Don Juan Triumphant

by neverwitch

Summary

"Erik, please. I won't love you less by seeing what you're hiding behind this mask."

When Raoul first heard the voice of the Angel of Music in Christine's dressing room; when he first heard of the masked man from Christine, his interest was piqued in the most unusual way.

An adult romantic drama that takes place within the Paris Opera House, featuring more than one ultimate Don Juan.

Notes

I used elements both from the musical/2004 film and the original novel by Gaston, besides adding imaginary elements of my own. Please let me know what you think by leaving comments below ;) And sorry for the type-errors. I wrote this on my phone and it's difficult to spot all of them.

Enjoy!
The phantom liked to be the one with the upper hand. He liked to take advantage of others while displaying his enjoyment in the most reckless, bloodiest sort of sports. How the voices of his tormenters would turn from twisted jeering to ghastly screaming, how victim would turn to victor! The thrill of rising above his enemies had gripped his aching heart in a powerful charm long, long ago. As far as he could remember, that feeling of a thrill had always been with him--almost as far back as he could remember the pain. The pain. It has been great indeed for a child to bear. But what of it? The phantom smirked to himself. Was he not a man now? Those sensations of fear and pain that had been sharper than the stones thrown at him in the streets were now behind him. He had strangled them with his noose a long time ago, along with his other helpless prey. Had he not risen high? Was he not master of the Paris Opera House? And not just a man, but a ghost! That sickening sense of manipulative and harsh triumph he'd first tasted during his opera years, had by now dulled into a simple pride. Singing, composing, hiding, and threatening was now a tamed business of his everyday life, killing included when necessary.

The phantom let his cloak swirl elegantly as he paced the floor, then stopped. Even in his most secretive of musings, there was one subject he never dwelt on. Even in the darkest caverns of his very innermost thoughts, he never admitted there was one thing (and damn it, too! ) he could not control. Oh, it felt vile not to be able to just crush it to pieces. The man clenched his jaw in a tight line--for he felt the intrusion before he knew it. Stilling his movements to a complete stand-still, the masked man didn't even bother to turn around.

"...De Chagny."

"Erik."

Light footsteps carried across the carpet of the house on the lake. The familiar scent of an expensive coat and cold air wafted from behind as the boy advanced. He always smelled like that when he came to visit the phantom. Even when summer-time draped itself upon the outside world, it was always cold around the underground house by the lake. So cold. Sometimes, Erik cared to wonder why. The viscount was now standing a little way from the phantom, next to a wooden chair. A rustling noise issued as he took his coat off and carelessly slung it over an armrest. Then, in a voice that seemed too loud in the ominous silence, he spoke.

"I see you know me by my footsteps, now. How charming, to be known so thoroughly."

The phantom stirred, irritated.

"I care nothing for your steps, De Chagny. The mere scent of your coat is enough to give yourself away."

"Ah, so you know even the smell of my clothes? The intimacy is extraordinary here."

The boy smirked as the phantom remained silent. He knew how to make a man squirm. And he knew that Erik was uncomfortable around his presence. Perhaps...

"Perhaps the memory of my previous visits... haunts you still?"

Moving closer, the vicomte lowered his voice as he murmured into the man's ear. Low. Seductive. Erik had to repress a shiver as Raoul's voice vibrated against the air. It forced him to remember things, things he relived through and through with regret. The soiled bed-sheets, the rough breathing, the struggle, the guilt, and--'the pleasure...'

Forbidden thoughts echoed in his head. Things were getting dangerous.

Turning around completely, he hissed into the other's face.

"It matters little what you have done to me in the past, De Chagny."

Drawing himself to his full height however, did not daunt the viscount. Instead, the smirk on the boy's pink lips grew wider.
"So you call last month the past..?" He whispered, fingers playing around the corner of the phantom's cloak. He drew them aside, just a little, to reveal the back of Erik's black slacks.

"You must have wondered--don't pretend you haven't--at least once why I didn't come down to see you, I, who used to come down to... entertain you every once a week."

Raoul watched the masked man's uncovered side of his face in amusement as Erik nearly blushed at the word. The man was certainly beautiful, at least his unmasked part. The other half's features were impossible to make out because of the china mask stubbornly clamped in place. How he longed to rip the thing off!

Curling his hands into fists, Raoul seized the man's shirt collar and pulled him down to his own height. Too close, Erik warned himself. Their faces were now inches apart, the boy's nose almost touching his own. In this position where the phantom was the one stooping down, he could see Raoul's every little emotion flickering across his face.

Not letting go of his clothes, the vicomte murmured in an undertone.

"You found yourself another entertainer..."

Then, it all became clear to the phantom what this was all about.

"Christine Daae."

The name was spoken in absolute contempt, which alarmed Erik. Those pretty--he quickly changed his thoughts--those girlish lips of the boy were not smirking now. No, instead, they were pressed into a tight line, as if Raoul was harshly biting the inside of his bottom lip.

"You were having such a good time with that little soprano, weren't you? You looked up to her as a goddess."

"And I still do," the phantom replied softly. Raoul cocked his head to one side.

"I don't understand."

His eyes were big, doe-like and brown. With an inward start, Erik realized the man's eyes were always the same. When he was smirking, when he was hissing, when his voice conveyed nothing but contempt, still his eyes held something softer. When he was looking at the phantom, the cores of his eyes were always like that--mellow. Well, tonight there was something different. Erik narrowed his eyes, trying to fathom what it was. He let his gaze roam about the viscount's face, noting the slight flush of color that appeared as Raoul became conscious of what he was doing. Lifting his chin a little higher, the boy pressed the man for an answer.

"Well? What do you see in her?"

Erik replied coolly.

"Humanity."

The boy snorted.

"Why, am I not human?"

"She pities me, De Chagny. She sympathizes. She thinks of my pains. She...is pure."

Erik emphasized the last word with a glare as Raoul nearly doubled over in laughter. Shaking his head, the youth looked up with the tears in his eyes. His long lashes hooded the softness of his gaze, but Erik could see the abrupt change of emotion--the boy's brown orbs had darkened a shade with lust.

"So you are in pain?"

He asked huskily. A breeze of a smile ghosted around his mouth. Raoul leaned in. His forehead grazed against Erik's.

"But you don't want sympathy. You are tired of being pitied. You long for more..."

Deftly, his fingers tore at the phantom's drawstrings and let the cloak fall to the floor. Erik knew. He knew this was the time to move away, when the boy's hands were momentarily away from him. But before he could take a step back, Raoul grabbed the shirt of the taller man and pulled himself into a crushing kiss.

The moment their lips made contact, he couldn't think straight. Raoul's mouth moved fiercely against his, hungry and possessive. It was as if he was trying to imprint the very lines of his lips onto his skin. Skimming a burning line across Erik's mouth with his teeth, Raoul breathed out alluring temptation.
"You want more, Erik... You long for another's flesh..."
"Not yours!" Erik gasped, trying to get around the kiss but failing as he felt Raoul's tongue sucking at his bottom lip. He was demanding for entrance, slick saliva threatening to dribble down his chin. But not without resistance.

Grasping hold of the viscount's shoulders, Erik wrenched his face away from the other's and pushed hard, pinning Raoul brutally to the wall. The viscount didn't miss a second of all this. He could see Erik's eyes were wide open with ill-disguised excitement, his usually pale lips crimson with unshed blood boiling under his skin. He was breathing hard, cheeks flushed, body slightly trembling. Yes, try as he might, the phantom could not hide what his body had thirsted for during the last month of Raoul's absence. Erik's mind was desperately screaming for escape from this mess, but his limbs just weren't listening.

That was why he didn't resist the second time the boy tried to push inside. Still pinned to the wall by the shoulder, Raoul craned his neck to reach Erik once more. The man hesitated, but the facade lasted only a mere moment.

As soon as he parted his lips to submission, a hot tongue eagerly slid onto his own. Raoul's pink muscle was slick and nimble, thirstily trailing alongside the inside of Erik's gum and playing with the other's tongue over and over again with a fervor he had no wish to control. Pushing himself off the wall, Raoul took a step forward, the phantom, a dazed backward. But their legs were weak, shaking and numb with desire. They never made it to the sofa before they tripped, falling to the carpet with a dull thump. Erik's senses were overwhelmed, heated by lust and a want he badly needed to satisfy. The man found himself panicking breathlessly. He heard Raoul chuckling above him.
"Your eyes are so wild, Erik."
"Shut up, De Chagny..."
"Raoul. I told you to call me Raoul."

With that, a hand slipped inside Erik's shirt and began to travel up the man's pale chest. His skin was cool to Raoul's heated fingers, but the viscount promised himself that would change.

They needed relieving.

Both of them.

In a haze, he unfastened the buttons holding the phantom's shirt together and peeled it off his body. It was a splendid sight. Erik's usually sleek and flat hair was disheveled. His pale chest and stomach were exposed and sprawled across the floor, making a gentle contrast against the burgundy-red carpet. His chest, rising and falling in a heavy rhythm with every breath he took...

Erik's breath hitched as the blond started to tease his nipples. Raoul knew, through experience, how particularly sensitive that spot was. They got taut easily, if he just pinched one, right there... Erik gasped softly. He hadn't felt that for a long time. Covering his mouth with the back of his hand, Erik stifled another moan as he felt Raoul's thumb and forefinger pinch the spot gently, then rubbing circles into his breast. A steady blush rose from the naked chest to his fevered cheeks. The phantom--looking less and less like the fabled ghost by the minute--had to bite down on his hand to keep his lewd noises to himself. Nonetheless, the little grunts that bubbled at the back of his throat could not be silenced for long.

Raoul ducked his head and licked a hardened nipple. The tip of his wet tongue twisted around the head, causing the dark-hair a full arousal. Erik felt unbearable tingling sensations spreading across his spine and lower regions, tightening the place between his legs. When the viscount cupped an entire section in his mouth and began to suck, the man finally lost it. Erik's torso bent upward as he released a drawn sigh, the room resounding with moans he couldn't hold back any longer. The hot breath that warmed his stomach into rosiness was too much--damp and sweet, that was what it was. Every time Raoul's soft lips brushed a weak point, the phantom's airway caught itself in a gasp.

When this had gone on long enough, Raoul judged it was time to proceed further. Erik's bulge was plain for all to see, shy yet unrestrainedly pushing against the confining fabric.

Besides, he didn't think he could wait much longer either. Raoul propped himself on his knees and used both hands to undo Erik's belt. The buckle clinked loudly as he tossed it aside to the wall. When he turned to unbuckle his own, he was surprised to find it already loose and limp. His eyes met Erik's
green orbs and realized the man had undone it for him.
Something other than raw lust pooled within Raoul. But he had not the time to linger on it just now.
Swallowing the sudden emotion, he straddled the flushed phantom and recovered his cheeky voice again.
"You certainly got hard there."
A husky growl was his answer. The phantom's brow was clouded with want, an expression Raoul
had never seen on him before. The man must have missed his presence more than he'd liked to admit.
The thought made the viscount smile. Erik noticed this.
"What is it?" He asked, self-conscious. Even though he was responding to the young man more
freely than ever tonight, he was still embarrassed at what they were doing. He wondered what state
he was in right now, how he looked in the boy's eyes. Then he remembered he didn't care what that
Chagny brat thought of him. He should be worrying more about Christine, his angel and his muse.
Raoul's caressing hands went lower and lower. From the nape of his neck past the abdomen to his
pelvis, those knowing fingers continued to descend...until they reached his manhood. But he did not
touch Erik. Instead, he pulled himself up and ground down his hips against Erik's, hard.
"Oh!"
The contact provoked a sharp intake of breath, as Erik stuttered out an exclamation. God, he was so
human, Raoul thought. Once, twice, three times Raoul rubbed himself against the man before both of
their under-garments could slide down completely, exposing their erection to each other. Although it
was not the first time that Erik saw the boy's penis, the man could never get used to it. The way those
darkened eyes gazed on his nakedness... the frank hunger.
A chilling thrill developed along Erik's spine. Raoul had closed a firm fist around the man's erection
and was now sliding his hand along it slowly, smoothly. The flesh-to-flesh friction threw Erik into
abandon, and he moaned into the viscount's mouth as they wrestled with their tongues for
dominance.
"Raoul..."
Raoul's heart twinged when he heard Erik pant out his name. His hand moved faster, his other hand
stroking Erik's inner thigh.
"Oh..." Close, he was so close. He could never endure it for long, he was so sensitive. Reaching his
climax, Erik bucked his hips and thrust into Raoul before coming.
"Ngh...!"
An exalted moan broke out as pearly streaks of sperm spilled out onto the vicomte's fingers. A few
drops fell and dotted the carpet beneath them.
For a moment they were silent. Only the sound of Erik's ragged breathing was heard. Raoul waited
for him to catch his breath and looked upon the man's form, lean and strong. The phantom's usually
colorless pallor was now lit up from the high he was experiencing, reddened and radiating. The sight
reminded the boy of his own needs more than ever.
When Erik seemed to calm a little, Raoul unstraddled him and rolled onto the ground. He lay on his
back, golden locks spreading from his temple and collar tugged down. He'd just recalled he wasn't
completely nude. A flimsy blouse still veiled his upper parts, but it only managed to magnify the
nakedness of his legs.
Glancing next to him, he motioned for Erik to come closer.
"It's about time I got my turn, don't you think so?"
He asked, straying a hand down suggestively. Erik gulped. He always approached this inevitable
part with dreaded fascination. The prospect of having to copy what the vicomte had done to him had
always got him nervous. He would always keep his eyes lowered to the young man's private region,
secretly and carefully studying how Raoul twitched and pulsated under his touch. Yet he had never
seen his face during that time of pleasure.
Erik knelt on top of Raoul, reluctantly parting his thighs so he might straddle him. Then he gingerly
wrapped his hand around the boy's cock, making sure he wasn't doing anything stupid. Raoul tried to
flash him a reassuring look, but he couldn't guess if he'd managed to convey anything but burning
lust. That was the only thing he could feel right now.
The phantom started to move his fingers. At first he was timid and uncertain of his own hands, it was such a long time since their last section. Was the viscount feeling the same excitement he had felt? One keening sigh was enough to confirm the truth.

"E, Erik..." Raoul breathed. He wound his arms around the dark-hair's neck and pulled him closer. Erik had no choice but to look into Raoul's face directly. His heart gave an unexpected jump when he saw him. Raoul's highlighted cheeks were pink, his lips parted and his eyes closed in an incredibly erotic expression. Stray strands of blond hair fell across his forehead. The sounds he made burned at Erik's ears, high-pitched moans that steadily turned to an outbursting cry as he hit his peak. Well-built and slender, Raoul's back arched into Erik when he came.

"Ah...!"

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It was two in the morning when they got dressed.
30 minutes to three when Raoul was ready to leave.
At the bottom of the stairway, the way leading back to the living world, he turned around for a moment. It was as if he wanted to say something.
"Erik, I..."
But his words were left hanging. Instead, he nodded a silent farewell to the opera ghost and turned away.
Then he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Soo...how does it look? Questions and comments are welcome and if you liked it, kudos would be awesome! Thank you!
Raoul quietly entered his room on the second floor of their mansion. All was silent. The large Chagny estate seemed huge after his visit to the narrow opera cellars. Slowly, he walked across the floor to his bed. Slowly, he took of his coat and laid it aside at the foot of the mattress. And ever so slowly, he perched himself on the sheets carefully, as if he feared to make a ripple. His mind was in a sort of daze, still slightly high from the stolen hours of flushed night activity he'd done a few moments ago. A late autumn breeze fanned across his face and cooled his hot body. It seemed to chastise him, 'I know why you're so warm, monsier!' Raoul smiled tiredly to himself and sighed.

He had first met the phantom by accident. It'd been one evening inside Christine's dressing room, when the viscount was quite alone. He was waiting for the new margarita to arrive in all her splendor for half an hour now. Restless and impatient, he paced the length of the floor with his head bowed. 'Christine...'
"Christine..."
Raoul gave start and looked up. A voice had drifted from somewhere outside the room, distant yet clear enough to be heard. The boy looked warily about him.
"Christine."
There it was again. He stood, wondering at the sound that mirrored his own thoughts and echoed through the small room. Was it someone in the corridor?
The door creaked on its hinges as he stuck his head out into the narrow hallway outside, but couldn't see anyone else other than a small chorus girl stepping leisurely out of the lady's room. The only other presence that showed themselves were the gas-lit lamps, casting luminous shadows across the floor. Puzzled, Raoul closed the door and turned around to face the room once more.

And was stunned by the music that filled his ears.

It had come without warning. Sudden and sharp, the invisible notes exerted themselves into a single long string of pearls, soaring and unbearably sweet in the midst of themselves. He recalled how he'd been rooted to the spot open-mouthed, dumbstruck by the realization that the music actually belonged to a voice. Closing his eyes, he had lost himself in the intensity of its softness, surely the voice of an angel. If God could open His mouth to sing, surely His voice would be like this; powerful and hypnotizing; gentle yet masterful.

He couldn't know if he'd stood there for hours, or minutes, or mere seconds. All the viscount knew was that when the voice faded itself out and ceased to sing, a curious sense of apprehension had crept over him. Unsteady on his feet and still somewhat lost in a golden haze, Raoul had left the room as quickly as possible. After the mysterious burst of song, Christine's dressing room suddenly felt eerily quiet and empty.

He did not seek out Christine that night. He couldn't concentrate on anything else except for 'the voice.' Raoul would often try to describe to himself what the voice had sounded like. Night-clouds flying past a silvery moon, drizzling honey instead of rain? Morning dew burning in the heat of a crimson sun just risen from the horizon of soaring mountain peeks? If that were so, then the stranger had done a very good job of exceeding Mother Nature herself. But right then, what the he really wanted to know was, 'Was the voice even human?'

Raoul needn't have fretted himself. As it turned out, he later learned all about 'the voice'--from the new margarita herself.

"Oh Raoul, he frightens me!" She'd cried.
"Who would have known such an angel's voice could harbor such a face of a devil?"
From time to time, Christine would describe to him all the horrors of what she called 'the Angel of Music.'

"His heart is like the very sea, Raoul," she exclaimed. "when he is calm, not even the most atrocious comments can make a ripple in his mood. Quiet-speaking and composed is what he appears to be on those days; a simple genius working his way through music and organ scores. But something always triggers him in the end, it always does. Suddenly his mild voice would turn into a tempest, and his face would grow ashen within seconds. A rage too weak to scream weeps instead inside of him and makes him rave. He tries to speak, to tell me something he has in mind, but can never get the words past his tongue. Instead he simply pleads with me in the softest of thunderings--'You alone can make my song take flight, Christine. You alone can be my angel of music in this welling darkness!'"
Whenever he cries out that last line, I can see tears forming in his eye (alas, I cannot see the other side too clearly, for a mask--yes, a mask--covers half his face entirely). And for all his faults and bloody deeds, what woman would not pity such a wretched man?"
Christine's slender frame shuddered as she uttered the next words.
"He...he loves me, Raoul."
The viscount must have looked surprised. The young girl hugged herself tightly in her arms. Her white hands were cold.
"He loves me, he loves me, he loves me!" She chanted.
"He devotes his songs and compositions for me, smiles through his pains for me, hides his ugliness for me. He does so much simply because of me, and yet... somehow I feel nothing but terrible sorrow when I look at him. It sickens me with guilt how I cry for him on the outside but am secretly repulsed on the inside. He takes me for some kind of savior Raoul, but I know I can never give him what he wants. For I have seen his true face!"
Here she actually clenched down her eyelids in a veil of some horrid remembrance. For a moment the girl couldn't speak.
"And his face...?" Raoul prompted. Christine slowly re-opened her eyes.
"I have mentioned before that he wears a mask. A white, porcelain mask covers half his face completely, leaving only the other side visible. Oh, when my gaze first landed on that portion of him, I thought he would be beautiful. Defined brows that continued in a fine line to a shapely jaw--a bright green eye that shone whenever it caught mine--and pale, pale skin that stretched itself over structured cheek bones. It all seemed to fit the voice perfectly." Here she laughed a hollow laugh. Raoul could only listen, attentive.
"It was all a mere fancy of mine, Raoul. I revealed that to myself through my own hand that tore the mask off his face. Now as I look back, I regret I ever did," she whispered.
"Curiosity killed my fantasy."
Now Raoul was truly interested. Leaning forward, the viscount waited for the singer to continue. And when she did, her voice was anything but steady.
"Scarred, burnt, and hollow. That was what I saw. Disfigured into an empty shape of a monster. Not even the shadow of his grief could shade the terror of his ugliness. It was only after a few moments that I regained sense enough to let out a shocked gasp."
She shivered.
"I wish I had never seen that sight."
This description of the 'Angel of Music' did nothing but increase the boy's fascination. An entrancing voice embodied by a half-handsome, half-monstrous man who always wore a mask to hide his deformity and lived underground in the cellars of an opera house? The idea attracted Raoul deeply, and he still often mused about Erik's face.
Raoul liked to think the two sides each represented a part of the phantom's personality. The deformity represented his bitter soul, the part where he thirsted for revenge and was sunk neck-deep in a quicksand of misery, immeasurable and bottomless. But try as he might, the phantom was still human. He couldn't cut himself off from the thin hope of being saved. That was what his beautiful
half showed—a longing to be loved, and to love back. The vicomte looked at Christine. "But, after all, this Angel of Music lives underground. What stops you from getting rid of him? Why not simply walk away from him since he frightens you so much?"

But Christine shook her head. "It is because he lives underground he is so powerful. You would know better than to say otherwise if I told you that the rumors of the Opera Ghost live true inside him—for he is both, and everywhere!"

Raoul didn't know what to make of this enigmatic answer. He'd never been one to believe in cloudy, groundless rumors, and had never took part in the occasional arguments concerning Joseph Buquet's death. To him, it was a commonplace suicide and nothing more worth of mentioning. No ghost—the Opera's or the royal palace's for all he knew—and certainly not the voice he'd heard—was involved. However, what he did know was this: "So you continue to give your genius false hope."

Guilt was clear in the soprano's eyes, as was the coldness in Raoul's tone. Perceiving his disapproval, Christine bowed her head and muttered under her breath. "I know it's hardly fair. But you don't understand what that voice does to you, Raoul. Not if you've never heard him with your own ears."

She shuddered with a queer passion that seemed both hot and chill. "That voice has become part of myself, part of my arts. I cannot do without it! I must make the most of it, as much as possible, and endure what follows."

Raoul had to restrain himself from blurting out— "I have heard him also, Christine!"

But he didn't. Since then the fact had stayed within his breast, to be nurtured and kept by the key and lock of secrecy. Even then, he'd had a premonition that his fascination would fare better to be hidden. He never brought up the subject of the Angel first, nor did he ever look further into the case of Buquet's death in question. But Roul always listened, and strained his ears for HIS music—the music of a god. And though he never heard the voice again, he never could forget it. The memory had seared itself inside his mind, like a ring of singed fire.

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Erik leaned over the organ as he released a tense sigh. He hadn't been able to breath an easy breath since the moment Raoul had entered his house. Now he was drowsy, fatigue rolling in as the excitement of the night's disturbance slowly ebbed away. Soon it was only his thoughts that hummed loudly in the background. Everything else was quiet, even the usually musical organ keys—the phantom knew he wouldn't be able to concentrate on anything of the sort tonight.

Sitting down heavily on a chair, Erik let his mind wander... back to his first encounter with the blond De Chagny.

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It had been a day like any other. The phantom was in the organ-room, scribbling away with an inky quill and occasionally testing out the notes on the instrument's ivory teeth. His late inspiration was giving him wings, and Erik felt every string of his lyrics were homage to that one muse. This was what it felt like to be alone with music—lonely, calm, and peaceful.

If only the peace had lasted! Suddenly, Erik was aware of a loud splashing noise coming from outside the room—outside the house. He immediately recognized the sound of his own gondola's oars treading water. Somebody was trying to cross the lake, and that somebody certainly had enough guts to put the plan into action. Annoyed, the opera ghost rose from his seat in a flurry of black cloth and exited through the back door, which led straight to a hidden part of the small underground lake. This allowed him to slide into the water unseen by the approaching visitor in the gondola, and that was just what the phantom did after securing a long stalk of long reed inside his mouth. By using this self-taught combination, Erik was able to put his own little plan into action. Only, his intention would be to kill. Taking his cloak off, Erik slid into the rippling darkness and submerged himself completely, careful not to make a sound. Then, he began to approach the boat.

The water was cold, its waves murky. Only someone who had Erik's sight would have made
anything out in this gloom. He pushed the liquid element away from him in soft strokes, making sure his lips held tightly onto the hollow piece of reed. White shirt flowing about in the slow current, he saw the boat was just above him now. 'Time for the crocodile to snap,' he thought. Then, still underwater, Erik began to sing.

