting and things, always carrying a sense of dark foreboding with them. They sat for hours on end together, discussing various ways of dealing with the Phantom, and brainstorming different ‘what if’s and how to solve them. Over that short span of two days, the men of the house had been transformed from a father, a husband, and a fiancé respectively to a group of ruthless hunters, to whom nothing mattered but their cornered prey and the weapons in hand. There was no care or comfort to be found in the three men those days.

Psyche was a different case. She tended to follow the men around when they were not closed up in a room in deep discussion, and she tried to persuade them not to go out and fight the Phantom. At least three or four times a day, Christine would hear Psyche from the other room, yelling “Ly-sander, I will not stand for this!” or other similar phrases. But Lysander would have none of it, and continue resolutely in his task despite Psyche’s pleadings. Although she refused to admit, Christine rather thought that the reason Psyche opposed the quest so strongly was because she was afraid for her husband’s sake, even after she heard that the men only planned to capture Erik, and not fight to the death.

Eurydice was the calmest of them all. Generally, she did not stray from her usual tasks around the house, and had taken charge of watching over Psyche’s children, since both she and Lysander were otherwise occupied most of the day. And besides, Eurydice had also taken to helping make the men little snacks, so that they could keep up their energy even in their long talks. All in all, Eurydice seemed rather indifferent to the issue of the Phantom himself, even though she involved herself in everyone else’s way of dealing with him. As usual, she had placed herself in the role of mother, and kept a level head through it all, which was, perhaps, good, as no one else seemed to be able to.

Christine had her fair share of troubles too, but she did not voice them to the others, or storm around the house in a fit of rage because of them. No; she kept her fears bottled up inside of her, and withdrew from all the other occupants of the house, sitting mostly in her room, and talking to no one. But she could not help it. With every hour that brought her closer to her final confrontation with Erik, she grew more and more anxious. This would be her betrayal. She was going to betray the man whose heart she had already broken once, and it caused her physical pain to think that she was going to do it again.

And she worried about Rhal. She knew Erik was a powerful man, even if he did not show that side of himself to her, and a fighter, with a sort of desperation in him that she knew Rhal lacked, young as he was. Rhal was capable of defending himself, she knew, but thinking of him against Erik, if Erik truly did want to fight him… That did not bode well. She was not sure if Rhal would be able to sustain himself in the face of Erik’s desperation and rage. And, despite the fact that she resented him for forming this plan in the first place, the last thing she wanted was for Rhal to be hurt. He was her betrothed and her dearest friend, and she wanted him to be safe. If something happened to
him, she would blame herself even more than she already was for what was at stake.

And then, there was the issue of choice. When it came down to it, Christine was not entirely sure that, if made to decide between the two men, she would be able to choose Rhal again. Horrible though it was—Christine knew she must be the worst bride-to-be that had ever lived for even thinking it—she felt a stronger pull towards Erik than she did Rhal, and she was not sure if she would be strong enough to resist it. Sure, she wanted to be Rhal’s wife and settle down with him, because she had promised to do so to him, to her family and to her father, but her heart was not totally invested in such a future. As much as she wished it was, it simply was not, and, although without being faced with any alternate choices, she was sure she could stand fast to her promises, she was not sure if she could otherwise. And that was the truth but she was determined to fight it as best she could.

But despite Christine’s feelings, life continued, always moving forward to the moment of her betrayal, which was drawing near altogether too fast. In what seemed like no time at all, suddenly the sun was setting on the day before the expedition to Erik’s house, and the men had finally formulated a plan they were all satisfied with. Everything seemed to be drawing to a neat ending for everyone—the men were pleased, and even Psyche had given up her pleas to keep Lysander at home—and all seemed as if it were going to work out well and happily. Christine thought that she must have been the only person in the whole house who was suffering as a result of this decision to fight Erik, now that Psyche had given up her resistance. Surely, she could not be the only one who saw the plan as inherently flawed? Surely, she could not be the only one who was not proud of forcing what was in her eyes an innocent man out of his home? And yet, she knew she must be, because for everyone else, the plan to catch Erik seemed like more than a source of entertainment, or, at most, a chance to prove one’s honor. No one else thought twice about what Erik would surely feel from this confrontation—no one but Christine, and those thoughts broke her heart all over again.

Somehow late that night, she was able to go to sleep, despite the reluctance she thought towards what she was going to take part in, despite the pain she knew she would bring Erik by doing it, and when she was awoken again, it was to the gentle shake of Rhal’s hand on her arm, in the still silence of the morning before the sun had broken over the mountains.

“Christine…” He whispered, his voice all gentleness and love. “Christine, you must wake up now. Are you ready to catch the monster, Chris? Are you awake? Christine…?”

She nodded groggily, none too happy at being woken up before the sunrise. “Yes, yes—I am awake, unfortunately.” She sighed, rubbed her tired eyes as Rhal looked on, a giddy smile on his face.

“Ah, I had forgotten that you do not like mornings. I’m sorry. I know this must be hard for you.” There was a playful tone in his voice that Christine could not find it in her to reciprocate, without being fully awake.

“It is,” she replied flatly, before climbing slowly out of bed, stretching her tired muscles as she did so, trying not to think about what she was going to do this day, trying to ignore it all. Feeling somewhat conscious of Rhal’s eyes, she began to run her fingers through her hair, in an attempt to separate at least some of the mass of curls that had knotted together as she slept. She worked steadily at this task for a moment, her mind too tired to process anything else, until the feeling of Rhal’s soft lips against her forehead startled her into a state of semi-awareness.

“Oh,” she gasped, her hands stilling in her hair, as he swept her into his arms, the feeling of his body pushed so suddenly against hers sending a jolt through her. Slowly, he leaned down and
kissed her again, this time full on the lips—a slow, gentle thing, as sweet as the morning dew.

“Oh, Chris,” he sighed, as he broke apart from her, his brow crinkling. “Oh, just imagine it! Soon, we can live like this every day. We can wake up beside each other, and kiss as the sun rises, and we will be so happy together. Once we’ve put all this monster business behind us, there will be nothing stopping us from having that. And I cannot wait.”

“Yes,” she managed, her voice so soft and uncertain that she wondered if he had heard her at all. Would it all be behind them once they had dealt with Erik? Would they be able to know happiness? She tried to banish the thoughts from her mind as he pulled her closer in a strong embrace, and tried to let his presence soothe her for the time being, but her mind would not quiet. Even in his arms, she felt no peace.

“Rhal,” she whispered, tightening her arms around him, trying to reassure herself that he was there, he was hers, he would listen. “Rhal, I am frightened. Don’t make me do this. I do not want to have to be put through this.”

He shushed her and his hand came up to stroke her hair, but she had to tell him her fears, before she was unable to admit them even to herself. “I am putting myself at his mercy. For you. If he… If he decides to take me, and you cannot get to me in time… What will happen to me? He will take me, Rhal. I will not be able to fight him.”

While this was true enough, because there was no way Christine could have overpowered Erik, if she had wanted to, it was not that sort of fighting that frightened her. It was the battle between wills—between her doing what she knew she should do and what she knew she wanted to do, and that was a battle in which she seemed equally powerless.

“I will not let that happen. I would never let that happen, Christine. Don’t you trust me? I will not let him take you like that. I promise, I will be there, only ever inches from you, and he will never even get close to you. I promise.” He pressed a soft kiss to the top of her head, rocking her gently as he held her against him.

But the fear still lingered in Christine, despite his assurances. “I know, but what if something happens? What if you cannot save me, and he takes me back to his house? Oh, Rhal, if that happens…” she took in a shaky breath. “If that happens, I do not know what I will do—I do not know what will happen, and I do not want to have to find out. I do not. I do not want to have to fight him. I don’t want to. I’m not strong enough. I know I am not.”

Rhal shushed her gently again. “You will not have to fight him. I will give my life to make sure that does not happen. You will not have to, I swear it. I will protect you. It will all be okay in the end, I know it will. It will all end up well, and we will be together again. I will not let that… that demon hurt you. I would never.”

“Oh, Rhal.” Sighing, she drew back from, and gazed into that face that she knew so well, the face of her first love and dearest companion. “He is not a demon. He is not a demon, but he frightens me still, even though he is only a man—only flesh and blood. He is powerful, Rhal. But he is not that.”

He frowned slightly, his hand stilling its gentle caresses on the back of her head. “Then, why do you fear him? If he is only a man and not a monster, as you say, why are you so afraid of him?”

“Because…” she murmured, drawing away from him. “Men hold a different type of power than monsters.” Straightening out of his embrace, she sat down next to him instead, and continued before he could ask her what she meant. “And because of you, Rhal. I am afraid that he will hurt
you, and I do not want that, either. I know that you promised to protect me, and I do believe that
you will, but you must remember—Erik is powerful. And he is desperate. Rhal, there are very few
things he would not do if he felt he needed to. And that makes me fear for you. You are strong, too
—I know—and plenty capable of fighting for yourself, but I am still frightened. Oh, I wish you
could have just left him alone!"

Rhal frowned, his hands busying themselves in the many folds of his toga. “Chris, I am not a child.
I am a trained fighter—a soldier. I know I can stand up to this creature—I would not challenge him
otherwise. He does not know how to fight and how to defend himself like I do. He might be
desperate, but you have forgotten that I have fought desperate men before, but here I am. Trust me,
Chris, he will not harm me.”

Christine shook her head, the image of Erik when she had tried to steal his mask all those weeks
ago flashing through her mind—all the violent force and the nearly animalistic rage she had
encountered previously rushing back to her. “No, you do not understand me. He is not like other
men you have fought—I know it! You have to treat him differently, or else I fear that something
bad will come of you, and Felipe and Lysander, too. He is dangerous.”

“No, I believe you,” Rhal assured her. “I do and I understand what you are saying, but there is
really no reason to fear. I am trained, and he is not. Plus, there are two more of us than there are of
him, so even if he is as dangerous as you claim, we have him grievously outnumbered. Don’t
worry.”

“No!” Christine cried again, frustrated that Rhal was not taking her word seriously. Why would he
not listen to her? He was dangerous! Did he not understand exactly how dangerous he was?
Christine did not doubt that if Erik thought his life was being threatened, he would not hesitate to
do anything, and this would only be increased all the more if it was her life that was threatened.
And yet, Rhal would not take her seriously! If he continued to act as if he were simply facing some
untrained madman, something horrible would happen to him—Christine knew it.

She groaned aloud. “Why do you have to do this at all? Can you not just call it off now? Use me as
an excuse if you like—I do not care, but please, you cannot do this! It is too dangerous, Rhal! You
are going to get yourself injured and for what? Erik would not harm anyone if we only let him live
in peace!”

“Chris…” Rhal sighed, all his earlier energy fading.

“Please, Rhal!” Christine looked at him desperately, searching in his eyes for any trace of
sympathy, of understanding in his eyes for Erik—for her. “Do it for me. Stay here. Do not mess
with him. Leave him be, for me. Please, I am begging you—let him be. Do not get caught up in all
this.”

He shook his head, a small, sad smile falling across his face. “You know I can’t do that now,
Chris. I have to. It is my duty now. It is too late to go back, and let him be. He has wronged you,
and he was wronged others. I must stop him. I am sorry, but I must. My mind will not change.”

And Christine could tell he meant it. Perhaps it was from his resigned tone, perhaps his pitiless
eyes, perhaps that why his jaw clenched when she mentioned Erik, but she knew he was too far
gone in this plot to change his mind. She could do nothing. Whatever was going to happen this day,
she was powerless to stop it, at least in Rhal. Her fate was set, and there would be no changing it.

She nodded and stood, lifting her chin. “Then, we should go now. I want to get this over with. I just
want to be done with it all.”
Rhal stood to meet her, his hands resting easily on the sword around his waist. “As do I, Chris. In fact, nothing would please me more.”

Having nothing to say in response, Christine stood and exited the room, Rhal following behind her as she wound her way through the house. In the kitchen, she was met with her sisters and their husbands, who were already fully armored and prepared for a battle. Felipe had a double-handed, iron sword strapped to his back, and Lysander was using a spear as a support as he stood beside the table, on which lay the bow and arrows that he had discarded in favor of the weapon now in hand. Psych, despite having given up trying to convince Lysander not to fight, still sat brooding in the corner while Helena and Perseus played with some of the unused arrows nearby. As Christine took in the sight, Rhal was strapping on his armor, fastening the leather section around his waist and legs.

“Are you ready?” He asked the other two men, as he fastened a covering over his forearm.

Felipe nodded gravely. “I am. I sharpened my sword last night, and cleaned it, too. I am prepared now. Lysander, are you?”

The other man nodded, casting a worried glance at his children as they played with the armors. “Ah, yes, I am. Tell me, where is this— Ah! Helena! You cannot do that!” Helena was sticking one of the sharper arrows into the table leg with a surprisingly savage dexterity. In a moment, however, Lysander had grabbed the arrow back from her, and gathered up the others as well, ignoring the children’s pleas for him to stop.

“So, tell me,” he continued as he picked up the remaining arrows, as if nothing had interrupted his earlier speech at all. “Where is this place that we are going? I know you said that Christine knows, but I cannot remember. Is it close-by?”

Rhal looked at Christine, as if waiting for her to answer Lysander’s questions, but when she did not, he spoke instead. “Relatively. It is not so far away that we cannot make the journey there and back within a day. Although, I do not remember where exactly… It has been some time since my last visit up there… Christine, will take us there today, won’t you, Chris?”

Christine sank down at the table, and nodded miserably, knowing that she was leading them to Erik, guiding them to his betrayal, taking them to harm what she knew as an innocent man. Had she only been part of the group in the passive sort of way, she might not have felt nearly as much guilt as she did now, knowing that she was the one who was ultimately causing Erik’s betrayal. If she refused to lead the men to Erik, how would they ever find him? How would this whole business ever be put behind them? She was their only way, their key to finding the Phantom, and if she would not cooperate, there was really nothing they could do about it. But even so, she found she could not refuse now, not after she was so far gone into this plan. Not when it was the only way that could perhaps save her and Rhal’s marriage.

But she would do it, for better or for worse.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, alright... How'd you enjoy that one? Too similar to the last? Does Christine's reasoning make sense to you at all? Let me know, because I love to hear from guys, and improve my own writing!
And, as you might have noticed, things are about to get really crazy really fast. So, be prepared, because the next few chapters are gonna be intense :)

Chapter Summary

In which Christine makes a choice that cannot be reversed, for better or for worse...

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone! I'm sorry it's been so long, and I hope you all had a wonderful Christmas and New Year! I think you'll all enjoy this chapter because it's sort of the culmination of everything that's been building up in the last two. But that being said, I wanted to add more to this chapter, because the flow between this one and the next just worked *so well* but then it would have been around 10,000 words so... But I promise the next part will be out relatively soon!

(Also, COMPLETELY unrelated, but if any of you were wondering why there was such a long wait, aside from school and stuff, I found this show on Netflix called Dark and I've been obsessed with it recently. 10/10, would definitely recommend.)

Anyway, thank you all for your patience and I hope enjoy this one...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You do know where you are taking us, don't you, Christine?”

Tearing her gaze away from the miles and miles of forest visible to her from this high up the mountain, Christine nodded to Rhal, answering his question. They had been traveling for the better part of two hours now, and although Christine was not particularly tired, the men were, due to their armor, heavy swords, and shields. So, while she stood, looking down upon the world, Felipe, Lysander, and Rhal had taken the opportunity to rest and were sitting slightly off the faint trail, propped up against some rocks, their weapons scattered haphazardly around them.

“Are we very close?” Lysander asked, taking the wineskin from Felipe's hands and taking a long drink from it himself.

“Yes, we should be there soon enough. We have made it most of the way by now,” Christine told him, and sat down beside him, taking the wineskin from him to drink from, as well. The knife in her belt dug painfully into her side as she sat, reminding her of its presence for the first time since she had grabbed it on the way out of the door that morning. She had not been required to bring it by any stretch and moreover, Rhal had no idea that she had taken it, and she got the feeling that, if he did know, he would not be happy, although there was nothing wrong with her bearing a weapon. It was only a simple precaution that, if anything were to go wrong, she would not be left defenseless to the situation. She shifted and the feeling of the hard leather sheath lodged in her side vanished.

“Good,” Rhal said, standing again with a smile on his face. “I was not sure how close we were before, but now that I know that we are almost there, I feel significantly better. And now that you mention it, this place does look familiar to me from the last time I was here. I am ready to keep
going whenever you two are,” he told Lysander and Felipe, as he shouldered his broadsword.

After a complaint or two from Felipe, and a few minutes of gathering their things, the other two men were ready to continue the journey up the mountain, with Christine acting as their guide. But despite their eagerness to face Erik, Christine could not help the nearly overpowering sense of dread that grew ever-stronger the closer they got to their destination.

“Rhal.” Bounding to catch up with his longer strides, she caught onto his arm, pulling him to walk with her. “Rhal, you will not harm him, will you? You promised me you would not. You won’t, will you? You did promise.”

He stopped just long enough to kiss the top of her head. “Of course, I will not, Christine. I made you a promise, and I would not lie to you. But remember, the promises is void if he attempts in any way to harm you. If he tries, I will do anything and everything to stop him. But otherwise, he will not have so much as a bruise, if you do not want him to.”

Christine nodded, but even Rhal’s reassurances did little to lessen the guilt or the sense of wrongness she felt. Nothing seemed to be able to take it away. She thought she would be sick.

“You must make them promise, too,” she told him, jerking her head backward and tightening her grip on his forearm. “They know about what you promised me, do they not? They will not hurt him either, will they? Will you make them promise they will not?”

He sighed, stopping again to look at her as he spoke. “Yes, Chris, they know. I told them already, and they promised they would not injure the Phantom, either. But if it would make you feel better to hear that from them, I will ask them to swear it, too.”

“It would. Can you ask them?” Slowly, Christine loosened her grip on his arm, suddenly feeling childish for having demanded such a thing, for even believing for a minute that such promises would truly prevent her dear Erik from being harmed.

He said nothing, but simply turned to face them, looking suddenly ashamed at having to do what Christine was asking of him. He fiddled with his armor as he spoke. “Christine has asked me to remind the two of you of her wish that this Erik is not to be harmed, and would like you to promise that you will abide by it.”

The way that Rhal seemed ashamed to even so much as speak about what she wanted, and how he made it very clear that not harming Erik was not his idea, made Christine angry, perhaps more so than was warranted by the situation at hand. But even so, the way he spoke, and the way he refused to meet either Felipe’s or Lysander’s eyes made her want to scream, to run away from this whole thing, to find Erik on her own and leave Rhal behind. But, of course, she could not do this, so she swallowed her feelings, hoping her face had not betrayed her.

Felipe did not seem to have noticed, because he only looked at her and said, in a very understanding way, all things considering, “Of course, little sister. I will not do a thing to him. Besides, I would rather not have his blood on my hands, anyway.”

Lysander, however, only managed a slight nod in her direction, and a mumbled “Sure.” And although Christine expected these promises to offer her some sort of consolation, she found they brought none.

“Thank you,” she said quietly, turning back forward again, wondering if Erik was hiding somewhere just out of sight, watching as she hunted him out like an animal. She hoped most ardently that he was not, and that, perhaps, if it were in any way possible, that he would never
connect her to this event at all, that he would never know that she had been a conspirator in bringing around his demise. She knew there was no way—at least, not in Rhal’s elaborate plan—that Erik would not see her if he came anywhere near their group, but still, she could hope, could she not?

The path they were on was so well-known to her now, that she knew without hardly having to think about it, that they were only minutes away from that little clearing where she had first met with Erik. The clearing that she had suggested to Rhal that they use to trap Erik, because she knew that wherever he was, he would hear them there and come to them. She knew that they were nearly there and that despite how slow the men were walking, she would reach that clearing soon, and have to betray her dear Erik.

“It is just ahead, right, Christine?” Lysander called out from somewhere behind her, his words coming out in between shallow breaths. “I do not know how much longer I can walk and carry this shield.”

“Yes,” she replied, her voice sounding dead even to her own ears, as she continued to walk resolutely forward, knowing that if she turned back, even for a second, she would never be able to go forward again.

And then, faster than she could fathom, she was climbing up that sloping hill and walking through those trees that marked the entrance to the little clearing that she knew so well, that she so badly wished to avoid. But it was too late, because before she could even think about changing the situation, Rhal stepped up from behind her, his eyes taking in the spot for the capture.

“I remember this place now,” Rhal murmured from beside her, taking in his surroundings. “Yes, this is it.” As he spoke, Lysander and Felipe bounded up the hill behind him, catching their breath once they finally made it to flat ground.

Christine glanced around, although she already could have drawn that little place out from memory. “Yes,” she said again. Yes, this was the place where she would betray the man who had become one of her dearest friends. Yes, this was the place where she would condemn an innocent man to a life of wandering and hiding. Yes, this was the place that she herself had suggested to capture him, knowing full-well that it would cause his downfall. Yes, this was it.

Rhal turned then, facing Christine, although she refused to meet his gaze. “Are you sure he can hear us here?”

“Yes. I am not sure how he does, but he will be able to. I know he will.”

“Great!” Rhal said, and Christine rounded on him, astounded that he could be happy about such a thing when her own heart was breaking for it. How could he view what they were doing so lightly when, for her, it was one of the darkest moments of her life?

“Where should we go?” Lysander asked, forcing Christine back into grim reality. Rhal sighed, looking back around at his surroundings again, before facing the other two men, who had clearly begun to look to him as the leader of the operation.

“Well, we cannot all be here—he would see us if we were.” He frowned, his brow furrowing. “I guess we should station ourselves in the woods, just out of sight, but not far enough away so that we cannot see what is happening. We will stand behind Christine to make sure that she is not in any danger, but as soon as we see the Phantom, one of us should go around behind him, so that if he tries to escape, we can catch him and bring him down. Do you follow?”
The other two nodded that yes, they did, and after a few moments of quiet debate, they had all
slipped into their spots to stand guard and wait for Erik to fall prey to their trap. All was ready,
now, and it would only be a matter of time before the ball was set in motion, and things—all those
horrible, cruel things—would start to happen, leaving Christine powerless to stop them. It was odd,
she thought as she stood in that clearing, that recently, Fate had controlled, countered, and
destroyed nearly every aspect of her life, but now that she needed divine intervention, there was
none. There was only reality—cold and blind.

“And what of me?” she heard herself saying, although she could not remember ever meaning to do
so. “What will I do?”

“You, Chris,” Rhal began, unwrapping a thick rope from around his scabbard, “will remain here, in
this clearing, as we decided before. And I will chain you to this tree here, before we all go off to
the woods to hide, and you shall call for help until the Phantom crawls out of his hiding place.
Remember? We decided it all earlier?”

“I do,” she replied weakly. “But, Rhal, I do not want to be tied up! What if he tries to take me?
What if I need to get out and I can’t? What if something happens to me, Rhal? What will I do if I
am tied up?”

She looked at him beseechingly, twisting her hands together to keep them from trembling so
horribly. In truth, she was not afraid of being tied up, and she truly did trust Rhal enough to give all
her power up to him. Had it been any other situation, she would not have said a word, but would
have let Rhal tie her wherever he pleased while she waited, confident that he would slay whatever
monster it was that threatened her. But now, there was no real monster, and she had no confidence
in any of this, and the thought of having no power filled her with dread, making her tremble all
over in a cold sweat. She was so afraid that she would have to watch, as her back was tied against
the rough bark of some tree, as someone—rather Rhal or Erik—was murdered before her eyes, and
she would not be able to do anything about it. And she was honestly not sure which thought
frightened her more—the murder of her beloved Rhal, her betrothed, or her Erik, her dear, sad Erik,
who did not deserve any of this cruelty she was bringing upon him. But if one of them died, no
matter which, she knew it break her completely and irrevocably, and that she would never fully
recover again if she had to witness something like that.

But she had to do this. As of right now, she was still engaged, and she was doing this for Rhal, no
matter how much it hurt her. She was doing this so that they could remain together in the future, so
that she could finally beat Fate. True, she was not sure if the means entirely justified the ends, or if
she even wanted to live with the ends at all, but she was doing this for Rhal, and he was going to be
her husband. And did she not love Rhal? He was her best friend, her darling Rhal who had played
with her when she was little more than a girl, who had given her her first kiss, her first taste of
love. She would die to protect him. That was love, was it not? What else could love be, if not that?

But even as she thought these things, Rhal began to speak, drawing her out of her torturous
thoughts. “I promise, I will be right there with you the whole time, just out of your line of sight, and
he will never get within ten feet of you—I swear it. You will never be in a moments’ harm, and as
soon as this whole affair is done, I can untie you, and you can be happily free again. I only ask that
you do this—just for a few, short moments—so that we can catch this… this demon, and never
have to worry about him again. Because, Chris, I have started to think that while he is here, he will
torment the two of us, whether physically or mentally, until we are dead. We must get rid of him.”

“I know,” she murmured, wrapping her arms around Rhal in an embrace to remind her that he was
hers, not Erik, and that it was him whom she loved. “I know. But can we not do it a different way?
Can I not just sit here and pretend to be in danger? Do I have to be tied up like this?”
Rhal kissed her gently. “Yes, Chris,” he whispered, all traces of that soldier part of him vanished. “I am sorry for it, but I think this is the best way. We must make things look convincing, you must understand. Who would fall for a farce that is not convincing? No, Chris. But I am sorry—I really am—because I know this will be scary for you. But, I swear, it will all be over in not more than ten minute’s time, and by then, we will have caught that brute they call ‘the Phantom.’ I promise.”

She nodded and drew away from him. There was no use arguing with him, when she could see that his mind would not be changed, no matter what she said or did, because he had already decided that this would be best, and because he had already made up his mind that nothing would hurt her. There was nothing she could do now except fight him on it or agree, and she did not want to fight him.

Silently, she backed up against a tree, until her back was pressed against the rough bark, and told Rhal that she was ready, that he could go ahead and tie her up now. He nodded and walked over to her, rope in hand, a spark flashing in his eyes at the thrill of the war that was near at-hand. With the feeling of a sword in his hands, Christine knew he would never listen to her pleas, because he was a soldier and, although she loved him, he remained a solider, first and foremost, above all else. So, she let him wrap the rope tightly around her, binding her to the tree, so tightly that she was hardly able to move more than a few inches in either direct. And with that, he took all her power from her, subjecting her, perhaps somewhat unknowingly, to whatever would happen in this little clearing, and giving her no real means of salvation, even if she had wanted it.

“I will be back in ten minutes’ time,” he told her, looking at her earnestly as he gently stroked back the curls around her face. “No matter what happens, I will come back for you then, if not before. You will only be like this for that long. I will let nothing happen to you. Remember, Chris, I love you. I will protect you from everything.”

She nodded but could find no words to say back to him, none that she meant anyway, and so, Rhal drew away from her, his hand already on his sword as his eyes left hers. It was too late for her to fight now—she had accepted this fate, her betrayal, and there was nothing more she could do except wait until those ten minutes were up.

“Rhal!” She called after him, as he walked away from, spinning his sword in his hand. He turned, the smile on his face fading as he saw the obvious distress written across her features.

“What is it, Chris?” He took a step nearer to her, and stopped, still several feet away from the tree, eyeing her with concern.

“When should I…” She swallowed hard. “When should I… start calling for help, or whatever it is you want me to do? When will I know it’s the right time?”

“Oh! Hm.” He frowned and looked around, as if searching for an answer, but with Lysander and Felipe already stationed further off in the woods, he found none. “I suppose once I get into the woods. As soon as you cannot see me, you can start calling for him. Just make sure that I am hidden.”

She nodded, feeling sick to her stomach, and he nodded back before withdrawing from her again, his sword now still in his hand. This at least was a small comfort to her, because she had told him a thousand times that if he continued to swing his sword around like he so often did, he would chop off an ear or an arm, or some other extremity. She was glad he heeded her now, at least.

After a few, short paces, he came to the tree line to her right and stood there for a moment, before turning to blow her one last kiss, a smile in those green eyes she knew so well. Then, she watched helplessly as his strong, male form disappeared into the cover of the woods, the trees hiding him...
almost immediately from her view, their branches like thin, shadowy fingers pulling him into
themselves. Now, she was alone, bound helplessly with her back to a tree like some sort of
sacrificial lamb, waiting for her reaper to come out of the woods. There was no one—at least not in
her view—to save her, no one to protect her, no one even to tell her what she was doing was wrong
or right. For those few moments, there was only her, without the presence of Erik or Rhal—just
one girl, bound to a tree, shaking with fright.

She took in a tremulous breath, closing her eyes briefly as she thought. Rhal was expecting her to
start screaming for help any minute now, as he had told her to, and doubtless so were the other
men. And yet, to pretend to be in pain, so that she could use Erik’s undying affection and care for
her as a means of his downfall because she knew he would do anything for her, seemed to her to be
beyond despicable, no matter what Rhal said. She could not do such a thing. He could not help his
love for her, any more than Rhal could help his, and although she knew Rhal thought he was
monstrous and completely and utterly evil, she knew he was not. There was good in Erik, and she
was not going to use that goodness to capture him. To do so would have made her a greater
monster than him. No, she refused to do such a thing.

And so, knowing she must do something soon, or Rhal would get restless waiting, she racked her
brains to think of something else she could do—some other way to lure him in, that would not be
taking advantage of the love he had for her. For a few, long moments, she could think of nothing,and began to panic, knowing that Rhal would get upset with her if she could not think of something
soon, knowing that she would hate herself forever if she used Erik’s care for her so cruelly—and
yet, she could not think of an alternative. Perhaps, she could simply call to him, but he might not
come at all if there was no urgency in her voice, after what had happened between them. He likely
never wanted to see her again, and so to call for him would most likely fall flat. And even if it did
not, she doubt Rhal would like it much if she called to him using his given name—calling him by
that always made Rhal appear on edge. But what other way was there to gain his attention?

And then, she came across it, suddenly and inexplicably. Closing her eyes, she began to sing, the
lyrics of a love ballad coming from her lips before she could consciously choose another song. She
did not even know how her mind had managed to supply the song—it was one she had not heard in
months at least—but it did, and somehow, she knew it was the right song to sing. And somehow,deep within her, she knew that this—her singing—would not fail her, and that if Erik heard her,Erik would come, although she had no idea why she felt that was a true assumption to make. There
was no guarantee that simply hearing her sing would draw him more to her than simply calling out
to him, but even so, Christine believed that there was a great difference between the two, and while
she did not think he would come if she called, he would if she sang. And so, resting her head
against the tree behind her, she let those sweet and tender words rise from her lips, their gentle
melody surrounding the woods around her, knowing he would hear and he would come.

She was not sure how long she sang for him, although it must have been a fair amount of time,because her song ended, and she was able to start it up again for the second time. But even so, she
knew—she knew that he would come, that he would be there, that her ploy would work. It was not
until she was half way through the second round of the song that her efforts were in any way
rewarded, and she heard that low, melodious, hypnotic voice calling to her from somewhere
nearby:

“Christine.”

It was not a question, just a simple acknowledgement that he had heard her, that he was nearby and
coming to her, although she could hear the faint tremor in his words. He was coming for her. Her
ploy had worked and she had betrayed him. She had betrayed him and he had only ever been good
to her. She had betrayed him and the only thing he had ever done to her was love her. She had
betrayed him and now he would be hurt (if not physically than at least in his tender heart) because it was her, his love, who had led him into this trap. She was betraying him and he was falling for it.

From behind her, she heard a hissed whisper that was painfully loud in the otherwise silent woods. But from that whisper, she knew the men had heard Erik also and that whatever she had set in effect by the promise to do all of this, it was beginning now and there was no way for her to stop it. All she could do now was to watch as the events played out before her eyes.

Silently, she prayed that Erik would notice somehow that this whole thing was a trap, that he would not come to help her, but even as she tried to convince herself that he was far too smart to fall for such a trap, she knew he would despite. From behind her, she heard the brush of branches being pushed aside as the men shuffled and moved, apparently readying themselves for battle. Her heart began to hammer against her chest. Everything was happening so fast and she had caused this—oh gods, she had caused this.

From in front of her, she heard his voice again, this time not as far away, in tones not so calm and even. There was a pervading sense of heartbreak in his words as he called from somewhere out of sight, “Why have you come back here, Christine?”

More whispers from behind her, more quiet footsteps. She squeezed her eyes shut. Erik was in front of her, her brothers and betrothed behind her, and just like that her two choices had placed themselves strategically exactly where they were set in her mind. Rhal and her brothers—the life that was meant for her, the life she was supposed to have accepted long ago, what was good and familiar for her to fall back on. And Erik. Erik—always just out of reach, continually shrouded in alluring mystery, the picture of all her dreams. These were her two paths. She could not choose one, not when one was behind and one before; she could not go both directions.

What if Erik truly was her Fate? She could not stop herself from doing what she was destined to do, could she? Why resist, if resistance was futile anyway? Yes, it was true that he would never truly be her choice in that way that Rhal was, but he would be her choice in a different way, because she still chose him even if she did know that that choice was what she was destined to choose all along. Did that make it any less valid? Did that make Rhal any more deserving of her affections than Erik? Surely not, because if she had been given the opportunity to try again—to restart all of this with a free mind—she would have chosen Erik, over and over again. It would always be Erik.

At that moment, tied against that tree with the bark scraping into her back, with footsteps coming from in front of her and behind her, she could not make a choice. Her mind had not considered all the possibilities, she had not thought about all the consequences, she had not yet come to terms with anything so concrete as choosing would be. But she did know this: she could not let Erik die for her actions, Fate or no, Rhal or no, love or no. Perhaps she would not marry him, but she could save him. Perhaps she was powerless against the Fates and against the gods and all the rest of the world, but she held enough power to keep him from being slain by Rhal’s cruel hand. That, she could do.

Her fingers slipped into the folds of her chiton and found the small, sharp knife she had stuck in her belt. She felt the hilt as her hand closed around it, cold against her palm. All she had to do was cut the rope and she would be free, perhaps not free from the decision she would inevitably have to make between Erik and Rhal, perhaps not free from the repercussions of her actions, but free of the bonds that could have tied Erik’s blood to her hands. That was all the freedom she needed at present. She moved the blade towards the rope that encircled her.

And then, everything happened all at once.
Erik came into view the moment the blade cut through the first piece of rope, his tall figure still a shadow painted against the trees. The sound of metal sliding across metal came behind her, the sound of swords being drawn, as she cut the second circle of the rope. Her name slipped from Erik’s lip as he saw that she was tied up, and he began to rush forward, already asking what had happened to her, as she sliced through the third and final circle of rope. The bonds fell from her, powerless now, as Erik walked towards her, his arms outstretched.

She cried out to him, the warning not even having the time to leave her lips before the first spear flew through the trees.

It was a bad throw, knocking off the tree she had previously been tied to, which interrupted its intended course, making it, instead, stick into a tree a foot or so to the left of Erik’s upper arm. But had the spear not hit the tree, it became clear to Christine that it would have stuck into his heart. The throw had not been one to frighten or to intimidate, it had been one to kill. Intentionally kill. And although she did not know who threw it, it made no difference to her because, suddenly, her promise to Rhal was void. He had tried to kill Erik.

Her breath caught in her throat, but this was no time for pause or hesitations. She could hear the men scuffling from behind her and talking to each other in full volume now, alerting Erik of their presence, if it was not clear to him already from the spear. Her legs began to move before she could fully work out what she wanted them to do, her only thought being that she had to protect Erik. In an instant, she had run from where she should have been bound to the tree to where Erik stood, his arms now against his side and his eyes still looking at the spear stuck in the tree behind him, still quivering from its flight.

At the feeling of her back against his chest, however, he sprang back to life, taking in the sight of her in front of him. His fingers curled painfully into her arms, which she had stretched as far as she could to either side of her, as he hissed, “Christine, what are you—“

But the words were lost when Rhal emerged from the forest, sword in hand, brow hard as steel as he stared at the two of them standing there together. Even the sight of her betrothed did not weaken Christine’s resolve and she stretched out her hands farther, blocking any opportunity for Rhal to hit Erik without hitting her first. Erik’s hands tightened on her arms but he did not try to push away her protection.

“Chris?” Rhal shouted, gesturing at her vaguely with his sword. “Chris, what are you doing? Get away! Get away from that man!”

As he spoke, Felipe and Lysander crawled from the woods also, Felipe still armed with his sword but Lysander lacking anything but his shield, with his spear still stuck in the tree. At their sudden appearance, she heard Erik swear behind her, realizing that his little resistance with Christine was outnumbered and out-skilled. But Christine knew that as long as she stood in front of him, he would be safe and she was not planning to leave him exposed.

A resounding gasp came from one of her brothers and she heard her name being mumbled in a shocked tone from the other but she did not care. “I am not moving, Rhal.” She told him, surprised by the strength in her voice. “You tried to kill him, so I cannot help you in this anymore. You… You cannot touch him. I will not let you. I’m sorry.”

Rhal’s lips parted as he came to understand that her position was voluntary and not forced, and Christine saw something flash across his face that she knew would never truly leave him after this. Whatever trust that had been between them was broken now. Despite her heartbreak knowing this, it did not change the fact that she did not regret her choice to protect Erik.
“I’m sorry too,” he murmured and she furrowed her brow in confusion. Then, he raised his sword in a position that stated anything but defeat and hearing Erik’s sharp intake of breath from behind her, she knew that Rhal would stop at nothing—nothing to kill his phantom.

Before she had time to think, she felt the grasp on her right arm tighten and her feet were jolted into action as Erik began to move, yanking her after him as he ran. And she ran too, not even turning when she heard Rhal screaming after them, yelling at her brothers to chase them, to kill that man. She ran, her hand slipping down to knot itself in Erik’s, not even caring where he took her. She had to keep him safe.

As they pounded through the woods, the shouts of the other men grew fainter behind them as the two of them ran through the familiar terrain, moving without hesitation, without pause, their steps nearly in sync with each other without the added weight of armor. Despite the situation, Christine thought she had not felt as free as she did at that moment in a long time, with the wind blowing through her hair, her pulse pounding in her ears, and Erik’s hand clinging to hers. She clutched her knife tighter in her free hand as they moved further into the woods, nearing their destination. Nearing their fate.

Chapter End Notes

Well, well, well-- what do you guys think? Ready for more? Let me know!
The War

Chapter Summary

In which the war breaks out...

Chapter Notes

Hello again, dearest readers! Well, here it is... the culmination of everything that has been happening for the last, like, five chapters. But that isn't to say it's the end of this fic because, trust me, it's definitely not. There's still more to come, so I hope you're not bored yet! Anyway, I wanted to say thank you and a special hello for all you lovely new-comers who left such kind comments on here-- I'm very happy to have you!

A quick note about this chapter: it's roughly 8,000 words long (sorry about that) but in it, you guys will finally get to see the true nature of the Phantom that you've been asking to see for so long. So, be warned-- this chapter is a bit gory.

I hope you all enjoy this one...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In a few more moments, they reached the front doors of Erik’s house, where it sat just as it had when she had left it the last time with tears in her eyes. In an instant, he flung the doors open with one hand, still hold tightly to her hand with the other, and threw her inside the entry way. She nearly fell at the force with which he pushed her, but managed to regain her balance on one of the marble pillars in front of her, grasping it for support, while he slammed the doors and bolted them, leaving no way for Rhal to enter. She stared at him as he turned back to face her, awaiting his reaction to all of what had just happened. But his face conveyed nothing to her, so she turned her attention back to her surroundings, looking at the place in which she had spent so many days.

It was then that Christine noticed the destruction that had happened within the house since she had left. Everywhere she looked, she saw upended tables, shards of broken clay from cracked pots, bits and pieces of shredded up wreaths, a chair missing two of its legs. He had destroyed his own house. Mouth slightly agape in horror at the sight in front of her, Christine looked around, turning in small steps to take in the damage he had done. It not only stretched from the entry way, but to the rest of the other rooms she could see as well—every piece of furniture was defaced in some way, and not even the smallest things seemed to have escaped his vengeful touch. Everything—everything—was ruined. Her eyes made their way back to where he stood, back still to her, his shoulders rising and falling heavily with uneven breaths. Fear laced through her.

“This was you?” She whispered, taking a hesitant step towards him. “You did this?”

His silence was answer enough and she inhaled sharply. “Why, Erik? Why did you do all this?”

He rounded on her and she was met with the cold stare of his mask, face-to-face, completely alone for the first time in days. Her heart fluttered within her and she stumbled backwards at the cold
fury in his eyes.

“Because you destroyed me, Christine!” He cried and although he did not move from where he stood, she shrank back further against her pillar. “Look around!” He snarled, his hands gesturing to the wake of his destruction. “This is what you have done to me!”

She could not speak as he stared at her, his gold eyes broken, his chest heaving with breaths. She did not know what to say, what to do, how to calm the storm that raged in the man in front of her.

He shook his head, his eyes flickering closed. “And now,” he continued in a deadly whisper, “And now, you… you have returned and you stand here as if you expect me to… to love you after everything you have done to me! For all the lies and all the betrayal you have dealt upon me…” He shook his head again, his voice trailing off into silence.

“Erik, I…” A lump began to form in her throat but she forced it down. She could not cry now. “I am sorry for this, for everything…”

His eyes flashed open in an instant. “You are sorry?” He slammed his hand down on the wall next to him and the sudden sound that followed made Christine jump. “You are sorry? You are sorry, and yet you come back here again, like a knife to an old wound. You are sorry, and yet were you not trying to kill me only a minute ago? And now—and now, you come back to me as if you were some sort of hero—some sort of savior for protecting me. But it was you—I know it was you! You came up with that plot! You wanted me killed! You—you—you… And you are telling me you are sorry?”

“Yes!” She cried, her shrill voice nothing in comparison to the dark anger of his. “Do you think I wanted any part of that plot? They tied me up, Erik! They forced me into it! I wanted nothing to do with it, I did not want to hurt you. I never did. So, yes—I am sorry, because this—all of this,” she gestured to his house, “was not what I wanted. Not what I meant. And I am truly sorry.”

Erik began to laugh, a low, humorless sound that made shivers crawl up her spine. “They forced you into it,” he repeated, his voice hard. “And yet you held a knife the whole time. You were never truly tied up, Christine, so do not claim that you were.”

She looked at the knife in her hand that she had nearly forgotten about until he pointed it out. At his words, however, she dropped it onto the floor with the rest of Erik’s shattered belongings. But there was truth in his claim and she could not deny it, no matter how much she wished she could. Instead, she simply said, “I did not want to, though. I never wanted to.”

“But you did.”

She lowered her head, the lump reforming in her throat. “Yes. I did.”

They stood there in silence for a moment, neither one of them looking at the other, the space between them full of tension. Christine had hoped, perhaps in spite of reason, that there might be some peace between them after how she had protected him, after she had returned to him. But now, it seemed things had just become worse by her presence, old wounds reopened because of her, and she did not know how to heal them. “But I am sorry,” she murmured at length. “Please believe me when I tell you that. I would change it all if I could—I would.”

She heard Erik sigh from across the room. “You would? Yes, you would. I might even believe you, my dear, if every word you had told me had not been a lie—lie after lie after lie—all under the pretense that you did it for me, did it to keep me happy. But it never was for me, was it? Because here you are now, back in the Phantom’s clutches again because you could not leave well enough
alone, because you had to return here and haunt me again. You had the choice to make things better, to leave me in peace, and you chose instead to return so that you could kill what was left of me. You are not sorry. Do not lie. I am sick of your lies, Christine.”

Something broke inside of her at that and she walked towards him, her fists clenched at her sides. “You do not get to tell me what I am and what I am not. I did want to make you happy, Erik, but everywhere you looked, you saw only sorrow and pain no matter what I did. I am not… I am not just another person who wants to kill ‘the Phantom’, so stop seeing me as that. I did not come here with my only thought to hurt you as badly as I possibly could. Stop living in the past and open your eyes! It was all for you—everything I did, but you were too stuck in the past to see it!”

A low growl came from somewhere deep in his throat and he lunged forward at her, gripping her arms. “Do not speak to me of my past. You know nothing of what I have endured. You know nothing of what I have seen, so do not even pretend to understand me. I have seen things that are more horrific than anything your pretty, little mind can even think of imagining. I have endured pain that you do not even know exists. Do not speak to me of the past, girl—you have no business there. You know nothing of me.”

He pushed her away from him, making her stumble backward and nearly fall if she had not caught herself again on the pillar. But his words only made the fire within her burn brighter. She shoved herself back off the pillar and marched back to face him, fists clenched at her sides. “I am not a child! I know the world! I have experienced pain too. You are not the only person who has suffered, so do not act like it.” She sucked in a deep breath, meeting his burning stare with her own. “And you think I know nothing of you? You think that after all this time you are still a mystery to me? Well, you are not! I know you, Erik, even if you like to think yourself too complicated for anyone else to understand. You are not! And I know enough about you to know that all the suffering you speak of, you bring it upon yourself! You enjoy it! I know you do. You could have moved past it, but you choose not to, always. You dwell on it, you let it fester and fester in you, until your whole mind is poisoned with it! But it is not an excuse for you anymore. Your past is not you! Your pain does not make up who you are! And do not act like it makes you better than anyone else.”

He narrowed his eyes, the anger practically radiating white-hot off of him. “Better than anyone else? You think I act like I am better than others? No! I know I am despicable. I am a demon. I am a fiend and I will not pretend to be anything different. I am the Phantom! I am a creature of night, of death, of Hades himself! And you know nothing of that part of me—nothing!”

“I know enough,” she snarled back at him, matching every inch of his rage, “to know that you are no more than a man, no matter what else you might pretend to be. You are only a man. You are no different than the rest of us. You are no phantom, Erik.”

He took in a heavy breath, his eyes still gleaming, but his lips did not open again. Silently, he turned away from her, leaving Christine wondering if her words had stoked the fire burning within him or quelled it—at present, she could not tell, although she prayed it was the former.

From outside she heard distant yelling, and although which of the men’s voices she heard remained indistinguishable, they were far enough away from the house, judging from the sound of their calls, that they did not break her concentration. Erik, however, tensed momentarily and drifted closer to the door. But the voices faded, leaving them once more in silence. For a while, it was only their labored breathing echoing throughout the broken rooms. Then, “Why?”

Erik continued to face the doors, leaving the open-ended question to hang in the air between them for some time, and when it became clear that he was not going to say anything more, Christine
demanded, “Why, what?”

But before he could answer, she heard a familiar yell from outside—Rhal. He had returned, just like he had so long ago, the last time she had been in Erik’s house. The past hit her again with such force that it nearly knocked the breath out of her—it was all happening again.

Erik flashed her a look, any trace of his gentle interior vanished. “Ah! Christine, it is your boy come to visit us! How pleasant! He has come all the way here to kill me and save you… It seems you have found yourself a true hero.”

Her eyes flickered to a nearby window as she heard more indistinguishable shouting coming from nearby. It seemed that it was only Rhal shouting, but she did not doubt that her brothers-in-law were close by, waiting with her betrothed. She swallowed hard, suddenly realizing how dangerous the situation was likely about to become.

“Erik, I am going to try to sort this out, but you must not hurt him. I think… I think if I can talk to him, I can make him see reason, but you must let me do that without you. He will only want to kill you if he sees you, and I will not let that happen.”

In reality, her claim was not founded entirely in truth, because she was far less than sure she would be able to convince Rhal of anything while he was in such a mood, or perhaps even once that had passed. In fact, she was not sure if he could be reasoned with at all. But she felt that if she could talk to him, perhaps she could do something, even if that something was as simple as telling him that she could not marry him if he continued to act like this.

But Erik only laughed at her request, a deadly, mirthless sound that reminded her more of a sob than any sort of true laugh. “Are you hearing yourself at this present moment? After all that has happened—after all you have done to me—you think even for a moment that I will let you out of my sight and back into the company of that—of that boy? Gods, Christine! No! This is not the day that I will die, not now that I finally have you back with me again—even if at present, I am not sure if I have ever hated a human being more than you, my dear. No. You are here now, and you are sorely mistaken if you think I will simply let you leave again, like you have every time before.”