The melody was an old one, something he'd composed in his much younger years. Repetitive and simple, the tune carried through the reed and vibrated itself out into exquisite notes of an eerie song. There were no lyrics. Just a breath of his whisper, gathered and raised in the broken silence. Erik knew what effect this would take; the victim would stop in its tracks, and still the movement of its oars; it would look around, confused and transfixed by the invisible music that seemed to rise out of the very lake itself, like mist. It would lean from the gondola, searching the watery surface for the music that barely tickled its ears. But it would see nothing, nothing save its own reflection mocking its astonishment. The victim would lean further out however, and nearly capsize the boat while trying... just as the person up there was doing right now.

Erik saw the figure as it leaned forward towards him, its shadow falling across the lake. He kept on singing, murmuring softer and softer until he roared out the last note and broke out from the depths in one terrific lunge. Snaking his arms around the victim's neck in a murderous embrace, the phantom dived backwards into the lake again, this time dragging the person down with him.

Bubbles erupted under the surface as his victim tried to escape, arms and legs kicking wildly in every direction. Holding the person's head down beneath his chest, Erik caught a glimpse of the man's face--and started in amazement. He saw the face of Raoul De Chagny, fixed in an expression of utter shock and pain. Instantly Erik released his monstrous grip on the boy's neck. He knew that if he gave into the urge to kill the boy, Christine would fly into fits of horror and rage. She would never come down to see him again.

That was why the phantom pulled himself and also the viscount put of the water and onto dry shore. (The gondola was left in an awkward position in the middle of the lake.) As he smoothed his hair back and wrang out the hem of his dripping cotton shirt, he kept a contemptuous eye on the boy. Raoul was coughing up what was left of the lake from his lungs and trembling from the shock. The phantom sneered. He would definitely leave a lasting impression on the boy. Though it was not altogether far from the truth, little did he know Raoul already bore an impression of quite another sort.

"Your little Lotte saved you today, De Chagny," Erik hissed. Raoul's head snapped up when he heard the phantom's voice. But his expression had now changed hue. He looked no longer frightened. Erik read the boy's face as realization, awe and stupidity exchanged color on intervals. When they finally settled for a single shade, it was something Erik couldn't put a finger on. Raoul was staring shamelessly at the older man, dumb-founded and europhic. How he'd searched and searched for a way to meet the Angel face to face! He let his gaze roam about the masked man, and he found himself more surprised by how HUMAN the Angel of Music looked, than by the fact he had had a near death-experience just now.

Yes, he was handsome. Everything was just as Christine had described. Sleek black hair, pale cheek, green eyes and of course, the stiff porcelain curtain hung on the right side of his face. But all these couldn't hide the solid, realistic fact; the Angel was a man.

And the first words Raoul found coming out of his mouth were--

"That was beautiful."

Erik frowned.

"I couldn't have cared less if you thought otherwise." He responded coldly. Even if the vicomte hadn't been mad enough to compliment his near-murderer (which was just insane) the phantom still would've had reasons to hate him. The logic involved here was simple. Christine Daae loved Raoul De Chagny. De Chagny did not love Christine Daae. Therefore, De Chafny was the enemy.

Raoul was hardly daunted.

"Please," he persisted. "Let me hear you sing again."

Erik stared at the boy. He still had that nameless, spellbound expression on his brow (Erik happened to notice his brow was white and smooth, like Christine's). Slowly, his mind formed a question.
"Why do you ask me of this?"
Raoul could only repeat his last words.
"Your voice is beautiful."
Erik turned away in exasperation. He was getting nowhere with this boy. And even though it was the first time anybody showed such open admiration towards him, the phantom really had no intention of letting De Chagny know that.
"Go now, and leave." Was his response.
But Raoul took a step forward, as if he couldn't decide whether to close the distance between them or no.
"Why not?" He asked softly. The phantom let out a disbelieving laugh.
"Because I sing for no one but myself, vicomte. No one is to be a guest."
"But you sing for Christine."
"And you," he retorted without turning, "are not Christine."
Raoul narrowed his eyes. For some reason, this mention if the soprano irritated him.
The thought of this man giving Christine what he stoutly refused to give Raoul annoyed him beyond measure. Even though he'd never grown up spoilt, the viscount was not used to being denied.
Having that kind of personality which won over virtually everyone he needed, whether through his looks or manners, Raoul was always confident. He could humor anyone into humoring him, men and women alike. Although his method of 'humoring in' someone was not always very healthy (often involving his body and a bed in the case of the other sex), charms were still charms, and he certainly knew how to use them. This kind of life led him to easily desire something, easily achieve something, and just as easily abandon something.
He'd thought it would be the same with the Angel. This burning fascination would end the moment he satisfied it. All he had to do was 'persuade' the phantom. And since his usual dazzlements on men (money and the promise of a good business relationship) were worth nothing to this underground-inhabitant, he would have to apply the more 'feminine' method in his case.
Erik's back was to the viscount. Slowly, Raoul made his way towards him, treading silently on his leather heels. As he got closer, the boy could see how the soaked cloth gave way to a transparent drape on the older man, sticking onto his back and waist. It wasn't only his voice that attracted him, the boy realized. It was also his body.
Erik became painfully aware of the vicomte right behind him. Raoul's blond locks were tickling the nape of his neck, and the boy's chin was threatening to touch his shoulder. He felt his hair stand on end--with loathing or discomfort, he couldn't tell--as the boy lowered his voice and murmured,
"You see, monsier genius...when I ask people for something, and they don't give me what I want...I don't just walk away."
Suggestion dripped thickly from his next words.
"I PERSUADE them."
Raoul's lips were now barely an inch apart from his ear, warm breath brushing past his cheek. Erik's spine was tense with confusion. He couldn't for the life of him guess at the viscount's intentions...until he felt the boy's hand on his backside. It trailed lower and lower down to his waist. He could feel its grasp at the edge of his shirt, tugging at the linen hem.
Erik hissed. Jerking violently away from the touch, he whirled around the spot and slammed the boy into the wall of his lake-house in disbelieving fury. Bringing his face up close to the other's, the phantom spat out a warning between clenched teeth.
"Don't you dare. Touch me."
The phrase was closer to a growl more than anything, yet it did no more to stop De Chagny than a barking dog. Mouth set in an easy smile, the boy grasped Erik's arms and pulled him in even closer.
The proximity sent a thrill down both of them.
"Well then," breathed Raoul. "This seems a good place to start our negotiation."
The next thing Erik knew, the blond's lips were pressed against his own.
* * * * *
Raoul would remember that first time he'd touched the phantom with ruefulness. Oh, his insolence
had known no bounds (even now the boundaries were fuzzy), to do such things without fear of anything. The cut from his first attempted kiss would always sting inside his memory, the masked man's bite vivid in its repellence. Erik had twisted his face away from him in alarm, squeezing his eyes shut in silent resolution never to open them in front of the vicomte. "Keep your eyes open," Raoul had said. "I'm going to show you a world where no muse can enter its door."

The first time, clearly, had been forced. The second had been coaxed, and the third drawn out of the phantom in embarrassed resignation. But soon Raoul realized the problem of the situation. He found himself thinking physical closeness could only get him so far, that it was not enough. There had appeared an empty hole inside of him the moment he'd first heard Erik sing, and it was growing wider with every contact he made. He had wondered, frustrated--what was wrong with him? He'd touched the man, he'd held him in his hands, he'd made him helpless and flushed. Hadn't that been his desire? Or, could it be an overdose? Had he finally gorged himself in his own lust for the Angel of Music..?

* * * * *

And that had been it. After three weeks of those three visits, the boy stopped coming. When Erik first noticed this absence, he couldn't stop his heart from feeling bitter. Hadn't the Chagny brat been the one to boast of a new world? To tell him to keep his eyes open, to submit himself under his dominance? And now, to look at himself getting upset over this whole thing! It was an unthinkable rupture on that cold, glassy character of his. It certainly would not do.

From that day on, he threw himself into nothing but work and Christine. Perhaps he'd tried to cleanse himself of an unconscious sense of guilt. Perhaps he'd tried to bury those three visits into nothingness. Or perhaps, he'd wanted to deny an important revelation. Raoul vicomte De Chagny was gone, but not before he had reawakened a carnal desire that had been dormant within the phantom for a long, long time.

* * * * *

Raoul knew this couldn't be the answer. Try as he might, he could only last so long without seeing his Angel. One, futile month had barely gone by, and he found himself needing the feel of Erik's white porcelain mask against his skin again. And tonight, upon his return to the underground world, Erik had been all but half willing to his touch. Raoul had to grin.

'Or yester-night, rather.'

He glanced outside his bedroom window as the sky began to clothe itself in pink and grey. Dawn had come. And with it, the thought of a new promise. As the first rays of morning alighted on his hair through the glass window, Raoul sank into the bed sheets and closed his eyes.


If he wanted things to change, his attitude would have to change first.

Erik put down his goose quill wearily and looked up at the clock. Its hands read 6, but whether it was morning or evening he couldn't tell. Although he was pretty sure it was morning, he might have wasted a whole sixteen hours lost in recollection for all he knew.

"Damn it..." he muttered, and held his head in his hands. He was so tired he could have fallen asleep right then and there, had it not been for his own disturbing thoughts. The quick pulsing of his veins had long slowed down, and the fluttering of his heartbeat had returned to normal after De Chagny's departure. Only his silent, unknowable thoughts were there to betray him--and they did it with relish. The phantom slumped all over his organ in the most ungraceful manner. Then straightened up almost instantly.

Footsteps. In the house. That could only mean one thing. He didn't even need the scent of expensive leather to pervade the air around him to know.

"If you cannot repress that insatiable urge of yours to copulate, then please go find yourself a
Erik's voice carried to the room outside, where Raoul stood with his coat in his hands. When he didn't answer right away, the phantom went on sarcastically.

"Oh, but I assume a man of your rank would rather prefer a parlor-house? I am surprised you trades such a delicacy for this cold cellar of a place."

His hard-flinted darts found their marks on the vicomte's breast. Erik could see they stung. It gave him a sense of petty triumph.

"What, no word from our silver-tongued cheek?" He asked viciously.

"Run out of snappy retorts, have you? Surely you must have thought of something in the last four hours. After all, you've had a whole month to yourself to think of such answers."

Frosty bitterness wafted from that last one, and he knew it. He also knew that deep down, he was more angry with himself than with the boy. As much as he hated the viscount for making a mess out of him, he hated himself more for letting the boy take advantage of him. Raoul stirred things in his brain, and Erik hated himself for being stirred.

He made him feel strange emotions, and Erik hated himself for feeling anything at all. He had left him for 4 weeks, and Erik hated himself for admitting that, during that time, he'd felt more hurt than ever.

All this time Raoul stood listening, facing the phantom in his fury and taking whatever was thrown at him. Now it was his turn to speak.

"Actually," Raoul took a deep breath.

"Actually, I've been reflecting... And I know what I've done to you is wrong. But believe me when I say this--it was never my intention to use you as some sort of--"

"--toy?" Erik drawled. He looked straight into the boy's eyes when he said this, and found shameful honesty looking back at him, for Raoul was steeling himself not to avoid his gaze. For a moment their eyes locked, and each fought his own battle inside him while each searched the other for a hint, a clue. They asked themselves: 'how did we come so far?'

Or in Erik's case, 'How can I trust him?' De Chagny's whole attitude was so much changed, it unsettled him.

Meanwhile Raoul swallowed and continued.

"I only wanted to know you, Erik. I only wanted to hear you. It was foolish of me to think I could force an intimacy between us, and I am sorry to have caused you pain."

He waited, but the phantom made no answer. He seemed to be having a mental struggle with himself.

"You fascinate me," Raoul continued. "And I've realized there is more to it than just bodily needs. As you've already mentioned, such things may be easily satisfied in a brothel. Whereas you,"

He shook his head.

"You are so much more complicated. I won't go into all the gory details--" here he actually attempted a smile.

"--but hear this. What arrogance and insolence I've shown, I shall make it up to you by showing another side of me. This side I shall never take away from you."

The last sentence was spoken in a vehement promise, and Erik could not deny the earnestness of the speaker. It shone like a tangible element from his face. Still holding the boy's eyes in a piercing gaze, Erik opened his mouth.

"How can I trust you?"

The question was barely above a whisper. Cracked and lined, it voiced itself as if afraid to be answered. This time however, Raoul really did smile.

"Blindly," he replied. Erik realized his smile was small and sad.

"When you desperately long for something, you follow whatever means even when there's only a cane in your hand and a blindfold over your eyes."

Under normal circumstances, the phantom would have never listened to such advice. But Raoul had said this so gently, with so much wistfulness in his voice the older man found himself wanting to believe in him. And sometimes, that is all it takes to make a difference.
"You just gave me my blindfold. Where is my cane, then?" He challenged. The viscount replied, "I have not one to offer, save my word. My word to be good, and to behave myself."
"And other than that..?"
"Nothing."
The phantom raised an eyebrow, to which Raoul sheepishly cleared his throat.
"So, your pardon for my new leaf. Do we have a deal?"
He extended his hand as a sign of peace. Erik glanced down but couldn't bring himself to shake it. Instead, he met the vicomte's brown doe-eyes with his own and silently, expressed consent in a cautious nod.
The relief was visible in Raoul's face as his face broke into a relaxed grin. Laughing, quietly, the boy plopped down across the carpet, throwing open his arms on either side of him like a child.
"Shall I tell you something?" He called, grinning from his place on the floor.
"This has to be the scariest, the most nerve-grinding way to start a morning."
It was the boyish casualness in this one comment that softened the phantom. Dropping his gaze to the yellowing scores, he asked in a soft voice.
"Were you nervous?"
"Hell, exceedingly so." Raoul rolled onto his stomach.
"I had zero sleep after coming down here yesterday, you know."
"What were you doing?"
"As I've said, reflecting. But mostly I was thinking about us."
"Oh."
Erik felt warm despite of himself. Careful not to look up at the viscount, he stacked all his music sheets in order and began to draw staves on a fresh sheet of parchment. The sound of quill scratching on thin slices of stretched leather had always managed to calm him, and he could use that effect now. Dipping the end of his goose-quill in black ink, he proceeded to writing a score for the piano of his opera. Black-and-white musical notes flowed effortlessly from the melody already inside his mind. Black head with two tails formed capricious waves for the right-hand, while dotted heads of white with one tail produced booming chords for the left. Occasional mistakes and ink-blotches decorated the vellum whenever his quill moved too fast or his hand paused for too long, and when that happened the phantom simply scratched it out and plowed on. But for all his absorption in his work, Erik couldn't help feeling the Chagny boy's gaze on him every few seconds. While it wasn't exactly bothering, it didn't exactly make him feel comfortable either.
"Stop staring..." he muttered, eyes glued to an ink-blotch in the corner of his parchment.
"I'm not." Raoul replied, who contradicted himself by keeping his eyes on the phantom. After a few minutes, Erik had to reprimand him again.
"De Chagny."
"Oh, fine." Huffing, Raoul flipped onto his back and stared at the ceiling of the house instead, hands folded behind his temple. He knew the people above ground would soon notice his absence, but he didn't want to leave just yet. The tranquility of the place (not to mention its masked occupant) appealed to his tired mind more than the hustle and bustle that surely awaited him 'way up there.' Absent mindingly, Raoul began to sing. It was a popular old lullaby, one his mother had sung to him to sleep in his infant years. His quiet falsetto gently joined in the scratching of the goose-quill, and broke the near-silence further.
"Sail on, my good soldier
Be not daunted by mere boulders
Let the shining North Star be a guide on your way...."
"...Let my own blessings follow, through the nights of May."
He started as the Angel finished the song for him. The quill had stopped. A short pause in everything they did soon followed. The older man seemed startled as well. His eyes were wide, as if he'd just become aware of what he had done.
Raoul recovered first, and asked what was on both of their minds.
"How did you..?"
But it took a full minute before Erik could emerge out of his trance-like state, and another ten seconds to form his thoughts into audible words.

"...My mother sang it to me when I was little." He explained, slowly. His voice was soft and distant, as if he was speaking to himself. Raoul tentively sat up, uncertain how to reply. He had never heard about Erik's childhood. He tried to picture it, a small and innocent Angel somewhere around five years of age. It took a long stretch of imagination.

Erik went on quietly.

"I remember her voice. It was beautiful," he murmured, lowering his gaze. "It was in spring, I think, just before she sent me away to a traveling carnival house. She was never gentle to me. But on that day she held my hand unusually tight as we waited outside our house for the carnival owner to arrive. When a cloud of dust appeared on the road ahead, she turned to me and took my wrists in her hands. I wanted her to lift up my mask and see my true face for the last time. I hoped she would kiss me goodbye on the forehead as I saw other parents do to other children. But she never did. Instead, when the traveling tent was nearly at our gates, he bent over and whispered into my ear a song... It began and ended like the one we sang just now."

Walking up to where the masked man sat, Raoul laid a hand on his shoulder and stood next to him. He could see an old wound had opened inside the Angel, and he knew there were no need for words. He knew Erik could feel them, perched on his shoulder in the shape of a warm hand, sympathetic and true. Only pride came between him and the vicomte's chest where he longed to rest his head and be comforted.

The next morning, Raoul found a note on his bed-stand, left by someone during the night. On a yellowing piece of parchment, in black ink, were written:

"Thank you."

And underneath that,

"Your obedient servant,
the Angel of Music."
Seven days went by. And during those seven days, Raoul's formerly weekly visits turned to daily ones. Every night from ten to twelve, he slipped quietly out of his bedroom and stole his way across street-lamp illuminated pavements, gathering speed with each step as his feet guided him towards the dark opera house. His mind often missed the part where he jumped down stairways and paddled in the gondola. Before he knew it, he was there in the phantom's living room, cold with the night-air and glowing.

After a cheery hello--and a polite reply--the two would settle down in their established places. The phantom in front of his organ, and Raoul next to the organ, on the side where a row of inkstands stood. Then a short moment of quiet thoughtfulness would ensue between them. The phantom would scratch away with his quill in silent composure, trying not to give way to the temptation to take a glance at the viscount sitting next to him. Staves of music would flow inside his mind, and soon he would be lost in his own world. Occasionally a straying sound of a note escaped, or a testing tap on a line of keys slipped out. Whatever form his wandering thoughts might take, he always had an attentive listener beside him. Not a note was lost on the viscount's eager ears. The boy would listen and watch, undisturbing and much tamed by his own vow.

He behaved.
And always--always--he would be the one to start a conversation. Sometimes it began with a question. Are you not lonely down here? Sometimes the answer was sad and melancholy. I have been alone for decades. It is easy to get used to it, as long as you are left that way. Sometimes the answer held an unspoken after-thought. Now that I have met you, I feel the loneliness keener than ever when you are gone. Sometimes I wonder if it would have been better if you were never here.

But Erik couldn't lie, not to himself. As each day passed, he found himself giving in to Raoul more and more. He found that words instead of lyrics could fill his mouth, that his lovely voice could hold lengthy conversations instead of an opera.

Every visit found the thin layer of truce which they gingerly walked upon a little thicker, their boundaries a little easier. And with each passing night, the phantom found his heart beginning to thaw. Soon he was looking forward to Raoul's visits almost as much as the boy himself.

Raoul watched as Erik broke yet another quill nib. Black ink spurted out in a magnificent piece of blotch on the yellow parchment, resulting in an annoyed sigh from the writer. Raoul had sat in his usual place by the organ for less than 15 minutes when the first nib splintered under the phantom's hand. Now the clock was just stricking half-past ten as the phantom reached across his organ for a third quill.

"You know," Raoul remarked conversationally. "There are always fountain pens."
Erik shrugged.
"Modern comforts are often less elegant than archaic ones."
"So you think quills are elegant?" Asked Raoul. There was a smile in his voice that softened his teasing tone to a pleasant degree, something which felt very agreeable to the phantom. The older man dipped the third nib in another bottle, this time in red ink.
"I am sorry to find not all people are of the same tastes. It would have made an easier business of acquiring these."
Erik paused to muse over the black-and-brown patterns of the turkey-feather, in which time Raoul took the liberty of rolling his eyes at the opposite direction.
"These must be getting old down here. Perhaps I should get a new stock."
The viscount glanced at the large crate of quills sitting quietly in front of them. Then a curious thought occurred.
"Where do you get all these, anyway?" He asked. Erik was shameless in his reply.
"Since I cannot walk up to a store in the broad light of day, I get them the same way I got my suit and cloak a few years ago--I steal them."
The vicomte raised his eyebrows.
"From...?"
"From this very Opera House, right under the nose of those two managers."
Raoul blinked as the phantom sneered at the mental images of Fermin and Armand.
"And you never get caught?"
"Oh, I never leave so much as a trace of myself in these excursions. Though many have claimed to have seen me, they do not know me."
Raoul detected a boyish, almost childish pride in Erik's words. But there was something else in them, something that tugged at the back of his mind... rather uneasily. A shadow of a doubt began to creep inside his head.
"Erik?"
Erik would have been a fool not to notice this change in the boy. Glancing curiously, he asked "What?"
"What do you mean," Raoul said slowly, "by some people have claimed to have seen you?" Even as he felt the suspicion rise in his chest he suppressed it. It couldn't be. Erik on the other hand looked surprised.
"Surely you have heard a few rumors?" He said, raising an eyebrow. The boy felt the thin strand of doubt tighten into a knot.
"Rumors?"
"Why yes, the one with all that death's heads and mention of ghosts--surely you've heard at least one? No? To them, I am the Opera Ghost!"
Raoul felt the breath escape from his lungs as Christine's words flew back to him, so heedlessly forgotten that time, so cruelly thrown back at him now. He'd been free of all horrors till this moment, the horror of a truth he'd carelessly regarded as nonsensical rumors coming from frightened chorus-girls and silly managers. Looking at the man whom he'd come to call 'his' Angel, Raoul suddenly knew there was more to this person than he'd been willing to believe. Never for a moment, not even for a second, had he suspected the Opera Ghost to be the other side of this coin. He knew this man could be moody, angry, sulking, exciting, inspiring, softening. To think he was a murderer of many, to think he would KILL many...
Raoul's voice shook slightly when he opened his lips. He wanted to spit out a denial, an exclamation. But instead, something different came out.
"My brother... Philip..." he took a breath to steady himself. "When I was a child, he told me a lot of scary stories to frighten me. One of them was particularly gruesome. I knew it was a true story because the adults kept talking about it for days after it appeared in the newspapers. In that story, there was a travelling carnival house. It was a popular house, quite well known in its own country. The house was known to appear in certain towns every week, all the year around." Raoul looked at the phantom to see for any change in his countenance, but Erik remained silent. His composure was unruffled.
"But one day the carnival house didn't appear. The towns people waited, the children were impatient, and even the dogs noticed their absence. But no carnival appeared that week. A few days later they found the carnival tents, spattered with blood and full of bodies--the bodies of the entire member of the carnival."
Erik's eyes returned the vicomte's gaze coldly, unruffled and unmoved. The boy took a step towards him.
"But there was one body missing. No matter how they searched, they couldn't find the body of the infamous 'carnival freak.' Everybody knew HIM. But nobody could find a trace of him. The police came up with a theory. They argued it was the 'freak' that had murdered the entire carnival troop and run away. They said he had escaped."
Raoul took another step forward. Erik didn't move. His face had turned impassive, his gaze, even colder.
"Go on," the opera ghost said coolly. He could see Raoul's brown eyes expanding, his breath quickening. And he knew there was an inevitable question ahead of them. Raoul could feel this question on the tip of his tongue right now.

"I never thought anything of it. It was just one of those unsolved mysteries, a scene of a terrible crime, one of many others. But now I remember every word of it. Erik," Raoul's voice dropped to an anxious whisper.

"You belonged to a carnival house, once."

"Go on," was all he said. The viscount spilt out the words.

"Did you kill those carnival people? Did you escape from them? Did you run all the way from Persia to this place? Did you kill," he deliberately formed the words, "Did you kill Joseph Buquet."

All this was painfully disarmed by a single syllable.

"Yes."

The opera ghost's reply was matter-of-factly calm, as if he couldn't understand why the viscount was making a fuss out of such a small matter.

"Why?"

Raoul asked desperately as soon as he could speak. The Angel looked down upon the boy. Perplexion and a hint of anger were in his emerald eyes.

"Why? Why do you think? They were in my way." His white mask flashed in the candlelight, his voice hard and smooth as a mirror as it reflected total void of guilt.

"They guarded my cage during the night, Chagney. How was I supposed to make my escape with the troop loitering around? I HAD to get rid of them."

Raoul turned away to hide his expression--he could plainly feel the fear purmiating his facial muscles. It wasn't a fear for his life. No, he now knew that if Erik had truly wished to kill him, he would have done it much sooner. It was a fear not for his own life, but Erik's life, and the life of others. It was a fear coming from the knowledge that this man--this strangely misguided child--was completely unaware of the WRONG he'd done.

"Are you frightened?"

To hear the Angel's voice so low, so beautiful, so dangerous as that moment. It was excruciating. The boy was at a loss.

"I see you are."

The phantom's tone was no longer sleek and smooth. A seam of bitterness had appeared, a seam that had managed to stay underneath the surface for the last seven days. Raoul longed to close it up again, but he knew he had to deal with it. He turned around.

"Of course I'm frightened. Of course I am."

Raoul tried to tell him how sickened he was, how worried he was about him by staring into his green orbs.