Hearing the word ‘hate’ from his mouth—after all the times he had begged for her love, for her acceptance—stunned her into silence. Ever since he had first told her that he loved her, Christine had never once considered that his views could change, despite what she might do. It had always seemed a concrete thing in her mind that he should love her, and though she had toyed with the concept of him hating her, she had never seriously considered that that might be the reality she would have to face. And now, hearing it from his lips seemed so surreal, so opposite of anything she had known from him that fear pulsed through her. She did not know this man. She did not know what to expect from him next.

“Erik…” she murmured weakly, any comprehensive train of thought lost in the unnatural situation. She could not speak.

“You will not speak to him,” he repeated, his voice cold as iron. “You will not leave me. We are together now, you and I, and I cannot let you leave again. I will not. That boy will not take you from me while I am alive, I swear to you that much.”

Having said that, in a fluid motion faster than she could follow, he snatched her knife from off the ground, cut a piece of fabric from his toga, and fastened it around her wrist before she could shake off the mental numbness that had settled upon her.
“What are you doing?” She asked, watching as he wound the fabric around both her wrist and his, circling both of them in an inescapable loop. Breathless, she realized what he meant to do before he answered, and tried to pull her hand from his. But the fabric was pulled too tight by then, and even her resistance was futile. Her heartbeat quickened.

Erik watched as she did this and, seeing that the bond he had created was strong enough to keep her connected to him, smiled a slow, deadly smile. “I am keeping you here, just as I promised. You will not run back to your boy, and he will not get the satisfaction of having you with him again. You are staying here with me, and now you have no choice to do anything otherwise.”

And with that, he knotted the fabric, both around her wrist and his, ensuring that there could be no escape from him unless one of them were to cut the binds between them, and with Erik holding the only knife in visible proximity, Christine doubted the likelihood of that happening.

“Christine! I am coming for you!”

Rhal’s voice echoed through the walls of the house and Christine, unthinkingly, snatched her hand away from Erik, pulling his arm closer to her with the action. From just outside the entryway, there was a loud bang as something—likely Rhal—slammed itself against the bolted doors, which only creaked slightly at the sudden force. Erik’s lip twisted into a cruel smile. Christine’s heart jumped.

“Your lover is a determined man, it would seem, my dear.”

“Leave her alone!” Rhal cried from just outside the door. “Do not touch her, you brute! Mark my words, I will take her from you and I will kill, as sure as the sun will rise. I will kill you.”

Erik viewed the door for a moment, his masked face betraying no emotions, as Christine stood beside him, her heart hammering against her chest, her pulse pounding in her ears. She had to warn him.

“Rhal!” she cried, attempting to get closer to the door and to Rhal before Erik snatched her back to him. “Rhal, it’s useless! Just go! I am safe here! Please, go! Do not try to kill him! Do not try!”

Erik yanked her closer to him and, before she could warn him further, covered her mouth with his thin, cold hand. “If he wants to kill me,” he whispered, sending shivers down her spine as his lips brushed her ear, “then let him try. Why spoil the fun so soon, Christine? After all, is this not what you intended to have happen all along? Do you not want him to kill me? So, let him try.” Then, he pushed her away from him again, separating the two of them as far as their tied hands would allow.

“I don’t want him to kill you!” She nearly screamed at him. “I don’t want you dead!” Why could he not understand her? Why did he not believe that this had all been a mistake, that she had desired none of what was happening now? How could he believe, after everything, that she wanted Rhal to kill him?

“Your word holds no truth for me anymore!” Erik yelled back at her, matching every inch of her own intensity. “I cannot believe anything you say! Your words are poison!”

A sob rose in her throat from the amount of frustration rising in her, pulsing in her veins and clouding her vision. “Why can’t you just believe that I am telling the truth? Why is that so hard for you after everything I have done for you?”

“Because you have done nothing for me!” He cried, yanking them back together again, his face inches from hers, the rage that blurred his features not even hidden by the mask. “You have lied time and time again. You speak words of kindness—words of affection, but then everything you do
—everything is a knife to my heart. Everything you do tears up any truth in your words. You are a liar, Christine!”

“At least I am not a murderer like you!” She screamed, the words flying off her tongue before she had time to consider their consequence. But at this moment, she was so angry that it hardly seemed to matter—the fire burning in her mind had blotted out all hope of kindness and sympathy.

Erik stared at her in silence, his eyes narrowed and dark. “A murderer,” he said at last, repeating her words with such evenness that she could almost believe that he was not burning with unrestrained anger. “A murderer. Well, perhaps I ought to demonstrate my own talents to you, in return for all the times you have done the same to me, with all your pretty lies. Yes, you have never gotten a chance to see me take the life of another, have you, dear Christine? You have never seen the way the light vanishes from someone’s eyes when I draw a blade across their throat. Yes, I think I must show you—return the favor, perhaps. And why not start with your lovely... heroic... Boy.”

And before she could react, he had wrenched the door back open to reveal Rhal, gripping his sword tightly with both hands, who was so taken aback by the sudden opened door that he hardly reacted at all when Erik stabbed Christine’s knife into the crease of his left elbow.

Christine screamed.

It was not until after the blade was lodged into his arm that Rhal flinched backward, howling in pain, letting go of the sword so he could grab the hilt and pull it out of his arm. Christine only had time to see a momentary flash of red—so much red—before Erik yanked her back with him as he began to run through his house, navigating expertly through the maze of broken glass and upturned furniture.

Christine could hardly breathe. “Oh gods,” she gasped as her legs carried her blindly after him. “Oh gods, oh gods...” She collapsed suddenly, her knees giving out from under her at the remembrance of all that blood, of hearing Rhal’s scream of pain from behind her... But Erik pulled her back to her feet and dragged her mercilessly after him as he ran.

As if in a dream, she watched Erik stoop down and pick some object off the ground, some object that gleamed in the light, sending a metallic shine across the walls. A sword. Her breath caught in her throat as she stared at that weapon, designed so well for destruction and death. The weapon he meant to use on Rhal.

Erik’s eyes met hers briefly and, seeing the horror that she knew was reflected in them, swung his sword in a wide circle. “You say I am a murderer, Christine? Then, I shall show you murder. I will show you death, since that is what you see in me.”

“No,” she gasped weakly, as she heard Rhal’s pained moans sounding from somewhere else inside the house. “No, no, Erik. You can’t hurt him, please—leave him alone. Please, don’t hurt him. I don’t think you are a murderer, Erik—I didn’t mean it. I was angry and it just...”

“It is too late for that,” he snapped, grasping his sword loosely at his side with a sort of grace that Christine knew only came with an experienced swordsman. “You have made your choice and it is too late for you to take your words back now. We shall fight, and we shall see who wins. Isn’t that fair, Christine? Why do you object to that?”

She heard a weak cry of ‘Christine?’ echo through the house and somehow, the broken call immediately started her back into a state of awareness and decisiveness that she had thought lost only moments before. She yanked Erik’s tied hand back to her side.
“I do not want his blood on my hands, nor do I want yours. Just put an end to this. Now. Don’t hurt him and I can make him walk away. I swear it. Just let him be. Then, it can just be us again, like you always wanted. He will not come back here. I will even…” She took a deep breath, her thoughts flying. She knew there was one thing that she could promise him that would make this whole war stop, and one thing alone. But was it worth it? Would it be worth it to offer so much to put an end to all the fighting? Would it even stop him if she did offer?

But yes, it had to, and it would all be worth it if it did. She exhaled, and finished. “… I will even marry you, if that is what you wish. I promise. But you cannot hurt him.”

She wondered as soon as the words left her mouth if she truly meant them all at once—if there was still any affection for him in her—, or if she had said them solely to get Erik to comply with her will. Once he managed to recapture some semblance of logical thought, she knew he would let her leave again as she always had before, even if it just broke his poor heart again. But even with that knowledge, did she mean what she had said? Would she truly have married him, even if she could have gotten out of it?

She closed her eyes. Yes. She would. If it meant that Rhal could walk away from this unharmed and that Erik stood no more chance of fighting to the death with her betrothed, then yes, she meant it. She would marry him if it solved all the problems she had created. And even if it did not, she somehow felt no fear attached to her claim, nor any sort of hesitance at all. She did want to marry him, and although the idea of leaving Rhal still seemed wrong to her, the thought of spending her life with Erik seemed so infinitely better that it cancelled out any qualms she might have had about leaving Rhal. Yes, it was a promise made under pressure and yes, the bond between them was, at present, tense and precarious but she meant what she had said and wanted it all the same. Even now.

As she opened her eyes, she was met with Erik’s frown. “You would marry me. You would marry me if I said I would stop all of this right now? Do you mean that?”


His lips parted slightly and his eyes widened at her words, his hand falling limp at his side, pulling hers with it. She felt a faint tremble course through him. “Forever? Together… Forever?”

“Yes,” she affirmed, her voice weak but her resolve still strong, despite everything. “Together forever.”

He blinked and shook his head slowly, the confusion shining in his eyes. “Christine… I…”

The sudden cry of ‘You!’ shattered the moment between them and in an instant, Erik had snapped the sword into position again, as Rhal lumbered through the doorframe, his eyes smoldering. “You! You… You fiend! You demon! Get away from her!”

And with that, Erik’s demeanor became stony once more, his emotion masked behind him eyes and his muscles all tensed to fight. Whatever her promise to him had begun to melt, Christine saw, was frozen again now and it seemed that she had missed the window in which she could reason with him. The Phantom was back.

“Erik,” she hissed, gripping his hand against hers. “Erik, please—forever, if you will only leave him be. Please…”

He shook off her grasp and took a step closer to Rhal, his chest rising and falling rapidly with uneven breaths. “And if I do not?” He demanded in a low, yet deadly voice. “What will you do to
me if I do not do as you ask?”

Rhal lifted his own sword above his head, revealing for the first time the damaged Erik had wreaked upon his arm. Blood coursed from the wound in red rivulets and all around it, there was crimson evidence of blood that had already been split and had dried, forming an uneven circle around his elbow. Christine sucked in a breath.

“I—I’ll kill you!” Rhal cried, jabbing his sword into the empty air for emphasis. Fear ran through Christine at that sight, at the coldness in his green eyes, the angry flush in his cheeks, and in that instance, she knew that he meant those words—he would kill Erik without any hesitation.

But the same fear did not seem to be at work in Erik because he simply shrugged and replied, “I would be surprised that, after all those who have attempted to do that very thing, you should be the first to succeed, boy.”

Rhal spat at him.

 “…And as you can perhaps see,” Erik continued, as if nothing had happened, “your lovely betrothed and I are bound, wrist to wrist, so if you ever want to have the blessing of having her again, you will have to kill me. That is the only way you will get her back. And unless that happens, she is mine.”

Rhal’s eyes flickered over to her, showing true doubt in them for the first time since Christine could truly remember. And if she had been forced to admit it, she knew that the likelihood of Rhal besting Erik in combat was minimal to none, and that if one of them was to be killed, it would more likely be him than Erik. Suddenly breathless, she ran forward to him, as far as her wrist would let her.

“Rhal—go. Please. I am serious. I have this situation under control but he will kill you when it comes down to it. Please, go now. This isn’t your battle to fight! It is mine and—“

“This is my fight, Christine!” He yelled, his cheeks flushed. “He’s taken you and you are mine, and I must win you back from this… this creature now! I have to save you from this, because you have gotten yourself—and all of us—into this mess!”

All the old anger from having to participate in this betrayal at all came roaring back to life within her, stronger than before with Rhal’s words as fuel. “What? I am not a child for you to watch over and… and to protect! I am my own person! And neither of us would have gotten into this mess if it wasn’t for you, but you couldn’t leave Erik alone, because you were jealous! Because you could not accept the fact that it was possible I might love someone more than you—because who could be better than you? And if you hadn’t have come bursting in here to ‘save me,’ or whatever it was you thought you were doing, I could have solved this whole thing, but now that’s all ruined, thanks to you!”

A stunned silence enveloped all three of them at her words, leaving Christine to wonder briefly if she had ever said anything so honest and, moreover, so harsh to Rhal before. No— of course, she had not. She would never have dreamed of saying anything of such a nature to her sweetheart until recently and even then, would never have actually said it. And yet, despite how odd it felt to talk to him in such a way, she felt strangely liberated from having spoken the truth to him.

“Just go,” she told him with a shake of her head. “Just go, Rhal. Please. Leave it alone. I… I will marry Erik and I will be happy here, but it is not your duty to shed his blood for me. Because the thing is, Rhal… I think that I love him now. Not you. I will be happy here, with him. So, please—just leave.”
“No,” she heard Rhal gasp. “Chris, no!”

She was met, then, with the sight of Rhal, now pale where he had been flushed, although if it was because of the small pool of blood beneath him or her words, she did not know. But either way, she knew she had broken his heart. And yet, even so, she was happy that she had finally done so because the truth was, she was not sure that she could have ever been happy with Rhal. She did love him—yes—but she had come to see that there were different types of love and that, perhaps, one cannot retain the childlike infatuation of a first love forever.

“I am sorry, Rhal,” she whispered. And she was—sorry that she had hurt him and sorry that she had let this masquerade go on long enough that her love had become a lie. But she was not sorry for saying the truth.

Rhal shook his head, a shadow passing over his green eyes. “No, Chris… No. You do not mean this.” He then cast his gaze back to Erik, readying the sword at his side. “He… He did this to you! I am not sure how, but I know he did. I know that you love me—you must love me! Not this… this thing, this vile beast.”

Christine could hardly believe her ears. She had spoken the truth to him for the first time since their engagement and he did not believe her? How could he not believe her? “Rhal!” She gasped, but he cut her off before she could start.

“You!” He snarled, jabbing his sword towards Erik. “How did you do this to her? Let her go, for gods’ sake, let her go! She does not deserve this! She would never love you!”

Erik gasped in a shaky breath from behind Christine and she turned to look at him, having been so concerned with Rhal’s reaction, she had not yet been able to see how Erik was doing. Even her first glance at him told her that he knew what she had said was truth—his eyes were wide, his posture rigid, his sword shaking in his hand. She took a slow step backward towards him, clasping the fingers she could reach of his bound hand in hers. His hands were so cold. He blinked

“You doubt her words? You think I could possibly…” A look of the purest disgust crossed his face. “Did you not just hear her? She has chosen me! Get out of my house, or I truly will kill you, despite her wishes.”

Rhal raised his sword. “Then, kill me. I am not leaving unless it is with her.” When both Erik and Christine remained frozen, still recovering from the shock of what had just happened, Rhal raised his sword and screamed, “Kill me!”

“No! Rhal, don’t—”

Erik raised his sword as well, slashing it down in an arc as he began to cross over to his opponent, his long strides impossible for Christine to keep up with. “I will take great pleasure in doing so, I assure you,” he snarled, gripping his sword tighter in his free hand as he came toe-to-toe with Rhal, boring into him with those golden, glaring eyes.

The first move was made by Rhal. He heaved his sword down towards Erik’s neck in a sloppy death-blow that Erik easily avoided with a stroke of his own sword. At the first instance of war, however, he jerked his right hand behind him, forcing Christine back as well, keeping her safely under the protection of his tall form.

Fueled by the frustration of having Erik deflect his blow so easily, Rhal slashed his sword down again and although Erik avoided this one too, his defense was slower than it had been the previous hit. Rhal must have noted this, and soon, a blur of bronze followed his sword as he attacked on
Erik’s every side, jabbing and jamming in every direction he could, no matter how sloppy.

She could only watch as Rhal’s sword met Erik’s in a flash of gold, and then as Erik brushed off the attacks with simple parries time and time again, as if Rhal were nothing. Perhaps Erik could not tell, but Christine could see it in Rhal’s eyes that he was becoming enraged by Erik’s lack of attacking, if he was not enraged already by the fact that his betrothed had been abducted by another man. But his rage was making him reckless, Christine saw, and his recklessness was making him fight badly, and, if he was fighting badly, it was only a matter of time before he mis-stepped and Erik ended him for his one, small mistake.

“Stop it, Rhal!”

At the sound of her voice, Rhal made an especially daring thrust at Erik, stabbing blindly at his chest, his moves entirely devoid of any of that gracefulness that she had so often heard attributed to sword-fighters. And Erik, clearly not expecting such a move, only barely stopped the sword from piercing his own chest, and stumbled backward as the force of the blow jolted him off balance. As he stepped backward, his shoulder collided with hers, and any chance he had of regaining his balance was lost immediately as she fell backwards with him, without anything to break her fall except the floor, pulling him down with her. The floor smashed into her first, Erik second, nearly crushing her as the whole of his weight landed on top of her. Then, she heard a metallic sort of crashing, and, as Erik stumbled to his feet again, she realized what she had heard had been his sword, flying out of his grasp and landing some ways away on the stone floor.

Her heart contracted—Erik was defenseless. She snapped her head up, as Erik’s movements pulled her onto her knees, and saw that Rhal had seen what had happened as well, and that he was not going to let this opportunity go to waste. He raised his sword over his head, his eyes gleaming, yelling incoherently, and Christine watched, in horror, as that sharp, life-taking weapon swooped down from over his head, flying towards Erik’s exposed neck as he struggled to regain his balance from Christine’s extra weight tied to him. She saw it all happening a moment before he did, and she screamed his name desperately, her mind racing, all her thoughts centered around one idea: he is going to die, he is going to die, he is going to die…

Erik turned, saw the sword flying through the air towards him, a life-ended blow, and reacted faster than Christine would have thought a person able to do. He had nothing with which to defend himself, but that did not stop him, and he raised his right hand, dragging her left with it. For a brief second, confusion clouded her senses, before she realized what was happening, with a sharp inhale, a second before he caught the sword in his palm. His fingers closed around the blade as its momentum slowed, mere inches from her own hand. She could feel the hot blood running freely off his hand and onto hers, as he tightened his fingers around the now stopped blade and threw it to the side before letting go of it entirely, leaving a bloody handprint on the metal, the crimson a stark contrast with the sharp bronze.

She expected him to start howling in pain—because surely, his hand must hurt horribly, given that he had likely cut it through to the bone in catching that sword as he had—but he did not, and, from what little of his face she could see from where she was standing, Christine saw a slow smile stretch across his face as he raised his hand, dripping with blood.

“You think you can hurt me, boy?” He roared. “I feel nothing!” And laughing hysterically, he grabbed a shard from some shattered pot on the floor beside him and flung it at Rhal, who only barely had enough time to cover his face with his shield before the shard struck it and broke into a million pieces, all spraying different directions. Erik used this time to grab his sword from the ground and was already centered again as Rhal lowered his shield, an obvious fear in his eyes.
“What are you?” Rhal asked him, looking at him with narrowed eyes and standing completely still for the first time since he had entered into Erik’s house. “What sort of thing are you?”

“Me?” Erik laughed again, raising his sword as he did so, the blood still dripping off his tied hand. “I am the Phantom! A shade damned to dwell on this earth for eternity, always stuck halfway between life and Hades. I am Death personified, Suffering with a face, the Terror that walks the earth—I daresay you have heard of me?”

And without waiting for a reply, he struck his sword down again, nearly slicing through Rhal’s neck in a stroke that was clearly meant to kill, but Rhal spun out of the way at the last moment, and most of the blow was absorbed by his armor, the blade only barely catching the skin on his shoulder, leaving a trail of blood in its wake. Rhal let out a cry at that, and dropped his shield so he could take his sword with both hands, as Erik struck at him again. This time, Rhal stopped the blade from making contact with with his own skin, and then, the two were fighting in earnest again, in a blur of gold, amidst a storm of clanging bronze.

“Stop!” Christine cried again from behind Erik, as her eyes flickered between this sword and that, her heart slamming against her chest, and blood running cold with more fear at every strike, every blow. “Stop it, stop it, stop it!”

Without a moment of consideration, she tried to run between the two men, her mind grasping blindly at straws to stop what was happening, to keep them from killing each other. But the moment she lurched into motion, Erik jerked his right hand further behind him, forcing all of her forward momentum backwards so rapidly that she almost fell to the ground again.

“Stay back, Christine!” she heard Erik hiss from in front of her, his words interrupted by the clashing of the two swords. She nodded breathlessly, hovering behind him as she continued to watch this nightmare play out in front of her eyes, knowing that she had caused this, that this was all her fault.

Clang after clang sounded through the room as the swords met over and over again, scraping off each other just narrowly enough for both their owners to avoid scraping their own skin. Christine only just had the time to praise the gods that neither man was dead yet and to pray, briefly, that things stayed that way before Erik’s sword slashed down in a blur of gold just under Rhal’s armor, slicing Rhal’s tunic and stomach open in a move so perfectly timed that Rhal could not defend himself from it at all. She heard herself screaming as the blood began to flow, red, from the laceration across his stomach, running over his clothes and dripping onto the floor.

For half a second, Christine thought he might be dead and she tried to rush to him, her only thought to stop the enormous amount of gore pouring from him. Gods, it was everywhere. But again, Erik jerked her back and Rhal, hearing her sharp cry, shot his head up once more. His face was ashen and his hands shaking, but he was still very much alive.

“Rhal! Rhal, please! Stop it! Please, stop it! Please, don’t do this anymore!”

In response, he only screamed, a cry of agony tearing from his mouth as he raised his sword once more and brought it down hard on Erik, hammering down on his shoulder before he could fully block it. And more blood—everywhere. Christine felt a sob rise in her throat as Erik, too, lifted his sword, a grimace twisting across his face. There was no sign of them stopping this anytime soon—not until one of them lay dead on the floor in a puddle of their own blood and the other just barely alive. Neither would stop. Neither would live. Oh gods, oh gods...

Seeing the blood beginning to pour down his arm from the wound in his shoulder, Erik began to fight even more savagely and merciless than before, hacking at Rhal again and again, the attacks
badly aimed but continuous and unrelenting. Christine could only watch as Rhal, trying and only barely managing to stop one of the sloppy attacked aimed straight at his face, stumbled backward and only just caught himself on the wall behind him. In a moment, Erik was on him, cornering him against the wall as he attacked again and again and again, each time the blade of his sword cutting closer to Rhal’s exposed throat as Rhal tried desperately to save himself. She could hardly breathe—he was going to die, Erik was going to kill him, he was going to die...

A sudden blur of gold followed Erik’s sword as he slashed it downward, apparently aiming for Rhal’s already damaged stomach again and Rhal, catching this a moment before it happened, slammed down his own sword to protect himself. In the space of a second, Erik whipped his sword back to himself as Rhal’s weapon lingered lower to protect his midsection. And then, there was a sickening crunch as Erik brought the end of his sword down on Rhal’s fist. Hard. Christine heard the snap of bones even from where she stood behind Erik. Rhal’s agonized screams followed immediately afterward, his sword falling from his hand as he clutched the already bruising fingers to himself.

“Rhal!”

And just like at, he had lost the fight. He was defenseless, his sword now some feet away from him, laying where Erik had kicked it after it had fallen to the ground. Even if Rhal had been able to grab it, his fingers were clearly smashed and there was no possible way he could have held anything in them. He groaned, his eyes meeting Christine’s briefly. In them, there was defeat. He knew that he had lost as well as she did.

“I think I will enjoy this immensely,” Erik growled, yanking Christine forward so he could grab his sword with both hands, despite the blood still dripping off his right one.

In that moment, as Erik held his sword ready for the death-blow, the constrains of time seemed to disappear entirely. Thoughts darted around her head, short and panicked and screaming, of Rhal when he had only been a boy, with all that unruly white-blonde hair. And Rhal, her first love, kissing her for the first time under the moonlight, tender and unsure. And Rhal, her friend, sitting with her as she sewed, telling her whatever silly thought was on his mind as she laughed at him. And Rhal, her rock, holding her the day her father had died as she sobbed into his neck. And Rhal, in front of her, bloodied, defeated.

She was about to lose him.

She screamed—ran forward, only just permitted the freedom to do so because Erik was hold the sword with his right hand now, making him unable to push her back. She ran forward, shoving her body between them just as Erik’s sword began to slice downward for the kill. But her body was already there and her arms were outstretched in front of Rhal even if they were shaking—she was there for him. She closed her eyes.

If it was too late already and Erik could not stop the sword before it reached its target and killed her instead of him, she would be happy. If it meant that she could keep Rhal from dying, she would have thrown herself in front of a sword for all eternity. If she could stop him from losing his life this way, she was happy to do it. She could not let him die this way, not by Erik’s hand, not because of this mess of a situation she had caused. She could not and she would not. So, as she stood there, between her two loves, her arms outstretched to embrace the cold reality of that sword, she was happy. Her Rhal would be safe.

She was happy.

Metal shrieked past her ear, the wind from the blow caressing her face, and she wondered briefly if
this was death—if Erik had truly inadvertently killed her in Rhal’s place. She felt no pain, no sorrow. She was at peace.

Then, she heard a terrible cry.

“Christine!”

There was a clatter of metal on stone and she opened her eyes just soon enough to see Erik’s weapon quivering slightly on the ground. She looked up and was met with those golden eyes, staring at her in horror.

“Christine, Christine—”

He looked down for the briefest moment and she, following his gaze, saw on the ground strands of brown curls—her hair. He had been close enough to killing her that he had cut her hair. Tentatively, she reached up and felt the place where she was missing those strands of her hair. She caught her breath.

She had been less than an inch away from dying.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry to leave this chapter at such a cliff-hanger like that, but this one ended up so long that I had to end it somewhere and I figured this was probably the best place. But I'm very sorry if you're not satisfied! That being said, how did you like this chapter? How did you think the war went? Let me know!
Healing, Part One

Chapter Summary

In which fragile tears between people are stitched back together...

Chapter Notes

Hello again, everyone! So sorry it's been so long since I updated... I had a lot of stuff going on for school but good news! I'm basically done with senior year! Everything that's actually important has been done and everything left doesn't really matter! So, I'm hoping I'll have a lot more time to write with this new freedom haha! But thank you for all your patience, especially since the last chapter was a bit of a cliffhanger.

And some more quick notes that actually have to do with this chapter: As you can see, it's a two parter because after I finished writing this chapter, I saw that it was around 11,000 words and while I would have been okay with posting 9,000 words, 11,000 seemed like a bit much. So, I divided it more less in half and the next half will be up tomorrow, so the wait won't be long. So, if you end up thinking this chapter's kinda weird and doesn't have much resolution, that's because it's not a full chapter! Also, this chapter deals a lot with the aftermath of the injuries of the last chapter, so it's a little graphic too. Anyway, enough- I hope you all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From behind her, she felt Rhal’s fingers grab into her arms, pulling them back to her sides as he wrapped her in an embrace, murmuring under his breath, “Why did you do that, Chris? Why? You should have just let him kill me. You could have died, Chris. You could have died…”

Somehow, her mind could not fathom it all as she continued to stare into Erik’s shocked eyes in front of her, as Rhal held onto her from behind. She had been less than an inch away from dying. For Rhal. By Erik’s hand. She had nearly died…

“Christine…” Erik murmured again, reaching his free hand out to her gingerly, tracing the outline of her face but never coming near enough to touch it. “Oh, gods…”

That was all it took for Rhal to remember his foe. He pulled his arms from Christine in slowly and shakily, and pushed her out of the way as he stumbled closer to Erik, the blood from his wounds still dripping all over the tile floor. “You!” he growled, pointed the broken hand at him. His pointer and middle fingers were now both blackened, as well as a significant portion of his knuckles. “You nearly killed her—you monster! I hope Hades damns you forever! You could have killed her! You could have killed her! See what a monster he is, Chris? See what he is? He nearly killed you! You almost died!”

His words faded out as he struggled to keep his balance, but his eyes showed fury and unrestrained hatred that Christine had never seen before on his face. She stepped forward to catch him as he stumbled backward, just barely supporting him enough to guide him to the wall he had been
cornered against just moments before to give him something to lean against. His eyes flickered closed and he sucked in an unsteady breath.

She just barely had the time to realize that perhaps he was weak from lack of blood—there was so, so much of it now and everything seemed to be coated with red—when his head lolled to the side and he collapsed down the wall, his legs giving out from under him as consciousness left him. She gave a sharp cry as he fell at her feet, her mind still reeling too badly from the shock of her own near-death experience to fully register what was happening. She stared at him for a moment, wondering somewhere far off in her mind why he was not getting up. Perhaps he had passed out, or perhaps… No! She could not even consider that thought.

After a long pause, she knelt down next to him, her mind stumbling through what was happening and how to solve it as well as it could, but it was simply not fast enough and things did not seem to be adding up right. How was she supposed to check if he was dead or alive? What would she do if he died? And what would she do if he was alive? She could not for the life of her seem to remember basic medical practices. Oh gods, she was falling apart!

Carefully, she lifted his wrist and found a gentle pulse living there. So, he was alive then. That was good. She glanced at Erik, hoping from some form of help from him but one look towards him told her that he was still staring at her, his mind clearly elsewhere. She took in a deep breath. First, she ought to… What was she supposed to do? She shook her head, trying to shake loose some of the information she knew she should have known, tears stabbing at her eyes all the while. First, she ought to… Clean the wound. Yes, she was supposed to clean the wound. That was the first step.

Dropping his wrist, she stood and turned once more to Erik, trying her best not to acknowledge that horrible tension between them, growing at every second that passed. She could not think of that now—not of the marriage she had promised him, not of how he had nearly killed her only moments earlier, not how their wrists were still bound together. Now, she had to focus on Rhal, because he was still lying on the cold floor, more blood leaking out of him for every moment she wasted.

“Erik… Erik, do you have any wine. Or… Or anything I could clean his wounds out with? Do you have anything I could use?”

In a daze, he nodded, his brow furrowing as if her words had confused him. “Yes,” was all he said in reply before his golden eyes began to wander.

Christine had to bite back the hysterical sob rising in her throat at his lack of response. “Erik. Please listen to me. What do you have that I can use? And where is it? What do you have and where is it?”

He frowned, his eyes still not returned to her. “I have… Wine. I have wine. Use that.”

“Wine,” she repeated, some semblance of logic slipping back into her head. Just as she was about to go out in search for it, it occurred to her that she and Erik were still bound and that he had not revealed to her where this wine of which he spoke was actually located. She took a deep breath.

“Can you please take me to it, Erik? Can you take me to where the wine is?”

He stared at her, utterly lost, saying nothing.

It was then that the torrent of emotion she had been holding at bay flooded over and she felt all her attempted composure disappear. Tears flooded into her eyes without her consent as she heard herself scream, “Erik! He is dying! He is dying and you are standing here doing nothing! Where is the wine, Erik? Where is the goddamned wine?”
She sucked in a deep, shuddering breath, her hands shaking from the anger, the stress, the fear, the shock of what had happened. Could he not see that Rhal would die if they did not work to fix him? Or perhaps he did and that was exactly why he was simply standing there in front of her like a dead man. But either way, she needed his response and she would get it from him in whatever way possible. A sob fell from her lips.

At that sound, not from the force of her words, Erik seemed to regain some mental consciousness and began to move, slowly at first but then more certainly, to somewhere else in the house, dragging her with him. When he did not say where he was taking her or what he was doing, Christine nearly began to yell at him all over again, because every second she was not healing Rhal was another second closer to his death, but she eventually decided against it. She was too tired to make war with him again and the results of what had happened the last time she had spoken to him without thinking had not been good at all. So, she held her tongue, trusting Erik, for the moment, to take her where she needed to go.

He stopped, at last, in the kitchen near what appeared to be a sort of cupboard, filled with glass bottles and wineskins of all different kinds. After looking at them for a short time, only just short enough for Christine not to comment on it, he grabbed a jar full of red-purple liquid and handed it to her.

"Wine," he told her, his gaze slipping back to their bound wrists.

"Thank you," she said, pausing to glance up at him briefly before continuing. "But we must get back to Rhal! And we will need stitches—a needle and thread! Do you have any of that? He needs to be sewn up or else I am afraid he will die and I do not want him to die, Erik. Will you help me?"

His eyes met hers and although he was clearly still not entirely aware of what was happening around him, in that glance she saw the Erik she had come to know reflected back at her. "Of course," he murmured.

She sighed, happy that she was at least able to talk to him now. "Thank you," she said again. With that, he turned and, after some searching on the counter behind him—which was also in disarray, like everything else in his house—, grabbed a knife, so similar to the sword he had just used to nearly kill her Rhal. Her breath caught in her throat as he moved closer to her, still clutching the knife. One part of her wanted to say that she knew Erik would never hurt her but another darker part of her knew now that he could be unpredictable and violent, more than she wished to acknowledge. And now, he was coming at her with a knife.

"Erik," she gasped, "What are you—"

And then he brought the knife down, making all of Christine’s impulses scream at her to run, and she would have, too, had it not been for the ties holding her wrists to his. But the knife missed her—easily—and instead, found its target in that piece of fabric wrapped around their wrists, slicing it in half as if it were nothing. Just like that, she was free again and, although she knew Erik had likely separated them for purely logical purposes, she felt a certain degree of loss when their little union was severed. There had been something intimate about being bound together, even if it was only by fabric and not by choice, and Christine almost wished that she could somehow bind them together again, perhaps in a different way. But she did not have the time to dwell on that at present. She met his eyes briefly, wondering whether he was thinking about any of the same things she was, and withdrew from him, using her newfound separation to go back to Rhal with the wine in hand. From behind her, she heard Erik wander off somewhere else as well, presumably to get her the needle and thread.
Once she got back to Rhal, she saw that he had still not regained consciousness and that, more importantly, his face was now a corpse-like shade of grey, quite similar, she noted, to Erik’s natural skin color. In a panic, she knelt over him, uncorked the wine jar, and poured the entire contents of bottle over the wound in his stomach, not even pausing to think how much wine would be necessary to clean out the wound. All of it would do.

He let out a low moan at the wine being poured over his laceration, which Christine knew must have burned horribly. “I’m right here, Rhal,” she promised him as she set the empty jar beside her. “Everything will be all right, I promise. I’ve got you.”

She doubted he could hear her at all, but even so it made her feel better to think that he might have been able to take some comfort in her voice. Suddenly, she felt a presence behind her and turned to be greeted by Erik’s tall form, holding, as promised, a needle and thread. Vaguely, Christine wondered if he had heard her speak to Rhal. Before she could ask, however, he dropped the supplies next to her and retreated into the far corner of the room where he sat, unmoving. So, Christine turned her attention back to her patient.

“How honestly, Rhal,” she confessed to him, “I do not know the first thing about stitches or how to give them to someone. But I suppose you will be the first. And how hard can they be? It is just like sewing, is it not?”

She smiled grimly at her own words as her shaking finger barely managed to knot the thread around the needle. After all, how different could the two be? She was simply stitching up a hole in a person and she had done the very same with fabric hundreds upon hundreds of times. He would not feel any pain, she assured herself as she moved the needle slowly down to exposed, broken flesh, because he was unconscious anyway. She could not hurt him. All she needed to do was patch up the hole in him and he would be well again…

The first thing she noticed, with considerable horror, after sticking the needle through his skin was that flesh offered even less resistance to her stitching than most fabrics. The skin pierced unbelievably easily under her fingers. She watched, with morbid fascination as the needle slipping easily under his flesh, leaving the smallest trail of blood behind it. That had not been so hard. Carefully, she moved her needle to the other side of the large cut to close the stitch, but the moment she tried to pull the thread on the other side of the cut, the first stitch ripped out. With a cry of dismay, she yanked her needle out of his wound again, realizing that this was not as easy as she had first anticipated.

Rhal moaned again and Christine felt another rush of panic run through her. “I am trying, Rhal,” she whispered, her voice catching as she tried to speak. “But this is harder than sewing, it seems.”

The next attempt at the stitches ended the same way as the first, leaving yet another rip in the already tender flesh around his wound. The stitches were not working and blood was still running out of Rhal’s wound. He would die if she could not fix him and she did not seem to be able to. She took in a deep breath to hold the tears at bay. She needed to keep trying or he would die and it would all be her own fault for being so utterly stupid, selfish, and useless. A lump rose in her throat as she passed the needle through a new section of skin.

“You must start farther from the wound,” came Erik’s voice from behind her so suddenly that she stabbed herself with the needle in her surprise. “If you do not, it will rip out like that every time.”

She took another deep breath, willing herself not to yell at him for not sharing this information earlier. She undid her first stitch with shaking fingers, remaking it, as Erik had said, farther away from the wound. “How do you know so much about stitches?”
This time, when she attempted to close up the first stitch, it worked and both stitches stayed safely in place. She jerked the thread together before moving on to the next stitch.

“I have given myself many,” she heard him reply, his voice growing louder as he moved closer to her. For a moment, he watched her slowly and painstakingly give Rhal another stitch after stabbing her own finger several times in the process.

It was only when Christine ripped out yet another stitch, a swear flying off her tongue as she did so, that Erik knelt down beside her. “Let me,” he murmured, taking the needle carefully from her, making sure that their hands did not brush even slightly. She had nearly forgotten his hatred of human contact.

The moment the needle left her hand, she rocked back on her haunches, watching as Erik whipped through the stitches with so little effort that Christine felt color rise to her cheeks from her own sad efforts. But at least the stitches were done and Rhal’s cut was sealed closed, ironically by the very one who had done it moments earlier. Rhal let out another low groan as Erik tied the threads, leaving an oddly shaped knot nearly sticking out of Rhal’s bloodied skin. But the endless flow of crimson did seem to have stopped.

“Thank you,” she whispered as Erik sat down beside her. “I am not sure if I could have done that by myself.”

He shrugged, rubbing his bloodied hands together with a slight grimace. “It was no trouble at all. Do not mention it.”

Her eyes fell once more on the limp form of her betrothed, assessing the rest of his body for injuries that needed immediate fixing. The cut on his shoulder was bleeding, but not too badly—hardly more than what she would consider a ‘minor cut’—so she decided that that particular cut could heal easily enough on its own. Then, there was the stab wound in his elbow. She looked at it, carefully moving his arm so she could truly see the place where the knife had damaged his flesh. The sight of it nearly made her gag, which was rather odd considered the cut across his stomach had been considerably worse than this one. But this one—she could actually see the innerworkings of his elbow in the depth of the wound. When she wiped some at the blood, she could see the faint pink insides, marking the muscle and fat inside of his arm. She covered her mouth as she turned away, revolted.

“Do you think—do you think it needs stitches as well?” she managed to gasp out to Erik, unable to turn and look at the wound again herself. Perhaps it was only now that the true force of the trauma that had been inflicted on Rhal was hitting her—his stomach wound was already a hazy memory in her mind. But now that she had to look at his injuries, to judge them to see whether they would need as careful bandaging as his last wound, it nearly made her sick. She was not a good doctor, it seemed.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Erik lift Rhal’s arm to inspect the wound and then release his limb without any trace of gentleness once he was done, making it fall heavily to the ground. Christine bit her lip.

“My ruling would be that, in order to be as safe as possible, he likely does require stitches.” He glanced at her and waited for a moment, likely to see if she made any attempt to act on his ruling. When she did not, because of the sickening churning of her stomach and shaking of her fingers, he sighed and said, “If you would prefer it, I can administer the stitches. Would that suit you better?”

She nodded, closing her eyes as the image of the stab wound flashed through her mind again, knowing full-well that doing so would do nothing to lessen the image. She pinched her hand in an
attempt to draw herself back to reality. “Yes, please. I do not think that I am able to right now.”

“Of course,” she heard him breath. Then, his dark head bowed out of her vision as he set to work, his skilled fingers closing up the hole in just a few minutes. It was not until after Christine heard him rise and sit back down on the floor next to her that she was able to turn her eyes away from the safe spot she had found on the wall.

“Did you finish?” She asked, knowing he had but wanting a confirmation anyway. And, “Do you think there are any other places we should fix? Are his fingers going to heal naturally?”

“Yes, the stitches are done,” he assured her. “And no, as an answer to your second question. I do not think that he requires any more stitches. The wound on his shoulder is hardly more than a graze, I would say, and will likely scab in the next few minutes, if it has not already. As for his fingers,” he shrugged. “I know little about caring for broken bones, but if I were to suffer such an injury, I would simply leave my fingers be and keep them immobile for a while, until the pain lessened a considerable degree.”

To this, Christine nodded, satisfied that he at least knew more than she did on the subject at hand. If it had been left to her, she was not sure if Rhal would have survived at all from his wounds, because she doubted that she would have even been able to have stitched up the first wound if it had not been for Erik’s help. As of yet, he had given her no reason why she should not trust his judgement on Rhal, despite the fact that he had inflicted every wound on his battered body. He had promised to help her and help her he had, true to his word.

“Do you think he will recover?” She asked him, needing his reassurance that her worst fears would not come to pass.

She heard him exhale sharply beside. “Yes, Christine, I think he will recover and go on living as he always has, because of you, no less. Had you not jumped in front of him, I do not doubt that he would have died.”

She closed her eyes, relief from his words washing over like an ocean, although she had, admittedly, been nearly certain that Rhal had already passed the most dangerous stages of recovery. To hear such things repeated from Erik’s much more learned mouth, however, gave her a greater sense of confidence than her own feelings.

As she was about to thank him for saving Rhal when she could not, she heard him rise once more to his feet and begin to make his way slowly across the room. Her eyes flashed open in a second, following his form as he limped to the door.

“What are you doing?”

He turned, a slight grimace on his face from the physical exertion it took to do so. “I am going back to the kitchen to get another bottle of wine.”

She frowned. Why on earth was he doing that now? All Rhal’s wounds were stitched up, and now was surely not the time for drinking. What, then, was he planning on using it for? She stood shakily, disliking the great height difference between them when she sat and he stood.

“Why on earth—” she began, but stopped suddenly when it occurred to her that, of course, Rhal had not been the only one injured. How could she have forgotten so quickly? How could she be so stupid, so selfish, asking him to doctor Rhal as he sat bleeding out all the while? Oh, she was awful!
“I’m so sorry!” she cried, her eyes flickered down to his bleeding palm. “I do not know how I forgot! Here, here!” She was at his side in a moment, grabbing an overturned chair beside him and dragging it up onto its legs. “You must sit here, and I will get the wine. And I will fix you up. Just sit here.”

And with that, she pressed him into the chair, a command to which his own exhausted body gave no resistance whatsoever, and made her way to the kitchen, all the while cursing herself for forgetting Erik. She rifled through the bottles of wine as quickly as possible, searching for something that looked somewhat like the first bottle Erik had grabbed for Rhal, in case different sorts of wine were better for cleaning wounds that others. In the end, she ended up grabbing a random bottle, because there seemed to be no difference, to her at least, between the color of the first bottle and all the others. Besides, if the one she had chosen was truly a terrible choice, Erik would tell her. With that in mind and the bottle in hand, she ran back to the room that now functioned as a surgical ward to both men.

Erik still sat in the chair that she had forced him into, but when she entered, his head lifted somewhat to look at her, although the rest of his body seemed limp and dead. She knelt down in front of him, holding up the wine bottle she had chosen for him to see, as her eyes wandered over the red trail of blood that had pooled off of his hand. This wound needed stitches as well, she was quite sure of it.

“Is this all right?” she asked, giving the wine a shake.

Erik simply nodded, the light in his eyes seeming to fade even as she looked at him.

“Does it matter how much?” she asked him as she undid the bottle, not wanting to dump the whole of the wine on Erik’s wound if it was not required.

His mouth twitched as he opened his palm to her. “Enough to cover the wound, but there is no reason for anything more. It does not have to be much.”

She nodded and, as instructed, poured the reddish-purple liquid slowly over the cut, watching to make sure she covered every inch of it. He let out a hiss between clenched teeth as she did so, reminding her suddenly of something he had said earlier. She closed the bottle and set it aside for later use.

“When you said that you felt nothing, earlier—that was not true, was it? This did hurt you, did it not?” She threaded the string through the eye of the needle again as she spoke, trying to prepare herself mentally for the sight of yet another deep, bloody wound.

He flexed his fingers. “You tell me, dear one—what do you think?

It was not until she managed to knot off a long portion of thread that she was able to look at him again, searching his face for the answer to his question. “No,” she said, after a moment. “You do feel pain and I know it—I suppose it would be foolish for me to believe that you did not. After all, you are only human.”

His lips turned up in a sad, faint smile. “You are correct, Christine. Although I do wish at this present moment that what I said was, in fact, true because it feels as though you set my hand on fire with that wine. But, no—I assure you, I do feel pain and right now, it is growing so terrible that I can hardly breathe.”

His mouth twisted into a grimace and she gasped out a quick ‘I’m sorry,’ before returning back to his hand, her only thoughts how to heal it, how to take away his pain. The cut, as she had
anticipated, was quite gory. The skin across every finger except his thumb and the skin across his palm were both sliced so deeply that, where the blood was less, she could see the faint white of the bones his skin now failed to hide. Bile rose in her throat but she bit it down as she examined his fingers more carefully. The skin was sliced cleanly in half on all of them, but very deeply, making her realize that it was possible that he could lose some of the fingers on his right hand if she did not take care of the wound. Even Rhal’s stab wound was not so deep as this cut. The blood continued to bubble out of them, so red it was almost black. She took a deep breath.

“I am going to try to stitch these up as well and as quickly as possible, because I do not want you to be in such terrible pain, but I am going to need you to help me too, because…” Her words were suddenly forgotten as his other hand, his uninjured one, lifted from his side and moved to her face, closer than his hand had ever been to her before. Her breath caught in her throat as she wondered what he was doing and why, his hand hovering so close to her that, had she shifted forward just the slightest bit, her lips would have brushed his thumb.

Before she could ask, however, his fingers twined themselves in her hair, looping themselves around that section that was now much shorter than it had been previously. She searched his face for an answer for what he was doing, but in those golden eyes, she found only sorrow, only pain. His fingers skimmed the side of her jaw, no longer so cautious to avoid her flesh, no longer so controlled and graceful, making her shiver against them. “Erik…?”

“The pain…” He took in a deep breath. “The pain I spoke of is not from the cut, my dear. It is not from that at all.”

Those words made her heart begin to beat restlessly within her in a way that was different, somehow, than it had been before from the blood and the fear. She glanced at him again, suddenly realizing how close she truly was to him, how she was holding his hand in both of hers. His fingers shifted, now skimming along the ends of her curls, feeling the jagged cut he had made in them. Heat rushed through her.

“Erik—Erik, please. I need you to keep your hands still so I can stitch this one up. I do not want to hurt you. Please, just sit still. I need to fix you right now. I need to do that first.”

He nodded at her words, but his eyes stayed trained on where his fingers were, now mostly stilled next her face, just inches away from brushing her cheek. But she could not deny that the movement of his other hand was doing absolutely nothing that would affect his injured hand so, instead of trying to fight him on this point, she began to ready the needle and thread for his skin. Perhaps she would be able to distract him some from the discomfort of what she was about to do to him, even if having his fingers so close to her made her wonder if she would be able to administer stitches at all.

After taking in a deep breath to prepare herself, and offering him a quick word of warning that this might hurt, she pushed down all feelings of doubt or uncertainty and pushed the needle through his broken skin, this time making sure to stay far away from the actual cut. A sharp inhale escaped him but nothing more, as he finally turned away from her face to watch his own healing process. His hand, however, never left her hair.

It took her three stitches to close the cut across his pointer finger, none of which, thankfully, ripped out of his skin. After some short instructions from him on how to tie off the string, she did so and, using his sword, cut the string to begin stitching up the next bleeding finger. But the bile was rising at an alarming rate in her throat and she began to think she might truly be sick from having to look at the sheer amount of blood coming out of him and from the way the needle went so easily into his skin. She closed her eyes, trying to focus on something—anything besides the present situation.