"But not for myself. I do not think you've any inclination to do me harm."

"Do you wish to secure yourself, Chagney? Sounds more like a reassurance than a statement."

"If it's not that. I'm--I'm frightened for you. No, listen!"

Closing the remaining distance between them with a violent stride, Raoul grabbed onto the man's shirt sleeve and pulled himself closer, drawing up eye level to eye level.

"I'm frightened for you. I'm frightened of what you do to yourself. I'm frightened of what might happen to you. You may have forgotten during all these years in this opera house but remember, you are HUMAN. What if they find you? What if you come under the law? What has been done already to yourself, your soul? Erik, look at me."

All the while he spoke, the phantom had tried to push him away. His soul?

"My soul?" He hissed as he broke away. Incredulous wrath gleamed from his mask.

"As if you are on the top of the moral chain!"

"I am not proud of what I do! I bribe, I seduce, I use wealth and even sex to do it, I know. But to kill?" Raoul looked crushed as he said the word.

"I do not for a moment, pretend to be better than you are. I do not mean that. But you have to know, Erik, your method of solving problems is destructive. It destroys you, it marrs your heart when
everything else about you is so beautiful."
Raoul reached up to the opera ghost's face and tenderly touched his cheek. Erik fancied he saw a tear in the boy's eyes. He'd never seen him like this; so serious and so passionate. Yet he still could not understand.
"I have always been this way, Raoul." He said quietly.
"You have managed to accept me so far; accept me now, if you will. But do not try to change me."
What animosity and frustration he'd felt a moment ago was gone. There was a weird feeling left in the dregs, something like disappointment and resignation--without knowing who he was disappointed in and whom he was resigned to, the boy or himself. Erik became conscious of Raoul's hand, still cupping his cheek and trembling. He couldn't meet the boy's eyes directly. Raoul, however, stared up at him still.
"Do you think I am trying to change you?" He whispered softly. "Change you because I dislike the way you are? Because I feel you are below me the way you are? Is that what you think? Just that?"
These questions were far more disturbing than the previous accusations on their moment of truth. They unsettled the phantom, as if he'd said something wrong.
"It's nothing like it."
Raoul's voice was kind, but undeniably firm.
"I am trying to help you, Erik. Not for any petty satisfaction of mine, but only for you."
"Why you would do tha--"
"Because I care for you! Why is that so hard to believe?"
Erik lifted his gaze to Raoul's face. Both of them were trying so hard right now, trying to understand each other and make the other understand. Raoul surprised himself almost as much as the phantom by that speech. Never, in all those short-termed relationships of his, had he ever felt so strongly for someone else like this. No connection of flesh and blood whatsoever--just this sense of WANTING to care for him, this dangerously wandering child.
They stood, simply looking at each other. They stayed that way for many minutes.

At last, Erik stirred.
"Someone is coming. I hear the oars."
"Christine?"
"Yes."
Looking for a place to hide himself and finding nothing better than the phantom's coffin, he immediately dove in and half-shut the lid behind him just as the soprano opened the door to the outer room. The vicomte eased into a flat position on his back and lay still. He could hear the girl's heels as they stepped into the carpeted floor of the organ room.
"Erik."
"My angel."
The opera ghost had arranged his expression to his usual composure the moment he'd heard the door open. Now he faced Christine quite calmly--pretending his head wasn't still resonating with the vicomte's last words--with only a little confusion showing in his tone.
"I believe this is the first time you have come here, alone and unguided. What brings you here?"
"Why, Angel of Music! Have you forgotten your pupil?"
There was not a little anxiousness and a good deal of surprise in Christine's voice. Taking off her silky blue cape and draping it around a chair, she gazed him closely.
"You always visit my dressing room between ten and eleven, Erik. Every night. But I haven't heard you at all this past week. You didn't come."
"Didn't I?"
Erik inwardly cursed himself. It was only then he recollected the accumulation of his missed-out visits to the new margarita. The last seven days...he'd been completely preoccupied by someone else. 'Raoul,' he growled silently. Confound that boy.
"My apologies, Christine. I had tired myself out recently, so I took a much-needed rest. Even a ghost needs to lay down his chains sometimes."--was what he actually said. A lame excuse, but credulous.
Christine looked unconvinced, but did not press the subject. Erik was important to her. She had to keep up with her trainings. Not only would her voice be in danger of losing its power without them, but the very thought of not hearing the Angel's music ever again was terrifying. She had no choice but to enslave herself to him—just as his heart was enslaved to her. She had to hold back a shudder as Erik dropped one knee and kissed her hand. Oh, this wretched, wretched creature! How much longer would she (could she) able to keep playing this charade with him and herself, she didn't know. All she knew was that the opera ghost was the key to her career.

All this the vicomte heard without seeing, knew without hearing what passed outside the coffin and what passed in Daae's mind.

'The little vixen...'

His thoughts turned angrily against the soprano. She was both clever and selfish. She knew what the advantages were, she didn't care what pain she might cause her genius by her pretences and facades, she didn't take him seriously enough. It pained the boy to see him so unwittingly used.

Erik, unconscious of what Raoul was thinking, elegantly swirled his dark cloak as he once again took position of the organ. "Shall we begin with the usual aria?" He asked. Christine only nodded.

The song began. The phantom's fingers glided across and across the ivory teeth of his musical beast as the young soprano started on the first strand of their aria. At first it was deep and mysterious, the organ's ominous tune entwined around her low, undulating voice. But as the song progressed, the two sounds traveled higher and higher in unimaginably intricate spirals, preluding against and with each other as both melodies seemed to aspire toward the finishing note. Christine's voice got stronger and stronger until even Raoul, who was used to hearing her sing, paused his running thoughts to wonder at her. Just when it seemed as though her voice could go no higher, the organ stopped. That was when Erik joined in.

Christine's voice was supernatural, cold and beautiful as clear-cut diamonds trapped in winter's frost. But Erik's. His must have belonged to an Olympian god once upon a time, improved and condensed to stunning power through the ages. It was so much older, so much more experienced than Christine's. It sounded as if the Angel of Music's notes each carried an individual emotion behind each and every one of them, smoulderingly soft and entrancing. She couldn't even compare.

And yet. There couldn't have been a more perfect example of harmony, more perfectly matched duet than what Erik and Christine were showing between them. The two handsome figures lit each other up in an unearthly manner, her spirit and his voice, in one, combined. The girl was high from her Angel's music and the man was simply lost in the glory of his pupil. Any listener would have at that moment thought: they are perfect for one another; they are beautiful together. Both the eyes and ears would have confirmed it.

The clock struck midnight when they stopped. It was the silence that reawakened Raoul from his trance within his hiding place in the wooden coffin. He realized he'd been pricking his ears, breath baited for a long time. After a parting word—breathless but not any warmer for it—Christine left the house. It was some moments before Erik called to him.

"You may come out now. She's gone."

Raoul did so, with a stiff back. He would never understand how the phantom managed to sleep here without cracking a bone or two.

Raoul cautiously approached. Erik's back was to him. He sighed.

"Before we close this subject," he said, stopping at the ghost's heels, "I want you to promise me something."

The ghost said nothing.

"Erik, look at me."

This gentle plea moved the ghost just enough to make him turn around. He looked down upon the boy as Raoul lifted his face for direct eye contact. There was no fear or anger in those doe-eyes, now. Compassion remained instead.

"Promise me. Never to do it again."

The ghost did not have to ask what he meant by 'it.'
"You are smart enough to know that I won't be able to keep a promise of that sort."
Erik's answer was not cold. It was what he felt to be the truth. The easiest, swiftest way of solving problems had been to kill. It had given him highs and triumphs in the past. Would he be able to restrain himself from that with a single word? The boy couldn't know what a mess he was inside, how hollow he could feel sometimes, how only blood and music could fill that hollowness beneath this opera house-- the boy didn't know how weak he could actually be.
As these thoughts ran like a painful river through Erik's mind, Raoul's voice, if possible, softened even more.
"Keeping it, I can help you. Keeping it, I'll be here for you. But making it," he opened his brown eyes wider. "I cannot help you with that. Only you can make that promise."
Erik couldn't avoid his gaze. He struggled.
"I..."
The viscount waited. The Angel, suddenly relenting, bowed.
"I'll...I'll try."
"Thank you, Erik."
It took all the boy's might to stop himself from kissing him. Instead, he contented himself with a hug, which Erik received awkwardly. But when they broke apart again, he could see how much it meant to Raoul by the smile he was wearing. And that was enough to dissipate his doubts about himself and Raoul, for the time being.
He managed to pull up the corners of his mouth in a small smile. Seeing this, Raoul cleared his throat in a considerably lighter mood.
"So! You have been neglecting poor Christine, have you?"
"No, not intentionally." Erik protested, secretly glad of the subject-change.
"Someone has been taking up my time, obviously." He stressed 'someone' while throwing a glare at the boy. Raoul however, was all innocence.
"I cannot imagine who that can be. He must be very attractive, to divert your attention from your pretty idol."
His old cheekiness was returning, all right. The phantom replied with sarcasm.
"Narcissus, you know very well who I'm talking about."
"Well, I cannot lie. But it was never INTENTIONAL, dear An--- oh!"
Raoul, who'd been quite close to the organ, had somehow managed to knock down a row of ink-bottles with one dramatic sweep of his hand while emphasizing this particular word. A couple bottles were smashed to pieces on the ground, another one had its top loosed off and issued thick black ink all over the phantom's scores, and the rest toppled from their places and rolled and spun on different angles. Erik let out an aggravated groan.
"I'm so sorry, I didn't quite mean this--" Raoul reddened as Erik simply shook his head.
"Ah Chagny, still such a careless brat. What have you done to my scores? It took me years to compose that one over there."
He pointed to a particularly soggy corner of the pile of heaped-up music sheets, which Raoul followed with his eyes in remorse.
"Confound my carelessness! Can you remember the notes? Do you have to start all over again? Have you got a copy, by any chance?"
The boy was in a state of near-panic and highly embarrassed. He knew how Erik treasured his compositions, and would never touch them without his consent, whatever he might do or say in his playfulness.
That did it. Erik crossed over to clear the mess, chuckling quietly. Raoul stared at him.
"These are all recent scores." Erik explained as he picked up smashed pieces of glass.
"All the old ones are stashed inside a drawer. You destroyed half-a-dozen sheets of an opera I began writing only three days ago, but I can remember everything I write down. In short," he said straightening up, "I was merely having a laugh at you."
Raoul blinked.
"Oh."
"And remember the next time you decide to jest, Raoul; glum as I am, I do have some wit left within me."

Mopping up the last bit of goo off the keys, he looked up and smirked. For a moment the boy was flustered. But only for a moment.
"Well, I'm glad to hear that." He said, a little haughtily (all the more so, due to embarrassment). "I thought you would never handle a joke."
"I learned that from you, I must admit."
"From me, the attractive distraction?"
"You know De Chagney, I can kick you out of this house as soon as I please."

Both were now quite comfortable. The sudden release from tension had lent them more liberty than usual.
"I mean," the phantom continued in half-jest. "I have my pretty idol as you say—not only comely in looks, but also in possession of a musical talent. CHRISTINE would not knock over ink bottles and wet the parchment. CHRISTINE would not flatter herself as much as you do. CHRISTINE would not make such a big deal out of any issue of mine."
"Christine," Raoul murmured softly, "wouldn't care."

He wanted to tell him. He wanted to expose her. The words almost came to the tip of his tongue. But not now, he decided. They've had enough arguments for one night. Instead, he drew closer to the opera ghost. Leaning over the other side of the organ, he lowered his voice to a purr.
"So you think your idol is better than myself? You prefer her? It makes me jealous, Erik. It makes me want to...do things..."

His hand trailed up to a button on Erik's shirt. His finger played with it for a while, chafing the surface with a sensual touch.

Erik held himself still. He did not know what else to do. He worshipped Christine. He adored Christine. But he found his feelings for her diminished in the face of what Raoul made him feel. The physical proximity they were sharing at the moment kindled a living, tingling thing inside his stomach like a snake, coiling itself onto his chest. Its sly body tightened him and forced his pulse to beat faster, his breath to come quicker. What was this? It was an unfamiliar emotion inside his long-disused heart. Raoul's blond hair was so close, he could have buried his chin in it with a mere bow of his neck.
"But no,"

Raoul said, suddenly letting him go. Laughing, he took a step back.
"I said I would behave, and I will. I promised to be good, and I intend to keep my word."

He turned away from the phantom, and Erik was glad the viscount couldn't see the pale blush that appeared on his cheek.
"But you did give me an idea, there."

"An idea?"

He asked, trying to recover himself. Raoul looked back as he opened the door to the under-ground lake. It was time for him to go.
"Yes, an idea."

His eyes were bright. Before Erik could ask just what he was thinking, he slipped out and left, leaving him to be confused and pondering for himself.
Erik was, as usual, very busily engaged with his quill and organ. He hadn't had a blink of sleep last night after Raoul had left, and had chosen instead to stay up until 8 in the morning, re-copying and modifying the ink-sodden half-a-dozen opera sheets the boy had ruined. He'd immediately fallen asleep then and there in his organ chair, after the last staves of the second act had been completed. When he'd woke up four hours later, the needles of the time-piece struck twelve o'clock sharp without any certainty of day or night--that was for the phantom to decide. Knowing his own body to be incapable of sleeping so many hours as 16 hours straight, Erik had figured it to be noon and time to feed himself.

After a brief lunch which never lasted more than fifteen minutes, he'd rowed out to the other shore in his gondola and scaled the steep stone stairs leading up to the 'upper world.' He seriously needed some new quills, and he could only get them from the upper part of the building. The tedious excursion through walls and cellars and managers' offices fulfilled, he was back to work now, scribbling away and fingers flirting with songs.

Two in the afternoon. Three in the afternoon. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. The clock struck nine when he heard it--the sound of an instrument, coming from outside. It floated gently into the cool house in a lilting wake, sashaying from low to high and high to low as it proceeded down the lake. Smoother and sleeker than the Angel's grand organ and weaker than any of his powerful compositions, this thread of music continued to approach closer and closer to his own door.

Erik stood, bewildered. Could it be Christine? But she never took lessons from him on instruments, nor had she in her earlier days to his knowledge. He walked softly up to the front door, minding not to drown out the melody with his own footsteps. It was very close now, almost as if right on the other side of the doorknob. There was only one other person who would and could come down to this place, and that was--

The door was flung open from outside the moment he turned the handle from inside, and in waltzed Raoul, violin in hand.

"What in the..."

The boy didn't even wait for him to finish. Half-dancing, half-walking, he brushed past the phantom and continued to play with undeterred confidence as if he owned the place. Erik stood by the door amazed, and could do nothing better than to listen to the boy's song. It was only when he'd recovered from the initial shock that he recognized what he was playing.

"Henry Purcell's Rondeau?"

"Or, as is more popularly known, The Moor's Revenge." Raoul answered, nodding. "It is one of my many favorites."

The song went on. Erik watched as Raoul drew back his arm and extracted note after note in light, easy motions. He noted how a smile tugged at the corner of the viscount's mouth every now and then, how easily the boy gave into it. He could tell that Raoul genuinely enjoyed playing his strings--he did so with so much mirth! How different he was from the Angel of Music, who always played with power, eloquence, and grandness; who hardly knew half the time if he was enjoying his own music or merely filling up his loneliness with an endless array of organ keys. Raoul's eyes were half shut, head tilted to the side and slender jawline folded in the dip of the instrument's wooden body. His blond locks fell across the side of his face to shade one of his doe-eyes from view.
When the last note had extracted itself to the full and faded out with a tremor, Raoul lowered his arms, and turned to Erik. His face was aglow with the pride he felt for his wooden companion. "So, what do you think?" He asked. Erik broke from his brief musings and looked at him. It was a considering look, partly of a professional and partly of a personal evaluation.
"Hmm."
"Yes?"
"I surprise myself by admitting this...but you certainly know how to handle a violin. But--" he added as the viscount beamed.
"You are still quite naive, Raoul. You used a couple of techniques that were impressive there, but the song itself is not of an advanced level. Besides, you were holding your stick in the wrong manner the entire time."

The phantom expected his tutoring tone to discourage Raoul, but instead, the boy's expression brightened even further.
"I never had a professional tutor except for Christine's father when I was a child. I guess I never got through the basics properly."
"Yes, your posture was also slightly off."
"YOU know all the basics and all the techniques, I presume? YOU know all the scores?"
"You know I compose many of them myself when I fancy to play."
"I know that. And that is why I want you to teach me."
"I--what?"

Erik stopped short and looked at him. Raoul just shrugged.
"I don't see any reason for you to object. I can't sing...but I can play."

It suddenly dawned on him what the boy had meant by "an idea" yester-night. And as much as he wanted to, he couldn't see the point in denying him anything. He knew the boy wouldn't stop badgering him about it till he got what he wanted.
"I cannot believe I am actually consenting to this ridiculous fancy of yours."
"Thank you, Erik." The viscount answered, smiling sweetly. And though he seemed to make a light matter of it, becoming Erik's pupil was important to him; he would never be able to quench his jealousy of Christine in any other way.

* * * * *

"First things first; we need to fix your posture."
The opera ghost's tutoring air of a professional was both cool and natural as he made Raoul hold his violin a little higher.
"Fortunately for us, you are not TOO far off from the basics. But after years of familiarity with the wrong position, it might be hard to change it just now."
The phantom's silky black cloak rode the air as he circled around his new pupil, looking for adjustments to make.
"You need to spread your fingers on the bow much wider than that---yes, like that. Your performance will be more stabilized with a balanced hold on your fiddlestick; some of the notes quavered when you played."
Nothing was lost upon Erik's sharp eyes.
"And please don't slouch."
"I don't think I did," Raoul said uncertainly, for Erik's critical brow was telling him another story.
"You may not feel it yourself but your back is too relaxed. Straighten up, will you?"

This particular instruction caught Raoul's attention as he felt the palm of Erik's cool hand settle firmly on his spine. Going behind Raoul, the phantom murmured (unintentionally) near his ear.
"A little straighter, now. That's right. Hmm. You don't have to lean your head to the side quite that much. You shall end up with a bad crick if you keep doing it."
The taller man reached over Raoul's shoulder and set a gentle finger on his chin, guiding his jaw to lessen the tilt and ease the strain upon his neck. Raoul kept his eyes down to the violin strings and forced himself not to be conscious of Erik's close scrutiny and casual touch. God, didn't the man
know what he was doing to him?
"Now...play Henry Purcell's Rondeau again, but mind to stick to this posture and keep your back straight."

"What, like this?" Raoul asked. He didn't relish the idea of performing with the Angel right behind him, it made him self-conscious. Besides, Erik's hand was still set on the back of his shirt. The older man however, clearly had no idea what the boy was going through.
"You will be sure to slump again the minute I let go. I'll stand aside after this song if it discomforts you too much, but I am sure this is more effective."
Raoul huffed, but obediently began the tune. He could soon see the effect of his altered position. The bow struck the strings more steadily, and his fingers felt surer in their present places than they had before. Purcell's piece was able to gather more tempo and strength, and Erik couldn't help but feel pride in this improvement. From time to time he reminded Raoul to hold the instrument a little higher, criticized, or hummed along quietly in approval.
But for all the benefits of his advice, the boy's back still ached after all the songs he could play from memory were completed.
"See? You're already more controlled over your music."
"Thank you, but my backbone is crying their souls out for the sore."
Raoul stretched his stiff arms, grumbling playfully.
"Eight songs in a row with a ruler-straight spine IS a feat," Erik admitted. He was impressed with the Chagny boy's endurance, but kept that opinion to himself. He would save the praise until he REALLY deserved it.
Raoul laid his wooden friend down on a stack of music sheets on the organ, and then tossed himself onto the carpet. Leaning against the front of the organ (the organ, he was beginning to see, had many purposes besides making music), he looked up at the phantom with a sly look.
"Your ninety-degree straight-back thing nearly killed me, Erik. A little encouragement is well deserved, do you not think so?"
The older man glanced down warily.
"Encouragement?"
"You know I tried hard to impress you...But I think I could do even better for a reward."
Erik narrowed his green eyes suspiciously.
"What makes you think I would give it to you?"
Raoul ignored the question. Instead he tilted his blond head back to the full, exposing his white neck and long-lashed chestnut eyes. In a light, playful tone that quite contradicted his obvious longing he replied,
"Maybe a small kiss?"
Erik frowned and turned his gaze away.
"Pray, don't be ridiculous," he murmured in disdain. The idea of HIM giving Raoul a kiss was unthinkable. He didn't like it at all! HE never initiated such things, he only endured them when the boy came at him first. Erik chose to overlook the fact that the idea stirred a ticklish sensation in him that wasn't so bad--just confusing. He also neglected to remind himself that it wasn't endurance so much as submission produced by guilty pleasure on his part. No, he refused to look at it that way.
While all these ran through his mind in a jumble, Raoul shifted his expression to a subtle pout.
"It's not ridiculous...and I am not asking for much, am I?"
Again. That persuasive, seductive tone. Raoul was behaving well these days, but he couldn't abandon his trade-mark charm for long.
"Why don't you come and get it yourself, then?" Was Erik's petulant response. Raoul lifted an eyebrow.
"Would you really prefer that way? I might get carried away, you know. I might not stop with a kiss. I might want to do more and--"
"Oh please shut up, I can't stand your cheek."
"Then make me."
That did it. Stooping next to the boy, Erik brought his masked face close to his and growled. 
"Fine, I'll get it over and done with."
"I'm waiting..."
That teasing tone colored the phantom's cheek into a perfect blush as he leaned forward. But just as his lips were nearly touching the viscount's, he stopped. That mouth which was the shade of an early rosebud was so close to his own now, but he just...couldn't. Raoul saw that he was faltering. He didn't push him, but waited patiently. Poor Erik, suddenly too shy to go further and too proud to back out, changed maneuver unexpectedly and pecked the viscount on the left cheek---hard. He immediately withdrew afterwards and tried to stand up, but Raoul swiftly pulled him back down again, laughing.
"I asked for a kiss, but you go and peck me with a hard-hearted beak like a hen instead."
Before Erik could do or say anything else, Raoul arrested his neck in his arms and covered the man's mouth with his.
It wasn't the typically deep and lusty contact he liked to make with the phantom. It wasn't the harsh, eager one from their bed-days from the past either. This one was kept chaste and honest, and although Raoul came very near to tasting Erik with his tongue while gently nibbling his lower lip, this one kiss managed to remain innocent.

After a warm-up of half a dozen songs (and not without a few impatient nudges on the spine from the teacher's part), Erik was willing to let Raoul try something new.
"Do you have anything else besides the ones you can memorize?" He asked. Raoul shrugged.
"There are a couple more that I haven't managed to get down yet. But they're boring, and I keep putting off practicing them."
"Well...in that case, you can choose something from my stash over there," said Erik, pointing towards a thin stack on his organ.
"I composed some violin sheets yesterday after you left-- I just did it on a whim of mine. It was a spur of the moment thing." He quickly added the last couple sentences, not wanting to appear too interested in the boy's progress. Raoul, however, knew better than to take his word for it.
"Thank you Erik, that was very sweet of you."
"No it wasn't, it was just a--"
"--whim of yours, yes."
"Trust me, I did not do it for you."
"And trust me Erik, I never said you did."
The opera ghost gave the boy one of his most chilling glares, to no effect other than an innocent smile from the latter. Frowning, he gave up and stalked away into the outer room. Raoul's quiet laughter followed him all the way out.
While Erik fumed--or thought he did,--the viscount strolled over to the precious stack and began to flip through the yellowish parchments one by one. Despite his teasings, he really was touched by the thought of the Angel scribbling away by night, writing for his little violin.
'I'll have to thank him properly sometime.' He thought, running a finger over a few ink blots. As much as he loved to sport a witty mouth, he did not want to seem like an ungrateful brat either. Suddenly he stopped his absent finger and narrowed his eyes. For a moment his eyes carefully scanned through the parchment he was holding, then began to flip through the rest in a much slower pace. After ten minutes of intriguing study, he picked up his violin again and gave a few experimental strokes at a few staves. Then he put it down again, satisfied.
Of the five scores, only one of them bore any sign of Erik's usual gloom and temper. Turning over some of the phantom's previous organ compositions, Raoul found that they were either tempestuously passionate and violent, or they were soaked to the core with unbearable bitterness. The former were clearly the outlets of the phantom's anger and frustration--anyone could have plainly read it in a minute. The latter type tended to be very gentle, very high, and very moving, with the beauty of a feminine kind of intricacy. Christine Daae was the obvious theme in these type of works, and they didn't exactly agree to Raoul's jealous mind.
But his new violin sheets! They were shorter and easier; not the grand epics of uncontrollable, strenuous scale; not as dramatic or emotional either. The length and difficulty were toned down to match Raoul's level, with only a few lines here and there requiring new techniques. These were all very nice little details, but what caught his attention was the alteration of the composer's STYLE. Gone were the thunder-clouds and stormy seas; gone was the tear-inducing grief; gone was the maddening obsession with the dark; gone was the endless frolicking with shadows. Now there appeared bursts of sunlight through grey wisps of mist, a surge of wind through a stagnant pool of fog. The fog had been a heavenly thing to behold, graced with dew drops from the high skies. But the fog had been a fog nonetheless--white, anxious, and always the same. Now the moods of Erik's songs were quite different. One sheet was a quiet ballad, but the Angel had softened the melancholy to a relaxing extent. The bitterness showed its dark edges just enough to cause gentle sympathy, not pain. Another sheet had an easy, light-hearted lilt to the entire song. Anxiety and loneliness was not made a guest on this particular piece, and a pleasant peacefulness lent its sunshine to the stretch of aged vellum. Still another had a playful flavor, with musical notes running away an octave higher and backtracking an octave lower. When Raoul tried it on his strings, the harmonious chords almost sounded cheerful. Almost happy.