“How does that finger feel?” She asked at last, her voice sounded weak even to her own ears.
She opened her eyes just in time to see Erik carefully bending and unbending his finger. He frowned. “It feels well enough for now, my dear Christine. I think your stitches have worked quite well, at least on this finger. I think it will make a complete recovery given substantial time.”

She nodded, his reassurances making her feel more confident in spite of everything. “That is good,” she murmured, pushing down that sick feeling that was beginning to slowly recede now. “That is very good. Next one?”

He nodded and held up his hand again, offering up the next finger for surgery. This one took four stitches and, again, she was not forced to redo any of them. After Erik’s confirmation that these too were satisfactory, she moved onto the next finger—three stitches. And then, the pinky which required only two. All the stitches seemed to be holding well enough and Erik seemed pleased with them all as well, even if his skin did seem more drained of color than usual.

“Are you sure they are all good? I do not want to mess up your fingers,” she told him, watching as his moved his long, thin fingers with relative ease. From beside them, Rhal groaned weakly, shifting somewhat against the wall where they had left him. Christine watched him for a moment, ready to get up and help him to his feet should he need it, but his eyes remained closed and his face remained dreadfully pale, so she turned back to Erik, worrying her lip.

“They are all fine,” he promised her. He said nothing for a moment and then, she was reminded of the presence of his hand near her face when his thumb began to trace her jawline—very slowly and very gently, light as air. She flushed and began to study his stitched fingers even more intently. It was so interesting to her now that the blood stopped nearly the moment she knotted the string. She had not known that before.

“Christine,” he whispered, drawing her thoughts away from his bloody hand. “I must know—would you truly have died for him? For your boy? Do you truly mean what you did?”

Out of all the things he could have said at that present moment, he had chosen that? She stared at him, confused, before turning away again, taking his injured hand in hers as she nodded. “Of course, I meant it. I would have died for him.”

“Died for him…” he echoed, and Christine heard the unmistakable sorrow etched into his voice.

“Yes.” She cleared her throat and tightened her grip on his hand momentarily, trying to draw herself back to reality, and away from the gentle brush of his hand on her cheek. “But now, I must stitch up your palm. I think now that I am sure I can do it, it will not be so bad. I will close it up in hardly more than a minute, but you really must sit still. I do not want to stab you on accident with this needle.”

He nodded again, this time saying nothing as he exposed his injured palm to her. Blood still ran freely out of it and much of his hand was coated with it, making the flesh hardly visible under so much of that dark red. The hand at her cheek dropped down to her neck, sliding down from her face until it reached her shoulder, where it rested, his fingertips still fixated with her curls. Try as she might, Christine was not able to force this small knowledge from her mind and even as she attempted to re-thread the needle, her hands shook to such a degree that she was barely able. Finally, however, the thread slipped through the eye and she slipped the needle under his skin, forcing all realization of what he was doing from her mind.

For a short time, there was silence as she looped the needle through his skin and pulled it together, looped and pulled together, looped and pulled together. Then, sounding as if it were coming from somewhere very far away from her, she heard Erik’s gentle voice again, hesitant and weak.
“You say you surely would have died for him—this… this boy of yours…”

“Yes,” she murmured, yanking another stitch closed.

He grimaced, sucking in a hissing inhale between his teeth, before continuing, “… And surely, if you were—if you are willing to give your life up for his, as you claim, I must ask, Christine: do you love him?”

She said nothing, not trusting herself to speak, not when she was the only one responsible for his well-being and healing at this present moment, not when she herself was so unsure of her answer, not when tears were constant threatening just behind her eyes. She could not answer. Instead, she simply looped another stitch and pulled it through, focusing all her attention on keeping her hands even and steady.

Erik fingers twitched as she worked. “Please, answer me, my dearest Christine—is it true that you love him? That you love him as I always wished for you to love me?”

She dropped the needle halfway through a stitch, hysterics rising within her at his every, insistent word, and closed her eyes, willing herself to remain calm. “Not now, Erik. I cannot do this right now—I really cannot. Please, do not ask this of me. Just let me stitch up your hand.”

He did not reply for nearly a minute, a time during which Christine used to regain what little she still possessed of her composure after everything that had happened that day. If she simply pushed it out of her mind and pretended that she was caring for some domestic wound Erik had inadvertently inflicted upon himself, and that Rhal was simply asleep in the corner, all would seem normal. If she simply did not acknowledge the fact that she was missing several inches of her hair because she had nearly died barely an hour ago, she would be all right. If she simply pretended…

Finally, Erik gave her a soft, “If you would rather not discuss this now, I suppose…”

He trailed off as she took up the needle once more, intent to finish closing his wound even if her hand was shaking far worse than it had been one minute previous. “We can talk about it later, if you want. But I really cannot right now.”

He nodded, watching her progress as she neared the end of the harsh, red line that cut across his palm. “Forgive me,” was all he said, falling once more into silence the moment the words left his mouth, a silence that Christine loathed to break.

Chapter End Notes

Well, I hope you enjoyed that! I know it was a lot about medical stuff but I promise the next half won't be as bad. Speaking of the next half, I really hope you like it because there's going to be a lot of fun stuff happening... So yeah! Stay tuned! Leave a review, if ya want... Or wait until the next chapter :)
Healing, Part Two

Chapter Summary

In which a decision is made, for better or worse...

Chapter Notes

Hello again, my lovely readers! Here it is as promised- part two of 'Healing.' Also, for those of you who just clicked on the most recently updated chapter, I did post a chapter yesterday because, as you can see, this is a two part chapter. So go back and read that first, if you haven't already.

Like the last chapter, this one has a little bit of gore in it, but hopefully a tasteful amount. So, be warned. Anyway, I don't really know what else to say, other than I hope you enjoy this chapter... I certainly think you will :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It took twelve stitches in all for her to bring the broken skin of his hand together, finally drawing a curtain over that hauntingly white bone, barely visible in its sea of red. For that, she was grateful as she carefully tied off the ends of the thread, holding his skin in place. She wondered if these stitches were truly as strong as they looked—it seemed to her that, with one wrong move, one could burst and then, all the rest would rip down the middle, causing that red sea of blood and gore to flow again. It hardly seemed possible that such a small thing could truly hold together something as fragile as the human flesh and bring it the healing it needed. And yet, even with those twelve stitches, the blood flow had stopped and when she poured wine over the now-closed wound, she was at last able to see the pale skin on his palm again, instead of red. She frowned.

“Is there anywhere else that you think I should stitch up?” She briefly assessed his body, her eyes falling on the bloodied patch on his toga over his shoulder. “Does that one need stitching as well?” She asked, nodding to the wound in question.

Erik, who had been flexing his injured fingers and examining their stitches, turned his attention away from them to look at his shoulder instead. With an obvious regret, he withdrew his uninjured hand from the place it had been resting on her shoulder so that he could probe the other wound for damage more easily. Yet the moment his hand left her body, Christine felt a sense of loss, as if by the separation, he had severed some invisible connection between them. Perhaps it was foolish of her, given the current situation and the sheer number of things that mattered more right now than his physical contact, but she wanted nothing more than to take his hand in hers and revive that connection, to assure him he was not alone, that she was there. She sighed and forced herself to re-enter the realm of reality, where Erik was still carefully examining the cut on his shoulder.

He shrugged as he turned back to her, wiping his bloodied fingers on his toga. “It is not terrible. I think I will recover from it in time. Stitches are not necessary, I think. But thank you, my dear.”

There was something in his tone, however, and in the size of the crimson stain on his toga that
made her doubt his words. “May I see it?” She asked, reaching tentatively forward, ready to stop at one word of disagreement on his side.

But he offered no resistance, simply nodding to her request as she pushed away the torn remainder of the cloth there and looked at the wound for herself. In all fairness, it was not nearly as bad as the other three wounds that had already been dealt with but it was clearly in need of some sort of medical attention. Blood still ran freely down from it, dripping further down his chest, past where she could see, leaving dark stains on the cloth it reached below. She frowned.

“I do not know—it looks fairly bad, Erik. I am no expert, I know, but I think stitches would be good. I do not want you to bleed out, after all.” She glanced at him, hoping that he would agree with her and let her heal him, if not for his own sake than for hers.

“If you think it needs stitches then I will not refuse you,” he replied. “I suppose it would be better to take the precaution than to deal with the risks.” He paused for a moment, his eyes resting on where Rhal lay, still unconscious, before he said, “Unless, of course, you are uncomfortable touching the skin on my shoulder, in which case I would understand your discomfort perfectly and would not be at all unopposed to letting the cut simply heal on its own.”

She sighed. “No—of course, I am not. There is hardly a difference to me between touching your hand and touching your shoulder anyway, but besides that, any sort of minor discomfort I might have does not matter when you are in need of medical attention. You are coming first right now and that is that. I am fixing you.”

His lips turned up in a fleeting smile. “Ah. Christine. You are such an angel. I am so indebted to you. Your kindness for me astounds me, as it always has. I fear I do not deserve you.”

She shook her head as she began to knot the thread around the needle again, the process, this time, becoming faster now that she had done it so many times. “Do not say such things. You are hurting, so I must heal you. You would have done the exact same for me, had I been in your situation. In fact, I would say you have already.”

He said nothing to this, however, but moved the tattered fabric of his toga so that she could reach the destruction that lay beneath it, revealing a large portion of his pale skin to her in the process that she had not seen before. She took a deep breath and stood so that she could reach his shoulder more easily, her needle hovering just over the wound, ready for stitching, when he shook his head.

“The wine first.”

“Oh, yes.” She had completely forgotten about the wine. Hastily, she pressed the needle into his uninjured hand as she reached for the wine, uncorked it once more, and poured perhaps a larger quantity than needed over the wound. A sharp intake of breath escaped him and his hand twitched closed but nothing more as the burning set in, setting the already painful wound aflame. She felt a stab of pity for him, knowing how terribly he must have been suffering at present.

He offered the needle to her once more and she took it, this time maneuvering it through his broken skin again, forming eight quick, slightly uneven stitches in the time it had previously taken her to do twelve. She was becoming better at practicing medicine, it seemed. Carefully, she knotted the thread and cut the excess away, leaving the cut sealed and the blood-flow ceased. Exhausted, she slumped back to the ground, drawing her knees to her chest and allowing her burning eyes to slip closed, knowing that both her betrothed and Erik were adequately healed and in the process of recovery.

“How does that feel?” She asked, knowing that he would have spoken before if all had not been
Affirming her beliefs, he replied in a quiet voice, “It feels fine, Christine—almost as if it had not been cut open at all.”

She smiled as she passed her hand over her eyes, suddenly wanting nothing more than to sleep for a very long time. “I am glad.”

For a moment, the two of them sat in silence, leaving Christine to her thoughts, which drew immediately to this new and frightening version of Erik she had seen—the Phantom she had heard so much about. It was odd to her to consider that this man, who usually seemed so gentle, so compassionate and passive, could turn into someone so unrelenting and vengeful. It unsettled her—she had never known him well, admittedly, but she had known him well enough to know his general nature and what she had witnessed today did not fit into that. And yet, perhaps she had always known that there was another darker part of him that he had not allowed her to witness until today. The mask had served as a subtle but constant reminder of just that, a symbol of that repressed, cruel nature he tried so hard to hide from her. It should not have surprised her, she knew, to see it, when she knew that part of him had existed all along.

And yet, it had, very much so. The two sides of him that she now knew—the passive, honest, raw, and somewhat awkward side and the twisted, cruel, and desperate side of him hardly seemed compatible in her eyes, being so entirely unalike. She had to consciously force herself to acknowledge that both of those natures were part of the same being—Erik. Was there really so much of him that she did not know? How deep did this darker nature go? How much of him did it rule? She sucked in a deep breath, hoping that the Erik she had thought she had known was still there.

“I am sorry,” she murmured at last, shaking these thoughts off of her. There was no point in dwelling on them when they only led her in continuous circles with no clear answer. No, there were more pressing matters at hand.

She opened her eyes, only to be met with his, staring at her in confusion. “Whatever do you have to be sorry for, my dearest Christine, after all the good you have done today?”

She closed her eyes again, unable to face him and those opposing sides of him that lived in those unrelenting eyes that harbored so much sorrow and so much hate. She simply could not.

“You were bleeding,” she answered him. “And you were in pain, and yet I ignored that and forced you to stitch up Rhal instead. And I’m so sorry. That was so cruel of me—so inconsiderate—and I feel badly about it all. To act like your pain did not exist and to focus only on Rhal’s…”

“Oh, Christine,” he sighed, but she did not open her eyes, letting her head instead slump against her knees. “Why are you apologizing for a thing as trivial as that? Let it out of your mind—I have already done the same. You were scared, and your first thoughts were, naturally, to stabilize your beloved, not your poor Erik. But I understand that, and I feel no ill-will towards you at all. There is nothing to forgive.”

She shook her head, feeling tears prick at her closed eyelids. “No. No, Erik there is. Your hand was bleeding everywhere and I…” She took a deep breath. “I treat you terribly and you always brush it off because I suppose you are used to it, but I do not want you to feel like that. I do not want you to be used to being treated badly. And I feel like half of that is my fault because I do it so often, and doing that only makes it seem like I do not care either, just like everyone else. But I do, Erik. I do care for you. I’m sorry. I do not just want to reinforce the idea that you are nothing, because you are not.”
He did not reply for a long while, for which Christine was grateful because it gave her time to compose herself enough to choke down the tears that threatened to spill. Finally, in tones hardly more than a whisper, he replied, “Thank you. To hear you say that… To hear anyone say that after all these years…” He made an odd sound and without looking, she could not tell if it was a laugh or a sob. “But I believe I must now apologize to you, because anything you might have done, what I have done this day outweighs by the tenfold. You are innocent in all this, my darling—I am the one who ought to be apologizing.”

She shook her head before she realized her knees likely blocked his view of her subtle objection. “Don’t. We have both messed up today, Erik… and Rhal too, I suppose. There are a million things we could both be apologizing for, but I do not think there is any point in it anymore. We both know that we are sorry—I already accept your apology, just as you accepted mine.” She sighed into her legs. “I am so tired, Erik. I just want to go to sleep.”

She did not think she had ever felt so exhausted in her whole life. It was as if all energy and all potential for energy had suddenly been drained from her limbs and from her mind, making all that was left of her long to sink down into the only place she knew that required no thought, no effort, to exercise at all. Even after her father had died and she had lost the will to do even the simplest of things, she had not felt like this. This was a different thing altogether, and she did not even know for sure if sleep could cure the numbing exhaustion clouding over her.

“I know,” he murmured, sounding as if he were speaking more to himself than to her. “I know.” He was silent for another moment, during which time Christine debated half-heartedly whether she should get up and crawl to the nearest bed and do what she so badly wished to do, but before she had summoned up the willpower, he spoke again:

“Christine—my dearest Christine—I know you are very tired, and I am as well, but there really is something I must talk to you about now, otherwise I would simply wait. It is a matter of the greatest importance concerning…”

She groaned. “Oh, Erik, just don’t right now. Surely, it can wait. I do not think I am in the right state to talk about anything of importance. I am so tired.”

She heard him shift in front of her. “I know, darling, I know. But please—this truly is very important or else I would not ask this of you. But… Your boy—your Rhalamanthos, as he is called—were you speaking truly when you said that you would die for him?”

“Erik, I cannot see how this is so important that I cannot wait until tomorrow. And I already told you—I would.”

“You would,” he echoed, sorrow dipping into his voice. As her senses began to dull down further as sleep took its hold on her, Christine wondered if he was going to speak more on this point or if that was the only thing he meant to ask, whether she was willing to die for Rhal. She hoped it was the latter because she did not think she could bear more questions, especially not concerning Rhal and her relationship with him. That was far, far too complicated for her to dwell on now.

“Christine.” Erik’s voice broke through the fog that had enveloped her and Christine silently cursed him for interrupting her rest. Could he not see that was all she wanted right now?

“Christine, I fear I have made a grievous error. And I know—I know that you are very tried, but, please, I need you to listen to me for a moment. Please, my dear.”

When she did not lift her head, she heard him slide off his chair onto the floor beside her, probably just a few feet away. She could hear his slight, uneven breaths in the silence. Knowing he would
not leave her be until she complied, she lifted her head and stared at him with burning eyes.

“Thank you,” he whispered, dropping his hand down to his side. It had appeared that he was about
to touch her before she looked at him, and Christine regretted that she had been a moment too soon
in moving.

“What is so important that it cannot wait until morning?”

He drew back slightly at the tone of her voice and a look of hurt flashed across his face, but
Christine could not find it in her to care. “I… I fear I have made a grievous error. Your boy—you
would die for him. You threw yourself in front of him, and nearly killed yourself for him. For your
boy, your Rhalamandos.” He took a deep breath. “I know you have told me before that you do not
think you love him like a wife ought to love her husband, and that you are uncertain of your
feelings for him, and I want to say that I believe you. I truly believe that you believe that is the
truth. But you have proved to me this night that your words are not, in fact, the complete truth,
because—in a moment of turmoil, a moment that required a split-second decision to be made—you
chose him. You chose to sacrifice your own life for him. And that, Christine, is an act of the truest
love a person can show for another.”

A dry, shaky sob escaped him and something within her that had been numbed by the present
circumstances whispered that she ought to comfort him, to say something to him, but she could
think of nothing. So, he continued on uninterrupted. “Perhaps you will try and argue with me and
say it was an impulse brought on by your childhood relationship or something of the like, but I
cannot believe that now. You chose him over yourself, and you chose him over me—over us. We
could have had the future I offered you the first time I proposed—a future of security, of happiness,
maybe even of love in time—but you stopped us from ever having that when you stopped our
opposition from dying. But I do not resent you for it. I do not want you ever to think that, Christine.
I think you are the best, kindest, purest, most loyal, most accepting, most loving, most generous
human being who has ever walked the face of the earth. I could not resent you even if I wanted to,
no matter what I might say when I am angry. I love you, Christine. I love you more than anything
—far more than I have ever been able to love myself, or even the world I live in. No. You are far,
far better than anything—anything—and I will never, until the day I die, change my mind on that
fact. I love you so much.”

As soon as those words left him, the shaky façade he had built for himself since the duel crumbled
and he began to cry in earnest, tears dripping over the waxy covering of his mask. Nor did he try in
any way to stop them. He just sat and let them come, streaming down his face. “Today you
promised me that you would marry me if I called off the fight. I thought I must have grasped all
the happiness the world can give when you said that, when you said that you loved me. That you
could have been happy with me, even. It simultaneously… broke my heart and healed it. I would
have rather died than have that taken from me. Because, I thought… If I can marry Christine—my
darling Christine—all the suffering I have endured in this hell of a life will have been worth it. In
fact, I would have… I would have done it all again if I had known you were going to come into my
life and save me from this solitude. I would have carved every single one of my scars back into my
flesh to marry you, and I would have done it with a smile. I do not know if words can express my
happiness at what you told me today.

“And that is why, my love—my Christine—I cannot let you marry me. I cannot… I will not let you
do this to yourself when you still love your boy, when all your actions still point to that fact. I
cannot let you marry me when I know that you will be unhappy with me, when your heart will
always remain with him, whatever else you might claim. I cannot let you chain yourself to me—a
faceless horror, the Phantom himself—when you could have someone infinitely better, someone
you love and… and deserve. It would tear my heart to pieces to see you, everyday, wishing for a
life I could never give you. I could not live, I could not breathe, knowing you were unhappy. I
would go to the ends of the earth to ensure your happiness, Christine. I cannot force myself to give
you the life of sorrow, of suffering, of wandering that a marriage to me would bring. You are light
—I cannot drag you into darkness.

“So, please, Christine—please, listen to me when I say you must leave. You must leave this house
now, and never return, never for the rest of your days. You must never look back for me, nor
inquire after me, nor even waste your thoughts on me. I must be nothing to you now. You must go
and take your boy and live the life you were always meant to live—a life of happiness and light.
Please, go. Know that this request hurts no one more than it hurts me, but please—I am begging
you, go now. Leave your Erik. Forget all that has happened here—of your Phantom. Speak of it to
no one. Forget me. You have so, so many better things ahead of you to think of, and I know that
with time, I will be nothing to you anyway. You can go on without me and you must now,
Christine—you must. So, please. Please, leave. Go, my love, and never return. I am sorry.”

And with that, he turned, his sobs overpowering whatever else he might have wanted to say. Tears
ran down her cheeks, too, at his words, at seeing all the pain in him, at seeing how he cared for
her, how he loved her so much that he was willing to sacrifice all of his happiness for hers. Never
had she met anyone like him. She knew, somehow, that if she were to leave him, as he asked, he
would cease to breathe and would finally pass on to the next life, whatever that might be. Perhaps
it was long overdue, because she had seen it in his eyes long ago that death was a relief to him. She
knew that he did not want to continue the existence he had been given. Perhaps it would have been
good of her to let him have that small relief, to let him have what he needed. She turned away,
crying.

But she could never do that. To do that to him would kill her too, would destroy her worse than
even her father’s death, because with Erik, she knew that his entire fate was held solely within her
hands. This was her decision, despite what he said. She could choose not to argue with him on his
points, to accept that perhaps he had seen what she could not—that she did love Rhal and would be
happy with him—, and leave him for dead. That was what he wanted. Or she could choose to
disobey his wishes, and stay with him—to tell him again that her love for Rhal was not the same
as her love for him, that there was an ocean of different between the two, and show him that
perhaps there was enough good in the world to keep him alive. It was her choice.

Perhaps it had been destined long ago, when the oracle had spoken those fateful words to her, or
perhaps it was never destined at all and she truly did hold all the power in that moment. She did not
know, but now she saw, as the sun set over that ivory house, that it hardly mattered. If it was
destined, she had grown to need it and if it was choice, she had grown to choose it. There was no
difference. Nothing mattered now except him and her, and the words hanging on her tongue. She
spoke.

“Oh, Erik. Oh, my Erik… Do you not see that I would have died for you too? If it had been you,
and not Rhal who was about to die in that moment, I would have done the exact same thing. I
would have died for you, had it come down to that. And not only just for you, but for my sisters,
and my brothers-in-law too. There are many different types of love, and just because I feel one of
those for Rhal and for my family does not mean I no longer can spare any love for you.”

“No…” he moaned, covering his ears, his breath catching in his throat. “No, no, no…”

“Yes.” Carefully, she removed his hands from his ears and when those gradually fell back to his
sides, she cupped his face in hands, her thumbs skimming the dark leather of the mask. “Listen to
me, Erik. I cannot marry Rhal because I do not love him… not like that. Just in a different way.
But you--”
“Christine,” he cut her off, gazing up at her with teary-bright eyes, nearly making her tired heart break within her. “Please, go.”

“I cannot go, Erik. I will not go. I know that you think you are doing what is best for me, but I do not want that any more than you do. When I said I would marry you… that was not just a ploy to get you to stop fighting with Rhal. I meant it, more than I have ever meant anything in my life. I… I think I…” She took a deep breath, knowing within her heart that she had never meant anything more than what she was about to say.

“I love you, Erik.”

“No!” he sobbed, pulling his gaze from her and grabbing tightly to one of the hands that she held to his face, as if he meant to tear her from him. But he never did.

“Yes,” she gasped, more sure of herself than before. “I love you, Erik. I will not leave you alone, not now, not ever. I want to share my life with you, to spend every waking moment with you from this day until my last. Nothing sounds better to me.” She bit back a sob, but she was not sure if it was one of sorrow or one of joy from doing what she had dreamt of doing for so long. “That is what I want, Erik, and I will fight for that future—for our future. So, I am sorry that I cannot leave like you want, but I can give you something better—I can stay. Forever.”

“Oh, Christine…” He breathed her name as if it were heaven itself and she smiled through her tears at him. “Oh, Christine… is this true? Do you mean that? Could you truly… love a monster like me?” The hand that had previously been gripping hers loosened itself and twined its fingers with hers, joining them. “Can you truly…”

“Yes.” She choked out a sound that was somewhere between a sob and a laugh. “Yes! Yes, I can. And I already do.”