"I should keep an eye on his music for a while..." he muttered softly to himself in an undertone. "What did you say?" Asked Erik as he walked in. He had been secretly watching the boy test the violin sheets from the other room. He couldn't help it--he wanted to see the pleased expression on Raoul's face.

"It is nothing, I'm just...I'm very thankful." Raoul covered up quickly. He was only half-lying, and although Erik could sense there was something growing at the back of the viscount's mind, he could also sense the sincerity behind his words.

"I hope you would keep up with them and not abandon them as you did with your 'couple other sheets.'" He remarked, letting his hunch go. Secrets never stayed long undiscovered from himself, anyway. Raoul held up his chin indignantly.

"I would never!"

"Thank goodness, then." Erik said softly, giving him one of those small, rare smiles. It was so pretty when the Angel wore that genuine curve of the lips. He found himself wishing he could see that expression more often on that masked face. Usually it was Raoul who was always laughing, since his personality never allowed him to stay grave for too long. What he wouldn't give to see the Angel laugh, just once! Reaching out, Raoul gently laid a hand under Erik's chin.

"I wish you would give me that look more often," he said, tracing the bottom of Erik's lips in a thoughtful way. Erik didn't say anything--he couldn't think of a proper reply, he was focused on the boy's hand--but he met his eyes. It was some moments before he could ask,

"Why?"

It was a stupid question, but it tumbled out anyway. Raoul shrugged, not removing his thumb.

"Everyone wants to see everyone smile. But I think... I guess when you wear that smile...I can really feel how close we've grown. I like it when you show me you are comfortable with me. And...and I like it when I see how more open you've grown. The first time we met, you were so busy hissing at me, you know."

"You CANNOT blame that on me. The first time we met, you were so busy trying to touch m--" He stopped mid-sentence and blushed. Memories came flooding back in vivid images, accompanied by ghost-sensations of rough touches and heated flesh. His skin spiked into hyper-awareness, and even this innocent contact at the moment suddenly seemed too much to him. He dropped his gaze and shied away from Raoul's hand, blushing a shade deeper as the viscount raised an eyebrow.

"Feeling uncomfortable?" He asked. Erik did not answer, but his face said it all. Raoul could not have been more delighted.

"How about we both shut up and get on with your lesson?"
For the next few days, Raoul practiced on the violin and spent all his evenings down under the Opera House, taking lessons and mastering the phantom's sheets. The new routine sunk quickly into place with him, but during those few days, Erik also discovered something new--his music was changing.

He'd first realized it when he'd been up the whole night composing violin pieces (for Raoul). After a satisfactory half-a-dozen hours, he'd reviewed his work and crinkled his forehead, unsure what to make of it.

"Perhaps it is a momentary mood of the moment," he'd told himself, decidedly making no big deal of it. He'd filed away every other little detail safely away from his own thoughts, refusing to admit them in. It was quite stubborn actually, how he dismissed his new "inspiration." Those staves where he'd tried so hard to capture the image of wavering candlelight caught in golden hair; those nimble, trilling notes where they so obviously described a quick and witty tongue; those easy, relaxed parts that subtly concealed a flutter as of wings where they hinted at Erik's own confused emotions of these past weeks; all these were noticed and went as if unnoticed by their creator.

He soon found out lying to himself was much harder to do when his own music flowed back to his ears. The ideas images behind the alteration became even more noticeable as Raoul got better and better performing them. Erik tried to replicate his earlier sounds, often losing himself among drawer-fulls of old parchment and ink-covered vellum--but to no avail. The changes slipped out unconsciously every time he composed a new song, so much so that oftentimes, he never realized them until he'd almost finished. It didn't seem like anything he could will away. He couldn't help it if his mind strayed away from the old well of inspiration to a new one. He couldn't help but feel unsettled. But he couldn't bring himself to dislike it, and he couldn't give up on the pleasure of exploring something new.

Raoul quietly watched the phantom struggle with himself. He could only guess why the phantom was acting strangely lately, but the guess was good as the truth. He observed how animatedly Erik would scratch away with his quill and hum along quietly for a while, but then suddenly switch to playing old sheets, then switch back to restlessly composing new ones. Raoul also kept an attentive ear as always, listening and observing. But he didn't make any comments. He didn't even pretend to know what was going on. He would wait until he was absolutely sure.

On the fifth evening of his training, the viscount finally decided to drop the ball. It was 9 o'clock, and Erik was playing his most recent sheet on the organ. Laying down his violin on the carpet, Raoul sidled up to where Erik was playing. He paused, and listened for a while. The phantom glanced up at him, but continued to play without stopping. He did not mind Raoul listening to his music anymore.

"The sound is very fresh. Is there a title to it?" The boy asked, starting out easy. The phantom cleared his throat behind his hand.

"Um, no, I am not going to title this one. I was only experimenting with a new sound."

"Mm-hmm," Raoul nodded. "I noticed."

"Did you?" Erik asked, flinching inwardly. Raoul was sharp, but he guessed it wouldn't take a genius to note a change as sudden as this. He picked at the corner of a long, luxuriously plush raven-quill. It was something the boy had given him in thanks for the lessons and the sheets.

"When have you started noticing?" He ventured to inquire. Raoul saw his chance, and didn't hesitate.

"Days ago, actually. I first picked it up in the violin scores you presented me."

Erik let out an inaudible groan at that.

"Naturally I became interested...so I began to pay more attention to your recent compositions. I was curious to know what it would turn into."

"It will not turn into anything. It is but a moment of diversion." Erik replied, but Raoul wasn't buying it.

"Four days, Erik. Four. During those days I heard a lot more than you may have expected. Do you even know how much this style is shaping your masterpieces, now?"

"Well, if you've observed so well, be free with your tongue and tell me all you have heard! Go on, let us hear of your fascinating study."
Although he folded his arms across his chest and ejected an amount of sarcasm in the demand, the opera ghost was feeling a genuine curiosity in what the boy had to say. Perhaps some clarification was needed, since he himself was in confusion—in denial. Or perhaps he just wanted to know how far into his music, his personal language, the viscount was able to read. He was in for a surprise.

"At first, it was merely the shift in the atmosphere of the songs. Your songs are always super-human, you know that. But they used to be always so heavy, Erik. Heavy with anger, heavy with obsession, heavy with grief, heavy with any other stormy things you could think of. They were beautiful and full of awe; grand and hypnotizing. But I do not think they had the power to make the audience feel joy in what they heard. Your operas entrance their ears, grip at them with terrible amazement, make them cry and make them applaud...but they never quite smiled, did they?"

Erik's face was now turned straight forward, making it hard for the viscount to see his expression. Kneeling beside his chair for a better look, Raoul gently put Erik's hand in his, and went on.

"The plots, the lyrics, the instruments...all so magnificent. Magnificent and negative. Marvelous and dark. Your resentment threaded a way into the quilt—all the time. No wonder I noticed a shift right away! A bright spot is rather hard to miss in such a gloom."

Raoul paused, giving the Angel time to digest this analysis. The Angel swallowed.

"Go on," he said. Raoul complied.

"When this was repeated for a while, I noticed other things. For instance, the intricate patterns and notes you use when you write about the vix--Christine. You pitched them down a couple octaves in a few of your new scores. They still retain their elegance, only they don't sound very feminine anymore. They are more...masculine."

Erik lowered his eyes down to the keyboard and experienced an invisible flush at the implication. Surely, that last word was coincidental? Surely Raoul wouldn't know?

"Also, the lyrics--there's actually a sense of humor in them here and there. You don't usually jest in your operas. Is that not a pleasant development, now? Also, I noticed how your skills are improving in the...bawdy scenes. The raciness comes more naturally. I wonder who gave you ideas in THAT area?"

The knowing smirk in his voice was too much. This time, Erik really let out a strangled sigh.

"Ugh, fine. Fine. You are right. Are you happy, now?"

"No, I am not done yet." Raoul was starting to enjoy himself.

"I am going to ask you a question, and you will answer me."

"Not if I do not want to, no." Retorted Erik.

"Yes you will. You always do if I ask you."

"I can lie."

"What inspired you, Angel?"

Raoul sprang the dreaded question in a croon, as if persuading a kitten to come out from under the bed. Erik but his lip and refused to look at him. But that was kind of hard to do, since Raoul's uplifted brown eyes were leaning in a bit closer.

"Erik, answer me," he repeated. His voice was pitched low. He could see the warmth rise to the older man's cheek in a lovely shade of peach. The 'kitten' looked just about ready to attack—or cry.

"You already know!" Erik burst out at last. "It is hardly fair to press me like you do."

"Well, no one succeeds like I do, do they?" He returned sweetly. The Angel didn't even bother to glare this time.

"I can never understand why I haven't strangled you to death already." He exclaimed, vexed.

"I think I will do it tonight."

"Oh, you wouldn't."

"No guarantees, De Chagny."

"No need of any—I already have one."

Dropping his voice to a murmur, Raoul straightened up on his knees and brought his face up to a touching distance to phantom's. His mouth barely escaped contact with the sensitive skin right beneath Erik's ear, but his breath caressed the spot just as well as a set if lips might have.
"I inspire you." He breathed, causing Erik to bite back a gasp.
"I invoke new thoughts for your art..."
"Wait, don't--don't talk into my--"
"I influence you..."
"Raoul, please!"
"You wouldn't strangle your muse." Raoul very nearly buried his nose in the crook of the man's neck. His locks brushed the tingling, pale skin. But only nearly.
"All right, I won't!"
Erik couldn't move away. He was too busy keeping his breathing steady, he wanted to, but the whole sensuality of this was so fascinating at the same time that he couldn't budge. He could even feel the virtual droplets of heat nearly trickling down to his lower regions.
What was wrong with him?
That was when the viscount chose to move away. And as he did, he chuckled.
"I am a good persuader, aren't I?"
"You promised not to do any 'persuading' if my memory is correct."
"I did not touch you, my dear phantom."
That was true.
"I made you whine without even laying a finger on you."
That was also true.
"To top it off, you admitted I am the one behind your alteration."
Which was also true.
The viscount's peal of laughter rang through the house on the lake.
"Muse..." he mused, as if the title amused him. He had this stupid grin on his face--injured Erik told himself it was stupid, anyway--that, whatever the cause may be, was sincere.
"So I am your MUSE, now?" He asked, smiling. Erik sighed. He knew it was pointless to deny Raoul (he was feeling that a lot these days).
"Yes," he relented.
"Yes, you are."

However, it did not necessarily mean that Erik's enamoredness with the soprano was over. She was still a goddess in his mind, the ultimate hope and object of his art. She was still inside his heart--perhaps with less predominance than a couple months ago; perhaps with less drug-like potency than before; but still there. The zeal for her love and the vague dream of her hand in his would fade into a dull picture for a time, then suddenly flare up again like an old flame.
So Raoul found when he scurried down to the lake one night. He hadn't been in the house for ten minutes when Erik got up and started searching for his gloves.
"Where are you going?" The viscount asked.
"The only place I CAN go." Erik replied, tossing a piece of stiff paper onto the viscount's lap. Raoul picked it up, and scowled. It was a note, short and sickening.
[Dear Erik, please visit me in my dressing room tonight. I noticed that your voice adorns my time less frequently than before, and I long to see you. Christine.]
"I meant to go two days ago, but I wanted to finish our duet first. This duet I dedicate to her."
The corner of Erik's mouth lifted up as he turned over a roll of parchments in his hand, briefly pausing from looking for the gloves. Raoul glanced at the single, silky black ribbon tied around the scroll in a neat knot. True phantom-style, simple and elegant.
"Don't go." He said quietly, letting the note drop to the floor.
"Excuse me?"
"I don't want you to go." Raoul repeated, this time more loudly. The phantom snorted, not even bothering to turn to look at him.
"I cannot baby-sit you every evening, Raoul, you know that. Not even the title of a viscount may
monopolize my presence."
"I did not mean it that way."
"Jealous of her, are you not?"
"Yes...(Erik's eyes widened a little. He'd meant it as a joke.)...but there is another reason..."
Raoul trailed off, hesitating.
"Well? Spit it out, no time to dawdle." The older man tapped impatiently with his boot as he pulled
on his leather gloves. Raoul deliberated a second longer, but decided not to hold it back anymore.
Beating about the bush would do no good here.
"She would not appreciate your gift as you intend her to."
"Interesting," Erik replied, tidying up his sleeve-collar.
Raoul clenched his hands into fists.
"It would fall flat on her as any vain flattery from any young suitor would; that would be the only
way she'd take it."
His words were harsh, but it was not so much the words as the disgust in his tone that caught Erik's
attention. Turning, he could see seriousness written on the boy's face. He narrowed his eyes.
"Oh?"
Raoul instinctively knew this was the moment to reveal the truth. How long had he refrained from
telling him—how he dreaded to tell him now! He was afraid what the phantom's reaction would be.
"Christine is using you, Erik."
There was a long pause. Raoul read the phantom's face cautiously as confusion, suspicion, and
something else that was yet too distant flitted across his brow in mixture. Once the opera ghost had
sufficiently collected himself however, he did not question nor exclaim.
"Elaborate."
His voice was cold in his commandment. Raoul pressed his lips together for a moment, as if in
denial. But it was only for a moment. Taking a deep breath, Raoul plunged on.
"Your voice is what she wants. You give her part of your voice, your talent, your genius every time
you give her a lesson, and she knows that it is you who have made her the margarita she is proud to
be called today. She knows every lesson lends her own voice strength, her own career, glory. She
thinks she could not survive without the your music, not what with the addiction it holds for her; the
addiction of loveliness, of glory, of ambition. And for these reasons alone...these reasons leading up
to her own gain...she still sees you."
Erik's white china mask flashed in the candlelight.
"And with what," he asked slowly, coldly, "with what evidence do you speak so?"
Looking at him straight in the eyes as he always did when he was honest, Raoul replied.
"Daee told me."
It came out fainter than he'd intended. He couldn't raise his voice. It seemed like, if he did, the mere
volume of his words might hurt Erik more than was necessary. The tall figure's head had dropped. Its
expression was impossible to make out.
"Erik," he pressed on, feeling his fists clench tighter.
"Christine doesn't love you."
The sentence sunk in. The meaning was absorbed. Something inside the opera ghost felt wrong. He
felt wrong. He felt pained.
But more than that, he felt livid.
The sharp crackle of yellow parchment crumpling in his hand broke the air, but not the anxiety. His
knuckles turned white. His countenance paled. His jaw tensed. When he lifted his chin again, Raoul
could see the piercing emerald green in his eyes had fled, and dulled into the color of poison ivy.
"The VIXEN..."
Raoul shuddered. A chill ran down the viscount's spine as the phantom unleashed the syllables
behind his teeth. His voice was drastically changed, rough, and dangerously low. Literally like
distant thunder. He felt his arm shaking, his fist was so tight around the vellum. He hadn't felt so
much hurt and rage in a long, long time. This was different from recollecting old sores and memories,
different from the resentment he'd always felt humming in the background. This was a new wound.
So much the sharper.
And there was something else, something that chafed him to a closer burn than the rest and made the rest more bitter than ever.

Humiliation.
Betrayal and disappointment he could take as part of the fury, but the humiliation. To be so devoted to something that was naught but an imagination. To be so led on. To be so beguiled. By a woman. His cheeks burned; he'd been alone in the nonexistent relationship all along.

"Satisfied, viscount?" He spat out bitterly.
"Had I been you, I would be gloating by now. Be proud of yourself, you have utterly destroyed my idol. How you raze it to the ground!"
The poison ivy was trailing out of his lips now. Toxic venom hung on the curling tendrils of his words.

"You leave not a shred of it for me to grasp, so thorough is your disillusionment. Triumph in the enlightenment of this fool, Chagny, and be content. How I've devoted myself to her! Now you make me want to kill her."
Erik stopped, tongue scorched with the heat of his own verbal attack. Raoul gazed at him, stunned. Satisfied? Gloating? Triumphant? He'd thought he would feel those things when he'd at last exposed Christine; when he'd told Erik the truth. But no. He felt terrible. Erik was radiating fury and pain and all Raoul could feel was their reflection; disgust for Daee, remorse for him who was suffering the aftermath of her snares.

"I am not enjoying this, Erik." He replied heatedly.
"If you think I am selfish enough to do this for my sake--"
"You are not?" The phantom's glaring question stung him.
"No, I'm not." He answered steadily, repressing the urge to shout. He had to be patient—the man was going through so much. But he wasn't exactly too helping.

"Are you sure, vicomte? Jealousy is a strong motive."
"No, YOU are a strong motive."
Before Erik could add another angry comment, Raoul rushed on, in a gentler tone.

"I am telling you the truth because I couldn't bear to watch you laying out every part of yourself for Christine to stamp on and use as a--a--stairway up to her career. Because watching her pretend she loved you enough to deserve it was sickening. It was unfair to you, it was selfish of her, and I could only stand seeing you being USED for so long. She encouraged your obsession over her by giving you false hope and alas, it worked! It hurt to see you playing blind-man's-buff in the dark, Erik. I kept wondering when you'd finally hit a wall and realize you were playing the game alone, with a cloth covering your eyes. When the wall never appeared, I couldn't let you go on. How could I, when I knew it was hopeless? I'm trying to pull that cloth off of you now, so you can see what is really happening. I am trying to help." Erik could hear the desperation in that last sentence. Raoul was pleading for him to understand, pleading for him to let her go.
The boy took a tentative step forward, and Erik took a step back, turning away from him. But this time Raoul didn't push it. He stopped in his tracks, a hand almost—but not quite—extended towards the phantom. His intuition told him that Erik would just wrench away from him if he offered any comfort. No matter what good intention he had, it did not change the fact he was the herald of Erik's disillusionment.

"I'm sorry."
Raoul could only hope for his sincerity to show in those three syllables.
"But I also want you to know something else."
"If you're going to tell me that you did this for my own good, you have said it already. Pray don't bother with a second round, I shall tire of your speech."
"No, it's something else..."
Raoul felt his jolted emotions subside and calm down in his chest as he softly uttered what was left to say.

"She wants your voice, and only your voice, Erik. Whereas I...I want your everything."
The opera ghost closed his eyes and drew a shaky breath. He was glad his back was turned to the viscount. Otherwise he would have seen just how much conflict and turmoil that last sentence was costing Erik.
"I will leave you alone now."
He heard retreating footsteps.
When he turned around after several hours, he was alone.
* * * * *

It was another triumphant night. Thunderous applause filled the boxes as Christine Daee finished her aria and stepped off the stage. Flowers were thrown in abundance, water-falling down to her feet. There were not few gentlemen who hurried backstage to hand the margarita their contributions themselves. Flushed with the pleasure of success, Daee gracefully glided through the crowd to look at the bouquets of flowers and tokens of admiration. Her shelf was decked with them more than any other altos' or ballerinas' or chorus-girls', and the attention pleased her. 'Chorus girl!' She thought scornfully. She would never go back there now.
As she turned to flirt with the young fellows, a particular color caught her eye--glossy black. Only one person could have used it, and she immediately recognized Erik's satin ribbon. She sighed. She was growing impatient with the ghost's courting, and the daily gift irked her. Without thinking, Daee reached into the heap and pulled out the flower to dispose of it.
"Oh!"
She dropped it a second too late. A crimson bead of blood appeared on her pricked finger. Staring down at what Erik had given her, all the insolence and pride left the soprano's face. It was the usual rose. But this time it was a dead one. The withered petals were brown and haggard on the edges, and the stalk was sickly green. Still in its prickly armor of un-clipped thorns, it was nothing like the lustrous roses given her on previous nights. Now, the thorns were the only things that gleamed about it in the bulb-light.
Everything else was faded, withered, and torn.
The next evening, Raoul was knocking on the door of Erik's organ room. In usual circumstances, he would have gone straight in without any invitation. But then again, this could hardly be called one of the 'usual circumstances.' The boy wasn't even sure if it did any good to come down here at all. Preparing himself for a violent rejection, he knocked again. "Erik, it's me."
No answer.
"...Shall I go away?"
He heard movement within the thin slice of barrier between themselves. In a moment the door opened and there stood the Angel, looking as if the Grim Reaper had temporarily impersonated his flesh. His brow was set somewhere between rage and a decided calm, with a touch of stony placidity embedded in his eyes. Raoul took it in, and thought he looked anything but natural in this layer of half-languid, half-forced subduity.
Without a word, Erik turned around again and stood at the farther end of the room. For a moment, neither of them spoke. Raoul found he was at a loss at how to begin. He wanted to know what Erik was feeling right now, how he was coping with all this.
He needn't have been so nervous. Erik solved the problem by speaking up first.
"I sent a message to Daae last night."
His voice was not quite right— it sounded damp, and off. Raoul noted the distant indication he used instead of the usual revered 'Christine.'
"What did you say to her?" He asked tentively. Erik replied coolly,
"She shall have to guess from the gift I sent her. And no, it was nothing dangerous," he added, seeing the viscount's alarmed expression; "as much as I would love to murder her in her bed...she was still my pupil. No teacher destroys his own sprout. And...I figured you were right about my moving on. I will not call her to my side again."
It was an aching resolution to make, but he'd made it. He knew there was no other way to free himself from the tether of consuming passion, the imprisonment. Raoul watched as determination flickered across his face.
"I..I am surprised you acted so quickly."
"I had to. Besides, I might have done something much rasher than picking out a dead rose for a parting gift."
"Well, I am glad you did not. And Erik...it was just an obsession. It will pass soon."
At that, the Angel turned around and faced him. The trace of a dying fire glinted off his mask in dull radiation as he fervently replied,
"I LOVED her, Raoul. No one can ever replace what she was for me."
"If what you felt for her was love...what is it that you are feeling for me?"
That threw him off. Erik darted a look into the boy's eyes for a second, but quickly lowered his gaze again, eyelashes fluttering slightly.
"I don't--"
"I care about you," pressed Raoul, knowing the man to be in a mere denial; "and you know you feel something for me too."
Crossing the floor to where Erik stood, he reached up and softly touched the phantom's face. As soon they made contact, Erik felt a warmth spread upon the outer-surface of his skin. Even through his anguish, that tingle was coming alive again.
"When I touch your face,"--Raoul caressed his cheek with a thumb; "when I kiss your hand,"--he lifted one of Erik's hands and brought it to his lips; "it's different from the way you felt when she touched your face and she kissed your hand."
"When I am this close to you," he said, drawing nearer; "it's not the same as Daae standing next to you."
"That's not tr--"
"Contradicting me?" he asked, cutting him off by setting a forefinger on the other's lips. "A little more honesty, please. Your reactions are enough to give away the lies you tell."

There was no slyness or accusation in this reproach. He was simply asking for honesty. Setting a hand upon the masked man's chest, he could feel Erik's tense breathing. "The words I utter affect your very breathing," he murmured.

It was true. This was different from Christine's cool hand and her cold lips; different from the deep-down, rejected intuition that her heart was somewhere else when he held conversations with her. With Raoul, there was truth in the affection he showed, in the warmth that touched home for both of them. It felt like...not being alone.

Erik groaned softly. He was suddenly so tired. He hadn't had a wink of sleep, nor a yearning for music since yesterday. And during Raoul's absence, he hadn't shed a single tear. He'd been too numb and enraged to indulge in such a thing. But now, as his heart slowly thawed into quiet sadness, a hollow feeling replaced the choke-hold that had blocked his lungs and eyes from sobbing until now. A strain seemed to lift as the hollowness advanced, and the sudden relaxation left him no time to stop himself before the back of his head started to sting.

"Erik..."

Raoul wrapped his arms around the phantom and gently folded the pained creature to his chest. Rubbing circles onto the silky texture of the man's cloaked back, he murmured encouraging words as soothingly as he could. "Just let it all out.. it will go away..it'll pass. I promise."

Erik was very quiet, almost silent in his moment of weakness. He closed his eyes and buried his face into Raoul's shoulder as his own shoulder started trembling, but not a whimper made it into open air. It was some minutes before he could raise his head. It felt dull and heavy from fatigue, and more so because of crying.

Raoul, of course, knew what he needed. "Alright...you look exhausted. Go to sleep right now before I tell you so again. And DO NOT crawl inside the coffin, if you please."

Like a mother nagging her son, thus the boy led him to the bedroom. Upon turning the handle and entering, he gently pushed Erik down onto the mattress, among the pillows. The phantom sighed shakily as the cool white downy enveloped his skin. This was a room that had been vacant for nearly two months. The last time he'd been here was when he and Raoul had...gotten each other off. For the third time. The fourth and last time had been two weeks ago...on the floor of the living room. God. It seemed such a long time ago, but when he really started counting, it had merely been a fortnight.

No, he decided not to dwell on it just now. He was too tired. He half-closed his eyes and tried to drift off into empty unconsciousness. "Good night," Raoul whispered softly, then turned to leave. "Wait."

Erik's hesitant call stopped him midway out, and made him look back. "Do you need something?"

"No, I just..."

Erik fumbled with his tongue. This was ridiculous. Childish. He sighed again. "Never mind. It is nothing."

Raoul scrutinized the older man under the white bed linen with a keen look. How vulnerable he seemed. How weak and helpless. "If you want me to stay for a while...you know I can," suggested Raoul, guessing what the man had hesitated to ask. Erik lowered his eyes. It was either pride or comfort. He shut his eyes tight, then opened them again. "I'd like that. Thank you," he said, picking at the sheets with a fumbling hand. He didn't want to be alone again. If he was left in solitude, then surely all the malice and anger would come back inside his head again--and he wouldn't be able to bare it a second time. Soft words and tears had soothed him, and he wanted to keep it that way. Fury was too exhausting to deal with for long.
"Then I'll sit here until you fall asleep."
With that said, the viscount gently sat on the edge of the mattress, and softly hummed the words.
"Sail on, my good soldier
Be not daunted by mere boulders
Let the shining North Star be guide on your way
May my own blessings follow, through the nights of May."
It was the lullaby; their lullaby. Erik's lips tugged upwards.
"I feel like a child," he muttered ruefully. Raoul smiled. "You don't have to be embarrassed by that, Erik. Just relax."
It was this reassuring answer that set the tired Angel drifting off to sleep. Ten minutes later, his breathing was regular and his countenance, peaceful. Seeing this, Raoul stood up.
"I'll see you tomorrow," he murmured, knowing the Angel wouldn't hear. He lingered for a moment.
Then, ever so quietly, he stepped out of the house.

* * * * *

"This is a most fortunate coincidence."
"A most annoying coincidence, I should say."
Regardless of what each thought about it, it WAS a rare coincidence that Raoul should walk in on Erik while he was singing. He must have been even more absorbed than usual not to notice the sound of paddling oars.
Erik had grown used to humming and playing in Raoul's presence, but never had he been caught in his moment of utter passion and devotion; the private moment when he sang with his soul on his tongue; a moment he'd only shared with one other person.
He shoved that last thought away. It was unhealthy how these memories would suddenly pop up to crinkle his brows, then disappear again.
"So much passion, so much genius..." he heard Raoul murmur.
"All rotting away beneath the very opera house which may turn your name into a priceless gem."
Erik turned around in his chair to look at the viscount. He narrowed his eyes.
"I do not care for fame or money. They are needless things for an anonymous composer. I shiver at the thought of receiving riches from such a base and blinded source as human society."
There was that old venom in his tone that saddened the heart of the boy who heard him. Raoul lowered his gaze.
"Are you not human?"
"Am I not the Opera Ghost?" He asked back mockingly. "The name that I have condemned myself with separates myself from the rest of the world. I have learned to be friends with solitude...and the world seems to enjoy my absence as well."
"Don't talk like that," Raoul pleaded. Erik shook his head.
"Your people have driven me to become an outlaw---and outlaws keep their arts to themselves, whether that be the art of running away from the law or music."
Raoul stared at him, not knowing what to say. This man had a way of throwing a person off his feet by saying such melancholy things with such a perfectly stoic face. He searched his eyes, trying to gouge what he must be feeling. Surely he wasn't unaffected at all? Erik's piercing green orbs calmly looked back at him, yet the boy could tell that the man was ruffled. He swallowed.
"Are you alright?"
"I am fine."
"You certainly SOUND fine."
"Do I not look fine, then?"
Raoul paused, then answered,
"Your face is expressionless...as if you're wearing another mask."
"Oh."
"What are you thinking?" He tried again. He wanted to know so badly. He hoped the Angel hadn't hurt himself with his own words. Erik looked away.
"I am thinking we should change the subject."
"If you wish." Raoul relented. For a minute they were silent. Erik did not say anything, but the viscount could tell something else was bothering him.
"I know you have something on your mind, Erik," he said gently. "You can tell me what it is."
The older man bit his lips, and for a second it seemed as though he would never open them again. He sighed heavily as if a great weight sat in his chest; as if he couldn't get rid of it.
"I...I don't know what I should do."
His words were spoken in a quiet forlorness. They were those of a lost artist. Raoul looked at him, concerned.
"What do you mean?"
"Nothing comes to my mind, Raoul. Nothing. And what little that does is worthless to put on paper. The notes come in brief jargons and there is no way of stringing them together to create meaning. I...I cannot seem to write songs anymore."
Erik's breathing became quicker as the words tumbled out of his mouth, as if a dam had burst from its place.
"This has been going on for the last few days since... I sent the rose to Daee. I lost my purpose as a guide to a pupil whom I fantasized I should wed someday--" a dark chuckle, "--and my most important muse. But it is not the pain of losing my expectations; it is not the anger that hinders me, Raoul. It is this strange...hollowness I feel that affects me. And I just cannot...seem to find a way out of it, and it alarms me. Is not this absurd?"
Erik clenched his fists and sighed in irritation.
"What is it that I am missing?" He asked, sounding more frustrated than pained.
"I have love for what I do, I have passion, I have devotion, and I have--"
Erik stopped just in time to catch himself. His face warmed at the confession he'd come so close to making. Raoul cocked his head, noting the sudden pause.
"Yes?" He prompted. Erik swallowed. He considered covering it up. Pretend his sentence hadn't caught in the middle. But that would only become another piece of truth left unspoken, the single blemish on this open and honest conversation they were having. He was beginning to understand it.
He wanted to say it.
"...And I have you."
He said it very quietly, looking anywhere except into Raoul's eyes. He was half horrified and half proud that it had actually fallen from his mouth. The taste of acceptance and admittance was very alien on his tongue, but... he decided it wasn't too bad.
However, he could not dare to lift his gaze to see the reaction. Had he been too sentimental? Had he been too bold? Was he just making a fool of himself?
He heard the viscount laugh softly. Taking a quick glance, he saw an easy smile on his face.
"What?" He demanded faintly. The boy's eyes were bright, cheeks slightly pink with the pleasure Erik's words had given him. He shook his head.
"Watching you struggle for words like that...makes you seem like the human I know you to be inside. Thank you, Erik. That was a very nice thing to say."
Then he added in a murmur,
"How you can manage to be so sweet without even trying..."
what a good chance it was now. Maybe he could even tease the man out of his gloom.
"Oh, have we forgotten where we were?" He exclaimed, professing a look of shock. Erik's cheeks went redder.

"No worries darling, you are not the first to lose yourself in the intensity of my gaze."
Erik started to splutter at this, but then changed it into a snort, pretending it had slipped out very naturally.

"You and your little vanities. No wonder your lovers are so short-lived, vicomte."
"Ladies, yes. Gentlemen? Not so much. They tend to stick around a while longer. Perhaps they like my...skills?"
The last was accompanied by a sweeping glance down Erik's body. When his eyes lingered on a very specific, very certain part of it, the Angel felt that region burn. Heat traveled down his spine to the top of the black slacks he wore, trickling and pooling like blood. Only a month ago, that kind of look from Raoul would have left him angry, humiliated, and guilty. Now he was just embarrassed. He glared at the boy's mischievous expression; eyebrow cocked and lips smirking. How did they get here? He struggled for a smart retaliation.

"Well at least I am not a GENTLEMAN. I am quite safe from your snares, then."
"You forget," the boy said, leaning in close. "You forget that you are a handsome man, all alone inside an isolated house beside a lake."
They held each other's gaze, neither of them willing to look away. Erik felt that it would be losing--Raoul was simply amused. His brown eyes probed into the other's piercing green orb, disarming the usually guarded stance of the man's pupils.

Yes, Erik was certainly changed. Raoul knew not whether a new sense of morals or scruples about murder had developed in any way in his breast, but he knew one thing for certain--this Angel was no longer trying to keep him out. Distance was now a faded, dissipated thing. Reserve was nearly gone. What was left between them was something both had never truly experienced before. Both had acquired a taste of it in the past, but both had gotten the wrong thing. One had tasted the dark, twisted, maddened version of it; the other had abused the lustful sister-side of the real emotion. And the tension. Both could feel it like a tangible block of wood and steel pressing against their chests. Erik could feel his body reacting to the substance, so solid yet invisible. Heated face, rapid heart beat, tense limbs, etc, etc... Every time Raoul got so close to him, these symptoms would appear. It was like a disease. A fever. Some lingering stubbornness whispered him to shrink away from it. Go against it. Somehow, he did not feel like doing so. He had tried all along. He had tried and failed. Perhaps some diseases were not meant to be cured.

The jesting was gone from the boy's expression. A lingering smile tugged at his lips, but his pupils had dilated into a mellower hue. For a moment they just stood there like frozen beings. They were too far gone to break eye contact NOW, but Erik couldn't gather himself enough to do anything else. He instinctively sensed this was the time to do something, but that something was what he had never initiated before.

He hesitated.
The boy, as usual, did not.
Standing on tiptoe, Raoul took that opportunity to kiss him. The phantom held still, and allowed the sensation sink in. He felt him starting it soft and gentle; he felt his lips being tenderly chafed by the other's; he felt the little smile pressed against his skin.
"Bend down a little for me," Raoul whispered into his mouth. Erik was reminded of their height difference, and quickly bent down to receive the contact more easily.
This kiss was yet another experience, for both. Raoul could feel Erik responding to his movements in a bolder, easier manner than before. Not only were their tongues familiar with each other now--they were equally in for this. And this feeling of shared will was divine in its sense of security. With closed eyes, they felt the ebb and flow of the tide of heat between them. Pushing and pulling, they let the moment go on as long as it would.
When they broke apart again for air, Raoul was the one to speak.
"I know what you need," he said, slightly breathless. He leaned his forehead on Erik's chest. A
belated answer to the other's earlier question had formed within his mind. The taller man opened his eyes. He was slightly dazed, and it took him some seconds to catch up.
"What?"
Lifting his head to meet his gaze, Raoul answered in a low voice.
"You need a purpose to your art, Erik. I think that's what you are looking for right now. You've lost a pupil and an idol, you say. But has it never occurred to you? That you yourself can be the idol? A god?"
"Erik," he continued, grabbing the other's hands in an earnest gesture, "you possess a beauty that none will ever hear from another human being. And I want to share your beauty, not because the society which has hurt you so much deserves it, but because you who have been hurt so much deserves to be acknowledged. Your gift is meant to be shown to the world. It is that much special. You say you have qualms about making your art a vehicle for worldly possessions. But no, this is not about fame or money. This is about showing Paris what they have. This is about making yourself the idol. Once you take the stage, Christine Daae will become nothing next to the new, mysterious Angel of Music."
'Reek your revenge on the vixen,' he thought, 'and gain the awe and respect of the rest.'
Okay, so I turned on the computer and corrected all the typos in the previous chapters (which was god-awfully numerous). Hope you don't find any on this one!

It only took about, oh, a couple of hours to persuade the phantom into the scheme. He liked the part of getting back at his once-beloved, but did not at all favor the part of having to share his music with 'common society,' as he liked to call the rest of the world with vehemence. When he had finally allowed himself to be coaxed into the plan, he was quick to set up another argument.

"But on one condition."
"Really? You are willing?"
"Only on one condition."
"And that is...?"
"You are going to perform with me."
"What? No! I can't do anything with YOU on stage. I shall be as insignificant as a tree-prop."
"A good actor must have good props to go with him."
"A good actor can be appreciated even without any props."
"I see you don't like what I purpose."
"No, not at all."
"Shame, then. The deal is off."
"Why are you so keen on me joining you? I shall only be a shadow on your spotlight."
"Because," Erik stressed, burnt pupil glowing behind his mask.
"I want Daae to know who she has lost, other than myself. I want her to know she was betrayed by her closest friend. I want her to know she lost her best confidant to ME. I want her to know I took something away from HER."
"You are already about to take away a whole chunk of fame and glory from her, Erik. I am sure you don't need me as a plan B."
"Fame? Glory? Can they afflict the same pain as the pain of losing someone like you? Do not pretend you are ignorant of her attraction towards you, Raoul. Her heart always yearned to be more than friends--I am guessing she still does--, and I am letting her know who she's hoping for has chosen ME now."
"You are getting possessive, Erik... I must say I quite like it."

The phantom merely scoffed.
"I'm going to make it clear that this whole joke is on HER, or I shall do nothing at all." He vowed. Once made up, never un-made; that was the doctrine of the Angel's mind. Who was anyone to change that? None. So naturally it fell to the viscount's lot to glare at him with the brown doe-eyes he had, and acquiesce without further quarreling. He may have been the upper-hand till now, but this was the phantom's territory starting right then and there.

Raoul's arms ached. It was not something that happened very often, since his 10 years of amateur self-training had toughened him against the strain of supporting a violin on his shoulder. But this was taking it up a notch to a whole new level, and Erik was pushing him to his limit, exerting him to the utmost. The sheets of the new score were spread before him in a row, but after an hour and a half of non-stop practicing, he had only made it to the end of the FIRST page.
Erik’s new composition—the composition for their insane stage performance—was difficult. He wasn't lowering standards and going easy on him anymore. This time, Raoul would have to meet the given expectation, and that was very high indeed. Complicated and tricky rhythms were involved, and still more (so many!) new techniques were to be learned. The poor boy felt like giving up already. Ten years of self-taught advancement were not nearly enough to prepare him for this.

"You cannot HONESTLY believe me to pull this off," he cried, almost angry. For a moment, a strange thought passed through his mind.

'Is this,' he thought, 'what Christine felt when she first started training with the Angel?'

"I am perfectly convinced of your capability of learning, and of my capability of MAKING you accomplish this." Erik replied firmly.

Raoul sighed.

"At least let me take a rest. My arms hurt and I am tired."

The genuine fatigue and much-felt despondency in his tone softened the tutor enough to make him allow a short break in their lesson. As soon as his consent fell from his lips, the boy fairly collapsed onto the organ chair and started stretching his neck and backside like a cat in the morning. God, this was torture. All the muscles along his upper limbs simply ached, even his wrists.

He felt the phantom coming up from behind him. Gentle, gloved hands touched his shoulders.

"Do you want me to help you with this?" The phantom offered in a softer voice. Raoul nodded without much energy. He hadn't been so drained in a long time.

Erik set to work. Placing his hands along the boy's shoulders, he started gently massaging the alarmed muscles and sinews under his skin. He pressed his thumbs in a bit harder and drew forceful circles just between the spine and the wing bones. A pitiful whimper escaped from the boy as he hit a particularly painful spot.

"Tender?" He asked as he continued to knead and rub the dip.

"A bit," Raoul gasped. Couldn't he do it any less painfully? Erik knew that would be no good.

"If you don't get this properly loosened up right now, you'll suffer more later," he very kindly reminded his pupil.

When he was done, he moved along to the poor boy's arms. Raoul winced and bit his lip as the phantom used both hands on his right arm, the concentrated force on the upper half of it making him whimper again, this time more loudly. The phantom paused.

"Should I stop?" He asked, uncertainly. Raoul cringed his brow, but shook his head. He might as well get this over with and relieve the ache a little before it could accumulate. After all, he had weeks and weeks of lessons to chew before him.

"No, it's alright."

Erik continued. Now, it would be lying if they were unaware of the amount of physical contact at the moment. Raoul's skin tingled at his touch even through the immediate pain, and actually trembled a little when it slipped down his spine by accident. Erik was even more sensitive. He could feel the faint heat--of his or Raoul's he couldn't tell--on his fingertips as he handled the viscount. It was an intimacy of a different kind from a passionate, hungry kiss; more tentative and subtle. And he didn't dare to tell exactly why, not even to himself, but the occasional sounds Raoul made made him feel...strange. Both of them knew where all this anxiety was coming from--the sexual tension was rather obvious. Raoul was amazed at how Erik could make him feel this way just by massaging his shoulders. No one had even taken his clothes off. It made him realize yet again how his relationship with this man was very different from all his past lusty bed-fellows and briberies, and yet again he treasured the realization.

This was the more honorable thing he'd promised himself to feel and show what felt like months ago; he'd vowed to himself in his own room--

'Love, not lust.'

It looked like he was keeping it up very well.

At last, the Angel withdrew his hands. He unconsciously let his touch linger on for a moment. Only for a second, though. "Alright. Another half-hour, and you are free to leave." He announced. Raoul groaned.
"I want to stop for tonight," he pouted irritably.  
"Then just for a quarter-hour?" Erik asked, rhetorically of course. His pupil had no choice, really. When the viscount didn't respond, the older man exhaled through his nose. Then, as nonchalantly as he could, bent down to give him a quick kiss. Just a small touch of the lips. He smirked when the boy started a little. He'd caught him off-guard.  
"Only for another fifteen minutes," he repeated.  
What could Raoul do?  
He complied.  

Raoul was not the only one who had his hands full. The Angel, too, was busy. Not only did he have his duties as a teacher on one hand, he also had to compose and meticulously plan the whole performance they would show Paris after a couple months on the other. His voice, he knew, would astonish and captivate the whole opera house in less than a minute. The moment he opened his mouth, the audience would become his. So HIS part was, in fact, only a second priority in his plans. What he wanted to highlight was Raoul. Not many knew the viscount could play; Daae, madame Jury, and perhaps Margeret. And even those who knew the fact would never imagine that he was currently taking lessons from the Phantom of the Opera! How he would show them! How he would show HER. He would show her that her dear Raoul was now as good at the violin as she was good at singing. Then she would know the Angel had moved on and discarded her for a better, genuine pupil. However, he knew Raoul was much more than just a student of his. He was sure the Daae girl would immediately understand what was going on, too. So much the better--it would pain her even more.  
"Erik? Erik."  
With a blink, he realized he was being addressed by the viscount. He looked at him. The young blonde was looking back at him with an earnest glance.  
"Yes?"  
"I'm about to ask you for something."  
"What is it?" Erik asked, instantly suspicious. But there was no mischief in the other's face, no cheekiness of any kind that might be expected. On the contrary, he seemed serious.  
"It's something I have always wanted...even before we met face to face. But you've always turned me down and never quite allowed it to me."

There was an irresistible entreaty in those large brown eyes, and Erik thought he could guess what it was that Raoul wanted. He didn't say anything, but waited.  
"I want you to sing for me."  
It was what he'd anticipated.  
"You have already heard me once," he murmured. "Twice, actually."  
"But the first time was when you sang a duet with Daae. Your heart and soul were all hung in obsession for her, and I was merely a hider in your coffin, an overhearer. I was entirely excluded from your mind during the song. And the last time I heard you from behind the door, you did not even KNOW I was listening."  
These were arguments that could have no retaliation. Besides, the more Erik thought about it, the more he thought there was no good reason why he shouldn't let the viscount in. Only a week ago he would've had a great many scruples about displaying his innermost moment to Raoul. He would've disliked it. But now... he found himself willing, maybe even wanting to.  
Why not?  
The next moment, he found himself saying quietly,  
"There is a song I've been working on for the last few days. It is for our performance. It still needs some touches here and there, but...would you like to hear it?"  
Raoul's serious expression broke into a grin.  
"Thank you, Erik."  
The phantom simply nodded. Then, after a collection of a breath or two, he started to shape the lyrics with his voice.
Raoul listened. His eyes were intensely fixed on his idol, his ears wide open. But after a minute, he closed his eyes and let all his senses concentrate their own abilities to his power of hearing. This was a moment he would want to remember forever, not by scent or sight or touch, but by the sound alone.

And how heavenly it sounded. The lyrics were powerful and possessive, and he found himself wondering if they were talking about him and Erik. The song also sounded as if it was capable of being sung by more than one person. Was it a duet? It could be, could be not. At the moment it could hardly matter less to him. All he could perceive with clarity was the sweet, intoxicating voice that resonated around the room they stood in, sending fresh goosebumps down the back of neck every few seconds with the sheer power of emotion.

How many minutes, quarters, hours had passed, he couldn't tell. When he lifted his eyelids again, the Angel had ceased.

"It's so beautiful...yet you kept it from me all along until now." Raoul couldn't help but whisper with regret, voice low in awe. The Angel faintly smiled, and replied as if in promise, "Not anymore, no."

There was a brief pause. After a short while, Erik resumed.

"You may have noticed already, but this song is intended as a duet. After your instrumental display, I will start with the first stanza. Then it will be your turn, then my turn again, and so back and forth. Only, you will answer with your violin instead of your voice."

"So that is why the composition's so complex," Raoul muttered under his breath. Erik gave a wider, rueful smile.

"I tried to convey the raw emotion through your instrument...it was difficult since the lyrics cannot be recited by violin strings, but I managed. Now it is your job to play it with flawless perfection."

Raoul shook his head in bemusement.

"You rather outdid yourself, monsier Opera Ghost."

"I believe so," returned he.

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Three weeks of immense progress. Three weeks of improving, gratifying, tiring, aggravating progress achieved through the means of ceaseless repetition. Raoul was increasingly spending more time underground with Erik than before. Every day he would get up extra-early, finish the business that needed looking after extra-early, and then run down straight to the bottom of the opera house with his wooden instrument slung over his shoulders. His feet would arrive at Erik's living room a little after lunch—a quarter past 1 o'clock to be precise—and remain there until well over 9 in the evening.

They did more than work on their project and their instruments. During breaks, when he wasn't too tired to open his mouth, Raoul chattered to the older man. Sometimes Erik took up the other half of the conversation and sometimes he did not. But he always listened with attention, even when he seemed to be careless of what the boy just HAD to say. Sometimes Erik would croon a song in a low voice, as if he was recalling the distant memory of a lullaby. Each time he did, Raoul couldn't be exactly sure if it was meant to be heard by other ears—it sounded too tender for another's. Even for his. And sometimes he would just flop down onto the floor next to Erik's organ, waiting for the Angel to condescend enough to join him. Whenever the Angel lay next to him, he would draw closer towards him and hug one of the man's arms to his chest, like a cat would do to its favorite cushion. Sometimes, the phantom smiled at this. Sometimes, he pulled out from the touch. And at still other, rarer moments he would absently let his other hand play in Raoul's hair. The phantom could be capricious, and sometimes the boy wondered if he was so on purpose.

Whatever the case was, at times Raoul had to keep himself from acting like a desperate teenager. After almost three years of frequent sexual intercourse, not doing anything with anyone for months felt...unfamiliar. A bit hollow. It was not a restraint put up against his will—he himself had not felt the urge for some time. Sort of. Ever since his return to the phantom after the long absence of a full month, he hadn't lain with strangers, not even once. It felt somehow WRONG when he was so unbearably attached to Erik, when he was feeling this weird sense of...loyalty? towards him.

'When you love him this much,' a voice in the back of his head whispered.
Raoul realized 'loyalty' was not the right word. 'Constancy.' 'Faith.' 'Honesty.'
He felt if he decided to satisfy his lust—it was something out of his control, he couldn't help it if his young body had needs—the way he had done before meeting Erik, it would be a betrayal to him. Sure, neither of them had ever acknowledged themselves as official lovers. Neither of them had actually said it. This relationship was just... a mutual pushing and pulling on both sides. Both knew it. They simply did not feel the need to put it into awkward words. But there you have it. A serious relationship.

And as much as Raoul had a passion for the times he spent with Erik, he was not made to spend all his days and weeks beneath the ground, in candle-lit caverns. He had a natural desire for society and a taste for people, and those were things he couldn't ignore even if he wanted to. He could not afford to be negligent of his friends and fellow counts/duchesses/etc, not only because of his title but also for his own happiness' sake. As much as he loved Erik, he could not possibly be satisfied with the company of him alone. He could not possibly be assuaged by their own music only, when he'd known so much more movement and vibrancy all his life if one-and-twenty years outside the Opera House. And lately he'd become increasingly absorbed in his new relationship, this all-consuming focus that was entirely new to him; so much so that a full MONTH had passed without him having joined a single social engagement outside of business.

He fully realized the ridiculous extent of his abstraction only when a letter arrived from the managers of the Opera House, asking him to join the annual New Years Ball held within its walls. They added in the most polite of terms, "They were not ones to pry into their patron's private life, but they were bound by innocent civility and the voices of many of the viscount's own relations, to ask him thus--was anything the matter? They were all quite concerned by his prolonged absence from their circle of evening parties. Ever at your service, Firmin & Richard."

After that, Raoul was restless. Regret and not a little embarrassment crept up to his cheeks to remind him that HE was not a ghost, a phantom, an angel who could live underground forever. He was starting to feel the need for varied interaction, fresh conversation, and the return of a measure of the dignity assigned to leading figures in the neighborhood such as himself. A craving for socializing he'd unwittingly starved for that long could only give him so much peace.