Tears began to spill again from his golden eyes but now, his lips wore a smile, not a frown. It was the happiest she had ever seen him. With a shaking hand, he reached out to her, his other grip on her hand tightening as he did so, and cupped her cheeks, looking at her as if she were the only thing in the whole universe. She had never felt so happy, even as she cried.

“I love you,” he gasped. He began to pull her closer, his hand now slipping around her head and using only the slightest urging for her to move, but she did anyway, closing the already fragile gap between them. He was so close now, so close that their noses were nearly touching, so close that she could feel his shaking breaths on her lips.

“May I?” he murmured, his lips brushing slightly against her brow. A laugh bubbled up in her throat as another tear ran down her cheek, her heart pounding against her breast.

“Yes.”

He was so close now that she was no longer able to focus properly on his face, so she closed her eyes, the salt water on her lashes making them stick together. She could feel his body heat radiating off of him, could feel his covered nose pressing lightly against hers.

Then, she felt the slightest, most innocent kiss she had ever felt being pressed against her forehead. It was such a fragile, gentle thing that it almost made her cry all over again. And yet, even so the kiss sent electricity sparking through her body, making all her breath leave her lungs in a rushed gasp. From the place where his lips touched her forehead, she could feel warmth, as soft but as radiant as sunshine, washing over her. It was their first kiss.
It was perfect.

She felt him draw away from her slightly, murmuring broken ‘thank you’s under his breath, joined with careful ‘I love you’s, that made her heart burst. So, instead of letting him draw away, and sever the newly made, delicate bonds between them, she pulled him back to her. Perhaps it was simply the newness of the situation, or all the things that had previously kept them from ever touching like this, but a thrill coursed through her unlike anything she had ever experienced with Rhal. It was utterly intoxicating and she thought briefly, before she joined her lips to his, that this is what she had always imagined a true kiss to be like.

It was very short, when it came down to it—hardly more than a second—but it was perfect all the same. If it was possible to have taken all the pain, all the happiness, all the anger, all the trust, all the tension, all the love that had formed between them and somehow combined them all together, it would have created something like that kiss. His lips tasted like salt water, but she could not imagine anything that could have been better at that moment. She was sure he felt her tears, too, because she was crying just as hard as he was, but it was perfect. So utterly perfect. And she would not have changed it for the world. Her only thought as she drew away from him, her hands shaking and heart beat pounding, was that she hoped more than anything that there would be a million more kisses to be shared between them that would be just as perfect as this first one.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, this would probably be a really good place for me to end this story. But there's still so much more I have to wrap up, even though I'm just now realizing how long this story really is- there's going to be more! I hope you're not tired of me yet! After all, I still have to tell you all what happens to Rhal, and to Erik and Christine, and maybe most importantly, what Erik's past was really like, which definitely includes why he wears that mask. So, I hope you stay tuned because I promise, I do have more plans for this story!

But let me know how you liked this chapter! I know a LOT of stuff happened in this one- let me know how you thought it went! Did you enjoy it? I wasn't sure if I was super satisfied with the kisses, so what did you think of those? Let me know, if you want! I'm always happy to hear from you guys!
Christine collapsed into Erik’s arms, both from the exhaustion that still threatened to take over her and from the need to hold Erik close after what they had just done, to convince her that he was there and that he meant what he had told her—that he loved her. And this time, he did not try to separate himself from her as she cried into his shoulder, her body shaking with something between sobs and laughter, but kept her close. At first, he did not return the embrace, although he did accept it, but after a few moments of Christine rocking him and promising repeatedly that she loved him, he did. His embrace was slow and unsure, and his hands never truly settled, instead stroking through her hair, but he did return it.

Christine could feel every shaking breath he took, every sobbing gasp of air that left his lungs and made his whole chest shake against her. She could feel the way his bones stuck out too sharply, even under his toga, nearly poking through his pale, fragile skin. She could hear her name on his lips with his every exhale, so soft that, had they been separated by mere inches, she would not have been able to distinguish it. It all seemed so surreal to her in that moment that she almost felt as if she was dreaming some beautiful dream that was just out of the grasp of true reality. With the burning that had settle over her eyes, with the blood of her two loves staining her hands, and with a strand of missing hair to act as a reminder of how close she herself had come to death that day, reality seemed, at present, slightly altered.

And yet, if this was all just some incredibly life-like dream, she would bask in it until she was awoken and even after, she would let her mind wander back to the beauty of Erik shaking in her arms when the world was quiet and there were not others around to interrupt her quiet, most hidden thoughts. If this was all just a dream, it was the best, most perfect, most real dream she had ever experienced.

As if he could hear her thoughts, Erik spoke, his soft breaths shifting past her ear and ruffling her hair. “How can this be real, my love—my Christine? How can this be true? Please tell me this is
not all a dream. Please tell me this is true, my love. Tell me I am not imaging all this only within my own twisted mind.”

She nearly laughed at his words, although his voice was still flooded with so much emotion he could hardly speak. Somehow, it was funny to her that after all the time that the two of them had spent imagining such a moment of love, of affection, neither of them were now sure whether such a dream could ever come true. “I don’t know,” she told him honestly. “But I hope to every god in Olympus that it is.”

At those words, he drew back from her slightly, separating himself just enough from her to capture her face in his palms and to stare at her as if the whole of his reality was made real in her, as if nothing else existed in his world apart from her. And perhaps nothing did. She did not know. Her eyes flickered elsewhere, unable to be met with such intense passion for so long, instead settling on a spot in his hair that the remainder of the sunlight had made appear nearly golden. Perhaps it was the glow of the sunlight, or perhaps it was born purely out of the situation they were in, but Christine thought that she had never seen a person as beautiful as he seemed to her at that moment, even with his hair a mess, his toga torn to shreds, and the black line of thread holding his damaged flesh together—to her, he was perfect.

“Christine,” he murmured again, and her eyes found his face again a moment before his lips found hers, pressing another fragile, gentle kiss to them, perhaps to test whether or not she was real. Even with the thick fog of exhaustion and the haze that clouded her senses when his lips touched hers, a realization came over her from his slight, uncertain movements and from what he had told her in the past about never finding love—that these were his first kisses. She was his first. The mask scraped against her lips as he drew away from her, his forehead resting on hers. She was his first, she was sure of it. The knowledge made her head spin—this man, who was far older both in years and experiences than herself, had never been given that sort of affection until this point in his life with her. And somehow, sad though it was for her to think about the life of loneliness he had lived previously, the knowledge made every kiss he gave her that much better and more intimate and pure. She was his first and, she hoped, his last all at once.

She was overcome. Words would not come to her lips, all her emotions were swirling frantically around within her mind, her hands not quite knowing what to latch onto, so she began to laugh. She was not even entirely sure what she was laughing at, nor even why she was laughing at all but she could not seem to stop herself once she started. The laughter simply continued to bubble up within her until she was shaking with unrepressed giggles as Erik’s gentle fingers stroked across her cheeks, her forehead still pressed against his.

“Sorry,” she managed in between gasps. “I do not… know what has come over me… I’m sorry.” Perhaps he would be mortified by her laughing, or if he was not mortified, perhaps he would be angry with her for laughing during such an emotionally raw moment between them. But, to her surprise, she felt his chest begin to heave with the same breathless laughter that had overtaken her and just like that, the two of them, only moments ago sharing tears, shared laughter—beautiful, unrestrained laughter—that was as out of place as it was genuine, as the best sort of laughter often is.

“Oh, Christine.” He shook his head, a low chuckle in his throat. “Christine, Christine… You have made me the happiest man who ever lived.”

She smiled, the same happiness he spoke of swelling through her whole body, lighting her up from the inside. Her fingers came up to stroke the waxy leather that covered his face, feeling the unnatural coolness of it as a substitute for the heat of the skin it must have hidden underneath, and almost immediately, his laughter faded into a low hum as he quickly but carefully removed her
hand from his mask.

“Erik,” she began, the giddy happiness that had overtaken her gradually subsiding into a sense of peaceful contentedness. Her eyes drooped closed. “What are we to—”

“Chris?”

It was that third presence that forced them apart, ripping the infant connection between them that had taken so, so long to even develop into the fragile thing it was now. It took only that one word to make Erik fall back away from her, finally renewing that space between them that Christine had come to know and hate. And when she was at last able to draw her eyes away from the man who sat, now distanced, in front of her, she looked and saw Rhal sitting against the wall, the look of one who has been cruelly and completely betrayed written across his face.

Christine knew she ought to feel bad. And she did feel guilt to some degree, but certainly not to the degree at which she knew she ought to be feeling it. Yes, she did feel bad for hurting her dear Rhal like this, after all he had done for her and after all the love he had bestowed upon her after all these years, but even so, there was no guilt present in her heart when she looked at Rhal. Perhaps it was the exhaustion that had settled over her, or perhaps it was her newfound happiness at telling Erik the truth, but she did not feel a trace of fear as she looked at him. Her heartbeat remained steady, and she retained the resolve of her actions with a force that she had not previously known she had possessed.

“Chris,” Rhal began again, staring at her in the dim light from his place against the wall. From the look in his eyes, she could tell he had seen a great deal of what had been happening between her and Erik—her betrothed. What a thought! Erik, her betrothed. She glanced at him momentarily, and saw that he had once more put his defensive stance—his masked face was impassive and all his muscles were poised as if ready to spring up and fight at any moment.

“Why?” Rhal asked, interrupting her thoughts and making her turn her attention back to him. “Chris, why?”

She was well-aware that he had more knowledge about all that had happened between her and Erik that she would have wished—the confessed love, the promise of marriage, the kiss; he knew about it all. Perhaps he had heard it in his state of unconsciousness, or perhaps he had awakened and silently watched the whole scene unfold in front of his eyes. But either way, Christine was happy that he knew, in a way, because now she did not have to explain what she had done, that she had betrayed him, completely and utterly.

“I did what I needed to,” she heard herself saying, as if from another person’s mouth. And it was true—she simply could not go on living as if she loved Rhal, constantly trying to convince herself that she would love him in time, that the relationship between them would feel right eventually. It had been tearing her apart to force herself to live a life that she knew was not meant for her and that she had not wanted for some time. Now, she had finally let go of that life and the future she had promised to Rhal, and although she knew it would hurt him for a time, she knew that she could not turn back to him now, for both their sakes.

“I am sorry, though, Rhal,” she added, looking back up to meet those shattered green eyes, as if such simple words could make such things right again. What could she say? How does one explain to the man to whom they once whispered words of affection, words of love, that all of those things are no longer true?

He sighed and shook his head. “No, Chris. If you were truly sorry, you would not have done this in the first place.” With those words, his attention turned to Erik with all the fiery rage of a demon.
“You never would have betrayed me like this in the first place.”

“No, Rhal, you do not understand.” She stood, distancing herself farther from Erik, and walked over to sit in the spot next to him against the wall where so much of his blood had spilled. “I am sorry for many things that have happened between us. I am sorry I got you into this fight and made you feel, even for a second, that you needed to fight to save my life. And I am so, so sorry that you were so terribly wounded. I am sorry that promised you things that I could never give. I am sorry that I told you that I could love you—that I did love you—when I was not able to. I am sorry I let you believe in a lie for so long. All of that was my fault and I am truly sorry for it.”

“But,” she continued, feeling a surge of determination well up within her, “I am not sorry for making this choice to be with Erik. I know it will hurt you terribly, and I am sorry for that too because that was never my intention, but I am not sorry for following my heart. This is the man I love now, Rhal. And I will not apologize for that. And I think—I really think—that we will be happier to remain as friends. I think you and I both knew that we could never have lived a happy life together as a husband and wife.”

“But we could have, Chris,” he said, never once turning to look at her, but instead staring resolutely ahead. “We always got along so well before… Before that thing ruined everything!”

In a frenzied rage, Rhal tried to struggle back to his feet but all the blood he had lost prevented him from doing so and he collapsed back against the wall before he could even attempt to stand. He cursed several times when it became apparent to him that he was still too weak to be mobile, so instead, he turned as far away from Christine as he was able.

“Rhal…” She thought about reaching out to him, as she had done so often before, but now, the idea did not seem like a good one when she was trying to sever their engagement completely, and when he clearly resented her so much for doing so. So, she continued, unmoving. “Do not blame Erik for all this. It was my choice. He did not force me to marry him; I wanted to. He is not guilty in all of this.”

“If he had not been here…” Christine said, looking back towards the man in question, who now appeared little more than an anxious child as he gazed at her, waiting for her response. “If he had not been here, we would have been forced into an unhappy marriage with no opposition from anyone. But he has saved us from that, because now I have found the man I love. Now, you must find the woman you love.”

“I do love you, Christine—I do. And we would not have been unhappy,” Rhal repeated with more conviction than before. “You loved me once—why not again?”

She shook her head. “Don’t ask me that question. Please, don’t—not now.”

He turned toward her, a shadow passing over his face. “I think I have a right to know because, whatever that reason is, it is apparently enough for you to leave me. I have a right to know why—gods damn it, Christine!”

From behind her, she heard Erik shift slightly, and although she could not see his face, she knew that he was tensed, his hands curled into fists, his brow hard as stone. Tension was brewing between them again, and she had no reason to give that could ever possible banish it all away. Perhaps there was some reason that she did not love Rhal anymore like she had once, but she did not consciously know it. It had been a slow and unexplained falling away from him, one that she
had hardly recognized even as it was happening, and now looking back at it all, she was unable to say with any conviction when she had begun to see that Rhal was not the man she loved. Perhaps the strain of her father’s death had been too hard on her and had smothered all her emotions for someone who figured so prominently in the memories of her father and in the memories that directly followed his death. Perhaps Erik truly had started it all, and the moment she had laid eyes on him, her affection had gradually shifted from one man to the other.

Or perhaps, most likely, there truly was no reason for it at all. Love is as fragile and as delicate as it is powerful, and although it sometimes takes nothing more than a glance to make one fall in love, sometimes it takes nothing more than a word to make one fall out of it. Her mind had never been completely logical, nor, by any stretch, had been her love and affection, if her relationship with Erik was anything to judge by. There was no one reason she could not love Rhal anymore, just as there was no one reason she loved Erik. There were only many, many small reasons—so small that at present her mind could make no sense of them—and in that way, there may as well have been no reasons at all.

“If you say his name, Chris, I swear to every god on the Mountain, I’ll kill him. I swear I’ll—”

“You want a reason, Rhal?” She slapped her hands on the ground and he quieted. “You want a reason? Well, here it is: there was no reason. There never was. I am sorry I cannot say more, but it’s the truth. I do not know why I stopped loving you, or why I started loving Erik. It just… happened.”

He was silent for a long while. Then, “I don’t understand. I can’t understand you.”

She closed her eyes. There was nothing more she could say to make him understand what had happened between them when she did not know herself. A dull ache throbbed behind her eyes. “I don’t know, Rhal. I can’t understand myself either. I do not say that to hurt you, or to cover up some painful truth I do not want you to know. I say that because I have thought about this so many times before, and every time I try to supply a reason for what happened, I never can. I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” was all he said, sounding just as tired as she was. Nothing more.

“I hope…” she took a deep breath and faced him, defeated and broken as he was. Her mind raced to find words that conveyed how deeply saddened she was over his fate, over the animosity between them when she loved him so dearly. Words to somehow convey that a piece of her life would be missing, even in the most blissful marriage imaginable with Erik, without Rhal, and that she never wanted to lose him like this, despite wanting to lose his love. “I hope that we can remain friends, like we used to be,” she concluded at last.

Rhal ground his teeth for a moment, but said nothing more, so, with a heavy heart, Christine stood, stretching her stiff legs as she fought to keep her eyes open. “Well, I think I shall take a bath—if that is all right with you, Erik?—and go to sleep. I am very, very tired right now.”

Slowly, Erik stood to meet her, the same exhaustion she felt showing in his eyes. “Do what you need to do, dearest,” he replied, casting a wary glance towards Rhal as he spoke. “Am I to just leave him here all night?”

Rhal shifted against the wall as they stared at him, Christine too lost in thought about how to solve the sleeping arrangement to notice the cold hatred with which the two men were regarding each other.

“Do you have a couch or something similar that Rhal could sleep on in here? I do not think he is well enough to move very far right now, and I see no reason why a couch cannot be just as
comfortable as a bed.”

Erik turned toward her, frowning as he thought. “I do have a couch but not in this particular room. We will have to move one in here, if you truly think he is unable to move. But that is nothing I cannot do, so if that is what you think would be best, my dear, I shall do it.”

She gave him a fleeting smile, knowing how much he likely wanted nothing to do with Rhal or anything that offered him any comfort. “Thank you. I can help you, if you would like. It will be easier with both of us, I think.” She passed a hand over her eyes. “And I can give him one of those cloths you gave me for a makeshift toga since his is rather… dirty. I could leave a bowl of water out for him too, if he wants to clean some of the blood off of him tonight, because I still do not think he would be able to take a bath without someone helping him.”

“Yes, that all sounds fine, Christine,” Erik murmured, his mind clearly preoccupied. “Shall we go get that couch now?”

The nearest couch was three rooms away, laying overturned on the ground next to the remnants of some shattered vase. Turning it over was not particularly hard, as it did not weigh too terribly much, but the moment they lifted it off the ground, Christine knew that carrying it three rooms down would be a feat. The couch was far too long and bulky to be easily carried by just two people and she was far too tired to do much of anything very well, as was Erik, although the situation was far worse for him, because in addition to all his blood loss, his right hand was still too newly stitched for him to do any sort of manual labor. So, with Christine dragging the couch from the front and Erik pushing it with one hand from behind, it took them several minutes to move it to where Rhal lay, attempting to scrub some of the dried blood off his skin with the water Christine had brought him.

“There,” Christine said at last as they finally managed to push it close enough for Rhal’s comfort. “Rhal, I can get you some cloth for a new toga, if you would like. And I can help you put it on too, if you need me to.”

The only word of reply she received from Rhal was a low, ‘sure,’ and nothing more, so she did as she had said and fetched a piece of cloth for him from her old room, as Erik wandered off to another section of the house. As she had thought, he did require significant help both taking off his old shredded toga and putting on the new one and, despite his weak objections, she managed to help him do both. Such a thing might have been awkward for her had she not long since been entirely overcome by numb exhaustion and transitioned to a nurse-like figure for both men, so it did not bother her to see Rhal clad with next to nothing on his battered body, although it was very clear to her that it did bother him. But even so, after a few minutes of working together, she got Rhal changed and maneuvered him carefully to his couch-bed where he lay, rubbing his fingers over the new line of stitches across the crease of his elbow.

“Now,” she told him, attempting to rub some of the burning from her eyes as she spoke, “I am going to take a bath and go to bed. Goodnight, Rhal.”

“Wait a minute, Chris.”

For one brief moment, she was convinced that he was going to tell her that he wanted to remain friends as well, and that if he could not have her love in a romantic way, he would be happy to be at least close friends. When he spoke, however, his words shattered all her hopes.

“What am I to do now? Why should I not gather a mob and have this creature”—he motioned vaguely to the door Erik had walked out of in moments previous— “killed, as he ought to be? Why should I not take you back to your family, where you belong? I know even without asking that your
sisters would never approve of this… thing. Why should I let the two of you be happy, when you destroyed everything I have ever wanted?"

A lump had begun to form in her throat, because, although she had thought herself numb to all emotion after everything that had happened, his words still stung. “How could you ever do that to me, Rhal? I know you do not like Erik—”

“I hate him and I want to kill him with my own bare hands!” Rhal interjected before she could continue.

“I know you do not like Erik, but I do. And if you ever had any respect at all for my wishes and what I want, you would never threaten to take him away from me. He is my betrothed now, not you, and you must accept that, because I will not change my mind.”

“If he were a good man, Chris, I would, but—”

“How are you to say he is not?” she demanded. “I am the one who knows, and I am the only one who is able to judge whether or not he is good—and I say he is! The fact is, Rhal, I know him and you do not. You do not get to throw around judgements when you are entirely ignorant of who Erik is!”

Rhal crossed his arms, the shadow that had settled over his eyes unwavering. “And what if I do not accept that?”

“You have to. If you ever loved me at all, you would leave us in peace.” She closed her eyes briefly, feeling a surge of panic run through her as she began to consider just how terribly Rhal could ruin her life if he chose. “If it were you who loved another and had chosen to leave me, even if it were for the woman I hated most in the whole world, I would not argue because if I could see that you truly loved her, more than you ever loved me, I would leave it. I want you to be happy, Rhal. Do you not want the same for me? If you do, you would never do that to me.”

He shook his head. “Clearly, you do not want me to be happy, though, because you are leaving me. I would have been happy with you, but you have fallen in love with another.”

“No.” She said, shaking her head. “No, I want you to be happy, but not at my expense. I cannot give you happiness if it means I will hate the life I live. And when it comes down to it, I know our marriage would not have been a good one, anyway.”

With that, she turned back away from him and made her way to the doorway, where Erik leaned, watching, in the shadows, his outline so obscured she had not even known he was there. She jumped as she rounded the corner and he slipped out of the shadows, an unlit oil lamp in his hand, alerting her of his presence.

“Christine,” he said, drawing her further into the hall until they were out of Rhal’s earshot. “I am going to get a bath as well down the hall. I thought I ought to tell you of my whereabouts, just in the case that you should need me for some reason. Am I correct in assuming that you know what to do and where to find everything for a bath? I heated some rocks for warm water, but they have not been in the fire long so I cannot guarantee much—my apologies.”

“I think I will be fine, thank you.” She took a step closer to him and a look of unsurety crossed his face, despite everything she had promised that she felt for him only an hour or so previous. But when he took a step back from her, his eyes flashing gold, she did not have the strength to reach back out to him, letting him distance himself from her once again, although she felt her heart tear because of it. If he still did not want her presence or her touch, the last thing she wanted was to
force something as fragile and as a young as their present relationship. She began to pick at her fingers as he turned away from her.

“Are you sure you will be all right?” she asked, careful not to do anything she knew he would not appreciate. “With your hand and all?”

“I have done this many times before,” he replied, his movements too rigid as he continued to back away from her. “And I can assure you that I will be well enough. And if I do not see you before you go to bed and get that rest you so deserve, goodnight, my Christine.”

He opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something more, but, perhaps thinking the better of it, shut it, offered her a tense smile, and left her standing alone in the corridor with the oil lamp, still unlit. She could not understand it. Only moments ago, they had been crying into each other’s embrace, whispering words of love, of affection, and now, he was just as distant and as closed off to her as he had been before. Perhaps, the novelty of it all was too much for him to handle, which Christine thought was understandable, especially given his lack of human contact, or perhaps, he simply did not know what to do now that he had found the thing for which he had been searching so long, which she also found understandable. But either way, she found it upsetting that almost nothing had changed between them, other than the knowledge of two kisses and a wedding in the future, which only added to the strain.

Perhaps she might have confronted him, had it not been for the events of that day and the exhaustion sapping at her bones. Perhaps she would confront him later, but now, she could not find the strength or willpower within her to do so, and so she let the issue drop for the time being, turning on her heel to, instead, find the bathroom. Yes, she would ask him about it later—sometime tomorrow perhaps—and strike up a much-needed conversation between them about the future that awaited them, on which so little had been said.

When she finally reached the bathroom, there were a few smoldering rocks beneath the tub, as Erik had promised, and that same collection of jars that had been there the last time she had taken a bath. Without a moment’s hesitation, Christine discarded her bloodied chiton and plunged into the warm water, letting its peace and calm seep into her weared bones. She sighed and closed her eyes. Had she been able to, she would have fallen asleep at that very moment, wrapped in the cocoon of the still, warm water, floating just above consciousness, but it would certainly not do for Erik to find her the next morning sleeping naked in his tub. So, she resisted the urge as the nearly mechanical steps of bathing set in.

She scrubbed the blood from her body, her mind so numb she hardly realized what she was doing, wondering all the while just whose blood it was that covered her—she had never actually been injured, after all. But, oh—what did it matter? She found herself submerging back into the water and watching, emotionlessly, as the redness dissipated into the clear water, spreading, invisible, all around her, surrounding her in someone else’s blood. Her fingers ached as she ran them through her tangled hair, massaging the oil through it, stopping only when they came across that one, shorter strand of hair that felt so unnatural among at the rest. A small, innocent reminder of the death she had almost died. She drifted back beneath the water, washing the oil from her hair, leaving it soft and gentle as it brushed around her bare shoulders in wisps.

She was finished. She climbed from the tub, dripping wet, and somewhere in the back of her mind she registered herself rubbing more oil into her skin and knotting another one of Erik’s cloths around herself before she slipped out of the room, leaving a trail of water in her wake. She had every intention of walking only to her own room and staying upright just long enough to stumble into bed for the night, but as she passed in front of Erik’s closed door, her feet suddenly stopped and she felt her knuckles rapping against his doorframe.
She had forgotten to say goodnight to him. She wanted to say goodnight to him.

“Erik?”

She pressed her hand against the door and it swung open slightly before he told her that she was welcome to come in. The room was dark—only one small oil lamp was lit to fend off the darkness of the night, but it cast an orange glow around the room that made it seem all the more warm and welcoming. It was almost as if she had walked into the inside of a hearth. He was sitting on his bed, the blankets draped around him like waves, his hands fidgeting nervously with his mask.

“What is it, Christine?”

It was the nervous fidgeting that brought her attention to his mask, which led her to realize the one he was wearing now was most certainly not the one he had been wearing earlier. Even in the dark, she could see that the leather was more worn and cracked, and that the shape of the mask itself, which usually was quite sharp and looked as though it followed the natural structure of his face, was not as exaggerated as it was before. In fact, the mask was little more than a sheet to cover his face, leaving, as usual, his eyes and mouth free. He cleared his throat, and she looked away, knowing he must have seen her staring.

“I did not know you had more than one mask. Is this the one you sleep in?”

“Yes,” he stated simply, drawing his legs closer to himself as she sat down on the bed beside him. She could feel the tension radiating off of him as they sat so close together, but she was far too tired to attempt to lighten it.

“What is it, Christine?” he repeated when she said nothing more, his voice stiff and curt. Perhaps he did not want her with him at all.

Christine knotted her fingers in the blankets, and felt Erik move even closer to the edge of the bed, his fingers abandoning the blanket entirely. Why was it that he loathed so much to sit close to her now, when earlier he had held her, kissed her even, and told her that he was the happiest man in the world to do it? She ran a hand through her damp hair.

“I just… I remembered that I did not say goodnight to you earlier and I wanted to say goodnight to you. That’s all.”

“Oh.” He frowned and sat up slightly, his hands flying up to adjust the soft leather of his mask. “I suppose… Well, goodnight then, Christine.”

“Goodnight, Erik.” She offered him a smile that he only just returned, the strain of doing so showing in his deep, golden eyes.

A thought flickered suddenly through her mind as he eyes strayed to the narrow windows carved into his walls. “Oh, and Erik? You might want to lock your door tonight. My two brothers-in-law were with Rhal but they never showed up here, and I do not know why. Just in case they show up here tomorrow or during the night, I want you to be safe—they will not hurt me.”

He inclined his head to her. “Thank you for the warning, my dear. I will do that.”

For a moment, she waited for him to say something—anything—more to keep her with him just a while longer now that she had done all she had said she was going to do. But he did not, so she rose, her heart heavy and her fingertips longing aimlessly for the novelty of his skin. At least she would finally be able to sleep.
Chapter End Notes

Confession: I went back and forth for a long time about whether I should add any resolve between Christine and Rhal AND Christine and Erik, and I ended up deciding not to really do it for either, which, I know, is sort of mean on my part. But hopefully both of these relationships will eventually reach a point that you guys will be more satisfied with.

Well... how'd you enjoy this chapter? Any thoughts? Let me know! And, as always, thank you all so much for your lovely reviews. I enjoy reading them more than you probably know :)
Chapter Summary

In which Christine's brothers pay her a visit...

Chapter Notes

Hey hey hey everyone! I'm so sorry it's been so long! Goodness, here I was thinking that I would a writing machine this summer and I only ended up getting out one chapter-- wow ;/ Fortunately for you all, though, it's a really long chapter! Some how longer than all the other ones, even though it's sorta boring, at least in comparison with some of the stuff that's been happening. But this way, you'll have a lot to make up for the time I was away-- these 10,000 words are my gift to you. (Although for real I'm sorry because I feel like this is probably going to be a nightmare for those of you reading on your phones!)

Anyway, hope you enjoy this unnecessary giant...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Christine awoke the next morning, it was not to the feeling of warm, morning light upon her face, gradually and naturally awaking her from her slumber, but to the feeling of someone shaking her shoulder slightly. She groaned, all her muscles aching and a dull throbbing inside her head bursting back to life the moment she was drawn back to consciousness. Wanting nothing more than to continue sleeping, she turned away from whoever it was who had interrupted her sleep so cruelly.

“Christine, wake up.”

She knew that voice. Slowly, she opened her bleary eyes to see the slightly blurred outline of Erik against the dark blue of early morning night, before the sun quite has a chance to rise. *How early was it?* With another groan, she sat up, closing her eyes again as they readjusted to seeing.

“Erik?”

“Christine, my dear, there is someone here. Someone is outside.” For the first time, she noted the barely disguised desperation and insistence in his voice, which stirred more life into her. If he was worried enough to wake her, there must be something very out of the ordinary happening.

“Where?” She managed as she climbed out of bed, stretching her stiff muscles as she did so. Without hardly waiting for her to finish exiting, Erik took her by the elbow and pulled her from the bed, rushing her down a dark hallway to a window that overlooked the forest that surrounded his house. In the distance, she could make out the faint outline of two men and, judging by the odd shapes that protruded from their backs, they were armed. That must have been why Erik was so terribly worried, but there was no cause for that.
“Do you recognize them?” Erik demanded from beside her, his voice breathless. “Do you know who these people are?”

She nodded and pressed her hand over her eyes as she turned away from the window. “Yes, yes. Those are my brothers-in-law. The ones I told you about earlier. Felipe and Lysander.”

When she removed the hand from her eyes, Erik’s attention was directed at her instead of the window, his brow furrowed in deep thought. “Are you sure?”

She nodded, frustration building in her, mostly due to the early hour. “Yes, Erik. I am positive.”

He groaned low in his throat as he turned back to the window, leaning on the sill as he gazed out into the trees. “What are we to do? They have weapons, Christine.”

“I know. I can see that.” She leaned against the window sill next to him, watching the two men as they made their slow progress across the grass. “I will talk to them, I suppose. They will listen to me—they are my brothers, after all. There is nothing to worry about. I’ll go out and meet them.”

She started from the window sill, her mind still hazy to think on what the many outcomes of meeting her brothers outside could be. At least they would not hurt her, and they would not be as blinded by jealousy as Rhal had been, so they would hopefully listen to her, as well. Her legs moved automatically towards the door as she thought, her exhausted mind hardly working. A hand on her elbow, however, stopped her slow progress and she turned to face Erik, the pallor of his skin framed against the dark sky.

“I do not want you to go,” he told her, gazing at her with large frightened eyes that reminded her, not for the first time, of the eyes of a child.

She sighed and took a step nearer to him, her fingers coming up to rest atop his hand. A swell of gentleness spread through her at his concern for her, at his desire to be near her. “I have to go, Erik,” she told him gently, rubbing her thumb over his knuckles. “I want to be able to explain everything that has happened to them before they see all this. I think they will listen better that way.”

“I know.” He dropped his gaze. “But what if they were to drag you away with them, and I could not get you back. What if we never see each other again. I could not live, Christine. I would not want to live without you. Please, stay here.”

He was such an unsure man, her Erik. Her heart constricted at the thought that he was hers, that if all went well, they would soon be man and wife. Her Erik. “I will come right back,” she promised, reaching up with her free hand to brush a stray curl away from his brow. “I promise. You mustn’t worry so much. I will just be right outside.”

He nodded, still not meeting her eyes, the hand on her arm tightening just ever so slightly before letting go and setting her free into the darkened landscape. As she walked across the grass to meet the men, who had stopped their movement since the moment she exited the house, she realized that if she had wanted to kiss Erik, her timing could not have been more opportune, if she would have pressed a quick goodbye kiss to the corner of his mask. Oh, well. She sighed as the space separating her and her brothers quickly closed. Perhaps some other time in their future, because it was true that now, she and Erik had many, many years to kiss and to do other things that married couples do. One missed opportunity was not the worst thing, even if it did leave her longing.

As her thoughts trailed off into blankness, she reached her brothers, who, she was relieved to find, had not even bothered to take their weapons out to greet her. Their brows, however, were etched
together in obvious confusion and concern, that Christine realized whatever she was planning to say would likely only worsen. There were few ways she could explain the new revelations for her future without causing at the very least some surprise.

“Hello,” she greeted them, offering them a smile that only Felipe slowly returned. Neither of them reached out to hug her, but simply stood where they were, hands at their sides like true soldiers, Felipe’s eyes trained on her while Lysander’s carefully searched the house stationed further up the hill.


“Where is Rhal?” Lysander interjected with some force. His fingers twitched upward slightly, as if he was considering grabbing his sword, although for what purpose, Christine did not want to consider. Surely, her brothers would never cause her any harm.

She turned to Lysander, her fingers busying themselves with tightening the knot on her dress. “He is inside the house up there.” She jerked her head towards Erik’s house before continuing. “I can take you there in a moment, if you would like. You are more than welcome to see him.”

Lysander nodded, the hard look in his eyes not lessening in the slightest. Felipe, however, let out a breath of relief. “So, Rhal is alive then, I take it?”

“Oh, yes—he is alive. Although, unfortunately, he did take a bit of beating yesterday… But he is not in danger anymore and will make a full recovery soon enough.” Before Felipe could say more, Lysander grabbed her arm. “What is this place?”

Now, she sensed the answers she was going to have to give would become difficult. Before she could explain to them that the house sitting atop the hill just paces in front of them belonged to none other than the Phantom himself, she had to explain that the Phantom was not the man they thought he was. After all, it would not do at all for her to lead them to Erik’s house, only to have them kill Erik on sight. And although she knew that was what she needed to prevent by all means necessary, she had no idea which means to use and how she could possibly convince even her brothers that Erik could not be their prey.

“Well,” she began at length, testing her words out slowly and carefully. “I think… I think I must explain something to you before I do anything else.”

“And what is that?” Felipe asked.

“I… Well, I am engaged.”

Lysander made a sound through clenched teeth. “Yes, Chris, we know you are engaged. You have been for several weeks now. I do not understand how that figures into what is happening right now. Where is Rhal?”

“No, no.” She closed her eyes. “You do not understand. I was engaged to Rhal.” When she opened her eyes again, both men were staring at her with a mix between disbelief and, once more, confusion. She supposed there really was no better way for her to tell them than to simply do it—she could not hide such an obvious truth from them for much longer. And besides, she did want them to know in a way, partly to keep Erik safe from their swords, but partly because, out of all the members of her family, her brothers, she guessed would be the least likely to do anything to talk her out of or hinder her marriage to Erik. Neither of her brothers had ever been very involved in her previous love-life, nor, she thought, did either one view themselves as having the authority to tell her what she could and could not do—although it was not outside of their power to do so. But, out
of everyone, she thought her brothers would be the easiest to convince, and the least likely to take action against her betrothed.

“I was engaged to Rhal, but I am not anymore. You see, I am engaged to someone else now—the man who owns this house. His name is Erik, and I love him dearly, and I expect you not to harm him in any way whatsoever because of that.”

Silence.

Lysander was the first one to speak, after several long moments of Christine’s heart pounding wildly in her chest and her mind trying to convince itself over and over that everything was fine, despite the circumstances. “You…” He cleared his throat, and shifted his gaze once more to the house. “You are not going to marry Rhal?”

“No,” she affirmed softly.

“Christine.” Felipe shook his head, as if he was trying to dispel her words from his mind. “Surely, this Erik is not the same man that we were all looking to kill yesterday.”

“He is. One and the same.” She smiled slightly, more to herself than to them, at how much the situation had changed in the past twelve hours. She felt like an entirely new person, and all those plans that Rhal and the boys had spent so many hours meticulously calculating, seemed little more than some elaborate play to her now.

Felipe sucked in a breath. “Surely you are joking, Chris.”

She shook her head as she began to wring her hands. “I am not—I promise you.” And yet, despite the apprehension that rose within her finally telling others of her infidelity to Rhal and of her change in plans, there was some excitement too and some happiness. This was the first time she had ever been able to share with anyone the news of her love for Erik, and moreover their engagement. True, it had been made official last night, but speaking it aloud to someone other than herself, Erik, or Rhal, who had, of course, been there when the proposal was offered, made it seem so much more legitimate than it had before. She swallowed her smile.

“How could you?” It was Lysander, now, who shot her a look so full of betrayal and disappointment that all Christine’s former excitement vanished. She looked away from him, unable to meet the heat of his stare. “How could you do this to Rhal after everything he has done for you and for your family? I cannot believe you, Christine. You cannot possible go through with this, you know. To end your engagement to Rhal you would need permission from—”

“How from?” Christine rounded on her brother, her face burning. “Who is there left to ask, Lysander? Not my father—he is dead. My mother is dead. Who would you have me ask? You? Felipe? Or, gods forbid, my sisters?”

Lysander only scowled at her as he adjusted his sword. “Yes! I would have you ask me. Or Felipe. But you cannot do this without permission. And frankly, I think I am speaking for everyone when I say that you will not get that permission if you want to marry a madman! A monster!”

“I don’t care,” Christine was saying before she hardly had time to consider her words or the consequences. “I don’t care about your permission—I do not need or want it. If you will not let me marry Erik—fine. I will run off with him anyway, no matter what you say. You cannot stop me, and you would be stupid to try, if Erik is half as powerful as you seem to think he is.” She took a deep breath but even that was not enough to stop the words that spilled from her lips. “And, Lysander? I feel like it is very brave of you to come here and tell me that I need your permission to
marry Erik, when you and Psyche eloped, too.”

The frown on Lysander’s face deepened, and there was true anger in his eyes, but he said nothing more. Christine crossed her arms, her chest heaving. Finally, Felipe spoke up, cutting the tension between Christine and her other brother.

“Alright, Chris. Permission aside, why on earth do you even want to marry this man? What does he have that Rhal does not?”

“Me,” she answered, her voice softening. “He has me. I love him, but I do not love Rhal. And that makes all the difference—do you not think so too, Felipe? I cannot marry a man I do not love.”

“But you do love Rhal,” Felipe pressed. “You have always loved Rhal.”

Christine shook her head. “No. I mean, he has always been my closest friend, but I do not love him now the way a wife ought to love her husband, and I do not think I ever would have been able to. I think that a marriage between us only would have brought both of us unhappiness, because I never would have been able to give him the love he deserves. I am setting him free of that.”

Felipe looked to Lysander and sighed. “Even if that were true, Chris, everyone thinks that this man that you love is a criminal. Perhaps he is not, as you have claimed, but there is something about him that is not right—I am sure of it.”

“He is not a criminal, though, Felipe. He is the kindest, most thoughtful, most considerate man I have ever met. There is nothing bad in him. Trust me—I know him far better than either of you.” Both of the men’s faces, however, remained unmoved. Christine sighed, and turned her attention back to the small palace on the hill, the place she soon would be able to call home.

“And if you do not believe me, I will show you myself. Would you like to meet Erik? I swear he will not hurt you, but you must not hurt him either. He is a good man.”

Both men agreed somewhat grudgingly and then, the three were on their way up to the house, Christine leading the way with an undeniable spring in her step, and the men trudging along after. The path to the house ahead of them was short, however, and the three of them reached the door before Christine could hardly begin to plan what she wanted to say to Erik, to Rhal, to her brothers. There was simply so much she needed to fix between the five of them—so much tension, unrest, and unhappiness—and she had not the slightest idea of how exactly to go about making things right. But it needed to be her—no one else could play her role in all of this. It was unfortunate, she thought to herself as she opened the door to Erik’s house, that she was the only one who could go about fixing things when she was so utterly horrible at doing so. At least, she could try.

She half-expected Erik to greet her and her brothers in the entryway, like a host ought to, but when he did not, she was not particularly surprised either. Judging from his actions before she had left, he was very nervous about having strangers in his house, especially if those strangers were the distrustful brothers of his betrothed. And Christine did not blame him for feeling such a way, either. She was certain she would have felt the exact same way, had she been in his shoes, and even in her own situation, she was terrified of how things would end up playing out between herself and her family. More than anything, she wished that they would accept her and Erik with open arms, despite their preconceived judgements of Erik, despite her broken promises to Rhal, and yet she knew, somehow, that her wishes would never be a reality. Even in the best scenario she could imagine realistically, there were serious complications between herself and her family, although within all of these better scenarios, these complications were easily solved.

It took several minutes of searching to find Erik, who was pacing one of the many sitting rooms he
possessed, one that he and Christine had frequented less than the others previously. Perhaps he had thought that she would not find him there. When she entered the room, her heart pounding in her chest and her brothers following close behind, his head shot up and his hands began to tug anxiously at each other, as his eyes searched the room desperately for something—anything—to look at, it seemed, other than Christine and her brothers. Even before words were exchanged, there was a tension in the air that was almost suffocating to Christine. It was as if two worlds that were never meant to intermingle had crashed into each other and had left their different characters standing together in a room that the universe had never intended for them to share. Everything just felt so wrong.

Christine crossed the room to stand next to her betrothed before he, or her brothers, spoke, more to offer him some comfort than anything else. His posture was so stiff that she appeared to her like some stone carving of a man, which would have been funny to her, had it been a different time and situation. Even so, she felt a laugh rising up in her, which she immediately swallowed down, because had she started laughing, she knew she would have been unable to stop.

“Erik,” she said, her eyes locking with his. There was so much fear there, and so much unsurety that she felt a sudden need to drop all that needed to be done and simply hold him, and whisper words of reassurance into his ears. But she could not, so she offered him what she hoped look like a smile instead, wondering if that would be enough for the time being. He did not return the look as she slipped next to him to stand by his side.

“Erik, these are my brothers: Felipe and Lysander.” At their names, the respective man took a slight step forward. Erik gave them both a slight nod. Christine began to chew the inside of her cheek. “And Felipe, Lysander—this is Erik. My betrothed.”

The three regarded each other coldly for a long minute. And then, Lysander spoke, a knife in his voice. “Tell me, Erik, why is it that you wear a mask?”

Oh, gods, no. Not this. Christine felt her throat constrict at those words. Out of all the things Lysander could have said, why did it have to be that? Why did he have to bring up the one subject that not even she dared yet to broach? The one subject that Erik refused to discuss even with her? Why?

She linked her arm with Erik, hoping against hope that perhaps the feeling of her skin on his would calm and center him somewhat. The arm she felt beneath her own, however, felt undeniably tense and coiled, as if her fiancé was a snake waiting to bite.

“Lysander, is it? Will you please do me the kindness of telling me why, out of everything you could have chosen to remark upon after making my acquaintance, you chose my mask? It is very rude to ask why someone wears a mask, I am sure you know.” There was poison in Erik’s voice that he did not bother to hide, and with it, a tremor so slight Christine felt sure that neither of her brothers could have picked up on it. She curled her fingers tighter around his arm.

“I am sorry then, if I am being rude. I just want to make sure that my sister is engaged to a good, honest man, because, so far as I have seen, no good, honest man ever wears a mask,” Lysander shot back. Christine bit her lip and glanced to Felipe, hoping for some resistance from the older man, but Felipe simply stood, his arms crossed over his chest and his face a dark frown. There would be no help from him, then.

Erik, however, remained almost completely impassive, his masked face devoid of all tell-tale emotion, his spine straight and poised. Had she not known him well enough to feel the tremor under his skin, the tension coiled in every muscle, Christine might have thought him unaffected, as she was sure her brothers did. But he was not, and Christine had no desire to see what Erik would
do when pressed a little too closely about his mask, after what he had done to her when she tried to
do the same.

“Come on, Erik,” Lysander prodded, his eyes narrowed, the grip around his sword far too tight to
be casual. “Tell us. What are you hiding?”

A short, sharp breath rocked Erik and his fingers curled into fists before Christine’s eyes.
Something was certainly about to happen, but she could not have a repeat of last night’s events with
Rhal—she simply could not. Out of the corner of her vision, she saw Erik open his mouth, about to
say something that would likely do little to lessen the tight atmosphere in the room, but before he
could do any more damage, she spoke instead.

“He wounded his face terribly during war and wears the mask only to conceal it.” Erik shot her a
look, but she continued nonetheless, the knowledge of the fact that she was lying only making the
words come faster. “I have seen it, but he does not like strangers to, for obvious reasons. The
scarring left his face deformed.”

Her eyes met with Erik’s gold ones briefly, and although she could not read his glance in such a
short time, she could see no anger in his stare and that was enough. Turning, she faced her brothers
again, whose stances had softened slightly at the sympathetic lie she had just fed them. Of course,
being soldiers themselves, the two would feel at least more understanding of Erik’s apparent plight
than previously. Perhaps it would be enough.

“You have seen it?” Felipe eyed her suspicious, and for a moment, she was afraid that he had seen
right through her lie. Was she truly so terribly at twisting her words? She supposed she had never
really had much practice before, but still…

Erik answered the question for her. “Yes, she has, I can assure you. But my face is now a gruesome
sight, which I do not delight in sharing with the outside world. She, however, is more caring than
most.”

Of course, it was not true, but coming from Erik, it sounded true. The way he spoke, the way his
voice carried such emotion, made the lie sound like the most natural, most true thing in all the
world. If she herself had not made up the story, Christine might have doubted that it was not
exactly what had happened. She offered a quick nod to her brothers.

“A war, you said?” Lysander’s grip on his sword had not lessened, even if his outright aggression
had. “Which war did you fight in?”

“Siege of Samos,” Erik replied, his voice not faltering a second. Christine wondered how on earth
he did it—lie so effortlessly.

“Siege of Samos,” Lysander frowned. His blade drooped slightly as he thought. “Corinth and
Sparta, right? So, which side were you, if not Athenian?”

Christine turned back to Erik, expecting to see him in a panic that the battle he had named did not
involve his home town and that he had mis-stepped somewhere along the way. But he appeared
completely cool, as he replied with ease, “Spartan. I am Spartan-born.”

He was a quick thinker, it appeared. Whether or not he had chosen a battle to have supposedly
fought in poorly, or whether this was what he had meant all along, Christine did not know but
either way, he spun the story effortlessly. “My father was a Spartan,” he continued, the tension
slowly leaking out of his muscles under Christine’s fingertips. “And I was raised in Sparta. It was
not until after Samos that I left it, in favor of joining a friend to travel. And, many years later, I
ended up here in Athens.”

“Hm.” Lysander spun his sword but there was a carelessness to the motion, which told Christine that he trusted Erik now enough to drop his guard at least somewhat. It was funny how easily war brought men together. “I should have guessed from that accent, I suppose. Well, Erik, that is quite interesting, and you will have to tell us all about it one day. And I’m sorry about your face.”

And just like that, the gap between the three men had closed up enough to be bridged. There was no longer an air of hostility in the room, nor a possibility that one might stab another. Things had drifted slowly back into peacefulness, and it was all from a well-placed lie. Yes, she knew it was wrong (of course), but recently, Christine had been finding the right lie at the right time to be very, very useful. She gave her brothers a tight smile.

Erik inclined his head. “As am I, but I appreciate the sentiment.” The smile that followed his words looked slightly out of place on his face, Christine thought, but he was trying to be sociable and that was enough for her.

The small talk had been brought to a halt with that, and before it could be picked up by someone again, Felipe asked the question that Christine knew must inevitably come. “So, where is Rhal? You said he was here, didn’t you, Chris?”

“Oh! Yes. Yes, he is.” When she glanced to Erik for help, she saw that he was still completely poised and serene. She would have to handle this on her own, it seemed, and perhaps that was for the best, because she did not want Erik to have much of a voice in what he had done to Rhal. “He is still asleep, though, I think. I can take you to him.”