Two days later, he was giving the news to Erik.
"You'll have to give me an evening-off tonight," he announced in a decided manner. The phantom raised an eyebrow. This didn't sound like a request.
"And why should I do that?" He asked. Raoul held up the letter for him to read.
"You cannot monopolize me forever, darling. You see, there are plenty more who wish to see me so--"
"Don't call me DARLING--"
"--so I really must attend," he finished, smiling with a hint of a smirk. "Fortunately for you, this ball is held right in the Opera House. I will not be too far away."
"I wouldn't care should you be fifty miles away," Erik muttered, looking away.
"And why should I do that?" He asked. Raoul held up the letter for him to read.
"You cannot monopolize me forever, darling. You see, there are plenty more who wish to see me so--"
"I do not want you anywhere NEAR that girl," he growled with feeling. He did not want Christine to make advances on the boy. He did not want him to see her simper and smile. The very thought of it irked him.
"But it's not as if I won't go just because the Daae girl might be there--which, unfortunately, has a high chance of being so," he heard Raoul say. He hmmed a reply. An absent moment of brief thought.
An impulsive, but not wholly unexpected thought.
'I will go to the ballroom and keep an eye on the girl myself.'
He didn't tell Raoul about it, though.
"A night-off it is, then. Just make sure Daae doesn't bother you with her feathers too much."
"Thank you, dear."
"Please do NOT call me that..."
"Would you like to come with me?" The boy cut him off smilingly, half jesting and half serious. It
wasn't as if anybody aboveground knew what the fabled Opera Ghost looked like. He let his eyes
travel across the smooth and pale plain of the Angel's face. Skimmed the line of his lips, the color of
faded pink, with an open gaze. Lingered on the obstinately unrevealing hill of his porcelain mask
with shameless observation. Dove straight into the shining tunnel of his eyes with unreserved
intensity. For a moment, neither looked away. But it only took ten seconds for the Angel to lower his
eyes and mutter, "why are you staring?"
Raoul grinned.
"If you don't want me to stare, you shouldn't look so ravishing every time you blush like that."
Erik choked on his own snort.
No, all they thought about was a skeletal head with yellow skin and a parched slit for a mouth.
They'd be surprised if they saw this elegant being was the very apparition the two managers of the
House were so afraid of.
They had no idea.
The silence was becoming uncomfortable. Raoul glanced down at his watch. The hands read 7
o'clock.
"I should go now," he said, looking back up. Erik cleared his throat, still staring at some very
fascinating, very imaginary stains on the carpet. He didn't want to/wanted to meet the viscount's eyes
again, because/he was almost afraid of the piercing intensity behind his gaze.
"Yes, you should go now," Erik echoed. But then he asked, "Will I be seeing you later tonight?"
The question made the viscount smile.
"Is that a wish?" He asked back. The phantom had to repress the urge to throw an ink-bottle at him.
That smirk on that young face.
"It's called 'curiosity', if you care anything for vocabulary, Chagney. Which, I see, you do not."
"No," Raoul answered, lifting up his face. "I care more for another sort of language."
Then he tipped himself in and planted a light peck on his lips.
It was supposed to be light and playful; it was supposed to be just once. But one peck became two
pecks, and two became three. Soon it became one long kiss that neither couldn't resist playing at,
couldn't resist lengthening; it was something adults would never do in front of their children.
Raoul, as always, was eager. He had his hands around the phantom, fingers gripping either side of
his waist. Erik gasped at his back hit the wall. Strange, he hadn't realized he'd been backing up. His
body was so close to him, one hand was in his hair, his other hand on his shoulder and he was
actually drawing the viscount IN. Towards him. His breathing grew erratic as he felt himself
enjoying this. Wanting this. A small sound escaped from his open mouth as Raoul mapped the line of
his teeth, his tongue. After only gentle and repressed, small kisses they'd exchanged over the last few
weeks, this felt ILLEGAL. Dangerous. It made him light-headed and out of breath, it left him
WANTING something. Wanting more of this and something else he desperately didn't want to
name.
He couldn't believe he was thinking like this. It alarmed him even in his own thoughts.
He felt a tingle in his lower regions.
He snapped open his eyes and pulled himself away. There was a tense, startled light in his eyes and
Raoul recognized what it was. Letting out a breathless laugh, the viscount let go of him and ran a
hand through his long hair. Candlelight illuminated his fair skin, made brilliant by an excited flush
that spread across his cheeks and lips mercilessly. He laughed again.
"I'll...see you tomorrow, Erik."
He then left, leaving his hot and flushed friend behind him.
Hmm. Raoul's looking forward to that ball, but I don't think it's going to run as smoothly as he expects.
It was twenty minutes past seven when he passed through the doors of the ballroom. Many of the invited guests—and the uninvited yet heartily welcomed friends of the invited guests—were already there, mingling with each other. Music floated about the wide open air, but the dancing had not started yet. Ladies flirted with young men and friends drank wine together, all the while having lively conversations. Then there were the elite circles of Paris, politely getting to know each other by elegant civility and gracious talk. They all turned as Raoul walked up to them, pulling out that sweet grin. The ladies' eyes instantly brightened a shade when they spotted their old favorite. The men were divided—some dryly nodded their acknowledgements, others waved their hands in glad familiarity. There were one or two new faces in the group.

"Why, if it isn't our Vicomte De Chagney!"

"Bonjour, Melvonte," Raoul returned brightly as they exchanged a brotherly embrace; "has my brother arrived yet?"

"Ah, Philippe. The Gentleman had some business on the other side of town and couldn't make it this evening." Melvonte narrowed his eyes at his friend for a moment.

"But you ought to know if anyone does! You are his brother after all, are you not?"

"I'm afraid I have been rather negligent these past few weeks..." Raoul replied with a blush. "I shall redeem it to the full tonight."

"As you should, Raoul!" A young lady--Rosamonde-- with silvery-grey eyes and long dark hair exclaimed. She had a romantic interest in the boy and did not care to hide it much. She was a sweet-tempered girl with beautiful eyes, but was rather childish and naïve.

"The way you neglected us!"

Several ladies nodded their approval at this chastisement. Raoul bowed his head in mock acquiescence, a boyish expression of amusement on his face.

"My apologies madam. I truly must've let myself wander this past month, to forgo seeing your pretty face. Should I amend myself to you by fetching you a drink?"

"And I will assist!" Melvonte gallantly stepped in. After much innocent flirting and ado, the group moved to the tables nearby, the ladies giggling profusely.

Along the short distance between their spot and the tables, Raoul quickly threw a glance around the room. The space was large with a very high ceiling, with seven thick marble pillars in a row on either side of the room. It could easily accommodate hundreds of people. He had one specific person in mind—and he truly hoped that one person wouldn't be here tonight.

No such luck. The damn girl was already there, across the room. She hadn't spotted him yet, but he could tell she was looking around hoping to catch him alone. She still thought they were intimate friends, perhaps more. 'But that is all in your head, Christine.' He thought.

Then he spotted someone else; it was a young man in his early thirties. Raoul recognized him immediately by the silky brown ponytail and the curiously angelic complexion of his skin. They had met about a year ago in a bar, both wandering in their drinks and the same desire for something exciting. The first night they met, the man had taken the boy to his home—to his bed. Then there had been a second time, then a third time, then a...they were sex-partners for over two months. The man knew how to turn the viscount on, and then drag the moment till both were ready to go insane. He liked to drive the boy to a cliff, the very brink of the thing he wanted and suddenly, with a slight tip, push him over the edge and make him a trembling mess beneath his body. To tell the truth, although they were not together anymore, those moments had given him the best orgasms ever.

"Why is it always, that, I'm so powerless, when I'm, with, y-you?"

The boy had asked one late night, trying to pant out a coherent question through the exhilarating haze of a very recent session. Lemende—that was his partner's name—had lain next to him, hand resting on his thigh. The question had seemed to amuse Lemende. Leaning down closer to his face,
the man had whispered an answer into the back of his earlobe, making it turn red right down to the base of his fair neck.
"Physical strength. Height. Weight. Perhaps age. But more than all these things..."
A puff of air released on purpose sent Raoul shivering.
"...you enjoy this. You take this. I draw you out and you just... like it so much. Don't you?"
So he had. But not anymore. Raoul paled at the memory of their later sexual intercourse. The possessiveness of Lamende. The exhausting demand. The obsession. Being used and being committed against his will. At first, when these symptoms had appeared, they were durable--mild and a little thrilling, even. But then they got worse and he couldn't stand it any longer.
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"You are free to shag with someone else but I'm not?!
"Of course. I give you the best things. Your needs should be satisfied enough."
"I am not a dog for you to keep and feed," he'd hissed.
***
"Lamende, I'm tired. And I--I think I should go to bed early tonight. ALONE."
"But I need you today."
"Go get some other man--or woman, whichever you prefer."
"I could always do that...but YOU are always the main entertainer, Raoul."
"Well, this entertainer doesn't want to play today so--"
"What I need matters, not what YOU need."
***
"I am done with you. I am so done with you."
"Raoul, don't you dare--"
"I'm moving out. Getting out of this life. Leaving you and your pathetic selfishness behind."
"Pathetic?"
"Did you know this kissmark isn't from you?" Raoul pulled down his collar, recklessly revealing a blushing hickey. He knew he'd pay for this but he just didn't care. "The blonde English boy living next--" It was all he could get out before he was coldly slapped in the face.
***
Reliving those memories put a cold palette to his cheeks as Raoul turned his face elsewhere. He desperately hoped Lamende wouldn't see him, wouldn't recognize him. But he knew that was too much to hope for. He knew the man had already seen him. Because their eyes had met for split second. Because he knew his sadistic obsession would not go away so easily.
"Raoul, are you alright?"
Rosamonde's concerned inquiry broke through his forehead and forced his brain to command his legs to keep moving, keep walking with the others. Raoul blinked several times before answering. "Yes, yes I'm fine..."
"Are you sure? You look as if you've seen a corpse," she said, taking in his white palor and wide eyes. He truly looked frightened, of what she couldn't imagine. They were in a big and glorious ballroom after all.
Raoul spun around, startled, when he suddenly felt a hand on his shoulder. He felt all the blood spring to his face, then drain from it all in a matter of seconds.
"Vicomte De Chagney, it is a pleasure to see you again after such a long time. Seven months? Eight months? have passed since we last...encountered."
'The devil wore a beautiful mask,' he thought, 'and the devil still does.' He made an effort to calm himself.
"Lamende Bôhendrá," he greeted, "it HAS been long."
"I must say I quite missed you." Lamende returned in an innocent tone. Raoul could only give him a purposefully unhidden force-smile and nod as carelessly as he could. Looking up into his hatefully attractive face but not quite meeting his eyes, Raoul wished he could erase away this particular part of his past into oblivion. How abhorrent, that sadistic, mad personality hidden behind the pretty skin.
His flesh crawled at the memory of the other's hands on his hips and downwards. He gave him another forced smile as he made to excuse himself. "Well, I should be going. My group is waiting for me over there and I really shouldn't keep them waiting..."

"I am sure they can wait a few minutes, can they not?"
Lamende stepped a little closer and it was all Raoul could do to suppress the urge to take a step back. Their eyes locked. No. Running away now was not an option. He had to deal with this and get over with whatever he needed to do as quietly as possible, and then turn his back to this man forever. "Rosamonde?" He called, not bothering to look at her. His eyes were intensely fixed, not looking away from him for an instant. He was showing him that he wasn't afraid—whether that was true or not didn't matter at the moment.

"Yes, Raoul?"
"I would like to talk to this gentleman for a minute...alone."
"Oh, of course," she said, looking back and forth between them. "I will leave you to it."
"Thank you."
Rosamonde retreated toward their friends grouped around the tables at the far end of the room, sending curious glances behind her every so often. She wondered if the two men were really friends or enemies, the disguised tension coming off from the viscount had been obvious.

Lamende watched her leave.
"She has a lovely face. Fine figure, too."
"Do not talk of her as if she's some piece of jewelry ready to be bought," Raoul spat. God knows how many other people this sex warlock had bewitched into servitude. Lamende turned to look down on him. He took another step forward, making Raoul take another step back. Then another and another and another.
The viscount's back hit the wall and he realized they were both behind a large pillar. They were largely hidden from the general view, now. Lamende had done this deliberately.
"What do you want from me?" He muttered. He tried to side-step around the man but before he could move an inch he was blocked. Lamende leaned down, an arm stretched before him, palm against the wall. When the boy made to move around the other direction, his other hand slammed into the wall as well, caging him in between. Raoul hissed in frustration.
"Let me go."
"No. Why, have you found yourself another bed-fellow, vicomte?"
"No, I haven't."
"Or have you bribed someone else recently?"
"I don't do that anymore, Lamende."
"Aren't we hungry, then, hmm? You are young and full of desires. Ah, I see you are," Lamende smirked as he observed the faint blush rise to the boy's face. Embarrassment and anger filled Raoul as he recalled the occasional fits of heat he'd felt for the past few months.
"How about I help you quench that a little?"
Lamende drew himself closer, one of his hands dropping to Raoul's chest. The hand slowly slid down further, coming to a stop and cupping a hipbone beneath the layer of cloth. He pressed his thumb into the hollow where the waist and hip met and elicited a hiss from the viscount. Two hands weaker than his own shoved at him harshly with savage energy, trying to push him away, but he was still stronger. And Raoul was, in truth, alarmed to the extent of fear.
"Get off of me!"
"Thought you could avoid me forever, did you?" His mouth was near his ear. "In case you have forgotten, you are a slut just like me. Only weaker."
"Not anymore--"
Raoul's breath hitched when Lamende bit his ear. The devil's hands were already loosening the top button of his black suit-jacket. What the hell was he doing? What the hell was HE going to do? Humiliated fury made his head go white for a moment. He desperately swallowed the panic rising to
his throat like bitter bile. Opening his eyes as wide as he could, as if to clear his mind, he grabbed the intrusive hands in a vice-like grip and dug his nails into the soft flesh as hard as he could.

"Stop. Now."

"What makes you think I will?" Lamende breathed, biting his neck and making him gasp in pure disgust.

"I'll scream if you don't. I'll scream right here and right now and make everyone turn and stare. Everyone will..."

Raoul trailed off as his gaze drifted into the air just above Lamende's shoulder. Before the pervert himself could turn his head to see what it was, the thing behind him pressed up to his back first.

"Move an inch and I'll put a bullet in your south."

A smooth, low, cool voice came from a person enveloped all in black. A lose black robe that hung around the stranger's figure; a wide-brimmed, velvety black hat that threw its shade to obscure his entire face from the on-looker; and an additional hood underneath, attached to the robe and reaching down to his eyes. He was at least as tall as Raoul's tormentor.

Both of them froze. Neither recognized him, but they both instinctively knew he was there to help one of them--and both knew it wasn't Lamende. Because, partially hidden beneath the long, overflowing sleeve of his black robe, the stranger was pointing a pistol at the man's groin. Raoul could see the steely gunpoint glinting coldly in the warm light.

"Who," Lamende growled tightly, "in Hell's name are you."

"No one too significant," replied the stranger. His voice was still unrecognizable but it had a weirdly alluring flavor to its edge. Raoul's eyes darted back and forth between the two men in front of him, hardly believing this was happening.

"However, I think I am significant enough for YOU right now, as we can all see here..."

All three men looked down at the pistol, poised in the most fatal way.

"Let us keep things civil, shall we?" The stranger murmured pleasantly into his ear, voice very calm.

"You will walk away to the opposite side of this room as far away from this pillar as you can, coolly and calmly as if the Purgatory isn't lying behind your back. You will take no notice of the boy--" (he never so much as glanced at Raoul when he said this) "--for the rest of the evening and hereafter as long as you are alive and breathing. Have I made myself quite clear?"

All three heard a distinct click as he cocked his gun. Lamende's skin was pale and clammy with barely controlled fear. He nodded once, eyed glazed straight ahead.

"Good," the stranger approved. He pressed the loaded end of his gun against Lamende's manhood a little harder.

"One..."

Lamende pulled out of the man's menacing shadow and began to walk woodenly out to the dance floor, away from the two of them.

"...two..."

He walked just a bit faster to the buffet tables, his boot heels hitting the floor with rhythmic clacks.

"...three."

He was at the end of the room now, almost obscured by dancing couples and crowds of socializing people. After fixing the far corner of the room with a hard gaze, the stranger put his pistol back into whatever part of his robe he'd drawn it from, then turned to the boy. Raoul still couldn't see his face.

"Follow me." His voice was compPELLingly urgent now, as if he wanted to get out of the ballroom altogether. Raoul tripped over his own feet as he hurried to obey, still too shocked to question the stranger's credibility. His mind was still numb after the rush of adrenaline from just seconds ago, heart still pounding and breath still quick. Surreal hatred and humiliation scratched away at his shaky limbs like rat claws.

He never noticed he was going in the wrong direction until he felt the stranger's hand pull him into a dark corridor, hidden behind an innocent-looking piece of tapestry. He realized they were somewhere on one of the upper floors. The tapestry fell behind them and would have plunged them into total darkness, if not for the lamp light filtering in through a couple of ventilation windows.

The stranger dropped Raoul's arm and immediately tossed away his hat and threw down his hood.
His voice abruptly changed in the next sentence.
"God, are you alright?"
Raoul's pupils widened alarmingly, then went back to normal. He found himself staring at an oh-so familiar porcelain mask and a set of cat-green eyes glowing in the dark.
"Erik," he exclaimed faintly. He felt the tension leave his frame and gave way to relief. His muscles suddenly relaxed and left him with a heap of questions and jellyfish bones.
"How did you...you found me and...your voice....Never mind." He shook his head violently as if to clear away the muddled riddles and thoughts. So many things passed his mind. How much had he heard? What was he thinking now? Why was he here, outside in the first place? Erik caught the boy's shoulders to steady him, slow him down.
"Raoul, are you alright?" He asked again, voice higher than usual. His gloved fingers gripped the boy's arms in a firm grasp and it almost hurt. Raoul didn't want him to let go.
"I'm...fine."
"No, you're not."
"...Right, I'm not." His voice cracked a millimeter. Erik rubbed circles into his arms with his thumbs as if to warm a cold patient. He didn't know how to comfort him. He didn't know what he should do or say. Thinking back, he realized he had always been the troubled one, the comforted one of the two.
"You can talk later if you want to," he reassured anxiously as Raoul tried to say something. Both had so much to ask, so much to listen to, but right now didn't seem like a good time for questioning and explaining everything.
"Thank you," was all Raoul could manage without breaking. The tumult of different emotions was spreading out through his body instead of receding, as if it took time to fully hit home. Regret, anger, embarrassment, gratitude, fear, shock, relief and so many others he couldn't even name made him feel like crying. He stood very still, holding his breath and trying to concentrate on the folds of Erik's robe. He tried to get the images out of his head and chew out the last of Lamende's perverted touch from his mind and throw them in the bin RIGHT NOW.
Erik, sensing all this, drew the viscount into an impulsive, warm embrace. He felt Raoul tremble in his arms in the effort to hold back tears. A whimper was all it took to ruin the pretense.
"Just let it all out...it will pass. I promise," the phantom murmured as he buried the words into Raoul's hair, softly easing his tight grip to a gentle cradle. Raoul let out a small sob, then a shaky laugh.
"Isn't that my line?" He asked, leaning against Erik's chest. Erik smiled, still concerned.
"Yes it is, and I'm repeating it back to you."
"Pute (fuck), I hate this..." Another shaky laugh through a curse he'd rarely used before.
'I hate this too,' thought Erik. 'I want to kill that bastard who did this to you.'
They stayed that way for a while, in the dark corridor hidden behind an innocent-looking piece of tapestry. The yellowish light of gas lamps fell through the ventilation windows and stopped them from plunging into utter darkness.
Erik led Raoul to his house on the lake. It was nine when they stepped into the bedroom. The viscount's head was heavy and his eyes still smarted from the now-dried tears. He slowly sat on the bed and gripped the edge of the mattress very tightly before letting go. Erik hung over him watchfully, aware of the awkwardness.

"You should sleep," he gently suggested. Raoul looked up.

"Here?" He asked. Erik tried not to feel embarrassed. He was technically inviting the boy to his bed, after all.

"You can go home if you like, of course. But truth be told, you look terrible and very tired, so..." He fiddled with his gloves. Raoul observed him, lips quirked into the smallest of smiles. A nervous phantom, worrying over him. His smile fell as soon as it appeared, though.

"Thank you. For everything. I'll just...wash myself and collapse here for tonight, then."

After a rueful, half-hearted smile, Raoul stood up and slowly made his way to the bathroom. Erik had to remind himself that this was a very serious situation and certainly NOT the time to care about the fact Raoul was bathing in his house right next to his own bedroom. He frowned in disapproval at himself. What was the matter with him? He flopped onto the mattress and was reminded that he had only one bed. Oh well. He'll just have to give it up for the boy. He could always skip a night's rest or go back to his coffin in the organ room.

He was still sitting there, thinking about what had just come to pass in the last couple of hours, when Raoul came out from his bath. Warm air and the scent of dissipated soap on his skin cast a pleasant aura around him and followed him to the bed. His suit jacket and tie and crisp white long-sleeves were gone, with only a loose, wide-necked undershirt and black pants on him. The damp ends of his long blonde hair brushed his prominent collar bone. Erik found himself trying very hard not to stare at the boy.

Raoul sat down next to him and leaned his head wearily against his shoulder, sighing a little. Erik glanced down at him.

"Feeling a little better?"

"Much better, thank you." Raoul murmured as he closed his eyes. Erik held still.

"Lie down," he whispered. Raoul reopened one eye and peeked up at him.

"Here?" He whispered back. "You ARE aware that you have only one bed..."

"I am aware of that," Erik shrugged. "But you know I don't always have to sleep. Besides, there's always my old coffin back there, so."

He faltered when he met Raoul's glaring eyes. The viscount frowned at the phantom.

"Not a bit of it. Either I sleep on the floor or...or you lie down with me."

Raoul, who never so much as felt embarrassment at any invitation, felt a blush crawl up his neck as he uttered this resolution. He could feel Erik's surprise and tension at this point and made an effort to keep the innocence of the case in mind.

"You want me to sleep with you?" The phantom asked doubtfully. Raoul bit back a smile at the unintentional double-meaning in his question.

"I wish I could," he muttered to himself. Erik cocked his head to one side, asking him what he meant by that. Raoul shook his head and simply said,

"It would be nice if you were next to me. Besides, I have no right to kick you out of your own sheets."

It ended up Raoul's way, as always.

Erik shifted uncomfortably on the mattress, conscious of how his shoulders constantly brushed against Raoul's. His body felt heated with unusual warmth as he was constantly reminded of the very obvious fact that they were right next to each other in the dark. He didn't want to know--but he already knew so well--why his heart was pounding away at such an unsettling rate. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt Raoul hand on his shoulder.
"Erik," he heard him whisper gently, "I wasn't implying anything when I said I wanted you to sleep with me. You don't have to worry about me attacking you or making a move on you. I promised to be good, didn't I?"

Erik felt the blood rush to his cheeks furiously at this sincere reassurance.

"I know you wouldn't--I never thought that way. Of course you promised, I just--I didn't--"

He sensed rather than saw a smile in the darkened room as he stopped to halt his tripping tongue. He drew a steadying breath to calm himself. When he finished counting from one to three, he opened his mouth again.

"I do trust you, Raoul. It's just that...I am not accustomed to being so intimate with one person...in this way. Being so close to you still surprises me whenever we fall into a situation like this."

Another piece of truth, spoken quietly into the darkness. He could feel Raoul's breathing quicken to a small laugh. He bit his lips in embarrassment.

"Does it make you nervous?" Raoul asked. He shifted on his side to look at the phantom, or, what silhouette that could be seen of him. His hand slid down the other man's arm and left a tingling trail all the way down to the wrist. He found his hand and took it softly.

"Do I make you nervous?"

The whispered question seemed to break Erik to little pieces of ice thawing on a merciless spring morning. He didn't want to speak another word yet he knew he had to.

"Yes," he breathed. His answer was so drowned in a tremblyingly low tone that it was almost obscured by it. Raoul remained silent and still, and Erik took that time to gather guts and carry on.

"You make me feel that way just by being so close to me. You make me want something more than this,"--he gave a little squeeze to their joined hands--"and it's painful how I can never think of a smart way to react properly...to all this. Sometimes I can't help but wonder if I should be ashamed of it. Of seeing you that way."

Ten heartbeats--rather rapid ones--passed in silence. Raoul's chest rose and fell with the organic flow of oxygen, reminding Erik to breathe, breathe. Erik's mask was a patch of light grey on a black background.

Raoul's hand enveloped more tightly around his.

"No," he heard him say.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. It's natural to feel that way if you lo--like someone. More natural than feeling that way when you don't."

Both the speaker and the hearer tripped over the tricky, almost-spoken word that meant so many things neither of them fully understood just yet. Under other circumstances this sort of confidence from Erik would've tempted Raoul to tease him to no end. But after what had happened that evening, he felt more thoughtful than playful. He was wide-awake now. Sleep had abandoned him as soon as he'd taken Erik's hand. He didn't show it as obviously as the Angel, but his heart was racing too.