Her brothers nodded, and her heartbeat quickened at the realization she was going to have to show her brothers how terribly her new betrothed had injured Rhal. Once they saw Rhal, his ruined image might just be enough to destroy the fragile acceptance that Felipe and Lysander seemed to have gained for Erik, and Christine could not have that. She supposed she would just have to explain it away as best she could. Besides, Erik had taken a beating too, so it was not as if Rhal had been mercilessly tortured or anything like that. The two had simply taken to settling a problem by combat, a thing which men did all the time, so there was no reason for unnecessary hatred. Right?

She wondered this as she padded, barefoot, navigating the labyrinth of hallways and empty rooms that she had come to know. Before she was entirely ready to deal with the mess she, Erik, and Rhal had made, she was suddenly crossing through the doorway of a room which held a makeshift bed and the body of a sleeping soldier. She took a deep breath and turned.

“Before you see him, you should know that there was… an incident yesterday, involving Erik and Rhal.”

Lysander raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

Her brothers’ eyes slipped past her and to the couch where Rhal was resting and Christine, who would have rather told the two men what had happened than have them see Rhal and draw their own conclusions, added to her previous statement quickly. “There was a fight between Rhal and Erik. A sword fight. That is why Erik has stitches on his hand and shoulder, if either of you happened to notice.” Both of them offered her only blank stares at that. She continued.

“See, Rhal got a bit… upset when he heard that I was going to marry Erik instead of himself, and neither of them were seeing eye-to-eye to begin with. So, when Rhal found out, he started attacking Erik, and Erik attacked him back, and things got ugly rather fast, as I am sure you can imagine. But Rhal and Erik are both alive, so the outcome was mostly good, I suppose. You should know,
though, that Rhal got pretty beat up, and had to get a fair amount of stitches last night to keep him from bleeding out. I think he will recover with time, but he does look rather rough now. Anyway, I just wanted you to know that before you saw him.”

“Thank you for telling us, Chris,” Felipe said, his eyes still searching somewhere past her shoulders. “Can we see him now, please?”

She sighed. “Be my guest.” And with that, she stepped aside and allowed them entrance into the room and to Rhal. They rushed in as she watched from the door, deciding she would rather not see Rhal again so soon, not after their meeting the night before had been so sour. From behind her, she heard soft footsteps that told her Erik had finally decided to follow them to Rhal’s room. When she turned, he said nothing to her, not that she expected him to, but simply stared at her, wordless. The air of easy confidence had left him, and she could tell, now, that he was just as anxious as she was about the whole situation with her brothers.

“Do you think they will be angry?” He asked at length, now watching her brothers speak in hushed tones to Rhal.

“Probably,” she replied. “But I think they will understand that it was harm done by combat, and I do not think they will come after you for it. I mean, the fight was honorable and all, was it not?”

He nodded slowly. “Yes, it was. Everything about it was fair.”

“Then, they have no right to be angry.” She tipped her chin forward, trying to catch some of what her brothers and Rhal were saying. She hoped that it was not anything too horrible. “I will vouch for you.”

“Hm. Thank you, my dear.” He pulled at the hair on the nape of his neck, as he watched. And then, “And I believe I owe you another thank you for saving me earlier today, dearest. Had it not been for your quick thinking, I do not doubt that the situation with your brothers would have gone much worse than it did.”

She looked at him as he spoke, but he only had eyes for the room in front of him. Perhaps she ought to reach down and press her hand into his. Then, he would look at her. But no. With her brothers here, she had to be the very image of perfect, innocent bride-to-be, and much of that image involved not drawing unwanted attention to herself or, more importantly, Erik. She twisted her own hands together instead, satisfying herself with the thought that later, they would be alone with no one nearby to control their actions.

“My quick thinking?” She shook her head and smiled slightly to herself. “I just said one thing. You were the one who kept the lie going. You made it sound so believable that I nearly forgot none of it was true. I should be thanking you.”

He turned towards her, a bemused expression playing about his lips, one she had scarcely ever seen on his face before. She decided it fit him well. “What?” she asked, her own smile spreading.

He turned away again, but the look on his face remained. “I should hope it was believable, because it was, in fact, true, you know.”

Her smile dropped. “What?”

“Oh, yes.” He shrugged. “Not all of it, of course, as I am sure you know. The bit about the injury… you seeing my face… But the rest. You chose a good lie, my little dear.”

She took a step backward, her mind racing. “All the rest? The battle? You being Spartan? All of
“That was actually true?” How had she never known any of that before? And to think that she was about to marry this man!

By now, his smile had faded, and he turned to her, frowning. “Yes, that was all true. They say the best lies all have a grain of truth, after all, and this lie happened to have many.” He rubbed his jaw. “You did know about all that, did you not? I have mentioned it before?”

“No!” She cried, forgetting to keep her tone at a whisper. Lysander glanced at her briefly before turning his attention back to Rhal. With a slight groan, she dropped her voice back to an appropriate level. “No, you did not mention that before, Erik. I had no idea. You are really Spartan?”

His frown deepened, as he affirmed her question. “Truly.” His hands began to twist together. “I am sorry. I thought I had mentioned that to you before sometime in conversation. I thought I had mentioned all of it. I thought that was where you got the idea for your lie from, but I suppose I am mistaken. My apologies, and I sincerely hope you are not too upset with me. I did not mean to hide the truth from you.”

She sighed and ran a hand through her hair. “I know, I know. It’s alright. I am not upset with you, just surprised, is all.” She looked over him then, searching for the signs that must have escaped her before. “A Spartan…”

His brow furrowed beneath his mask. “Yes, a Spartan. Are you disappointed, my love?”

The use of ‘my love’ still made her heart beat a little too fast and her stomach turn over when it came from his lips, so beautiful and sincere. “No, not disappointed…” She trailed off, thinking. She certainly was not disappointed in the slightest—more surprised than anything else and upset at herself for not realizing it sooner. She supposed she should have, from the slight accent, the clearly not Athenian coloring of his person, the odd vases and things that were scattered around his house, but she had not. No, it was not the fact that he was Spartan, it was just the fact that she had not known, and now there was yet another chunk of his mysterious past she had learned, destroying half the knowledge of him that she had thought she had. “…Not disappointed, just a little startled.”

Before he could say anything more on the subject, however, Felipe slipped from Rhal’s bedside and over to where they were standing, framed in the doorway, silencing their conversation. Her breath stopping in her throat, Christine turned to face her brother, her mind offering possible conversations that had taken place between her former fiancé and brothers nearly as fast as she pushed them from her thoughts, each one proving to be worse than the one before it. Surely, Rhal had not told them anything too terrible. Surely, they were not going to attempt to kill Erik and drag her back home again. Surely, everything was going to be absolutely fine. She began to pick at her fingers without hardly realizing it.

“How is Rhal?” Was all she was able to manage with her throat feeling as if it was squeezing shut with every breath she took.

Felipe, apparently oblivious to the fact that Christine felt as if she might faint, simply shrugged. “He says he has been better, but I think he is doing alright, compared to how he could be doing if you had not fixed him up with all those stitches. I did not know you were a nurse, Chris.”

“Trust me, Felipe, I am not.” The hold around her neck loosened slightly at the casual tone in his voice. The fact that he had not immediately tried to take a swing at Erik with a sword showed that reality was already proving itself to be better than most her imagined scenarios.

“Still, you did quite a good job.” He glanced back over his shoulder at the back of Rhal’s head, and
Christine followed his gaze, wondering if her childhood friend felt any of the same pressure she did, knowing that he had almost complete control over her future. Felipe continued, “You know, Rhal was just saying how well you and Erik both took care of him after this sword fight, which, he agreed, was fair. He accepts defeat, but he is appreciative of all you have done for him. He wanted me to tell you that.”

**What?** How, in all the world, could it be that Rhal not only was not actively opposing her marriage to Erik, but was not fighting it at all? In all her wildest imaginings, nothing this unbelievably good had ever happened, and it shocked her to think that Rhal would let the whole situation go so easily. Perhaps, of course, he had not actually and was still quite unhappy with her, as Christine thought was the case, but he was not fighting her! She could not believe it! ‘Appreciative of all she had done?’

The smile spread over her face before she could stop it, before she could reason with herself that grinning like a fool would not make her appear half as poised as she wished, but she was powerless to stop it. Rhal was so good to her. Perhaps he deserved more credit than she had given him—she ought to have known that her friend, her best friend who had never done her any harm in her life, would not destroy the one thing she had made it very clear to him that she wanted. How could he? And how could she, after all the good Rhal had shown her year after year, expect anything less of him? Still, however, she was dumbfounded at his goodness, at his love and loyalty to her, when he could have easily torn her marriage to shreds. He was so good.

“I… I was happy to,” she heard herself saying, her voice giddy. “I could never let him die. Did he… did he say anything else?” She wondered aloud, her mind still reeling at the idea that Rhal could possibly be so forgiving about the whole situation. Perhaps, there was more to it than she knew.

“Oh, he said a lot of things,” Felipe replied dismissively, and Christine felt a flash of annoyance at his vague answer. “He said he knew of your new engagement, and he said he was upset about it, as I figured he might be. But I am sure you know that already. He did not talk much of you, though, truly.”

“Oh. Well.” Her smile had faded somewhat when Felipe mentioned Rhal’s unhappiness, which she did, of course, know but to have to acknowledge it again, when she herself was so happy, was not an especially good feeling. She still held true to what she had said earlier, that she could not marry Rhal if it meant she would be unhappy all her life, but she also could not pretend as if his own sorrow had not affected her. She liked to see him happy, she truly did, and the press of guilt weighed upon her heavily when she thought about how she had sacrificed all his happiness for her own. But that guilt was not nearly enough to make her reconsider her actions. He would move on in time, she was sure of it.

“He is still very weak, and he was saying that he was feeling tired again right before I left. I am sure by now, he is probably asleep again. He lost a lot of blood, after all, and he needs sleep to heal.”

“Oh, well.” Christine nodded. “Do you think…” She chewed on her lip for a moment before continuing. “Do you think he will want to see me again when he wakes up?”

Erik shot her a look at her question, which, with the mask covering the majority of his face, she could not tell whether it was meant to be sympathetic or accusatory. Regardless, she turned back to Felipe, hoping that in spite of everything that had happened, in spite of the poisoned words they had shared last night, he friend would want to see her again as she did him, and want to attempt to reconcile the near ruined relationship between them.
“I do not know. Maybe. Maybe not. I cannot tell.” Felipe leaned against the doorframe. “You should ask him. Personally, I would understand completely no matter which option he ends up deciding on.”

“Me too,” Christine murmured, glancing back at the couch, which now concealed the back of Rhal’s head from her view. Perhaps he was asleep again—Lysander did not seem to be talking to anyone. She knew she needed to speak to him again eventually, but what she did not know was when would be the right time, what to say, how to apologize to him so that he would believe it, or how, even, to make things right again. Perhaps, there was no way at all, after what she had done to him, but she also did not want to lose her friend. Later, she decided. She would think upon it all later when her head was clear, and when Rhal was more able to function than he was presently. But for now, it was enough to know that somehow, he had decided not to oppose her marriage.

The rest of the day passed faster than it ought to have. Christine, still riding on the high of knowing her marriage was safe for the time being, hardly realized it when Lysander announced it was noon already, and that she had, as of yet, eaten no food at all. Lunch, then, flew past, as did a fair portion of time afterwards that she spent in the kitchen, doing servant’s work, clearing and scrubbing all the used plates and cups. But she did not care. Then, they were back in the room with Rhal, her and Erik both for the first time since last night, and they were talking with Felipe and Lysander, exchanging petty small talk as Rhal listened silently. And suddenly, they were on the subject of war, and Erik was telling them about his time in Samos, telling them about the battle he fought, about his experiences there. Lysander and Felipe exchanged similar stories, their eyes alight when talking about the closest they had ever come to a real adventure. Christine barely caught a word of it. Her mind was everywhere and nowhere all at once, buzzing with constant emotion that clouded all that was being said in the real world, with no real, comprehensive train of thought for her to latch onto. Besides, she had no interest in hearing, not for the first time, how many heads her brothers had severed in some far-off town, nor did Erik, if she judged his odd fiddling and comments correctly. But words were shared nonetheless, as the sun rose higher and higher in the sky, signaling first mid-afternoon, then dinner, then night.

Where had the day gone? She could hardly even think of what she had done, of what had happened in the many hours she had been awake. And Erik—there were so, so many things she needed to talk about with him, so many things they needed to decide upon, and yet, she could hardly think of one time she had been able to sit down and have a private conversation with him. And now, he had gone off to bed before she had been able to kiss him goodnight, and she was in her own room, sitting upon her own bed, without having had a word from him. She sighed.

Confident that it had been long enough since her brothers had gone off to their own rooms, and that with them on the other side of the house, they would not hear what she was about to do anyway, Christine snuck out of her own room, leaving behind the awful solitude of it in exchange for the warmth and welcome of a room farther down the hallway. She made her presence known with a soft knock upon the door, framed by a golden glow, letting her know that the man inside was most certainly not already asleep. It took a moment before she heard the soft rustle of someone standing and walking to the door before it creaked open, the noise painful in the silence.

“Christine!” Erik’s hissed whisper was hardly better than outright speaking. His voice carried like a song. “What are you doing here?”

His eyes travelled briefly up and down the hallway before settling, somewhat begrudgingly, on her, but Christine did not care. Just the sight of her Erik and the thought that they would finally get some more of the privacy they had previously taken for granted warmed her heart tremendously. “I wanted to see you,” she replied lightly, trying, and failing, to hide a smile.
He stared at her for a moment, his lips pursed, before opening the door enough for her to gain access into his room. The moment she entered his room, however, he shut the door again, his hands twisting absentmindedly at the door latch as he looked at her.

“Christine… You cannot be doing this anymore! What if someone saw you come in here? We are no longer alone, and if someone saw you come in here, with me, alone, in the middle of the night, they might not look upon it kindly. We cannot take that risk with your brothers. I do not want to get myself, or you, into more trouble than we already are.”

“What is there to worry about?” she asked him, knowing that she ought to, perhaps, take the situation more seriously than she was, because every word he spoke was true. “My brothers are off on the other side of the house, probably already asleep, and I was quiet. How would they know I was here?”

“I do not know,” he replied, his tone clipped. “But if they did, it would only spell more problems for us, my dear, that I have no desire to try and inflict by being careless.” He sighed, his fingers flying up to adjust his mask.

“Would you rather me go?” She knew before he replied that his immediate answer would be an emphatic no, but she still wanted to hear it from his lips.

“No, no. Of course not, my dear. Besides, you are already here.” She smiled as his hand left the doorknob and fell once more to his side as he looked at her, his eyes softening somewhat. “Forgive me, I do not mean to be rude. I just do not want to endanger what we have here, Christine.”

“I know.” She understood his fear when so much was at stake, when they had so much to lose if anything were to go wrong, and she knew the stress he must be under with everything that was happening—her brothers’, Rhal, their own marriage… She felt her cheeks grow warm at the thought. “In fact, that is what I came here to talk to you about.”

Erik took a slow step forward, distancing himself from the door. He was not even an arm’s length away from her now. “What do you mean?”

“What I mean, Erik, is that we are going to be married, but we have hardly talked about it at all! We have no date, no plans, no guests invited… No venue… Nothing! And now, I suppose, we must take into account whether we want this wedding to be a Spartan wedding or an Athenian one, because apparently you are Spartan, and we do not even have that decided upon yet.” The more she spoke, the more things she realized they had yet to decide upon and yet to plan, and the whole of it, the more she thought of it, was beginning to grow more and more overwhelming.

“There is just so much, Erik, and I do not know where to start. And more importantly…” She trailed off, looking at him carefully. “…I have hardly had any time to spend with my new fiancé. Really, I just wanted to see you. And talk, at least some.”

“I am honored, my love.” Erik’s lips quirked up in a slight smile, one that, had she not come to recognize it, she would likely have not picked up on at all. Now, however, she found it beautifully endearing. “And you are right, I suppose,” he continued as he turned from her to sit, instead, on his bed. “There is far more to this wedding than I had originally envisioned. I suppose I thought that once we were engaged, everything would fall into place on its own—a childish fantasy, I see now. Yes, we must talk. Come, Christine—sit here with me.”

She joined him on his bed. The last time she had been here, other than last night of course, had been all those weeks ago when she had found him, crying and cringing, from a nightmare, while she watched him helpless, having no idea how to help, how to heal. How far they had come since
them, even if, when she joined him on the covers, he shifted away from her to leave a sliver of space between their bodies. They had made so much progress.

“So.” She slipped her hands under her thighs as she sat, warming them from the chill of night. “I suppose the first order of business is to decide whether we want a Spartan wedding or an Athenian one. There are different traditions for Spartan weddings, right?”

Erik did not look at her as he spoke, but instead remained focused on his bare feet, resting on the stone floor. “Oh, I am sure there are, but I am afraid that I do not know them off the top of my head. But that does not matter—I am perfectly fine with having an Athenian wedding myself. I have never felt any real ties to Sparta anyway, and I am sure you would be more comfortable with having an Athenian wedding, if I am correct in my thinking?”

She nodded and added, in case he had not seen her affirmation, “Athenian wedding it is, then. Now, we have one thing decided upon. So, next, I guess we have—”

“Christine.” She stopped her chatter the moment she heard Erik’s voice, his tones gentle and calming and infinitely better than her own. He began to bend his toes under his feet. “I respect your need to discuss this wedding and I certainly agree that it needs to be done sooner rather than later, but may we just take a moment and simply talk?”

He turned to her, for the first time since they had sat down, his eyes shining, and her heart throbbed within her chest. “Yes! Yes, absolutely. Personally, I would much rather just talk than deal with all of this anyway. I just want to have something concrete to tell my sisters when they get here. But yes—we can talk.” She cleared her throat. “Is there anything you would like to talk about?”

“How do you feel about being married, Erik?”

He smiled as well, a slow-spreading, hesitant thing, although it was directed at the floor, not her. Still, she could not help the way happiness flooded through her veins at the sight, so much that she felt she might be glowing. “Married,” he repeated slightly breathlessly, as if turning the idea over in his mind. Then, “I feel very happy to be married.”

Christine laughed at him, at the way he flushed pink in the flickering light, at how abashed he seemed at the idea of married, like a little boy. “I thought you might have a little more to say. Usually, I can barely get you to stop talking.”

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This only made him blush harder, although a twinkle of merriment lingered in his eyes. “That’s just it, my dearest—I have so much to say that I cannot even put it all into words. It is just... I just... There is so, so much that I can feel inside of me, every time I think about you, of marriage, and it feels me to the brim. I am so, so happy—please, do not think I am not—I can hardly breathe or think or even eat for happiness. I did not know it was even possible for a human being to feel this happy, Christine, and yet, here I am, feeling more happiness in the space of this singular minute than I have in the entirety of my life.” Here, he shot her a lopsided grin that she had never seen before on his usually stoic face, which caused her to laugh at him once again. “But there is so much more than just happiness, too. I can hardly explain it.” The smile faded. “But to answer your question, yes—I am happy.”
“Me too,” she replied, understanding, odd though his words were, what he meant when he said them. She, too, felt happiness beyond belief and compare at the thought of being married, so much so that she nearly drunk at the intoxication of it. But to say she was simply happy would be a grievous understatement, considering all she felt. Happy—yes—but saddened too at the thought that she had burned her bridge to Rhal in order to reach this, that she was going to leave an entire part of her life behind the moment she said, ‘I do’. Confident—yes—in Erik, in their future marriage, in the love they shared for one another, but anxious too at the prospect of being a wife, at the uncertainty of the future they were about to share, wonderful as it might be. There seemed to be bit of every emotion swirling about in her head, so much so that she felt as if she were burst at the seams with them, as if she might fall apart from them. And perhaps, that was not a bad thing.

Carefully, so as not to shatter any of the boundaries he had created too suddenly, she extended her legs until her feet rested in his lap, cushioned in the fabric of his toga. He stiffened slightly at her presence, but it was just a momentary thing, and after it, his hands were meeting her own flesh, his fingers skimmed her soles in a gentle massage. She smiled. “Thank you.”

They were silent for a moment, Erik seemingly putting all his concentration into rubbing Christine’s feet and Christine too tired and too overrun by emotion to say anything else. She was nearly falling asleep when he startled her with a sudden declaration of, “A week.”

“What?”

“We can set the wedding from a week from today, if you would like. Does that sound acceptable to you, my love? Do you think that is enough time to prepare everything you have in mind?”

“I think so.” She nodded and opened her eyes, only to find him staring at her. She found that now, she did not mind it half as much as she had when they had first met. “Yes, I think that should be just fine. Although,” she began to play aimlessly with the pillow sitting by her side, “I do wish that it were tomorrow instead.”

She felt Erik shiver at her words, and he turned away from her. Perhaps he was cold. His hands did feel a little chilled against her feet. Perhaps she ought to warm him. Her hands moved to draw her betrothed closer to her, until his face was poised just opposite hers, the space between their lips marred only by their breathing, their life force. Her fingers found his chin a minute before she moved, holding his eyes up to meet hers, and she saw the surprise, the bashful love, and even an emotion she thought to identify as desire before her lips moved to touch his. It was their third kiss. Soft, slow, and sweet, still every bit as innocent as those first two. His breaths caught in her mouth, and the feeling of the unnatural leather of his mask pressed upon her mind even in that moment, when euphoria had taken over.

It was such a pure thing, his love, and so unsure of itself—Christine could tell from his every movement, from the way he parted from her, only to come back for more a moment later. Even when he did finally pull away, her name on his lips and wonder in his eyes, she could see it from the way he was still so careful with her, even in the dark of the night with no one else around. It made her heart thrum with an energy she had never experienced before, an emotion that both shot through her veins like bottled lightning and that moved like honey through her mind, stilling her thoughts and her fears. And it was so beautiful.

“Can I stay here tonight?” she asked, the words coming before her mind had even thought about them. His hands, which had not moved from their position in the sheets, even during their kiss, tightened, and she could see the white stretch of skin over bones. Her request suddenly hit her, and warmth rushed to her cheeks, dispelling all the languid calm from her mind.

“Your bed is so much more lived in than mine, and I would much rather sleep here than in my
room. And I just want to be with you for a while. We do not have to talk or anything—just lay here, if you like. And I... I did not mean to suggest we do anything other than sleep, of course, too.”

She closed her eyes, inwardly chiding herself for ever speaking such a request when she was still not married, especially when, moments earlier, she had been marveling at the purity and innocence of Erik’s affection for her. *Stupid, stupid.*

“Oh, Christine…” She had expected to hear mortification in Erik’s voice, but now she heard only a slight laughter. A sudden presence of velvet fingertips trailed alongside her jaw for just a fraction of a moment, and by the time she opened her eyes, they were gone anyway. Erik’s eyes, however, softened by an amusement that she felt none of, remained. She flushed.

“What would your brothers say if they found you in my bed come morning?” He shook his head. “No, tantalizing of an idea as that is, I think you ought to remain in your own bed tonight. You will sleep better there than you will with me anyway, I should think. But,” his thumb stroked once across her knuckles, light as air, before disappearing once more in the dim light, “I thank you for the enchanting time you have given me here nonetheless, even if it was short. Perhaps we can talk more about the wedding tomorrow, yes?”

She nodded. Then, she rose to go. It was only when she was standing at his door, one foot already in the hallway, that he offered her those three words she had already heard so many times from his lips: “I love you.”

This time, however, she finally had the chance to say it back, with no hesitations, no doubt, and no fear of later consequences. “I love you too.” If this was the joy that she had nearly gotten herself killed for, she thought it was worth it, foolish though it may have been to think it.

Chapter End Notes

So, what do you think? Was this worth the wait? (You can be honest, it's cool.) And are things going the way you thought they would?

Also, just be warned, I'm going to college in a week or two, and I really don't know how writing is going to fit in my schedule there. It may be that it helps me get into a routine, or it may be that I never have time anymore... We'll see, I guess! But I'll be back, even if updates are a tad inconsistent! Thanks for bearing with me, you guys! You're the best out there <3

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