"Do I love you?"

Raoul's breath caught in his throat at Erik's excruciatingly unexperienced, innocent, strange question. He'd asked that same question to himself many times before when he was alone. He'd gotten his answer on the third try, after that evening when he'd found out about Erik's past.

"My word, Erik," he exclaimed softly. "How would I know?"

* * * * *

The next morning, they were ready to talk.

Both were in the organ room, mulling around in their heads what to say first. When it became clear someone had to speak up first or the silence just might stretch on forever, the phantom cleared his throat.

"So...who was that man yesterday?"

He was tempted to say 'assaulter' but decided not to increase the drama, thick as it already was.

Raoul eyed his own knees.

"His name is Lamende Bôhendrá. He used to...warm my bed. Or I warmed his, really."

He glanced up briefly to see the phantom's expression. It was not very encouraging. He dropped his eyes again and continued in a deliberately slow voice.
"We met in a bar about a year ago. I guess I was a little drunk, and a little bored. I remember feeling very horny and looking around for someone to...take me."

Raoul paused, as if considering how to unfold the ensuing story in the least unpleasant way. How could he soften the revulsion, the brutality, when all of them stood out so clearly in his mind like jagged rocks? He looked up at Erik's touch, and was startled by the visible pain and concern in those green orbs.

"You don't have to use euphemism, Raoul. Just tell me everything simply as they were, naturally as they come to your mind."

"The words, Erik," Raoul replied gently, "the words are not the ones that hurt me. The vivid memories they bring with them are the painful ones. Perhaps you can handle them, but I can't. Describing them exactly as they form within my head, in every colorful detail would be excruciating."

A small pause. And then,
"The bar was not a very innocent place. As soon as he sat down next to me and ordered a drink for me, I knew he wanted the same thing as I did. We got acquainted...and he suggested that we go to his house. I was only too eager to comply."

Another pause.
"That first night was great, really."

His words dripped with reckless bitterness as they strung themselves more quickly.
"I won't deny it. That sick fils de salope (son of a bitch) knew what he was doing. In less than a quarter of an hour he knew just where to touch and how I'd like it."

His eyes were transfixed on the ink bottles and didn't see the discomfort on Erik's face. Erik turned his head to gaze at the quills instead.

"We went to bed a few more times after that, and for those three or four nights I was exhilarated. In all the past years I had never met someone so SKILLED." He spat out the word with a fierce grimace. He was now talking more to himself than to Erik.

"Oh, how I loved it. Until it all became too exhausting. He began to--began to use me like a toy and, and obsess over me with DISGUSTING possessiveness. We weren't lovers, we weren't even committed to each other. But he was using me as if I was under a perverted obligation to him, to be his bitch whenever he wanted me to. I couldn't even ask anyone for help for humiliation and couldn't even stop him. I won't go into details but at the end of two months I was running from him like a RAT."

Horrible memories that came to his mind found no way out through his mouth. He curtly ended the narrative in a trembling voice. But before Erik could say anything, he burst forth again.

"I know I was careless at the time," he said angrily. "Maybe I should have been more cautious with complete strangers. But is that any way to justify the wrong I had to go through?"

"No," Erik gasped, betraying a fleeting look of horror. "What he did to you has nothing to do with your carelessness, Raoul. You know that."

"Oh, I know. It's just that I never guessed my past could grip my ankle like this now."

Raoul felt like a raised blade ready to cut--or be cut and hurt all over again. Erik looked at his sharp and edgy expression.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. The boy looked up from his distress.

"For...what?" He asked, puzzled. "You're the one who came out of the blue and scared the git off."

"I only scared him off," Erik growled, disgruntled. "When I should have killed him on the spot."

"Oh."

Raoul considered that for a moment, but shook his head.

"I'm glad you didn't. It would have brought on a world of trouble for both of us. Besides..." He fumbled with his fingers. "You promised me not to kill anyone anymore."

"Yes, that I did." Erik recollected grimly. "That's why I restrained myself by counting to three."

"Were you really going to shoot him if he didn't move by three?" Raoul asked tentively. The phantom's answer was sardonic.

"Yes."
Silence ensued as the viscount contemplated his friend with some apprehension. A full three minutes passed before he lowered his eyes again.

"Tell me how you came to be in the ballroom in the first place."

"Oh, that."

"You never told me you'd be there."

"Well, I never intended to make an appearance," Erik explained, shifting a little in his seat--which, the viscount noticed. He raised a quizzical brow at the Angel.

"I wanted to keep an eye on the Daae girl without exposing myself," was the clarification. Erik lingered a little at the end of the sentence, not sure if he wanted to say something more or not.

"And was that all?" Raoul asked skeptically. He could tell there was something more to Erik's motive than being a guard-dog for him. The phantom crossed his arms in a slightly defensive manner.

"Yes."

"And?" He pressed. Erik huffed, faltering slightly.

"I wanted to see what you were like...above ground. With your friends and...other people other than myself. I know it's ridiculous," he said quickly, feeling warm; "but I knew you were acquainted with high people. I knew you were very social and liked to fraternize. And I knew I was keeping you from...whatever life you used to lead before finding out about me. And I suppose I just...wanted to see how you talked and interacted among normal society."

A slow grin worked its way up Raoul's lips as Erik stumbled across his words. Seeing this smile, the Angel recrossed his arms again and scowled. That, however, only increased the boy's amusement. It was amazing how his old bitterness and anger could dissipate like snow before this awkward, endearing side of the phantom.

"You were curious, were you?" he teased. "And how did you like me in my dress-suit?"

"Just fine, thank you."

"...And?"

"You looked good," Erik grumbled reluctantly. "Glowing, in fact. You were especially sweet with the ladies, I observed."

"One of my many charms."

"SO charming that you attracted one additional, unpleasant admirer," Erik remarked pointedly. Raoul narrowed his eyes.

"Yes, indeed..." he murmured. He lapsed into silent contemplation for a moment, glowering at nothing in particular. But soon he recovered himself, and shook his head.

"I've cursed and cried over the matter quite enough, then and now. Let us hear your side of the incident and speak of it no more."

"I've no objection to that," Erik sighed. "But if you ever change your mind about keeping Bôhendrá alive, you know who to turn to."

"Right." Raoul made a dubious face. Erik shrugged.

"I was watching you--and Daae--from the second floor where people were more scarce. I tried to disguise myself and stay inconspicuous at the same time, but I'm guessing I did a better job on the first point. The latter point was hard to accomplish in such a robe."

Raoul nodded, recalling the sinister feeling the robe and shady hat had produced.

"You'd been there not fifteen minutes when I saw Bôhendrá approach you. At first I thought he was a friend of yours and watched without suspicion. Things took a very disturbing turn after you sent the young lady away, however. I could see something was not right when you started backing away from him, and as soon as you two disappeared behind a pillar I decided to move."

A pause.

"I quickly came down stairs and crept behind the nearest pillar to observe you. The situation had escalated into a...sexual brawl, I could see. Luckily I always carry a pistol in public and had not forgotten to take one that night. You know what happened next," the phantom ended grimly. "He valued his crotch too much to risk a bullet wound."

"I still can't believe you aimed that thing on his CROTCH," the viscount remarked, almost laughing.
"Your cruel imagination is endless."
"The dirty pervert deserved it," the phantom muttered heatedly. "The way he touched and felt you up was revolting."
"But you scared him off," the viscount interrupted hastily.
"That doesn't mean it worries me less," the masked man argued gently. "The sight of anyone touching you the way you--you touch--me--" he looked away as he said this, "was a thorn in my eye. Especially because it was against your will. I hated it."
He stole a glance at Raoul's expression, and found himself the subject of another smile. This time, it was a sly one.
"You ARE protective, aren't you?" The viscount murmured, looking into his face. "You care enough to get upset."
"Of--of course I should!" The phantom stammered. "He was attempting a sexual assault. On you. Of course I got upset. Perhaps more so because his weapon were no dagger or sword, but pure lecherousness."
Erik made a disgusted face. 'And even if he hadn't been vicious at all, and you let him touch you freely,' he thought, 'still I would have been hurt.' Jealousy is an ugly thing, but it keeps one aware and attached.
Raoul leaned forward in his chair, not breaking his gaze. Something had bothered him since late last night, when he couldn't sleep. He had to get it off from his mind.
"What happened yesterday, and what you've said just now," he said carefully, "reminds me of...our first meeting. What I did to you against your will. I look back on it now and feel more ashamed of it than ever. I want to apologize to you for it, Erik. I heavily misunderstood my feelings for you then, and I realized I acted like, well, Bôhendré."
He said this and forced himself to look at Erik all the while, hoping to show his sincerity. It was uncomfortable for both of them, not the least less for Erik. The Angel shook his head and tried to stop him from going any further.
"You already apologized, Raoul. You promised you wouldn't do it again and you've kept your promise. You needn't feel ashamed of it anymore. Sure, we could have started this relationship in a pleasanter manner--" he said shruggingly, "--but maybe I would've just thrown you back into the lake if you'd kept on bothering me with small talk. At least, I am not SORRY for what you did to me, Raoul. Not anymore, when things are so much better than before I met you."
The things one can say when fueled with the most irrational of emotions. It lends uncommon bravery to the speaker, when at times it may break the hearts of the strongest.
"I...I don't know what I'm saying." He finished off-handedly. At the moment his own heart felt awkward inside his chest, and so did his mouth on his face. They felt like they belonged to someone else.
"Don't worry," the young man reassured him, laying a hand on his arm. "I know."
* * * * *
It took the viscount a couple of days to fully regain his mischievous cheerfullness, but time flew on and swept him busily forward to recovery. Soon he was Erik's ever-eager pupil again, always complaining of sore hands.
And three weeks later, he was sending a letter to the managers of the Paris Opera House, informing them of his intentions of a "special performance" approximately a week later. He politely requested his name on the programme as the provider of an introductory show thirty minutes before the opera, not forgetting to include a small stimulant in the form of cash. The managers were puzzled, but readily assented, knowing the viscount's generosity to the House and his popularity among "high folk."
Erik had planned the whole stage, and Raoul had seen to the whole arrangement. His skills with the violin were near perfect now, and there was nothing a few days of rehearsal wouldn't fix.
"I always had a doubt about it," he remarked in a wondering tone, fingering his wooden instrument. "but I really pulled this off. I mastered your score."
"Be proud of yourself viscount," Erik replied dryly. "At least, until I give you another assignment."
"No," Raoul protested in horror. "You're never training me this hard ever again."
"Teacher's orders," Erik retorted smugly. "Do what you're told to, little boy."
"LITTLe BOY--?"
"Besides," he added, cutting him off. "This whole idea was yours."
"You're the one who dragged me in to participate."
"I never dragged in anyone. You simply chose a twosome over a nonesome."
"Impressive imaginary word," Raoul muttered under his breath. Erik exhaled exasperatedly.
"Seriously, are we riding this merry-go-round again?"
"Always will, ever will."
"Childish," Erik noted pointedly. The boy scowled.
They'd bantered over the same theme over and over again well over a month, now. Secretly though, it never got old.
"Anyway, I just hope I don't get too nervous on stage."
"Confident and arrogant De Chagny? Nervous?"
"Hmm, I can see where the surprise is coming from."
"You have no idea."
Christine Daae walked fast along the lighted corridors, a thought gnawing away at her mind. It had been festering inside her head ever since the night the Opera Ghost had given her the withered rose. He'd never visited her since. His visits had become more and more infrequent even before this sardonic gift, until they'd stopped altogether. What was going on? Had he opened his eyes to her real intentions? Christine racked her brain for anything she might have done to expose herself, but no, there was nothing in it except frustration. This had gone on for too long; her performance was still greater than all the others', but the audience were beginning to notice the slight diminish in her voice. The phantom had not yet taught her everything; she still needed his guidance not only for greater talent, but to maintain what she already had as well. She'd told the managers that she'd caught a cold and had a sore throat, but that lie had been planted two weeks ago. She knew she couldn't pretend forever. She didn't even WANT to. She was on a temporary rest-leave now, lasting for a week, and she had no intention of wasting it away idly. She was sick of being anxious and being neglected by the phantom and--

"Raoul?"
Her rapid steps faltered and slowed. At the end of the corridor stood her old playmate. She suddenly remembered they hadn't spoken to each other for...weeks? Over a month?
"Raoul."
She picked up her gait and continued towards him. When she reached him, she pulled out her most winning smile and greeted him engagingly.
"I haven't seen you for ages! That is no way to treat your best friend."
She opened her arms to embrace him, and started slightly when he alluded her by stepping back. His gaze was cold as she lowered her arms awkwardly.
"What's the matter?" She demanded, trying to keep her smile in place. Consternation sat in her brow, ready to bend it into a frown at any moment. Raoul looked down at her distantly and contemplated her with ill-disguised disdain. His handsome face was aloof to her, not quite what she'd wished for.
She tried to brush it off lightly, changing her tactic to casualty.
"Oh, alright then. You're mad about something foolish you did or failed to do and are sulking by yourself. Fine, you don't have to talk. But listen," she urged. "I'm worried sick about the Ghost. He hasn't called for me or visited me for a full month, now. I don't know what it's all about, but I thought I might talk to you and get this load off my--"
"You are worried ABOUT him."
"Why, yes."
"You are not worried FOR him."
"I, I do pity him, but right now he's neglecting me so and I'm more worried for my voice. Why do you ask, Raoul?" She laughed. "You know he's the one who loves me, not the other way around."
"Ah," Raoul curled his lips. "Vanity."
He glided past her and made to move on.
The margarita stood rooted to the spot, face frozen.
"Wait!"
He waited three seconds, during which she asked tensely,
"What do you mean?"
The viscount cast a fleeting glare behind his shoulder, so fleeting Christine couldn't tell if she'd imagined it. Not turning, he said,
"I mean exactly what I say--vanity. You and your little dreams, false and not meant to be."
Then he continued on and disappeared around the corner, without one backward glance.
Christine stood still, shaking slightly. Confusion and anger filled her as she stood in a pool of her own shadow. She'd been neglected all along, not by one but two of the men. Raoul's altered behavior made that very plain. Her hands clenched into fists.
'He knows something.'
She couldn't imagine how these two men could be related to each other in any way, or how these two situations could possibly be connected. But suspicion had risen its ugly head, and although she couldn't for the life of her construe the faintest idea of the truth, she was determined to find out.

Raoul hurried down the steps winding down, down, down into the deeps of the opera house. His mind ran back and forth between what just passed in the corridor with Christine and what was to happen two hours later. It was the evening of their performance, and in 120 minutes he would appear before the multitude of curious audiences. The manager had told him he and his mysterious "special guest's" appearance before the beginning of the opera had fueled the ticketing and sold more seats than Cosi Fan Tutte usually would have.
Raoul entered the underground house--so familiar and natural to him now--and found the organ room empty of Erik's presence. So was the living room and bedroom.
"Erik?" he called. "Is anybody home?"
"In here," the phantom called. His voice came from behind the bathroom door connected to the bedroom. The sound of running water being stopped was heard, too. Raoul advanced to give a dozen hearty knocks on the door when it was swung open from the inside to reveal a half-dressed Erik with the water dripping down his chest. Both raised an eyebrow at each other, one of them coloring slightly.
"You just couldn't wait two minutes."
"Not for the world, darling. And I'm certainly not apologizing for this," Raoul retorted, gesturing to the man's torso. The color deepened on Erik's ears. Without another word, he slammed the door back shut right in the viscount's face.
"I thought you were finished!" Raoul yelled.
Apparently not!" Erik yelled back. "I'm not leaving this bathroom before you leave the bedroom first!"
Raoul retraced his steps out to the living room, snickering.
Erik followed him a moment later, this time fully dressed in his usual white long-sleeved shirt and black suit, minus the cloak.
"All right, I'm decent now."
"You were decent enough for me long before you finished your bath." The boy muttered in an undertone.
"What did you say?"
"Nothing," he lied flippantly. The phantom let it go.
"Have you finished rehearsing?" He asked.
"Of course," Raoul replied confidently. "I settled all the arrangements with the stage managers, too."
"Good."
"Erik?"
"Hmm?"
"Are you nervous?"
The Angel glanced at Raoul's face, reading the faint trace of anxiety in his expression. He allowed himself a smirk.
"Having stage-nerves, are we?" He remarked snidely. Raoul rolled his eyes.
"Well, not everyone has invincible nerves of steel as you do. So, back to the question; are you
nervous?"
"No, I'm afraid not."
"In the least?"
"Let us see how I really feel."
He ticked off his fingers as he ticked off the list.
"Slight irritation, disdain, condescension, and an unspeakable amount of superiority to those idiots
who are about to see our genius."
That earned a good stare from the boy.
"Oh, and some measure of excitement and anticipation, to be fair. We put a lot of time and effort in
this, after all."
"You are IMPOSSIBLE."
"Strange, I found you surprisingly manageable."
"Training you was time-consuming...but you followed up very well. You are much more talented now than you ever were
before."
He finished with a genuine sense of admiration, both at his effort and Raoul's. He smiled the
viscount's favorite smile, the one without sarcasm or wryness, a smile that totally reached to his eyes.
The boy couldn't believe it.
"Oh, so now you're complimenting me?" He asked with some incredulity. "I can never know where
you go with your moods."
"I like the mystery."
"I like the smile."
"I prefer smirks."
"You blush more than you smirk."
"I don't BLUSH--"
"Yes you do."
"No I don't."
"Like a lady."
"Like hell."
"Tut. Language, Erik, language."
"I DISTINCTLY remember you saying the p-word a month ago..."
"And I had a very good excuse for doing it."
"Cannot argue with that."
Thus bantering, they spent the next hour waiting for the clock to strike 7.

"Ladieeees and geeen-tle-meeennn! Monsier Armand yelled at the top of his lungs. "As most fans
of this opera may already know, tonight is the exact 90th anniversary of Mozart's Cosí Fan Tutte, a
special night indeed. Monsier Moncharmin and I are proud to announce the brief opening show, held
and performed by our generous patron, Vicomte Raoul De Chagny and his AS YET unrevealed
guest!!"
Applause lifted the roof of the House as devoted--if relatively few--fans of this particular show and
the majority of the women clapped and cheered. Not all of the women were enthusiastic, though.
Christine Daae's countenance forcefully remained stony and stoic. Monsier Armand stepped off from
the stage, all smiles and grins.
The lights dimmed around the boxes and focused onto the stage. Nothing happened for a moment.
All was quiet. The audience strained their eyes and ears for a few seconds, wondering what took
their viscount so long.
Suddenly, they could all hear a single note being struck upon the string of an instrument. Long and
drawn, the single note never changed sound or tempo as it increased in volume, crescendoing louder
and louder as it reached its end. Then it stopped. Another note followed, equally drawn in length and
equally gathering in volume. Then it stopped again.
That was all the warning the audience got before Raoul strolled slowly in from the left of the stage,
playing on his old violin and stringing dozens of notes together in a brilliant prelude. A collective
murmur and applause rippled through the audience once more as Raoul glanced up to look at the crowd. Among the hundreds of faces occupying their seats, he noticed only one—Christine. Their eyes met for a split second before each lowered them again, one in smug disdain and the other in angry uneasiness.

Raoul waltzed further on to the center of the spotlight and began to play in earnest. A quick tempo ensued, during which his fingers flew up and down the strings as if on wings, delicately delivering the notes from their homes of oiled guts and into the rich cradle of the bow. The high notes sashayed through the air and cut the held breaths of the audience with the very sharpness of their eloquence as they traveled higher and lower with unstoppable energy.

"That's no common feat."
"I never knew he played so well."
"That IS something..."

But as the song progressed, admiring chatter subsided into awed silence. Even the old ladies stopped fluttering their fans and held them still, suspended in their hands as they focused their entire attention to the young man and his fiddle. The music heightened still more, by this time coming on in rougher, emotional roils of layered complexity that cut the air in deeper tones. The high-pitched dexterity began to shy its way down to a more resonating pitch, bringing down with it a certain depth that rang through the House. The music, by almost imperceptible degrees, began to slow.

Slower, slower, slower.
Gentler, deeper, wider.

By twenty shades of silver, he slowly drew out a blue whale from his school of dolphins. By some extraordinary secret taught by the Angel, Raoul's violin was imitating the sound of the cello.

This was the difficult part. Keeping down his violin to this supernatural pitch, Raoul bit his lips in concentration as he weaved his bow to and fro to draw an undulating pattern in the ears of the listener, more mysterious and sadder in its ominous sheen. The colors of the music darkened, and ran its course like the massive sea rather than the swift river. He skimmed his bow near the surface of the white-frosted waves, then dove low again to touch the very bottom. Sighing, the little violin rendered note after note, ringing its hollow heart out. Raoul, remembering Erik's repeated warnings to "fuse his very soul into the wooden body of his partner," narrowed his eyes and focused, focused unlike any other time he'd played before.

Not a few people's eyes were wet from unconscious tears when he came to an end. Even Christine, whose face had turned pale and wide-eyed during the performance, had felt the whispering caresses of His music. Her very heartstrings were struck.

But before anyone could even raise their hands to give a thunderous round of applause, the Angel of Music himself materialized into view. The audience stared at the apparition as it appeared just behind the figure of the viscount. All they could make out of the newcomer was that he was tall, taller than the boy. A dark robe that hung loose around his figure and a cavernous hood that overshadowed his entire face threw the spectators at a loss. They all gazed at him very hard, wondering what this stranger was going to do.

Raoul had never relaxed his poise during this full half-minute of complete, unbreakable silence. The utter motionlessness of the curious duo and the speculative apprehension of the listeners were truly a rare sight inside a usually lively Opera House.

The stifling stillness lasted thirty seconds before the Angel finally condescended to begin. The distinct rustling of his robes were the opening notes. The lifting of an arm was the announcement.

Night time
sharpen
heighten
each sensation...

A thrilling chill ran down Raoul's spine as the unearthly, angelic voice of the phantom rang behind his back. This was their duet.
Darkness stirs
and wakes
imagination...

He followed the lyrics through his mind, holding his bow at the ready. Erik had advised him to murmur the words inside his head as he played, to focus on the meaning and sentiments of the lyrics.

Silently the senses
abandon their defenses...

A quiet, delicate accompaniment followed. Raoul cringed inwardly at the sound of his bow scraping across the strings. It didn't sound so lovely as before, now that his Angel was here. Erik stepped forward a little closer to him. Touching his shoulder with a light gloved hand, he skimmed his fingertips across Raoul's collarbone as he crooned.

Slowly
deftly
night unfurls its splendor
Grasp it
sense it
tremulous and tender

It was impossible how alluring his voice was. They had rehearsed together countless times, but this--this was taking it to a whole new level.

Turn your face away from the garish light of day...
Turn your thoughts away from cold, unfeeling light...

As Erik took his chin in his hands and lifted his face, he could see a cat-green light dance within the darkened hood. He attempted to fathom it further and nearly forgot his part. But only nearly.

And listen to the Music of the Night..!

With "Night," the phantom threw off the hood and revealed his masked face. Instead of the usual quartered mask however, he wore a Colombina. It covered the upper half of his countenance in an ornate shield of decorated fabric and porcelain, catching the light and glimmering in the eyes of the spectators. Golden vines twined themselves into eloquent shapes on the painted black background. The color of star-studded midnight, spilled all over his cheeks and nose in the form of a Venetian mask, hid everything from forehead to cheekbone except for the eyes. His eyes. They were smoldering shades of emerald. And though his voice was perfectly controlled even in the midst of the stunning passion of his song, his eyes were far from calm. Here he was, dumb-founding the Paris Opera House, degrading the opera singers who were to sing their lowly arias ten minutes later, and undermining Christine Daae in front of every oblivious person. For the first time in a long time, he truly felt triumphant. And it took all of the viscount's will-power to restrain him from declaring himself the infamous Opera Ghost who'd killed Joseph Buquet.

It was Raoul's turn. Erik had repeatedly told him to think of this as expressing the lyrics through musical notes instead of syllables.

'Close your eyes and surrender to your darkest dreams, leave all thoughts of the world you knew before...'

Moving his arms, he glanced at Erik's masked face. Once he'd caught his eyes he couldn't look away.

'Close your eyes, let your spirit start to soar..!'

Stunned by the unexpected and desperate seductiveness of their song, the spectators looked on. They sat, hypnotized. They could neither turn away in disgust or feel the dim heat of embarrassment at the
men's physical intimacy. The Angel's voice had rooted them to the spot and filled their heads with a golden haze.
'And you'll live, as you've never lived before...'
Digging the strings into his fingertips, Raoul saw the shadow of a smile fall across the Angel's mouth. Not breaking the contact, Erik disrobed himself with a single touch of a loose button. The dark cloth fell around their feet as he took up the song again.

Softly
deftly
music shall caress you
Hear it
feel it
secretly possess you...

Guiding himself around Raoul to face him, Erik fully revealed the back of his tall, lean figure, well-cut and clothed in black.
Open up your mind!
Let your fantasies unwind!
In this darkness which you know you cannot fight

Circling him, he drew himself up and gazed fiercely into Raoul's eyes before moving away to fully face the crowd.

The darkness of
the Music of the Night...!

'Let your mind start a journey to a strange new world, purge all thoughts of the life you knew before...let your soul take you where you long to be...!' Then both together,

Only then
'Only then'
Can you belong to me...
'Can you belong to me...'

A short accompaniment. Then, still playing, Raoul took a deep breath and drew closer to the phantom.
'Floating, falling, sweet intoxication! Touch, me, trust me, savor each sensation...'

Let the dream begin!
'Let your darker side give in'
To the power of the music that I write...
'The power of the Music of the Night!' The power of the Music of the Night!

Their sounds soared together towards the finishing note in an unbalanced harmony, Erik holding the last alto in a ringing vibration as Raoul climbed higher to the climax pitch. Not one person seemed to breathe as everyone watched the coming end, stricken.
Suddenly, all the lights went out. Just as sudden lightening, pitch-black darkness plunged itself into the eyes of the audience and threw everything into blindness. But before anyone could rise in panic or shout out, the lights flicked back to life in a second. They all blinked and rubbed their eyes.
There was no one on the stage.
Christine, sitting very still and very white, saw very plainly the whole truth of the situation. And neither she nor the others could quite believe what they saw.
The Colombina is a half-mask that is often heavily decorated. Often colorful, this type of mask only covers the wearer's eyes, cheeks, and nose.

"Cosi Fan Tutte" is one of Mozart's operas. I'm not sure how the reception of it was back in France in the 19th century, but it is known as the great composer's most unpopular work.
Bursting into the living room far beneath the stupefied opera house, they slammed the door shut and wheezed for breath. They'd ran the whole way, taking the secret short-cut through the opening in the abandoned scene behind the stage. In the darkness of the tunnels, Erik had slipped on his old quarter-mask again and thrown the Colombine into one of the rat-dens. Let them chew away at it for all he cared! Excepting that moment, they had neither paused nor slowed and were now out of air, hardly knowing why. When they were finished with catching their breath, they glanced at each other. For a split second, all was still. Then, all at once, they fell into roars of laughter.

"Did you see their FACES?"
"Did you HER face?"
"They had their jaws hanging open like--like--"
"Caught-fish."
"Caught-fish!"
"I can't believe we really did this--"
"Oh, I can't breathe--"
Collapsing into fits of giggling, they both slid onto the floor to bust their lungs in peace until Raoul felt the tears form behind his eyes. Gasping, he endeavored to calm himself.

When the general hysteria had faded into mild chuckling, he opened his arms to invite his Angel in.

"Come here."
For once, Erik obediently went over to his side. He giggled as Raoul put and arm around his shoulder and pulled him close.

"In a good mood, are we?" Raoul teased. Erik nodded, unable to repress a wide smile.

"Yes. More than I thought I was capable of."
"I never saw you laugh like that."
"As you say, I'm in a good mood."
"Yes, and I daresay you had a good excuse too, given the hilarious situation."
"Oh, don't make me start again..."
Snickering, he leaned his head against the viscount's shoulder. The viscount looked at him with appraising eyes.

"You really should laugh more often, Erik."
"Hmm, do you think so?"
"Yes," he replied earnestly. Erik glanced up at him with a quizzical brow.

"And why is that, Vicomte De Chagny?" He demanded.
"Because..."Raoul said, leaning in. He smiled at Erik's audible intake of breath as he lifted a hand to skim the rosy surface of his cheek. Their lips barely touched as he purred in a low voice,

"Your smile is the loveliest I've ever seen..."
He captured his lips in an engaging kiss as Erik opened his mouth to make a clever retort. Cutting him off before he could even begin, Raoul playfully pulled at his bottom lip with this teeth.

"Mmm, you're distracting me."
"Is it working?"
"Obviously."
This time, it was Erik who pulled the viscount back into contact. He moaned as he felt Raoul's mouth devouring his hungrily, turning pink at the sound of their tongues sucking at each other. Warm and flushed, he shivered when he felt Raoul's hand cup the nape of his neck and his thumb tickle the sensitive spot behind his ear. Without even knowing it, his hand slipped down from the younger man's chest to his waist, gently hugging his body into himself. This resulted in the viscount nearly falling all over him, had the boy not pulled himself into a straddling position onto his legs. Thus seated upon Erik's thighs, Raoul continued to administer kisses that seemed to last forever and only grow in intensity. Erik's tongue was sought out to be flipped over and pulled into the other's mouth, his wet lips to be caressed greedily. Sensual and heady, both emerged from time to time for oxygen. Every time Erik lifted his head from the kiss, Raoul breathed into his neck and nipped his chin with a jealous mouth. It took every inch of self restraint for the viscount not to rip out the phantom's shirt collar and loose his buttons in mere seconds. He contented himself by pushing Erik's shoulder against the wall and tangling his fingers in the locks of his raven black hair.

Suddenly, the phantom became very aware of Raoul's weight on the place between his thighs. Their groins were touching beneath their layer of clothes. In his eagerness, Raoul shifted his weight to pull himself up a little closer. Unwittingly, he ground his hips into Erik and both let out a stuttering gasp at the friction. Both felt the blood rush down to their aroused member as they became embarrassingly aware of the other's hardness. Abruptly breaking the kiss, Raoul pulled away, remembering his promise.

"I--I'm sorry, I didn't mean to--"
"No, it's okay."
The boy made to untangle himself and started to move away, when Erik stood up and caught hold of his arm.
"Wait."
Raoul hesitated. He had to leave before he could force himself on the phantom, before he could repeat his past mistakes again. He'd promised himself not to. He'd promised himself never to.
"I don't want you to be good anymore."
Startled, Raoul quickly turned to look at him. He met Erik's eyes searchingly, looking for answers.
"Are you sure."
He warned him with his eyes not to play jokes on him. He wouldn't be able to pull out of this later.
Erik steeled himself to swallow the burning embarrassment. He steeled himself to answer,
"Yes."
Neither of them needed any more persuasion from then on. Pulling Erik into his arms, Raoul kissed him deeply. So deeply, that, they both knew they wouldn't reach the surface in a long time.
No. They had to go deeper.
Raoul could feel the tender emotions of a lover clash with the overflowing animal-lust he'd bottled up within himself for so long. Both were struggling to free themselves.
Breaking the kiss, he lead themselves into the bedroom and stumbled dizzily onto the mattress with Erik on top of him. Only a few candles burned to keep the room dimly lit with a yellowish light. The dim illumination made visible to each other their tangible tension and excitement. Following Raoul's lead, Erik unbuttoned his jacket and kicked off his shoes just before Raoul pulled him on top of him again and rolled to the side, bringing the man down with him and pressing him into the sheets. Now Raoul was on top of Erik.
Breathing erratically, the viscount threaded his fingers through the phantom's shirt buttons in a trembling hurry. He started to kiss the phantom again, however, before he was even properly finished with undressing him, and loosened the last three buttons with his mouth in his own.
"You're in a hurry," Erik gasped as soon as he could. Raoul cast a pointed look at the man's crotch.
"And you're not?"
"That's not what I meant..."
"Don't worry darling," Raoul breathed. "I'm not going to rush this. But first," he accented the last word by tossing Erik's shirt into the corner. "I wanted that off. And I want THIS off, too."
His hand drew a dangerous line around the edge of Erik's mask, threatening to lift it off. He hooked a
finger beneath the corner of the porcelain plate.
"No, don't--"
e Erik grabbed his wrist to stop him. When Raoul lifted his other hand, he arrested that one, too.
"Erik, please," Raoul pleaded.
"You don't want to see this."
"I want to see you. ALL of you."
"You will change your mind about that as soon as you take this off."
"Erik," he pleaded again. "I won't love you less by seeing what you're hiding behind this mask."
Perhaps not. But you won't help feeling the repulsion rise to your throat, Raoul. I'll not lay bare an inch of this part of myself to see the revulsion in your eyes." The Angel's flashed with panic. "I didn't make myself this vulnerable just to read the HORROR on your face."
"Shhh, darling..." Raoul hushed, trying to calm him. "You think me so weak as to be repulsed by an outward deformity? After all the time I've been with you?" He smiled, disengaging his hands from the Angel's. "Erik. You are so much more than a timid ghost."
"If I've disappointed you, then fine. But this is all I'll ever be, Raoul. This is the only thing I knew and know how to be."
"You know that's not true..." Raoul gently disagreed. "You proved otherwise tonight."
On the night-stand next to the bed there burned three candles. Turning to them, he reached out and blew out two flames. The room darkened. Their shadows became longer. "If it bothers you so much, I'll put out the lights for you." He whispered. "See? I know I'm asking much of you, but it's not that hard to trust me."
"But..." Erik struggled, searching for an argument. Raoul hushed him again. He put a persuasive hand on his bare torso, whispering,
"I don't want to touch a mysterious, half-masked man, Erik. I want to touch you."
With that, he blew out the last candle.
They were immediately plunged into darkness. The only thing that stopped them from being surrounded by the utter pitch-black void of a cave was the glow from the crack of the ajar bedroom door, which they hadn't bothered with closing properly. Except for that one faint glow, and apart from the shine of Erik's cat-like eyes, there was absolutely nothing to illuminate their naked love.
Raoul felt the Angel shift nervously under him. Without a word, he once again reached down to touch the man's face. Erik's body tensed as the boy's palm trailed down his neck, then up again to the right side of his face. He found himself holding his breath, not daring to make a sound.
"No more hiding."
His mask fell away from him as Raoul cautiously lifted it up, ever so slightly brushing the end of a scar. The porcelain gave a feeble glint in the dark as it left its long-fixed place upon its master. The master felt a desperate need to cover the exposed area with a pillow, a blanket, anything. As if he had read his mind, Raoul did cover the exposure—with caresses.
Cupping the marred cheek with his palm and so, so softly running a thumb across the undeveloped cheek bone, he felt with his fingertips a strange terrain of rough, hardened skin. With his other hand he cupped the other side and felt the smoothness of a fair, unblemished cheek. He leaned down.
"Does it hurt?" He whispered. Erik could only shake his head from side to side, to indicate a negative. He'd barely even registered the question.
Raoul continued with his exploration. Curious scars and small wounds let themselves be touched under his gentle hand. He lingered near a deep dip between the eye and the bridge of the nose. He skimmed the right side from forehead to jawline with fingers that wondered and respected and sympathized. When he was finished, he repeated the same motion with his lips.
Erik's chest rose and fell rapidly. His scrambled brain asked him how he was still breathing and not shattered into a million pieces of shattered glass. Raoul laid a tender kiss on the mottled arch of his brow. Then downward, all the way downward to the chin he filled the cool hollows of years of anguish with human warmth and affection.
Erik closed his eyes and trembled. He thought of all the people who might have kissed him there. His father, his mother, a friend. And to find RAOUl'S lips there--
Tears broke out beneath his lids and wet his eyelashes as they trickled their way down his face. He gasped through his quiet weeping when he felt Raoul bite down on his collarbone.
"Don't cry," Raoul crooned. "I want you to enjoy this just as much as I do."
Blushing kissmarks bloomed wherever his mouth went, which was basically everywhere. Trailing a continual line with his lips, he traced the defined forms of Erim's neck, his ears, his jaws, down to his chest and stomach and waist and hips...
Erik whimpered. Raoul had a nipple in his mouth. Twirling a tongue around the round bud, his lover drove it to taughtness with slick, nimble motions. His body jerked slightly as the teasing sensuality sent spasms all the way down to his nether.
Down beyond the hipbones, navel, pelvis... his hardness strained against his slacks. Raoul smiled and nuzzled the raised place with his nose.
"Raoul..." the phantom whined. His breath hitched when the viscount started unbuckling his belt. The young man used his teeth to pull his slacks down by the fastening, making sure to brush his mouth against the erection on purpose, eliciting a sharp stutter from the phantom. Then, slowly in leisureed pleasure, he nudged soft kisses down Erik's parted thighs. Putting his head between his legs, his tongue softly traced the tender flesh of the Angel's lower limbs. He heard him whimper and felt him shiver with embarrassed anticipation.
"Should I remove this too?" Raoul whispered, murmuring lowly as he played with the edge of Erik's drawers. His hand traveled up along his shanks to the waistband, making the friction increase their carnal appetite. His other hand slipped under Erik's lower back to gently lift his hips from the mattress. He used the same hand to clench one cheek of his bottom in a massaging grip, urging him.
"I'm waiting..."
"Y-yes," his partner whimpered faintly. "Take it off."
The drawers were taken off. Cool air met hot air and sent off a chill of expectancy for both of them. A sudden jolt went through the phantom.
"Raoul, what are you doing?" He hissed, blood rushing to his cheeks. The boy hummed a vague reply, not bothering to take his mouth from the sack he was softly nipping. The boy's wet, hot tongue was a totally unexpected novelty around Erik's privates, and he squirmed to cover up the area again.
"No, stop--" he struggled weakly. A loud moan interrupted his resistance when Raoul took the other sack in his mouth and licked it with the most lascivious way. The noises he elicited were of the repressed keening kind, shy and tremulous.
"Don't be shy, Erik..." reassured his partner. "I'm going to pleasure you now."
"You--you've never done it like this before," Erik stuttered around a gasp. Raoul sucked a little harder, causing another jolt before releasing his little toy.
"Oh no, I've done this several times before. Only, not with you."
"Oh?"
"My past business partners were rather fond of blow-jobs..."
"Of course." Erik replied sarcastically. Raoul grinned evilly.
"Jealous, are we?"
"Not a tiny bi--!
Erik's words halted when he suddenly felt the tip of his penis being enveloped in moist muscle. He cried out as Raoul's mouth tightened around the head and started moving up and down along his length. The thrill of not being able to see clearly what was going on was incredible. The erotic sensation of wet pressure going in and out in increasingly fast motions reduced him to lewd noises that echoed in the darkness. This couldn't compare to anything he'd experienced before. Whenever Raoul applied especial pressure to the head he bucked his hips into his mouth, arching his back for more. He couldn't help wanting more. He felt as if the very precum trickling down his length was melting with the saliva.
"Mmph..."
Raoul pressed Erik's hips into the sheets with both hands to keep him from thrusting too deep.
"Aahh--ngh," Erik felt the back of his neck burn against the pillow. He dug his fingers into the cotton as he gripped the edge of the mattress, breath catching in his throat and turning into drawn
groans as he throbbed and pulsed towards his end.
"Raoul, stop--I'm going to--"

His free hand tangled in the boy's sleek blond hair as Raoul pulled back just in time to catch the slick, milky cum spurt into his hand. A few drops fell onto the blanket like pale blood, markedly soiling their bed. Erik gulped in fresh air to steady himself, chest heaving from the orgasmic sexual exertion. He felt feverish inside out, he'd never come so hard before. Raoul pulled himself up and kissed him lightly on the forehead. Erik responded feebly by inclining his head to kiss him back.

When he finally got his breath back, he lifted himself up to his elbows to give Raoul his turn. But instead of giving way, the viscount pushed him back down and told him to lie on his stomach. "We're going to go all the way this time," he explained, voice husky. Erik, lying on his stomach as he'd been told, was confused.
"Going all the way..?" He queried.

"You'll see. Get on your knees and lift your hips for me, please."

"What the--?!"

Jerking back, he tried to flip over to his backside again as he felt Raoul's finger at his entrance, plying his own cum to his hole. The viscount held him down as gently as he could while lubricating his entrance, trying not to hurt him.

"What are you doing?" Erik hissed for the second time that night. The muscles of his bottom tightened at the alien, ticklish feeling of attempted trespass, resisting the strange violation.
"Erik, relax. I know this feels unpleasant but I promise, you'll feel good in a few minutes."

"Are you sure? Because--ngh--this is so..."

"I know, I know. But try to relax, darling. This is just a process."

Erik flinched as he felt a finger deliberately push inside of him through his entrance. His hole tightened around the digit, not sure of its trespasser. The meaning of Raoul's words finally dawned on him. He felt his eyes widen. He hadn't known MEN could do it, too. And all this time he'd thought THEY were being dirty!

He exhaled sharply as one finger pushed itself all the way inside to the base.
"Is it painful?" He heard Raoul ask over his shoulder.
"I, I don't know." He answered honestly. He couldn't tell yet. The edge of his crack burned a little, and the feeling of something inside him was extremely strange, but other than some discomfort there was no pain. Yet.
"I'm going to loosen you up a bit, Erik."

"Urgh, okay..."

He huffed and squeezed his eyes shut. He felt the digit move slowly in and out, then press down inside him as if to widen the space. It went on like that for a moment, while Raoul distracted him by fondling his nipples and whispering into his ear things no one save a lover would want to hear.
"Just one more..." he heard him murmur before a second finger was pressed up to him. The viscount pushed it in a little quicker this time, wanting the process to be over as soon as possible for both of them.
"Mmph,"
"Almost there..."

Spreading the two digits within the hole, he scissored his way further in.
"It hurts," Erik complained. Raoul apologized softly, but didn't stop. He was searching with his fingers, delving into him for something...

"Oh!"

A spasm hit the Angel from somewhere deep within him, causing his head to jerk up. Found it. Raoul nudged the bunch of nerves a little harder, eliciting a still louder cry. He continued to finger him steadily, knowing how much pleasure it was bringing.
"It feels good in there, doesn't it?" He asked in a low tone, voice dripping with sexual sweetness. Erik could only give a shaky moan for an answer.
"Ngh--ugh, Raoul..."

Hearing his name being called like that, the viscount couldn't hold on any longer. His own needs
were begging impatiently for relief. Withdrawing his fingers from Erik, he leaned over Erik's back and ground his groin against his entrance to warn him.

"I'm going to enter you now," he breathed into his ear, causing him to shiver.

Erik grunted in pain as something much longer and thicker than a couple of fingers eased itself into him. A tear clung to his lashes as his insides were stretched to accommodate a hot, erotic fullness he couldn't quite describe. Breathing in irregular gasps, he concentrated on Raoul's hands grasping his waist and backside and waited for the sweet electricity to assault him again.

"Ah!"

Erik tipped his head back in exclamation as Raoul fully thrust into him, the sound of them joining together falling around in the darkness. The viscount measured slow, steady thrusts in and out of the phantom before they could find a rhythm of their own, sliding onto each other like puzzle pieces. "Mmm, Erik, you're loud..." Raoul murmured huskily, pinching a nipple between his thumb and forefinger. Erik's muscles tightened around his member in response, clenched and puckering.

"Tell me--you--are enjoying this," Raoul got out in between hitched breaths. Their steady rhythm became more rapid. Their hair hung down behind their damp necks and swung with each jerking movement. Erik's elbows buckled, and he buried his head in the pillows to stifle a cry.

"I--I am," he gasped. And he was. His length was swelled and hard again, as if to make up for all the past years of barren hunger and lost chances. He found himself loving every moment of having sex and the very lecherousness of Raoul's question turned him on more than ever. He loved the feeling of pleasing him and being taken by him.

"Oh, are you?"

"Ah--so much," he admitted aloud. His lovely voice, so changed with lust and charged with sexual excitement sent a chill down Raoul's spine.

"I love you."

He laid the words fiercely against Erik's neck as he thrust into him harder, pacing himself faster. His voice, just caught between loud moans and something so much more deeper, caused Erik's heart to skip two beats. His insides had been already filled with Raoul's heat and desire and pleasure, but now those three words were filling his chest with ecstasy even before they reached their climax. That one phrase cut him like a sword and he liked it--it made him bleed flowers.

Over his own moans and hitched noises, he could hear Raoul slowly reaching his peak. Just a little more, a little more and surely they'd tip over the edge.

"I love you," Erik breathed out, roughly drawing out the ragged phrase just as he felt something spill into him, hot and molten like magma. All over his body and all around inside the pit of his stomach he could feel the unbearable, indescribable sensation of unadulterated sex. Panting, he turned his head and reached back with his arm into the dark where he knew Raoul's head would be. Grabbing the locks of damp hair, he pulled him into a desperate and heady kiss, just to hold on to familiar reality as the alien ride of thrill reached its end. Just the need of him in his mouth. For a second they held still, panting and quivering in place with the thick freshness of their high.

Then they both fell back onto bed, spent.

They both slept well that night, deeply and peacefully with no trace of any dreams. And when Erik finally woke up first the next day, it was one in the afternoon.
"Erik."
"Yes, Raoul?"
The Phantom of the Opera turned his face to see a small sheet of paper in the viscount's hand. The viscount's expression was calm and unreadable. The phantom, with some apprehension, took the slip of paper from him and read it. The note was very brief and he had to read it twice to make sure of its contents.

"I have removed myself to the outskirts of Paris. The reason, you and I will know best. Christine."

He looked up at the viscount.
"How do you feel?" He asked quietly. Raoul simply shrugged.
"Good riddance, I say."
"You two were very close friends once," Erik observed, carefully searching Raoul's eyes. The boy shook his head.
"That was a long time ago. I distanced myself from her ever since I first met you, Erik. I was disgusted by her selfish shallowness and felt betrayed by this new Christine I'd never seen before. I hated her for what she did to you...and I still despise her now."
Raoul fell into a short reverie, no doubt contemplating the long-past years of their friendship and the recent decay of their bond. Both had made sure to snap the chord in two beyond repair. But then he shook his head again and smiled. "I am glad she went away. And you should be happy, too, Erik."
"Believe me, I am. I was just worried about you."
"Well, you needn't be. And besides," he added cheerfully, "I didn't bring you out here on a beautiful day like this to fret over sulky letters."

He gestured towards the worn pavements warming under a soft sun beneath a wispy, blue sky. Erik let his eyes wander over the grass, the distant trees, the street-lamps, and the stone fountain in the small park just yonder from where they sat. A few passers-by gave him and Raoul second glance as they strolled by the open terrace of the cafe. This sort of attention had irritated Erik to no end to the point of resentment during the first month of his "out-door" life, but after Raoul had coaxed him into reason and pointed out that most of the attention arose from curiosity rather than hostility, he'd suffered himself to grow used to it. He looked up at the breeze-filled sky.
"It IS a fine day," he murmured.

Three months had passed since that unforgettable night. Many things had changed, including their own lives. Raoul was still in the elite circle, though public opinions were now divided between newfound disgust and heightened admiration. Thankfully though, the majority leaned towards the latter, now that the initial shock had faded somewhat. Newspapers had circulated, gossips had arose, and many friends had been thrown into uncertainty regarding their Vicomte. Their struggle between the repulsion of his same-sex relationship and the brilliancy of the genius of the couple was of considerable magnitude, but in the end the sentiments of old ties and friendship won the flag. Many decided to overlook the viscount's oddity and "forgive" his difference from them for old time's sake. Some of course, were less enthusiastic and resolved to put cool attitudes towards Raoul from then on, while a few others wore a better face about it than others and embraced him warmly.
"Well, well, you love who you love and that's that. Where did you learn to play the violin like that, anyway?" Melvonte had promptly remarked as soon as they happened to run into each other again. Poor little Rosamonde had blushed furiously and given him a stammered good day before running away to hide her puppy-love tears.

"Brothers weren't made to strain their ties over little matters as this," Phillipe De Chagny had assured him. "Though I am a little disappointed you never introduced him to me."

The most interesting reaction had come from the two managers. At first they made a very great deal of it ("This is scandal!" "This is MENTAL!" "Can this be?" "It is true, bless me!"), then proceeded to putting a very diplomatic attitude to the whole affair, and acknowledged Raoul and his ("ahem") partner's undisputed talent in the warmest of terms. It had not taken long for them to realize just how many people would buy their way into a box or two for a taste of the unlikely duo's genius. Call them mercenary, but they were managers of the House coffers, after all. When the two men and Raoul (and Erik, though he remained invisible to the managers) had struck a deal of occasional and irregular performances in the Opera House, everyone was more or less happy enough.

"I hope you made it quite clear I am not a stage-monkey for their entertainment."

"Darling please, no one sees you that way."

After that, the astonishing storm of gossip died down among the busy Parisians within two months. Another notable change was in Raoul and Erik's daily life. As much as Raoul loved his Angel, he couldn't leave the world he knew and everything in it behind him to live forever underground. Nor did Erik want to leave his comfortable nook to take up another abode in an unfamiliar place. So they had established a new routine to keep both of them content. Every day, Raoul would take Erik from his house by the underground lake for a few hours and make him take some fresh air; get a sight of real world; and hopefully to show him that he belonged in a society where people were (perhaps) better than he made them out to be; that he himself was now changed. Sometimes they went out very early in the morning. Sometimes in the afternoon. Sometimes in the evening, when the sky was purple with twilight.

Erik closed his eyes. He could still feel its brightness. He could still taste its warmth. He was reminded that outside, there was a certain kind of light that could be sensed and seen even with his eyes shut.

He opened his eyes.

Sunlight filtered through the warm, lazy air of a late spring morning.

"How's the sun?"

Raoul asked jokingly. A smile lifted the corner of Erik's mouth. His white mask glinted in the fresh daylight.

"It's warm," he replied.

"It gets better and better every day."

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